

TLS

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Seamus Perry Seamus Heaney and the price of fame | **Gary Sheffield** Modern warfare
Martin Ivens The Tory endgame | **Jane Yager** Walter Kempowski's youth under Hitler



In her shoes

Muriel Zagha on Powell and Pressburger's ballet classic



Moira Shearer in
The Red Shoes, 1948
© Photo 12/Alamy

In this issue

In the poem “Afternoons” Philip Larkin observes young mothers in a playground: “Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives”. Celebrity, Larkin felt, was pushing him to the side of his life. Uneasy at the demands that fame made of him, too, Seamus Heaney made these lines a refrain in his correspondence. Although his letters show that he was humbly, sincerely grateful for the literary prizes heaped upon him - culminating in the award of the Nobel at the age of fifty-six - Heaney feared that public life might dry up the well-springs of inspiration. Up in the air between Boston, London and Dublin, it was hard to glimpse the peat bogs of his native Derry. In his review of *The Letters of Seamus Heaney*, edited by Christopher Reid, Seamus Perry points to the poet’s consciousness of his “Wordsworthian predicament”. Heaney wrote of the ageing Lakeland poet that “he had lost the path that should have kept leading more confidently and deeply inward; still vivid as an intelligence, domestically fortified, nationally celebrated, he ended up industriously but for the most part unrewardingly marking time as a poet”.

Heaney never wanted to take on the role of political seer, either, yet many demanded that he take a stand on Northern Ireland’s Troubles. When Heaney did write a poem about the Bloody Sunday killings, he refused to include it in any collection because it would have been “currying favour with a certain constituency, writing propaganda and letting myself down”. On the sunny side, the letters reveal the poet’s generosity to his peers and his pleasure in the appreciation of the critics. Not a caricature “portrait of the artist as a good bloke”, rather the triumph of an *Unpolitischen*, to use Thomas Mann’s terminology.

As the Russian Empire entered its death throes Leon Trotsky warned that the twentieth century would give no refuge to the unpolitical: “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you”. Jane Yager reviews a new English translation by Michael Lipkin of *An Ordinary Youth*, the first autobiographical novel in Walter Kempowski’s nine-volume *Deutsche Chronik*. The fictional Walter is forced to join the Hitler Youth and is punished for wearing his hair too long and playing swing jazz. Alice McDermott’s *Absolution* chronicles the moral ambiguities of America’s engagement in the Vietnam War. The innocent narrator, Tricia, only sees the glamour of expat life in Vietnam, the pretty dresses and the parties, oblivious to the “distant thudding of artillery”.

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

Find us on
www.the-tls.co.uk

Times Literary Supplement
@the.tls
@TheTLS

To buy any book featured in this week’s TLS,
go to timesbookshop.co.uk

3	LETTERS	SEAMUS PERRY	The Letters of Seamus Heaney Christopher Reid , editor
5	MEMOIRS	ANN KENNEDY SMITH	Unfinished Woman Robyn Davidson
6	LETTERS TO THE EDITOR		Notebooks, Jan Kaplický, Peter Singer’s ethics, etc
7	JOURNALISM	STEPHEN GLOVER	You May Never See Us Again - The Barclay dynasty: A story of survival, secrecy and succession Jane Martinson
8	HISTORY	JAN MACHIELSEN ANTHONY BALE GARY SHEFFIELD JOHN KEAY	They Flew - A history of the impossible Carlos Eire Beatrice’s Last Smile - A new history of the Middle Ages Mark Gregory Pegg Conflict - The evolution of warfare from 1945 to Ukraine General David Petraeus and Andrew Roberts The Lion and the Dragon - Britain and China: A history of conflict Lawrence James
12	POLITICS	MARTIN IVENS JAMES O’BRIEN	The Party’s Over - The rise and fall of the Conservatives from Thatcher to Sunak Phil Burton-Cartledge . The Right to Rule - Thirteen years, five prime ministers and the implosion of the Tories Ben Riley-Smith . The Case for the Centre Right David Gauke , editor All to Play For - The advance of Rishi Sunak Michael Ashcroft
14	ARTS	BREEZE BARRINGTON MURIEL ZAGHA	Rubens and Women (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London) The Red Shoes: Beyond the Mirror (BFI Southbank)
16	FICTION	JANE YAGER ALICE JOLLY BEN HUTCHINSON JAMES CAHILL	An Ordinary Youth Walter Kempowski ; Translated by Michael Lipkin Absolution Alice McDermott The Archive of Feelings Peter Stamm ; Translated by Michael Hofmann Blackouts Justin Torres
18	BIOGRAPHY	EUGENE R. SHEPPARD	Professor of Apocalypse - The many lives of Jacob Taubes Jerry Z. Muller
19	LITERATURE	JESS COTTON	Lament for Julia - And other stories Susan Taubes . The Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes - Between nihilism and hope Elliot R. Wolfson
20	SPORT	DAVID HORSPOOL	A Fan for All Seasons - A journey through life and sport Jon Harvey
21	POETRY	EMILY MCLAUGHLIN IMOGEN CASSELS	Œuvres poétiques Yves Bonnefoy Elusive magnetism - Poetry pamphlets and the Michael Marks awards in 2023
23	POEM	C. K. STEAD	Invocation
24	IN BRIEF		Kibogo Scholastique Mukasonga ; Translated by Mark Polizzotti. Take Two Caroline Thonger and Vivian Thonger ; Illustrations by Alan Thomas. The Funny Thing About Death Jo Caulfield . Every Drop Is a Man’s Nightmare Megan Kamalei Kakimoto . Walking the Bones of Britain - A 3 billion year journey from the Outer Hebrides to the Thames Estuary Christopher Somerville . La Vie - A year in rural France John Lewis-Stempel . Tolka Liam Harrison, Seán Hayes and Catherine Hearn , editors
26	MUSIC	JANE YAGER	Bee Gees - Children of the world Bob Stanley
27	AFTERTHOUGHTS	IRINA DUMITRESCU	Terrible beauty - unearthly good looks, from <i>Beowulf</i> to YouTube
28	NB	M. C.	The <i>Paris Review</i> at seventy, Oxford Word of the Year, Uncommon correspondence

Editor **MARTIN IVENS** (editor@the-tls.co.uk)
Deputy Editor **ROBERT POTTS** (robert.potts@the-tls.co.uk)
Associate Editor **CATHARINE MORRIS** (catharine.morris@the-tls.co.uk)
Assistant to the Editor **LISA TARLING** (lisa.tarling@the-tls.co.uk)
Editorial enquiries (queries@the-tls.co.uk)
Managing Director **JAMES MACMANUS** (deborah.keegan@news.co.uk)
Advertising Manager **JONATHAN DRUMMOND** (jonathan.drummond@the-tls.co.uk)

Correspondence and deliveries: **1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF**

Telephone for editorial enquiries: **020 7782 5000**

Subscriptions: **UK/ROW: feedback@the-tls.co.uk 0800 048 4236; US/Canada: custsvc_timesupl@fulcoinc.com 1-844 208 1515**

Missing a copy of your TLS: **USA/Canada: +1 844 208 1515; UK & other: +44 (0) 203 308 9146**

Syndication: **020 7711 7888 enquiries@newssyndication.com**

The Times Literary Supplement (ISSN 0307661, USPS 021-626) is published weekly, except combined last two weeks of August and December, by The Times Literary Supplement Limited, London, UK, and distributed by FAL Enterprises 38-38 9th Street, Long Island City NY 11101. Periodical postage paid at Flushing NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: please send address corrections to TLS, PO Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834 USA. The TLS is a member of the Independent Press Standards Organisation and abides by the standards of journalism set out in the Editors’ Code of Practice. If you think that we have not met those standards, please contact IPSO on 0300 123 2220 or visit www.ipso.co.uk. For permission to copy articles or headlines for internal information purposes contact Newspaper Licensing Agency at PO Box 101, Tunbridge Wells, TN1 1WX, tel 01892 525274, e-mail copy@nla.co.uk. For all other reproduction and licensing inquiries contact Licensing Department, 1 London Bridge St, London, SE1 9GF, telephone 020 7711 7888, e-mail sales@newslicensing.co.uk



Generous to a fault

The poet's letters reveal his kindness, and the weight of public expectation

SEAMUS PERRY

THE LETTERS OF SEAMUS HEANEY
CHRISTOPHER REID, EDITOR

848pp. Faber. £40.

WHEN THE PROSPECT of an edition of Ted Hughes's letters arose, Seamus Heaney wrote to Carol, Hughes's widow, with some advice. "A hefty volume done with ambition and thoroughness, not a stop-gap", he recommended: "I mean the editors shouldn't think of their task as being to hold the line until the "real" Collected comes along." The person charged with that enormous task was Christopher Reid, whose remarkable *Letters of Ted Hughes* (2007) fulfilled the Heaney brief with conspicuous success. He has now done a similarly striking job for Heaney himself.

It really is exemplarily good, judicious in its selection and arrangement, and informative and humane, even droll, in its commentary. Reid is a companionable editorial presence, a manner that feels only appropriate for a subject whose gift for sociability and friendship is manifest. To judge by the editor's foreword, the heft of this volume contains just a fraction of the correspondence that will one day no doubt be gathered into a "real" Collected, but it is more than enough to be getting on with, giving a full and often moving picture of the poet, and one that feels entirely authentic.

Heaney must have twigged that his letters were bound to appear in print - "Christ", he writes to Derek Mahon at one point, "now that Larkin's letters are out and Longley's are in the archives, I'm beginning to panic about putting down a line!". But actually one of the distinctions of the letters, as Reid observes, is that Heaney seems to write throughout with remarkably little sense of posterity peering over his shoulder. So this is a memorable volume: alongside the substantial volume of interviews conducted by Dennis O'Driscoll, published as

Stepping Stones (2008), it is as close as we will come to the self-portrait of one of the great writers of our time.

The volume begins just before Christmas 1964 with a bit of good news. "I got engaged to a fortnight ago to Marie Devlin and hope to be married next August", Heaney writes to his schoolfriend Seamus Deane. "We are very happy and believe that we can remain so for a lifetime." Only a few weeks later Charles Monteith, the editor at Faber who was famous for spotting the genius of William Golding, sought Heaney out, asking to see some poems, and by the summer the book had been accepted. When *Death of a Naturalist* was published in 1966 it announced to the world a wholly distinctive voice of boggy lyricism:

As a child, they could not keep me from wells
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

Heaney was lecturing at a teacher-training college in Belfast at the time, and the acceptance letter arrived while he was in the thick of marking A-levels; but as soon as things were calmer he was able to grasp the extraordinary nature of a debut that had featured none of the disappointments of the minority press and the rejection slip that more normally characterize "the early years". He paid a visit to Thoor Ballylee, W. B. Yeats's tower in Galway, which had just been opened to the public, and there, visitant to an almost comically apposite icon of Irish poetic genius, he "got round", as he told Monteith, "to the solitary realization of my incredible good fortune". And the good fortune continued. Early in his career Heaney was invited to take up a post at Berkeley, which he loved, and such invitations never dried up, culminating in a grand chair at Harvard.

The honours, too, were many. *Death of a Naturalist* earned him a Somerset Maugham award as well as the Geoffrey Faber memorial prize: Monteith, naturally pleased to see his judgment vindicated, sent a telegram that read "TORRENTIAL CONGRATULATIONS FROM EVERYBODY HERE".

Seamus Heaney, 2012

He won all the prizes - Whitbread and T. S. Eliot and David Cohen and Forward - crowned, of course, by the Nobel in 1995.

"I am deeply grateful for the powers of the upper air that seem to take an interest in me", he told Monteith - and he frequently mentions his own luck in his letters, sometimes with decent awkwardness when comparing it to that of his contemporaries. When his third collection, *Wintering Out* (1972), won a prize by defeating his friend John Montague's *The Rough Field* - which is probably Montague's best book too - Heaney wrote ruefully to Michael Longley: "No doubt I have a lion's share of the good luck and he has a gift for taking the wooden spoon". But he was also acutely conscious that luck is something that runs out: "My good luck in all spheres of life", he wrote to John Hewitt, "makes my Irish Catholic consciousness apprehensive that, as my mother would say, 'something is going to happen'."

Heaney was not just the recipient of torrential congratulations, but also the bestower of them. One of the most attractive things about the correspondence is the unfeigned pleasure that he took in the achievement of other people's writing and the readiness with which he passed on his praise: getting a celebratory letter from Heaney must have been one of the highlights of the literary life. He tells Medbh McGuckian that her poetry is "rich and strange and utterly poetry"; and Anne Stevenson learns "how greatly I admire ... the sense of an immediate impulse working itself out with vigorous intelligence, with no fancy stuff, no self-conscious profiling, no protections or come-hithers". In more straightforward but no less celebratory a mode he writes to Paul Muldoon, after reading *Horse Latitudes* (2006), "We should be rushing the pitch and carrying you shoulder high"; and, of Simon Armitage's *Gawain* (2007), "this is just to throw the hat in the air and rejoice in what you've done". "Rub-a-dub! Ribby-dib-dibs! Hulla-baloo-bellay!", he choruses Tom Paulin on *The Wind Dog* (1999): "An absolute utterance. Jubilant and rangy, seven-league-booted sound."

Not only poetry prompted the bounty of Heaney's generosity. "I cannot begin to enumerate all the places where I underlined and rejoiced in what you attend to and how you express it", he tells Daniel Weissbort, having read his account of Joseph Brodsky; and, to Alasdair Macrae, who had done a selected edition of Shelley, he writes "Flags up and out. Hats off. Thumbs up". His expressions of gratitude for appreciative criticism of his own work are also strikingly heartfelt: "You must know how irrigated the writer in me feels when I read such praise", he tells Helen Vendler, "I metamorphose from the pot-bellied sluggard into a trampolining *victor ludorum*". (The *victor ludorum* is the boy who has won all the prizes at sports day.) "I went to bed exultant, feeling trusted", he reports back, having read what Christopher Ricks had to say about *Field Work* (1979): "Marie once told me that my mind had all the manoeuvrability of a combine harvester, so I rejoice that a wit as lambent as your own can be bothered to stay so happily near it".

As much as all this demonstrates Heaney's grace and charm, there is more here than a portrait of the artist as a nice bloke. His absolute pleasure in the accomplishment of others, and his touching indebtedness to critics who celebrated his own, had a complex relationship with the acute hesitancy with which his own imagination habitually proceeded. His youthful pseudonym was "Incertus" ("uncertain, a shy soul fretting and all that" was his helpful gloss) and, as he told O'Driscoll towards the end of his life, "there's a residual Incertus in every poem I write". It should be said that he often sounds far from uncertain when he sets out his stall. Heaney's most intuitive beliefs about poetry were, as he explains to a correspondent, "romantic/symbolist", drawing on "Eliotesque assumptions that a poem was a poem, cut free from author and audience, an object rather than a statement"; and he was especially attracted by Eliot's idea that a poet's business is to find "that dark embryo within him which gradually takes on the form and speech

Seamus Perry is a Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford. He is writing a Life of Auden

of a poem". Poetry has an odd biological life of its own, emerging from somewhere deeper and darker than the merely rational mind: it is something achieved, as Heaney said in his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures in 1986, "not by dint of the moral and ethical exercise of mind but by the self-validating operations of what we call inspiration".

Given such sentiments, you can see why Heaney revered Ted Hughes quite so much, something we knew, but which becomes especially clear in these letters. Reading Hughes's volume *Lupercal* in the Belfast Public Library in November 1962, with its "verifying and releasing power", clearly marked an epoch - poems both describing and supposedly animated by raw animal energy, such as "An Otter" or "Hawk Roosting" ("My manners are tearing off heads"). When he won the Nobel prize one of Heaney's first actions was to write Hughes a postcard: "Wanted to say how much you were on my mind and how deep the sense of gratitude takes hold - for all that you have done to help me and the effort."

And yet "the moral and ethical exercise of mind" was not quite so easily foregone, especially in the moral and ethical circumstances of Ireland in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Hughesian side of Heaney did not lend itself obviously to anything recognizably like politics, and in truth he was what Thomas Mann called an *Unpolitischen*. He professed as much himself: "My temperament is not Brechtian", he told Melvyn Bragg on *The South Bank Show* in 1991. "In fact I have very little interest in politics in some part of myself." But the age demanded otherwise: in a letter to one of his critics, Peter Sirr, Heaney responded warmly to the observation that "H. has had to bear the weight of public expectation - an expectation as ill-defined as it was pervasive". He did not want to be a representative voice, be it of Catholic Ireland or of Northern renaissance: "I just don't want to be parading out / With the team", he writes in a verse epistle to James Simons collected here. "I want a solo run."

Many of Heaney's most scrupulously and painfully self-interrogatory poems animate a contest between the duty of historical witness and a compensatory idea of poetic freedom: many of his best critics have written about this, and it was a topic Heaney often dwelt on. The contentious elements are presented with great clarity in some of these letters. "I would have liked to do a really big poem on Bloody Sunday at the time but couldn't manage it", he writes to a former pupil. (In fact he did write a ballad on the occasion, but he wouldn't collect it, for to do so, as he later remembered, would have been "currying favour with a certain constituency, writing propaganda and basically letting myself down".) Likewise, corresponding with Karl Miller about the publication of his powerful documentary sequence "Whatever You Say Say Nothing", Heaney showed his *incertus* mode in full swing: "I'm not sure that I should publish them; and if I did, it would be as a piece of straight journalism". When he turned his hand to actual journalism, writing a mostly dismal think piece for the *New Statesman* about the state of things in Northern Ireland, he much annoyed the Longleys, who thought he had badly underplayed the cultural achievements of many, including some of his friends. "I was simply ashamed of myself", came Heaney's highly characteristic response.

His uncertainty was the experience of many in the North, he recalled in interview, "stretched as they often were between the impulse to maintain political solidarity and their experience of a spiritual condition of complete solitude". But of those two impulses it was solitude, going it alone, where his heart really lay - like Hughes, whose "courage and endurance and fecundity and brave solitude count for everything", as Heaney told him. In a lovely late letter to a sixth-form poet who had written in admiration, and complained in passing about the philistinism of his classmates, Heaney replied sympathetically and added: "But even if you were surrounded by congenial literati you would still have to repair to the solitary place in yourself in order to do your own work".

And, in one of the most audacious moves in his work, the ghost of James Joyce tells him the same thing at the end of his pilgrimage in *Station Island* (1984):

You lose more of yourself than you redeem
doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.
When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element
with signatures on your own frequency.

In the privacy of his correspondence, even this most affirming moment turns out to have its *incertus* counter-voice: "He does not come through properly - but then how can I do a genius?" Heaney wrote to Brian Friel. "And there may be a dangerous breach of tact in allowing oneself to meet the man at all."

He never seems to have doubted that the dark wellspring of his poetry lay in what he called "the private County Derry childhood part of myself", and a large part of the challenge of being Seamus Heaney was finding ways of maintaining his connection with that internal landscape - "the poet's need to keep in touch with the old, damp, Derry sources of his inspiration". His predicament, that is to say, was Wordsworthian. Heaney always wrote well about Wordsworth, whose educational ideas were the subject of an abandoned thesis: it is evidently with fellow feeling that Heaney discerns "a childhood and schooltime full of luminous and enlarging experiences", but equally it is with some sense of foreboding that he watches the poet age. "He had lost the path that should have kept leading more confidently and deeply inward; still vivid as an intelligence, nationally celebrated, domestically fortified, he ended up industriously but for the most part unrewardingly marking time as a poet". "The days gone by / Return upon me almost from the dawn / Of life", writes Wordsworth in *The Prelude*; "the hiding-places of man's power / Open; I would approach them, but they close." Heaney remained a brilliantly reinventive poet to the end, but it seems that the idea of a Wordsworthian fate, closed off from the hiding places of his power, haunted him. It is the self-elegiac note that sometimes gets into the interviews collected in *Stepping Stones*: his childhood self hasn't disappeared, he tells O'Driscoll, but "nowadays he dwells farther in, behind all kinds of socialized defences, barriers he learned to put up in order to keep the inwardness intact but which ultimately had the effect of immuring it".

If it was the obligation of political responsibility that compromised the younger Heaney's trust in the self-vindicating vitalism of poetry, these letters reveal that for the greater part of his career the villain in the psychodrama was something quite different: celebrity. From quite early on he writes lamenting the loss of his properly vocational energies in miscellaneous tasks that he has been asked to do because he is well known. "I seem to have lost touch with whatever sense of purpose and confidence I had last year - and to be spending my time doing itty-bitty broadcasts and articles", he writes to Montague in 1974. To Seamus Deane, three years later: "I see myself doing far too much hack work, dissipating energy, rushing, neglecting the silence or neglecting to fence it off and graze in it deliberately." To Michael Longley, four years on: "I am feeling that most of my life is busy and useless, that the time is being frittered yet somehow the frittering is inevitable". It becomes a recurring motif in the letters, which do indeed convey, as one of Christopher Reid's headnotes puts it, a life increasingly characterised by "the usual whirl of distractions and travel" - "the usual hurly-burly", as Heaney said to Deane.

And the hurly-burly only intensified after the Nobel prize: "There's no such thing as a free Nobel prize", Marie Heaney is reported to have said. The schedule of lectures, readings, star appearances, addresses and receptions is completely giddy; organisers of events were always after what Heaney called "the magic of the N. word". Letters are increasingly written from the aeroplane during the only spare moment that life allowed: "Marie and I are en route for Atlanta"; "Tremendous time in Russia". He meets the Queen and, making

“

He seems to write with remarkably little sense of posterity peering over his shoulder

conversation, volunteers to Her Majesty: "You know a friend of mine, Ted Hughes". "Yes", she replies. "My mother knows him better."

Why did he do it? At one stage, understandably, the incentive for taking on so many jobs was financial ("But at my back I always hear the Bank of Ireland hurrying near"); but that hardly explains the later endless rounds of "socio-literary activity". It was clearly a matter of some sensitivity when a critic began a (largely positive) review with a quip about finding Heaney settling himself into his seat on Concorde: "what appears as 'stardom' and 'globetrotting'", Heaney wrote with an unusual note of asperity, "is often the result of a decent sense of obligation to a person running a conference, arranging a lecture, whatever". He disliked saying no, even when it was to a proposition that appalled him, such as the establishment of a Seamus Heaney museum ("It's a 'commodification' of me, and a displacement, which is both exaggerated and premature ... It is imperative for me not to connive in the overstatement of my own meaning"). "I am being pushed to the side of my own life", he wrote to a colleague at Harvard. The allusion is to Philip Larkin - in "Afternoons" Larkin says of the young mothers at the playground, "Something is pushing them / To the side of their own lives". Larkin comes to mind, no doubt, because he represents precisely the opposite response to celebrity: "I don't want to go around pretending to be myself", he once said in interview, another phrase that Heaney invokes. "Pretending to be myself", as Larkin put it, becomes more and more of a test", he wrote to Michael Longley.

That Heaney should have become such a public figure while cherishing the deep privacy of his lyric impulse is maybe not such a paradox: pretending to be himself became such a prominent part of his life as a way of ensuring that what really mattered, "the private County Derry childhood part of myself", remained out of sight and untouched. The only time he is badly rattled in the whole correspondence is when a researcher of diligent good will, Michael Parker, begins to piece together details of his childhood: even here, such is Heaney's kindness of spirit that he is unfailingly polite and even affectionate to his biographer, but you cannot mistake the horror of the thought of exposure. "I prefer my family and the more personal hinterland of my life to remain private", he tells Parker. "There is quite enough of me and about me in print." Then he learns that the research is to be published, and that the book may include photographs, including one of the Moyola River, which runs close to the farm where Heaney grew up:

If any photograph appeared, or map that gave access, I would be devastated. It is one of the most intimate and precious places I know on earth, one of the few places where I am not haunted or hounded by the "mask" of S.H. It would be a robbery and I would have the cruel knowledge that I had led the robber to the hidden treasure and even explicated its value.

It is, he says, "a matter of the highest risk" - one that a life of "public smiling man jobs" might have been hoped to deflect.

He could be wonderfully wry about the whole Heaney double act. I heard him lecture many times, but only spoke to him once: this was during one of his interminable tours of "self- and book-promotion". He was sitting behind a desk in Blackwell's bookshop, his two most recent books piled up ready to be signed, as a long queue of admirers waited to pay for a brief audience. He sat in the room like a great benign bull, mildly puzzled at all the activity around him. He signed the first book I gave him, then, I suppose for variety's sake, asked me my name as I handed over the second. I do not sound much like a Seamus, but he was too polite to look absolutely surprised, and signed the book, a copy of *Sweeney Astray* (1983), the title page of which features King Sweeney in the guise of a quizzical, bird-like creature. He drew a thought bubble coming out of the King's head and wrote in it: "Who is the other Seamus, I wonder". ■

Following the tracks

A travel writer confronts her past

ANN KENNEDY SMITH

**UNFINISHED WOMAN
ROBYN DAVIDSON**

304pp. Bloomsbury. £18.99.

IN 1977, WHEN SHE WAS TWENTY-SIX, Robyn Davidson walked across Australia with her dog for company and four camels to carry her gear. It took her nine months to cross 1,700 miles of desert, alone except when Eddie, a Pitjantjatjara elder, accompanied her for part of the way. “It was a deeply private act, which I assumed would hold no interest for others”, Davidson recalls in her memoir, *Unfinished Woman*. “I had no intention of writing about it afterwards, nor of recording the journey as it was happening.” But before her walk was over the “camel lady” was front-page news, and suddenly everyone wanted to know her story.

To fund her trip the penniless Davidson had signed a contract with *National Geographic* to allow a series of photographs to be taken of herself and her camels. A few months after her return she agreed to write an article for the magazine, and when this was published in 1978 she became internationally famous. The *Sunday Times Magazine* featured her on its front cover and Jonathan Cape offered her a publishing contract to write about her experiences. The advance allowed her to buy a plane ticket out of Australia (“Can anyone today understand how urgent that desire was for my generation, and how difficult to assuage?”) and settle in London after writing to Doris Lessing for advice. Later Davidson moved into the basement flat of her home in Kilburn, and Lessing was the first reader of her book. “After she’d read it, she came down the stairs to see me, manuscript in hand”, she writes. “‘Well, Robbie,’ she said, in a rather severe tone (my stomach fell to the floor), ‘it seems you have written a classic.’”

Lessing was right. *Tracks*, published in 1980, became a bestseller around the world and has never since been out of print. “Thus I became ‘famous’ all over again, this time as a ‘born writer’”, Davidson comments drily, “which was at least a more palatable soubriquet than ‘camel lady’.” The huge success of *Tracks* led to financial independence and travel – which she loved – but also the pressure to publish more books, which she felt ill equipped to do: “if you write one book that sells mega copies, it is taken for granted that you will write another, whether or not you have anything to say”. For the past forty years Davidson has had a successful career as a travel writer and has edited and contributed to respected anthologies including the *Cambridge History of Travel Writing*, (see the *TLS*, May 29, 2019). But she now dismisses her only attempt at fiction, *Ancestors* (1989), as “a bad novel” and describes the account of her travels with the camel-owning Rabari nomads of northwestern India, *Desert Places* (1996), as “like an evil twin to *Tracks*”.

Unfinished Woman might be considered the good twin of *Tracks*. It took Davidson twenty-five years to complete her memoir, and she acknowledges the difficulty of telling her family’s story and the need to use her writer’s imagination: “factual truth is the least of my worries here”. It’s a lyrical and beautifully textured account of a mid-century Australian childhood (mango trees, ha’penny cordial ice blocks wrapped in greaseproof paper and *Blue Hills* on the wireless), interspersed with darkly painful episodes, the memory of which flows “like bad blood,



Robyn Davidson, 1978; from the book under review

making a lucky childhood septic with what would one day happen”.

Davidson was born in 1950, in “a small country not-quite town in the nearly-but-not-quite outback of Australia”. Her handsome father, Mark, came from a gung-ho Queensland farming family and, after serving in Africa and Italy during the Second World War, he persuaded Gwen, his much younger bride,

Ann Kennedy Smith is a freelance writer and researcher based in Cambridge

to leave Brisbane and set up home with him on the cattle station. Gwen was stylish and vivacious. She was also a talented musician, happiest when organizing informal concerts for her neighbours, and ill suited to the rigours of country life.

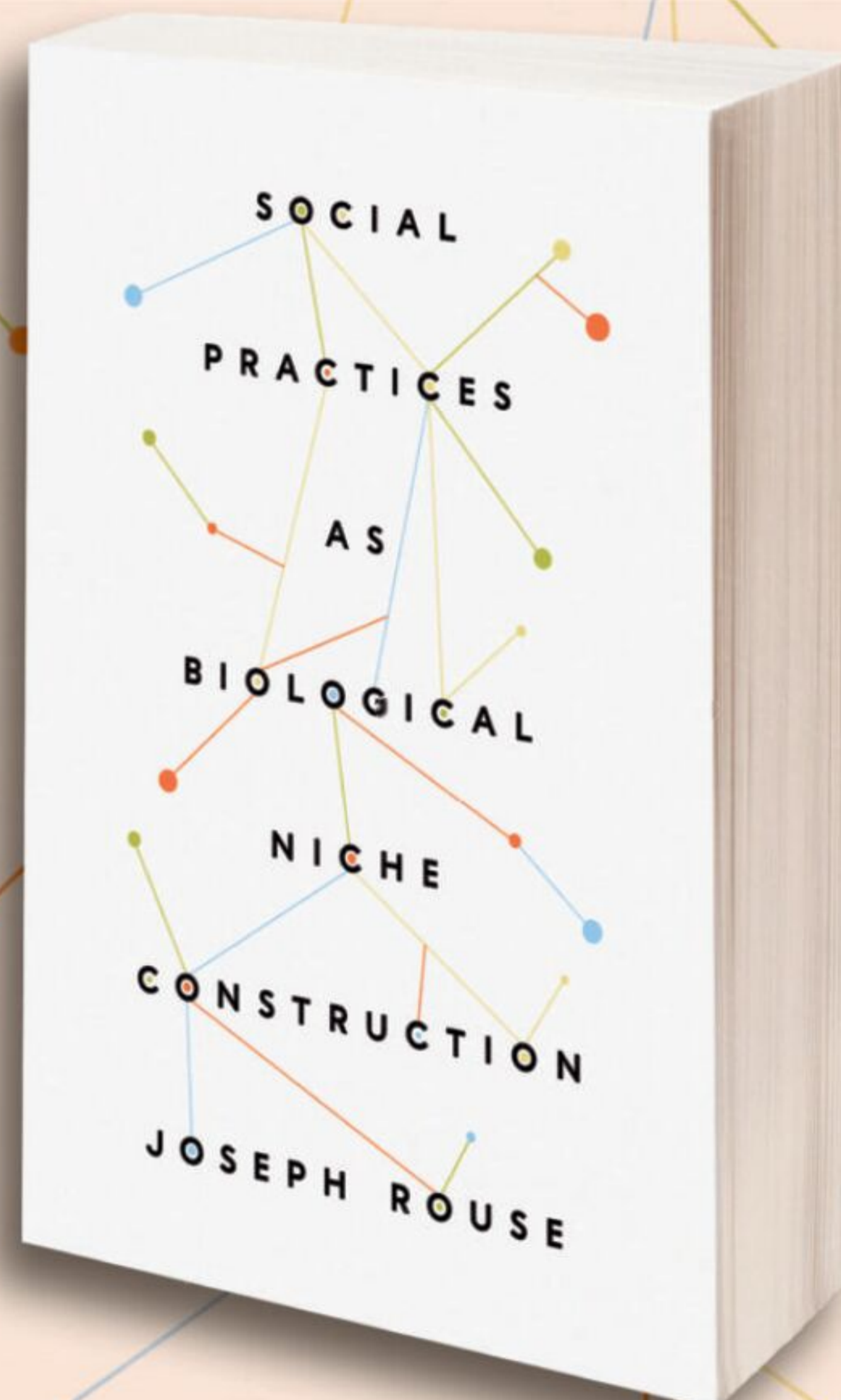
There were years of drought, and a move to another remote farm across Queensland’s Great Divide as Robyn’s parents struggled yet again to “make a go of it”. Malabah was an idyllic place for a child growing up in the 1950s, and Davidson spent as much time as she could outdoors with her beloved father, rather than practising the piano with her mother. “My father lived in the paddocks and my mother lived in the house”, Davidson writes, only later understanding the loneliness of this existence for Gwen. Labelled “highly strung” by her in-laws, and with a distant, tight-fisted husband (“Aw, what do you want a new dress for, darling, you’ve got plenty”), she sank into a clinical depression and took her own life aged forty-six, when Davidson was eleven years old. Gwen was never spoken of in the family again after her death. “It never crossed my mind to write about her, indeed even to think about her, until I approached the same age”, writes Davidson. “Then that erased, safely buried woman came back with, literally, a vengeance.”

“My mother is as close to me, and as hidden from me, as my own face.” Like a half-remembered refrain or a partly erased sentence, these words appear in the prelude and at the end of *Unfinished Woman*. The book’s multilayered structure allows disparate recollections to interrupt the chronological narrative in evocative ways, and its title suggests an unfinished symphony, with music and the act of writing serving as central motifs. One of the author’s earliest memories is of composing a symphony in her head while sitting on the garden swing at the age of three. But when she ran inside to tell her mother, the tune was lost. As a teenager she gave up the promising musical career her mother had encouraged, but decades later, when she bought a century-old Blüthner grand piano in London, she found that it unlocked the songs of her childhood: “I would sit down in front of the keys, begin to play, but be interrupted by the smell of beeswax and dust, or hear, in my mind, my mother’s voice singing”.

“Being a stranger is partly exile and partly the attempt to be at home everywhere”, she writes of her years of travelling and living in places that range from a squat in Sydney to a palace in the Himalayas and a converted shoebox factory in London’s East End. She describes the devastation that she felt at the end of her affair with a famous writer (not named here) as “too enormous to be the result of abandonment by a lover. This had to be what had lain beneath the callus all those years – the long-delayed shock of a more essential loss”. A knife-point encounter in her twenties finds a parallel in the severe depression that she endured in her mid-forties. That near-death experience was “the portal through which my mother returned to me”. The strength of *Unfinished Woman* is its honesty about Robyn Davidson’s difficult emotional and creative journey, and it is propelled by her unsparing self-awareness and willingness to confront her past. ■

SOCIAL PRACTICES AS BIOLOGICAL NICHE CONSTRUCTION

Joseph Rouse



“This book will provide a benchmark for approaches to this fundamental philosophical topic for some time to come.”—John Dupré, University of Exeter

Paper £24.00 ISBN 9780226827971

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

press.uchicago.edu

Trade Enquiries to Yale Representation Ltd. yalerep@yaleup.co.uk 020 7079 4900

Green fingers

I'm grateful to Robert Lacey (Letters, December 1) for mentioning one of my introductions to Harvill's 1990s reissues of Henry Green's novels as the printed source of a phrase much discussed recently in your columns. Given his acknowledgement that most of us are liable to make mistakes, it feels doubly churlish to point out two in his letter.

Simply for the record, then: the libidinous butler Raunce is a character in Green's *Loving* (first published in 1945), not *Living* (1929). More oddly, Lacey says that "The blurb of that otherwise admirable edition [Harvill, 1992] mistakenly describes the novel as being set in the First World War". I didn't write the blurb, but the one on the back cover of my advance copy prominently and unambiguously places *Loving* in the Second World War. Nothing would induce me to suggest that the historical adviser to Netflix's *The Crown* is capable of making anything up; perhaps he's thinking of a different reprint.

■ **Jeremy Treglown**
Ditchley, Oxfordshire

Why?

When Richard Swinburne (reviewing *Why?: The purpose of the universe* by Philip Goff, December 1) says "that it is extremely improbable ... that life would evolve ... unless the universe were fine-tuned for this", implying that there must be some sort of *Wizard of Oz* God doing the fine-tuning, he fails to recognize that an extreme improbability is not an impossibility. Swinburne is a most sophisticated apologist for theism, but as Herman Philipse has shown in his *God in the Age of Science?* (2012), the fine-tuning argument that

In his review of Roland Allen's *The Notebook*, a history of notebooks and notetakers (November 3), Henry Hitchings quotes the author's rather disparaging remark on police notebooks as being accoutrements "amenable to dishonest record-keeping", as if there were nothing more interesting to say about them. On the contrary, as children of a Durham policeman, my siblings and I would often spend hours secretly reading our father's stash of police notebooks when he was out on duty. In this way we learnt about the unfortunate cyclist who was killed when he crashed into a wall at the bottom of a steep hill after his brakes failed in heavy rain; the pub brawl between rival football supporters in which a drunk threw a chair at our father and broke his thumb; the hunt for an escaped prisoner in thick woodland, during which another policeman sank up to his chest in quicksand; the "ghost" lady in Victorian costume leading a horse along a county lane in the early hours, illuminated by the police car's headlights,

Swinburne uses for the existence of God (a variant of the cosmological argument) does not work. As Philipse wittily remarks, "it is as absurd as if a fly residing in the palace of Versailles thought that the palace was built especially for it".

■ **Edward Greenwood**
Canterbury, Kent

Jan Kaplický

Keith Miller's review of Ivan Margolius's biography of Jan Kaplický (In Brief, November 17) reminds me of a prickly Sunday lunch spent with the architect and Amanda Leveté at the house of mutual friends many years ago. As Miller suggests, Mr Kaplický did not take kindly to any criticism, and my partner was particularly concerned as to how the architect's designs would fit into any English townscape. With the brilliant Lord's media centre, this is not a

Notebooks

but then mysteriously and inexplicably fading into the night (our father checked with the local farmers the next day, but no one could explain who she was); our father's arrest of an infamous safebreaker who later became a multimillionaire businessman, rich enough to buy a football club and appear on the *Sunday Times* Rich List; and the reckless young motorcyclist, cocky and immortal, who was cautioned for speeding, then killed a week later.

My favourite entry was his account of finding a young Australian man snuggled in his sleeping bag on a bench at a remote bus stop along the A68 road to Scotland on a cold, wet, foggy autumn night in 1967. The insouciant traveller had been hitching from London to Edinburgh and got stranded in the wilds of County Durham in terrible weather. Thus do forgotten fragments of time enjoy a secret afterlife in someone else's notebook.

■ **Andreas Smith**
Bishop Auckland, County Durham

problem. The Birmingham Selfridges was to our minds less successful, and the interior, when we visited it, ugly. As to the small house in Islington, we were concerned as to how the windows would be cleaned. Abseiling, apparently. Bless!

■ **Robert Sénécal**
Waldershare, Kent

Peter Singer's ethics

In Simone Gubler's review of two books by Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation Now* and *Ethics in the Real World* (November 10), she informs us that what is ultimately wrong with the act-utilitarian ethos is that it leaves little space for individuals' happiness. Since Singer's brand of act-utilitarianism endorses an impartial ethics, in which the goal is to maximize pleasure and minimize suffering, we should "always be prepared to sacrifice our own passions, projects and relationships" for the sake of the greater good.

However, act-utilitarianism does have the resources to accommodate our individual preferences. Partial preferences are permitted as long as their satisfaction would increase the greater good; partiality can exist in an impartialist moral theory. Indeed, even the seemingly anodyne advice that we always be prepared to lose those attributes that account for our individual flourishing is also subject to the utilitarian test: accept that counsel only if it increases universal happiness. The cost of this response is that friendships, family relations, etc have solely instrumental value, a result that would annoy those who believe these relationships are worthy in their own right. In philosophy nothing is dispositive.

■ **Mark Bernstein**
Purdue University, West Lafayette IN

Collet's. How gratifying it is that there can still be such bookshops and publications under the regime of which you speak so bitterly ...". Thus George Steiner in 1975, acknowledging a student revolutionary tract I had sent him because I had learnt from his books. It was quite normal then to exchange words despite fundamental disagreements. Steiner replies tartly (and the "pamphlet" ran to 50,000 words) but, more importantly, he does reply, and to someone he has never met.

Cultures change. It is now pretty much the norm in our culture wars not to initiate communication with the enemy or acknowledge any outreach. It is all rather Victorian, snubbery pretty much indistinguishable from snobbery.

■ **Trevor Pateman**
Brighton

Oscar Wilde's yellow book

In her review of the exhibition *Colour Revolution* at the Ashmolean Museum (Arts, December 1), Kathryn Hughes repeats the canard that Oscar Wilde was mistakenly rumoured to be reading the *Yellow Book* at his arrest, when he was in fact reading a yellow book. But Simon Wilson has demonstrated (in the *Wildean*, issue 58) that the "rumour" goes back to newspaper reporters on the spot, and there is no reason to believe their eyes deceived them; whereas the idea that Wilde was actually reading a saucy French novel can be traced only to the *Yellow Book's* publisher, John Lane, writing many years later, who wasn't there, who had every reason to disassociate his name from Wilde's, and who identified the novel in question as Pierre Louÿs's *Aphrodite* - published in 1896, a year after Wilde's arrest.

■ **Iain Ross**
Colchester, Essex

George Steiner

"Many thanks for sending me your pamphlet. I had come across it at

Donna Leon

In his review of Donna Leon's memoir (November 24), Justin

Warshaw writes that "she does not explain her refusal to allow the series to be translated into Italian". In an interview with Leon, published online some eight years ago, she said (she was then living in Venice) that when she went out to meet a friend for coffee or lunch, she would be stopped by at least four tourists who recognized her from her jacket photo. If her books were available in Italian, she would never make it, she said, to the bistro or restaurant, so many fans would stop her.

Now she lives partly in Zurich and partly at her house in the Alps, perhaps to avoid her devoted readers.

■ **Hugh Van Dusen**
Yorktown NY

Essex

May I add to the points made by Jonathan Drummond in his review of *The Invention of Essex* (December 1)? There is a stark division between the northwest of the county and the southeast - broadly speaking, the tweed cap gives way to the baseball cap (often worn back to front) and the word "shot-gun" has a totally different connotation. The southeast of the county is most often maligned, but is in many ways the most interesting. For example, the medieval castle at Hadleigh (painted by Constable) looks out over the Thames estuary, where in winter thousands of Brent geese can be seen feeding on the mudflats. Meanwhile, the casinos, bingo halls and clubs of Southend are only ten minutes away. What's not to like?

■ **John Sheldrake**
Southend-on-Sea, Essex

Karl Shapiro

In Diane Mehta's review of Dara Barnat's *Walt Whitman and the Making of Jewish American Poetry* (November 3), she lists the nine poets Barnat discusses, then adds: "They all generally write 'free verse'". I am not familiar enough with the poets to comment on them all, but I was surprised to see Karl Shapiro so described. While some of his later work veered towards the Whitmanian, his early work was decidedly formal and he never fully abandoned form. He even published *The Prosody Handbook*, an excellent primer on poetic meter and form.

■ **Ian Thomas Halbert**
Sudbury MA

Correction

On the cover of last week's print edition (December 1), Emily Kopley's name was incorrectly rendered as Emma. We apologize for this mistake.

CONTACT

1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
letters@the-tls.co.uk

T BOOKS



TLS books have a new home

Browse the books featured in TLS
Visit timesbookshop.co.uk or scan the QR code



TLS



Twins peaked

The secretive owners of the Telegraph Media Group placed under the spotlight

STEPHEN GLOVER

YOU MAY NEVER SEE US AGAIN

The Barclay dynasty: A story of survival, secrecy and succession

JANE MARTINSON

320pp. Penguin Business. £25.

A YEAR BEFORE HE DIED at the age of ninety-four in 2007, Bill Deedes made an uncharacteristically candid confession to his future biographer, Stephen Robinson. He said that he thought his beloved *Daily Telegraph*, which had been acquired by Sir David and Sir Frederick Barclay two years earlier, was being run by “a stinking mob”.

Bill - Lord Deedes - was the mildest of men. He hated confrontation, though this didn't prevent his winning the Military Cross in the war. Once, when I was a young journalist on the *Telegraph* in the early 1980s, I urged him to take a stand on my behalf. Bill, editor of a formidable paper, was not in complete command. He replied to my youthful pleadings: “I have never given an order on this newspaper, and I'm not going to start now”.

For Bill to describe the regime instituted by the Barclay twins as “stinking” was an extraordinary departure from his habitual emollience. It wasn't as though the new owners had been beastly to him. On the contrary, realizing that he was cherished as a writer and former editor by readers, and fearful that at his advanced age he might leave the paper, they cosseted him. Aidan Barclay, Sir David's eldest son, held a lunch for Bill in a private room at the family's Ritz Hotel in London. Bill was flattered, though he later grumbled that he hadn't been offered a glass of wine.

“Stinking mob” appears to have been applied not specifically to the members of the Barclay family, but to their entire operation, which replaced that of Conrad Black, who, facing criminal charges in the US, had lost control of the *Telegraph*. It is a pungent phrase.

Was it an apt description? Jane Martinson, who has written the most thorough biography to date of the Barclay family and their dealings, would probably say it was. Showing little affection for her subjects, she makes a compelling case against them. And yet, at the end of it all, this question remains.

If the Barclays were as ghastly as she suggests, how is it that the *Daily Telegraph* has survived, notwithstanding Bill's fears, as an impressive newspaper? In recent months it has been pursued by several suitors after Lloyds Banking Group, owed more than £1.1 billion by the Barclays, forced its sale.

Martinson describes Sir David and Sir Frederick Barclay's ascent to great riches from their birth (David, the more dominant, was born ten minutes before his identical twin) to working-class parents in Shepherd's Bush, London, in 1934. As young men the two brothers, always inseparable and often, weirdly, dressed in identical clothes, moved into property, buying large houses that were turned into hotels and sold on at a profit. Frederick overreached himself and was declared bankrupt, but the twins stayed on the right side of the law. The Crown Agency was a fruitful source of loans offered on favourable terms.

Their breakthrough came in 1983, when they acquired Ellerman Lines, a once successful shipping concern that was struggling. This was their speciality. They identified underperforming businesses and broke them up so as to realize far greater sums than they had paid for the whole, while sometimes retaining the choicest bits. The twins created a byzantine web of offshore trusts and, as all their companies were private and had no shareholders, they were able to operate beyond the scrutiny of the media.

The brothers were fanatically secretive, as well as famously litigious. This creates a problem for Martinson, a *Guardian* writer and professor of financial journalism at City, University of London. Until their private affairs were exposed in two recent, mind-boggling court cases, the Barclays left as little trace as possible of their activities, and seldom spoke to journalists. To bulk out her story Martinson includes much extraneous information, so we are treated, for example, to a lengthy and not particularly fascinating history of Ellerman Lines. I should mention that the author has been poorly served by her publishers as, inexcusably in a book of this sort, there is no index.

There are fascinating passages about Brecqhou, the 80-acre island next to Sark bought by the twins in 1993. Most of this is already known, largely thanks to the efforts of the journalist John Sweeney, who was once arrested as he pitched up on the island. The Barclays destroyed the manor house and engaged 1,500 builders to construct a vast fortress.

David and Frederick Barclay, 2000

“**Exactly how a fortune once estimated at £7 billion has seemingly largely vanished is not fully explained**”

Stephen Glover was co-founder of the Independent and founding editor of the Independent on Sunday. He now writes for the Daily Mail

The story hots up with the court cases, and for the first time the Barclays' dirty linen is not so much washed as hung out in public. In the first case, in 2020, it emerged that Aidan and his brothers Howard and Alistair had bugged dozens of hours of conversations between Sir Frederick and his daughter, Amanda, in a private snug in the Ritz. A rupture had opened between David's clan (who now controlled 75 per cent of the empire) and Frederick and Amanda. David died in 2021. Since 2013 the twins hadn't spoken to each other.

Even more dramatic has been the divorce case between Sir Frederick and his wife, Hiroko, which has been played out in court since 2021 and is still unresolved. The judge awarded Hiroko a settlement of £100 million, but her husband of thirty-four years has been reluctant or unable to stump up. Sir Frederick, who until 2019 was paying himself £800,000 a month for living expenses, asserted that Aidan's side of the family now controlled the purse strings.

There is an illuminating court exchange quoted by Martinson. Aidan Barclay was shown an “organogram” in which “the two halves of the empire flowed into nine different trusts”. Aidan, who stepped down as chairman of the *Telegraph* in June, responded: “The routing of money is a complicated affair for which I need corporation and tax advice ... money travels up the tree but exactly how it goes and where it goes I couldn't tell you”.

It seems likely that Sir Frederick can't easily lay his hands on £100 million because the family is short of money. Exactly how a fortune once estimated at £7 billion has seemingly largely vanished is not fully explained by Martinson, though she enumerates several setbacks, including an unsuccessful VAT case against HMRC involving hundreds of millions of pounds, plus huge losses at two Barclay-owned businesses - at least £620 million at Yodel, a delivery company, and PPI claims amounting to £583 million at Littlewoods.

In June this year Lloyds Banking Group succeeded in forcing the sale of the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Spectator* in order to recoup some of the Barclay family's debt. Would-be buyers include the Daily Mail and General Trust and the hedge fund magnate Sir Paul Marshall. The plot has recently thickened, with reports that the Barclays, which principally means Aidan, have persuaded the Abu Dhabi-backed investment fund RedBird IMI to pay off their debt to Lloyds. This proposed deal has been referred by the government to Ofcom. In any event the family will lose control.

Such an acquisition by RedBird IMI sounds far from ideal. For it is one of the paradoxes in the tale of the Barclays, on which Martinson doesn't touch, that the *Daily Telegraph* is a vibrant newspaper, recovering its former healthy profitability, which has adapted successfully to the digital age. I doubt Bill Deedes's more deferential publication would have dared to expose MPs' outrageous expenses as the *Telegraph* did so triumphantly in 2009. It plainly sticks in Martinson's craw that the paper rooted for Brexit. Bill would probably have sat on the fence.

The author sees the story of the Barclay brothers as a parable of postwar Britain. A fortune - which turns out to be more imagined than real - was built on debt while prestigious hotels and publications were gobbled up. Little that is new was created.

One could interpret the story in another way. The Barclays are the latest iteration in a national saga first delineated by Anthony Trollope in *The Way We Live Now* (1875) with the character of Augustus Melmotte. Melmotte is a crook, which the Barclays were not, but they resemble him as energetic outsiders, enigmatic and secretive, who are welcomed into the heart of the British establishment. Margaret Thatcher died in a suite in the Ritz provided by the twins.

Actually the Barclays have been better than Melmotte in more ways than one. They're not “a stinking mob”. Just a bit weird, and possibly not very nice. For all their excesses they have looked after the *Telegraph*. We can only hope the same will be said of their successors. ■

Impossible feats or impossible liars?

Tales of levitating saints and witches

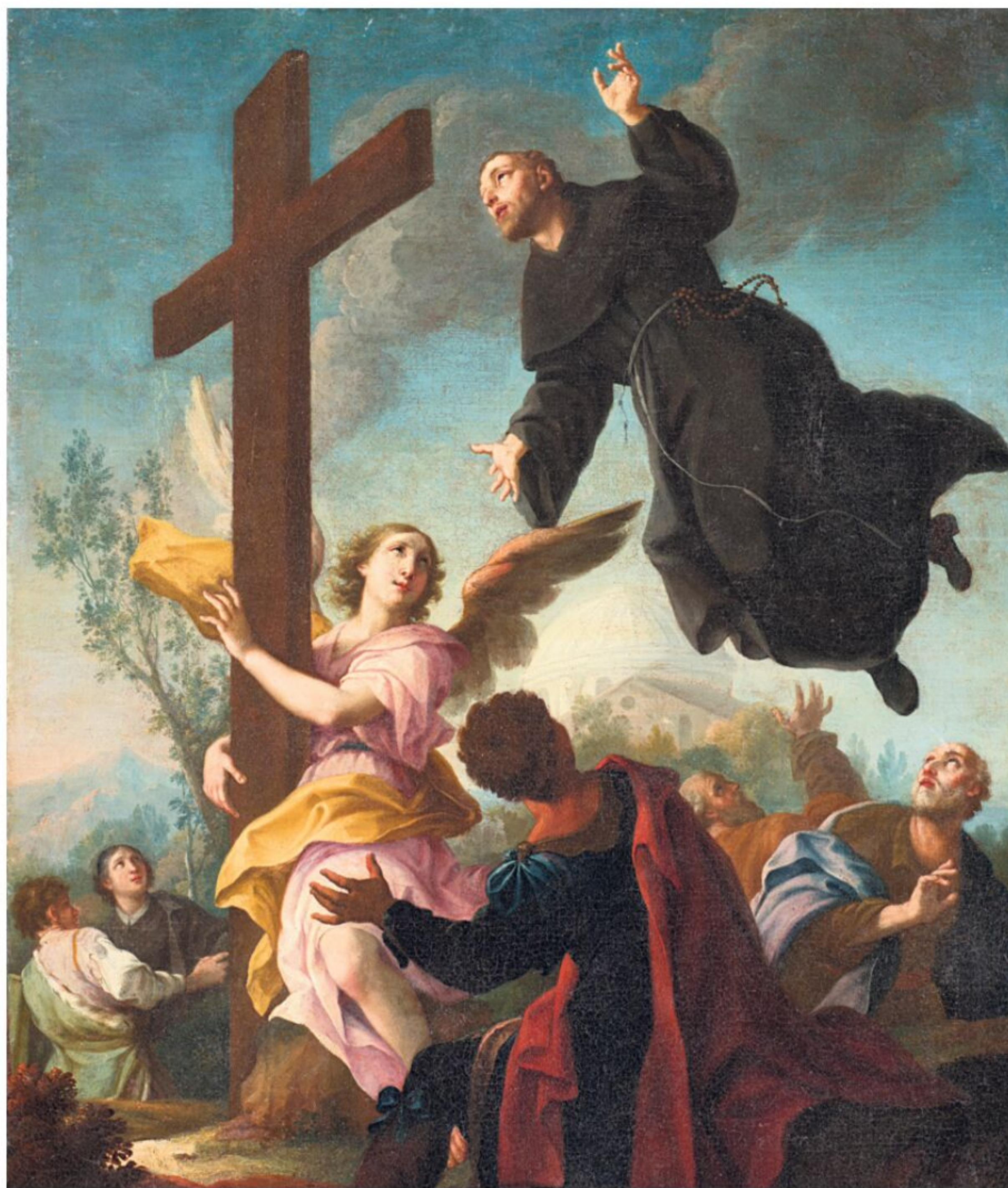
JAN MACHIELSEN

THEY FLEW

A history of the impossible

CARLOS EIRE

492pp. Yale University Press. £30 (US \$35).



“Saint Joseph of Cupertino in Ecstasy” by Giambettino Cignaroli

“NON VORREI star più quaggiù, / vorrei venir lassu.” (I don’t want to remain down here any more/I want to come up there.) These poignant verses are attributed to St Joseph of Cupertino (1603-63), a simple man not known otherwise to have said or written much. But his plea to touch the sky - a literal *tira-mi-sù*, a divine “pick me

up” - was apparently heeded from on high. Contemporaries testified that the Franciscan friar would hover above altars and perch on tree branches, light as a bird. Joseph would shriek and then he’d be off.

What are we to make of such testimony? Why do so many of us “reject all this flying as absolutely impossible nonsense”? And what does our failure to

take the subject seriously tell us about our (alleged) “materialistic culture” and the (also alleged) “dogmatic secularism” that permeates the study of religion? These are the questions with which Carlos Eire hopes to “annoy” his readers. And he has succeeded. Levitation, for all the obvious puns, is a heavy subject. Eire picked it - and its close associate, bilocation - because, unlike private visions or miraculous healings, their impossibility and their reality ought to be inescapable. Or rather, in the absence of photographic evidence, the apparent mountain of witness testimony is.

Moreover, as far as miracles go, levitation and bilocation are, to Eire’s mind, surprisingly “useless” and therefore immune to his final bogeyman, “functionalist” explanations. (I am personally less sure, having sat through plenty of meetings that made me pray for the gift of bilocation.) The choice of miracles is still more fitting for another reason. The heyday of supernatural flight coincided with the birth of our materialist clockwork universe, linking past and present together. What would have happened to the history of science, Eire asks in all earnestness, if Isaac Newton had travelled to Italy and seen Joseph “hovering in the air”? “Or what if he had run into someone who claimed to have seen a flying witch?”

These questions of faith and scepticism have animated Eire’s life and career. The Yale historian traces the present book back to 1983, when he was shown the very room where St Teresa of Ávila and her confessor, St John of the Cross, levitated together, introduced by a tour guide in the same matter-of-fact tone as the pots and pans in the convent’s kitchen. But the book also has deeper and shallower roots. It is impossible not to see it through the lens of Eire’s famous childhood memoir, mentioned on the cover. *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (2003) is an evocative account of an enchanted childhood in 1950s Cuba, filled with supernatural encounters but destroyed by Fidel Castro’s secular regime, denounced here again in the preface and a long endnote. Not acknowledged is a chapter published in 2009 on our flying Joseph that presents the argument above in miniature. Part of a volume honouring the witchcraft historian Erik Midelfort, this early airing perhaps explains the unwise inclusion of demonic flight in the present book.

They Flew, written in Eire’s familiar evocative, beguiling narrative manner, is in fact more revealing for what it does not say. His oblique style is famous. A colleague once publicly described it as “Erasmian”, not for its tolerance, but for its “use of satire, irony, indirection and wit”, which challenges the reader’s preconceptions. Yet irony also creates space for misreadings and plausible deniability. One reviewer wrongly labelled Eire a lapsed Christian, much to his annoyance. This time the author’s conclusions are evident from the title. And yet his “Baroque aethrobats” still require some impossible mental acrobatics on the author’s part. “The history of the impossible is all about questioning, about being evenhandedly skeptical”, Eire notes at the start. He presents our rejection of “thousands of testimonies” not as scepticism, but as another “form of belief”. Calling on others to leave their certainties - that saints and witches do not fly - at the door requires him to at least pretend to do the same.

Yet Eire wants more from us than an open mind; he wants our souls. His argument has deep roots in Christian apologetics. For all the barbs aimed at materialist, secularist and functionalist straw figures, Eire knows full well that his fellow Teresa scholars do not dismiss her visions as frauds or epileptic fits. The reality of her experiences is simply irrelevant to the questions they ask. But agnosticism is not enough. Eire cites an ally, Jeffrey J. Kripal, who “eloquently” denounces such supposed indifference as perverse: “A super-pious Italian man ecstatically flies into a tree and has to be retrieved with a ladder ... And you don’t care?” It is this fence-sitting that really is in Eire’s crosshairs. He is forcing us to choose between impossible feats and an impossible number of liars, much as C. S. Lewis once challenged

Churchill Acquired Papers – Inquiry for Copyright Holders

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, in co-operation with the Sir Winston Churchill Archive Trust, are proud to have published in an online format the contents of the Sir Winston Churchill Papers. The Churchill Archive, which launched in 2012, is a digital library of modern international history that includes more than 800,000 pages of original documents, ranging from Churchill’s personal correspondence to exchanges between the great leaders of the 19th and 20th centuries. This unique resource offers new insights into a fascinating period of our past and is an invaluable educational tool for a wide range of courses, supporting academics and students alike in their teaching, studies and research.

The Sir Winston Churchill Archive Trust has recently taken possession of some additional papers, comprised of documents drawn from across all stages of Churchill’s life and career. After conservation and cataloguing, the contents of the newly-acquired papers will be made digitally available as part of the Churchill Archive. Until now, most of this material has never been made accessible for scholarly and academic use.

The physical papers are owned by the Sir Winston Churchill Archive Trust in perpetuity, but many items are still in copyright and in such cases the copyright remains the property of the writer, the writer’s employer or their successors. We are therefore undertaking a process to obtain publication consent from as many copyright holders as possible.

Despite our best efforts, we have been unable to make contact with all copyright holders and we are still seeking to make contact with those listed on the ‘Copyright and Acknowledgements’ page of the Churchill Archive website, at churchillarchive.com. If you believe you may be a copyright holder and don’t believe you have received any of our permission requests, please email us at the following address: churchillarchiverights@bloomsbury.com. We hope that you will contribute towards expanding the scope of this unrivalled archive by granting the permission requested.

Churchill Archive

BLOOMSBURY

Jan Machielsen is Reader in Early Modern History at Cardiff University. He is the editor of *The Science of Demons: Early modern authors facing witchcraft and the Devil, 2020*

his readers to accept that Jesus Christ was either a lunatic or the Son of God, but nothing in between.

They Flew therefore purposely leaves a great deal unsaid. Eire never raises the inevitable next question: what would it mean for us, for our faith, if we accepted that Catholic saints such as Teresa and Joseph actually flew? But there are also difficult areas obscured from view. His discussion of the early modern witch hunt is unsteady, with large parts lifted verbatim from his book *Reformations* (2016). The parallel between levitating saints and flying witches falters instantly: no witch was ever accused because she was recognized (let alone caught!) traversing the night sky. More importantly, the comparison opens an ethical can of worms. Unlike Eire I have always been struck by historians' openness to, or at least tolerance of, the divine. The devil, however, not so much. Eire roasts the late D. P. Walker for "excluding the devil from history", for "keep[ing] the supernatural safely encased in amber". For Eire the devil's presence is "undeniable" - the "real problem" is modernity's inability to handle him. What that means for those who died as witches - whether he believes that some of them really flew - is conveniently left unsaid.

The book also unravels in another direction. Mindful of his promised evenhandedness, Eire pairs his levitating saints with contemporaries exposed as impostors. In the case of one "total fraud", María de

la Visitación, Eire vividly describes how her supposed stigmata were scrubbed clean by officials, "leaving the water bowl full of paint residue". Perhaps the contrast between the successful and the failed is meant to bestow confidence in contemporary investigations. But, if so, what judgement is still required of us? Are we asked to be open to the supernatural or to march to the dictates of the past? I found my mind taking Eire's advice, but wandering in the opposite direction. What would the superiors who locked St Joseph away in his final years have found if they had pushed their investigations further? Perhaps the simple saint was wise to opt for paint-free miracles.

Finally, then, what about the holy levitations and the "thousands of testimonies"? Eire's handle on canonization proceedings is shaky and his claims at times seem almost designed to test his readers' credulity. Witness testimony was never "archived alongside lawsuits and murder trials". The title "Blessed" does not extend devotion to "all Catholics" - beatification is an indulgence granted to a particular order or region. (Only sainthood is universal.) One needs to look at the Roman curia at a particularly contorted angle before Joseph Ratzinger, the later pope Benedict XVI, could be called "the cardinal in charge of canonizations". Yet the most incredible claim is reserved for the Spanish nun Juana de la Cruz, who "in 1530, four years

“
Contemporaries testified that the Franciscan friar would hover above altars and perch on tree branches, light as a bird

before her death ... was officially given the title 'Venerable', which validated her cult and placed her on the first rung of the ladder to canonization". The Church has never opened proceedings for the living and "Venerable", as an honour, would not become part of the process until centuries after Juana's death. Human levitation would be easier to accept.

As for the "thousands of testimonies", the "eyewitness accounts" we are accused of summarily dismissing, Eire never consulted Joseph of Cupertino's canonization documents for himself. The few references to them are through secondary literature and show no awareness that the Vatican Archives changed their name in 2019. (They are now Apostolic rather than Secret.) Describing such trials as eyewitness accounts is misleading. They could only ever be held posthumously, and Joseph had vanished from public view years before his death. The canonization process in Rome during which Joseph allegedly hovered above Pope Urban VIII in the 1630s was not held until fifty years later. In describing these aerial adventures, then, Eire relies mostly on posthumous "hagiographical narratives".

Perhaps Joseph really did fly. Who knows? Carlos Eire concedes that he can never prove the fact definitively, but further study could have eased the reader's own leap towards the heavens. Then again, who needs facts when they have faith? ■

Knees without wrinkles

How something called Europe came to be

ANTHONY BALE

BEATRICE'S LAST SMILE

A new history of the Middle Ages

MARK GREGORY PEGG

512pp. Oxford University Press. £27.99 (US \$34.95).

CAN MEDIEVAL HISTORY - stereotypically the purlieu of fusty archives and fustier attitudes - be rewritten as creative nonfiction? Mark Gregory Pegg's ambitious and luminous *Beatrice's Last Smile* emphatically suggests that it can. Pegg surveys the Middle Ages through a broad array of elegantly written individual stories, bookended by two martyred women: he begins with St Perpetua, put to death in Carthage in 203, and ends with Jeanne la Pucelle (Joan of Arc), executed at Rouen in 1431. Between these deaths sits Pegg's titular Beatrice, Dante's guide through *Paradiso*, whose last smile - at once earthly and heavenly - evokes for the author "the ebb and flow of holiness and humanity in the living of a life, whether on earth or in heaven (or in hell or in purgatory), that shaped the medieval world".

Pegg seeks to reveal this ebb and flow in his historical subjects. Perpetua, Beatrice, and Jeanne do not appear as token female characters; excavating cultural histories and medieval written accounts, he paints them as powerfully *individual* individuals who solicited strong emotional reactions, then and now. Perpetua forms a useful starting point, encapsulating how "*Romanitas* clashed with *Christianitas*" and establishing a model of conduct and divinity that, in the author's eyes, remained a template across the medieval period. A young Roman noblewoman



Dante gazing at Beatrice; from an early-fifteenth-century manuscript

imprisoned for her Christianity, Perpetua asked God whether she would be given "martyrdom or freedom". She was rewarded with a memorable dream in which "she climbed a great bronze ladder to a garden in the sky and, surrounded by thousands of people clothed in white, an old shepherd gave her a mouthful of cheese". On waking she still had a sweet taste in her mouth, and knew the answer to be the former. For Pegg, Perpetua represents a "distinct change in the relationship of humanity to holiness that inaugurates a sensibility ... that has more in common with a man or woman in, say, seventh-century Jarrow or fifteenth-century Paris" than with classical Rome.

Pegg moves through the Middle Ages via short vignettes, often headed by startling or cryptic soubriquets such as "Gaudy Trousers" (on the military outfits of fourth-century Roman soldiers and Alamanni "barbarian" troops), "Knees Without Wrinkles" (on the Gothic king Theoderic II), and "This Is What You Did to My Ewer" (on the conversion of the Frankish king Clovis). Ortonesque or Pythonesque as these may sound, they allow Pegg to focus on intimate and levelling moments. The devastating plague of 1348-9, for instance, is described briskly, in terms of its human victims. Pegg begins his account of its spread with the words of John Clynn, a Kilkenny Franciscan who documented his experience of the

pandemic in case "anyone should still be alive in the future and any son of Adam can escape this pestilence". He shows how the plague became a way for Christians to accuse Jews (who became "more like puppets than humans") of spreading the illness, and how Europe became a "persecuting society".

The concept of the Middle Ages is a modern one, retrospectively and variously applied. Yet by ending his survey at Rouen in 1431, Pegg adroitly evades several crucial topics that have conventionally helped to demarcate the period. These include Johan Huizinga's famous notion that the fifteenth century represented "the waning of the Middle Ages", as well as that century's remarkable florescence of popular religion in rituals of pilgrimage, civic drama, guild culture and the developing Reformation. Jan Hus and John Wycliffe do not feature at all; Pegg's heretics are Cathars and Waldensians, not humanists or (proto-)Protestants. In this way he avoids defining the Middle Ages by how they ended or what they would become. This is one of the things that makes this history valuably "new": its steadfast refusal to frame the medieval period, in the tradition of Jacob Burckhardt, as a dark waiting time, crying out inchoately for enlightenment, reform and a modern, humanist idea of progress.

Pegg's book is less novel in the diversity of its subjects' social class. While not expressly a history of the elite, *Beatrice's Last Smile* is based almost entirely on the stories of a small literate class: those who had a good amount written about them or those who left copious written records themselves. Pegg questions *how* we think about well-known medieval figures - Abelard, Boniface, Charlemagne - rather than *who* we think about. And, though the book strives for some religious diversity, with Jewish, Muslim and other voices present, and Pegg is adamant that it is "not a history of medieval Europe", it is a history of how something called Europe came to be. Through his skilful vignettes he sketches how people started to define themselves as European, coalescing around a variegated Christian identity, a vicious sense of exclusion and the flourishing of vernacular cultures. (Boccaccio and Chaucer make vivid appearances.)

This book is warmly recommended, not least as an exercise in historical storytelling and narrative craft. Mark Gregory Pegg is fully aware of the partiality of his account and the fact that, perhaps now more than ever, history is iterative. The "new" history he has to tell is concerned with empathy, curiosity and openness, not the easy judgements of presentism. *Beatrice's Last Smile* communicates a world connected to ours, yet brilliantly, beguilingly, strange. ■

Anthony Bale is Professor of Medieval Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. His latest book is A Travel Guide to the Middle Ages, 2023

Tactics and strategy

Continuity and change in modern warfare

GARY SHEFFIELD

CONFLICT

The evolution of warfare from 1945 to Ukraine
**GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS
 AND ANDREW ROBERTS**
 544pp. William Collins. £26.

A FEW YEARS AGO, many believed that old-fashioned war had gone for good. In his influential book *The Utility of Force* (2005), General Sir Rupert Smith argued that the future belonged to wars fought among the people: messy, amorphous conflicts in which clear battle lines and clashes of rival armoured forces had no place. Not everyone agreed. In *Another Bloody Century* (also 2005) the late Colin S. Gray argued that the

twenty-first century was likely to be as violent as previous ones, featuring insurgencies and guerrilla wars, certainly, but also state-on-state conflicts, with all that implied.

From today's perspective it is clear which view was the most prescient. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 launched a traditional interstate war fought by armed forces, albeit with sophisticated technology. In the Middle East, the Israel-Hamas

A Ukrainian soldier outside Bakhmut, November 2022



conflict is a “war among the people”, for in truth there was never a binary choice between two distinct types of conflict; just varieties of war. Gray believed that history was a valuable guide to current and future war, and *Conflict* takes a similar approach.

David Petraeus and Andrew Roberts are a formidable team of authors; the former one of the most significant modern US military commanders, the latter a bestselling British historian. As they state, one purpose of the book is to attempt to understand Putin's war, but it is much more than that. Part analytical narrative survey of key wars since 1945, part reflection on the lessons that can be derived from these conflicts, this is an important book with an avowedly didactic purpose.

Russia's decision to go to war in 2022 is the most recent example of the short war illusion - that seizing the initiative allows conflicts to be won quickly and relatively cheaply. Petraeus and Roberts argue that the failure of the Russian offensive demonstrates “how warfare had evolved since the days of Blitzkrieg”, with the tactical pendulum having swung in favour of the defender. An alternative and, in my view, more compelling view is that in 2022 an updated Russian version of “Blitzkrieg” (a problematic term, but useful shorthand for a style of warfighting) would have succeeded if the circumstances had been right. There are some contexts in which short victorious wars can be waged successfully, but only if the odds are stacked in favour of the attacker: greater numbers, superior weaponry, training, tactics, doctrine and morale, better strategy, generalship and staff work, and/or if the defender is poorly organized and deployed. The rapid victories of German forces against French in 1870 and 1940 were based on a number (but not all) of these factors.

However, as Putin has discovered, overestimation of the capabilities of a state's armed forces and underestimation of those of the enemy can lead not to an 1870 or a 1940, but to a 1914, when, after initial success, the invading Germans found themselves locked into a lengthy attritional struggle against France and its allies. In short, had the Russian armed forces been a great deal more capable, and their Ukrainian opponents much feebler, Putin's plan could have succeeded. In 1991 Iraqi forces in Kuwait, described beforehand as “battle-hardened” by some pundits, were swiftly crushed by the US-led coalition's forces in one of the most one-sided military campaigns in history. Operation Desert Storm demonstrated what happens when one side has truly massive superiority in every aspect of fighting power over its enemy. Put simply, there was nothing like that sort of disparity between the capabilities of the armed forces of Russia and Ukraine, and the resolve of Volodymyr Zelensky's government and the Ukrainian people proved equal to the task.

Petraeus and Roberts do an excellent job of explaining how war has evolved since 1945, delving into cyberwarfare, “hybrid warfare”, disinformation, drones and the onward march of robotics and artificial intelligence. There have been three genuine military revolutions since 1914. The first occurred during the First World War, when aircraft, radio and artillery were combined into a weapons system that vastly improved the effectiveness of gunnery, permanently changing the way that armies fight. The introduction of nuclear weapons was the second of these revolutions and the application of computers to warfare the third. Developments in AI and robotics have the potential to transform the conduct of war, although we are not there yet. As the authors say, quoting Max Boot, it is possible to envisage a future in which war will be fought “with Terminator-like machines”.

For all that, there are distinct continuities between wars today and those of the past, revolving around human beings, and it would be rash to bet against this trend continuing in years to come. Petraeus and Roberts are particularly strong on what they call “the central importance of strategic leadership”. Effective strategic leaders, they argue,

“**Napoleon or Alexander the Great would have been at home with General Schwarzkopf's plan**”

UNDER A LARKIN LENS

Your name avows!

Exclusive to Amazon

**PHOENIX
 REVANCHE**

Step aside, Ebenezer.
 This Scrooge is making a killing...

have four tasks. They must understand the situation, formulate what the authors call “big ideas”, then communicate and implement them effectively; and they must “refine and adjust the big ideas” in a continuous virtuous cycle of leadership. It is a compelling case, and Petraeus and Roberts offer a range of political and military figures - a diverse group that includes Mao Zedong, David Ben-Gurion, General Sir Harold Briggs in the Malayan Emergency and the first President Bush - as examples of effective post-1945 strategic leaders. Zelensky makes the cut for this elite, but Putin and his top team are judged to have performed badly in providing strategic leadership.

The authors also recognize that the importance of morale and motivation in war has not changed over the years. Moral factors have always been vital to armed forces. They set British professionals apart from Argentine conscripts in 1982, to pick just one example from this book. For much of the period since 1945 Britain has had the luxury of not having to worry about the attitude of the home front to wars fought by professional troops far from home. (The Troubles in Northern Ireland had the potential to buck this trend, but they are given scant coverage in *Conflict*.) In the case of the US

during the Vietnam War, and in an existential conflict such as Ukraine’s struggle for survival, civilian resilience is all-important. The authors quote with approval Napoleon’s dictum that “the moral is to the physical as three is to one”.

Mention of Napoleon suggests another thread of continuity in warfare in the case studies, which is somewhat underplayed in the book. Many campaigns since 1945 have had a family resemblance to campaigns in the past, both recent and distant. There are only so many operational gambits open to commanders. Desert Storm employed a deep left hook to outflank the Iraqi defences, while frontal assaults pinned the defenders in place, as did the threat of an amphibious landing on the Iraqi right flank. With the obvious exception of the use of air-mobile troops to get behind the enemy positions, a gambit that became possible only with the technological developments of the twentieth century, Napoleon or Alexander the Great would have been at home with General Schwarzkopf’s plan.

A similar point can be made about counter-insurgency. As Petraeus and Roberts tacitly acknowledge, the historical record suggests that a purely military approach may succeed in cowing the

Gary Sheffield is Visiting Professor in the Defence Studies Department of King’s College London. He is writing Civilian Armies: The experience of British and Dominion soldiers in the two world wars

enemy for a period, but is unlikely to result in peace in the long term. Only a twin-track approach that combines military action with an attempt to grapple with the political and social roots of insurgency, to address the grievances that fuel resentment, is likely to bring about genuine peace. As many commentators have suggested, Israel’s operations in Gaza, in response to Hamas’s terrorist attacks, may buy peace (in the sense of halting hostile action against Israeli territory) in the short term. However, the present campaign will store up problems for the future by making a lasting peace - not simply an absence of fighting, but also stability and security - more difficult to achieve.

The book comes with a formidable battery of endorsements from the likes of Henry Kissinger, Sir Hew Strachan and former senior officers from the US and the UK. One online endorsement even claims it is the best book of its sort since Clausewitz’s *On War*. Hyperbole aside, *Conflict* is an intelligent, authoritative, compelling and, above all, timely book. Specialist historians might quibble about the coverage of individual campaigns, but it will serve as an important guide to the bloody century ahead of us. Let us hope that political and military leaders take notice. ■

When all else fails there are gunboats

Britain and China have reversed imperial roles

JOHN KEAY

THE LION AND THE DRAGON

Britain and China: A history of conflict

LAWRENCE JAMES

198pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £22.

IN AN ADMIRABLY SUCCINCT 200 pages, *The Lion and the Dragon* follows the 200 years of Britain’s, and latterly the US’s, fraught relationship with China, from the nineteenth-century Opium Wars to the superpower rivalries of the twentieth century - and the profound resentment of both cultivated by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. It’s not a pretty story, nor perhaps an entirely congenial one for a noted historian of Britain’s imperial adventures such as Lawrence James. Elsewhere empire was about acquiring territory, commandeering its tax yield and exploiting its strategic potential. In China it was all about markets, big business and punitive treaties. Territorial acquisitions were few and small, mostly naval stations (Hong Kong, Weihaiwei), consular enclaves (as up the Yangzi) and the metropolitan concessions that comprised Shanghai.

Engaging with the world’s most populous economy was too good an opportunity to be jeopardized by provocative land grabs and hard-to-reach garrisons. Merchant adventurers preferred the sensational profits to be made from plying the Chinese with opium and cotton fabrics, novelties including the Tilley lamp and the telegraph, then railways, steamships, machine tools, armaments and, of course, crippling levels of debt. To Whigs



“Nemesis destroying Chinese junks in Anson’s Bay” by Edward Duncan, 1841

such as Thomas Babington Macaulay, British Secretary for War in 1841, championing free trade was as worthy a cause as suppressing slavery. No one could reasonably deny China’s 400 million people what he called the “luxuries” to which civilization entitled them; the Celestial Empire of the later Qing dynasty must be roused from its isolationist torpor by the clatter of its own industrial revolution. Commerce, in the words of Rutherford Alcock, one of Shanghai’s first British consuls, was “the true herald of civilization”, “the human agency appointed under a Divine dispensation to work out man’s emancipation from the thralldom and evils of a savage existence”.

Missionaries - French Catholics and American Baptists as much as Anglicans - were as sanguine as the free-traders. Excited by the prospect of history’s greatest-ever mass conversions, whiskered evangelists fanned out into the hinterland to proclaim “the sway of the meek and humble Jesus”. Moral certitude and racial superiority complemented what divine dispensation ordained. Admittedly, the bullying meted out by what James calls “predatory imperialism” was never meek, although to what extent the British were “reluctantly” sucked into the geopolitics of great-power empire-building might be disputed.

Bankers or clerics, the apostles of free trade and mass baptism enjoyed the protection of the British

consulates, their extra-territorial courts “and, when all else failed, gunboats”. For estuarine encounters the gunboats were augmented by the 1841 arrival of a death-dealing paddle steamer. The *Nemesis* had churned its way round Africa from Liverpool to Guangzhou (Canton), bent on demonstrating British invincibility. The Chinese understood paddle wheels and had been incorporating them into their own many-decked rivercraft for centuries; but those were pedaloos, laboriously propelled by the pumping limbs of their numerous crew. The *Nemesis* was classed as a “paddle frigate”. Steel-built throughout, powered by 60-horsepower engines and bristling with cannon, it epitomized the glaring disparity in terms of long-range firepower between the combatants. Junks were summarily sunk, often two at a time; explosive shells and rockets were met with a scatter of arrows and the splutter of antiquated muskets; machineguns mowed down swordsmen and archers alike. In the Guangzhou assault the British fatalities came to fourteen, the Chinese to between 500 and 1,000. “Systematically applied terror was the basis of British strategy”, writes James.

Ultimately this superiority would be challenged less by the Qing forces than by armies composed of recent converts to the millenarian Christianity proclaimed by one Hong Xiuquan, formerly an aspiring Baptist and by 1850 the self-declared “son of God”. Hong’s Taiping (“Heavenly Kingdom”) Rebellion - or “Revolution”, for its social reforms anticipated those of the next century - raged across China for thirteen years. It is thought to have accounted for well over 20 million deaths - more than the First World War, approaching the figure proposed for Mao’s post-Great Leap Forward famine and comfortably exceeding the total fatalities from the nineteenth century’s six decades of intermittent Anglo-Chinese hostilities. In the late 1890s, as Qing China succumbed to rebels and warlords, another uprising, that of the Boxers, found the dowager empress backing the insurgents while the overstretched British accepted support from perennial rivals France and Russia, and future foes Japan and Germany.

With an eye for the telling detail and a masterly grasp of the wider context, the ever-readable Lawrence James is at his best when tracking the seesaw of Sino-British relations during the twentieth century’s world wars. The postwar period brings a more predictable tale of role reversal. Beijing’s cyber supremacy and manufacturing clout now threaten Britannia and her western accomplices with a dose of their own medicine. Markets matter as much as ever, but for a global superpower, so does the retrieval of territory and international respect. A different *Nemesis* awaits. ■

John Keay’s books include Last Post: The end of empire in the Far East, 1997, China: A History, 2008, and Himalaya: Exploring the Roof of the World, 2022

Road to perdition

The Conservative Party faces an end to its political hegemony

MARTIN IVENS

THE PARTY'S OVER

The rise and fall of the Conservatives from Thatcher to Sunak

PHIL BURTON-CARTLEDGE

368pp. Verso. Paperback, £11.99.

THE RIGHT TO RULE

Thirteen years, five prime ministers and the implosion of the Tories

BEN RILEY-SMITH

432pp. John Murray. £25.

THE CASE FOR THE CENTRE RIGHT

DAVID GAUKE, EDITOR

232pp. Polity. Paperback, £15.99.



Rishi Sunak, September 2023

JOHNS RAMSDEN'S INFLUENTIAL STUDY of the Tories, *An Appetite for Power* (1998), identified the Conservative Party's ruthless instinct for ditching failing leaders and inconvenient principles as the key to its success. Five prime ministers and five violent changes of direction since 2016 is, however, surely overdoing it.

Opinion polls indicate that one of the democratic world's most durable political parties is heading towards defeat some time next year, and the only question is over the margin of disaster. The Labour Party, which not long ago looked to be stuck in the permanent doldrums, has become the dull but safe alternative. After an overdose of politics dull but safe is a winning formula.

Phil Burton-Cartledge's *The Party's Over* analyses through the prism of class how the Conservatives survived their "near-death experience" in 1997 to recover power thirteen years later. In his view the party had only "postponed its inevitable demise". Ben Riley-Smith's *The Right to Rule* provides the narrative of Tory decline, fall, rise and fall again, framed by general elections from 2010 onwards. Read together the two books suggest that, in Marxist terms, history does indeed repeat itself: first as farce, second as farce.

The last era of Tory hegemony ended a quarter of a century ago, when voters lost faith in the party's claims to superior economic competence shortly after John Major's 1992 election victory. The pound's disorderly departure from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) - the forerunner of the European single currency - also gave wings to Euroscepticism in the party and country. After that the uncharismatic Major failed to bring to heel the Eurosceptics in his cabinet - "bastards", as he called them - and his leadership was further undermined by a series of backbench rebellions over the Maastricht Treaty. The party was mired in sleaze and trouser-dropping Tory MPs became a staple of comedy.

Rishi Sunak's Conservatives are now travelling down a similar road to electoral perdition. The market turmoil that greeted Liz Truss's "mini-budget" last autumn trashed the party's reputation for financial prudence, probably beyond repair. Truss's tetchy technocratic successor finds it difficult to get a hearing. The UK might prefer a quiet life, but Sunak's party remains noisy and fractious. The prime minister is too moderate for his right wing and too right-wing for his moderates. As Burton-Cartledge sees it, Tory MPs have repeatedly put their narrow class interest first over their long-term survival, notably by rejecting the planning reforms that might have eased the housing crisis for young people and revived the economy. Lockdown parties at No 10 under Boris Johnson, scandals over Covid

contracts and allegations of sexual misconduct against various Conservative MPs - including rape - provide the dismal backdrop. This time round no one is laughing.

If Major waged an absurd "beef war" with Brussels to reassure his right-wing critics that he could get tough on Europe, Sunak proposes to process asylum claims in distant Rwanda in defiance of the courts. The new home secretary, James Cleverly - who seems to have a gift for speaking the truth by accident - is alleged to have described the scheme for which he is now responsible as "batshit". His deputy, Robert Jenrick, however, wants to double down on migration controls. The latest annual figures reached the three-quarters-of-a-million mark.

Major's government had more claim to coherence, and he presided over sustained economic growth. Sunak's prospectus is Austerity Mark II today and tax cuts tomorrow. In his party conference speech in Manchester in October he presented himself as the "change candidate". Weeks later he recalled the former prime minister David Cameron as foreign secretary.

The populist Tory alternative to the current set-up is to fight culture wars, scrap environmental targets and halt "the small boats" carrying illegal migrants to Britain's shores by leaving the European Convention on Human Rights. If the Tories lose the next general election this nativist faction, inspired by Johnson's inroads among former Labour voters in 2019, will stake its claim to the future of the party against the globalist free-traders. Big government nativists would prefer to onshore lost manufacturing industries and end "excessive" dependence on foreign labour to fill jobs in the NHS and social care. Their conservative social principles and defence of the nuclear family echo some of the themes of the Christian right in the US, though their concern for the poor seems genuine. The Tory MP Danny Kruger's *Covenant: The new politics of home, neighbourhood and nation* (2023) is their new bible.

Reading between the lines of Riley-Smith's *The Right to Rule* we see how the party's crisis is one of competence as much as of class. Recent Tory prime ministers had to reconcile the interests of their dwindling but rightward-shifting party membership with those of the wider electorate. And to do that they had to achieve three goals. First, the economy was to be guided to recovery after the financial crisis of 2008. Second, the party was expected to reduce immigration numbers - or, failing that, ministers had to prove that they were in control of secure borders and explain how mass migration brought compensating economic benefits. From Cameron's time onwards the Tories made a series of promises on immigration that they couldn't keep. The stubborn

persistence of hundreds of thousands of job vacancies demonstrates that they have also failed to reform the domestic labour market.

Third, Tory prime ministers had a political imperative to call a halt to the integration of the UK within the European system without tearing up its membership card to the Brussels club. The balance of opinion in the party and then the country had swung to Euroscepticism after the ratification of Maastricht, as it had across the European bloc. Without an apparent victory, Conservative leaders faced revolt from within the party and a right-wing populist challenge at the polls. The Tories hit none of these three targets.

Under Margaret Thatcher and Major the party could boast that the economy grew faster than its continental equivalents. Today Labour asks voters a variant of the Ronald Reagan campaign question: "After thirteen years of Tory government, do you feel better off?" Most voters do not. Following the financial crisis standards of living have suffered. Average weekly earnings, according to the Resolution Foundation, were £612 in 2008. At the end of last summer they were £613. Had they grown at the pre-recession rate they would have been worth £843. Tim Pitt's contribution to *The Case for the Centre Right*, a collection of essays edited by the former treasury minister David Gauke, explains that "on a per capita basis, the UK grew by just seven percent between 2007 and 2022 and labour productivity by just four percent".

The UK's growth and productivity travails "are not simply or even mainly the results of policy failure", argues Pitt. Economic growth has slowed since the 1990s and productivity gains were meagre even before the financial crisis. "This slowdown is common among advanced economies", he adds. (The US seems to be an exception.) The West no longer enjoys the advantage of the postwar baby-boomer generation, who entered the workforce with higher levels of education than their predecessors.

Twelve years into Tory rule, Truss became prime minister convinced that this record was a disaster. Research by the economic historian Nick Crafts (1949-2023) and his colleague Terence Mills bears her out. The UK's productivity slowdown has been the worst since the late eighteenth century. Thatcher's Big Bang deregulation of the City and the information technology revolution have seemingly run their course. But Truss's plan to cut taxes while increasing public spending during a period of market volatility - Reaganomics without the safety net of the dollar reserve currency - broke all the rules. Sunak's remedy is more austerity, eased by a few supply-side reforms. Perhaps AI will ride to the British economy's rescue. Perhaps not.

An influential left-of-centre school of economics blames poor public investment by the Tories for the economy's long-term weakness. All things being equal, Cameron and his chancellor George Osborne's austerity programme - which framed the financial crisis as the outcome of Labour overspending - might have done little damage to growth. But after the financial crisis the economy needed a shot in the arm. Although the government could have borrowed at knockdown interest rates, it failed to invest in infrastructure and housing. In his Mais lecture as chancellor last year Sunak owned up to the country's investment deficit. The right's remedy is supply-side reform, public expenditure restraint and tax cuts.

On the left those such as Burton-Cartledge argue that Tory voters are ageing, and that their illiberal social attitudes are unrepresentative of a younger, better-educated electorate denied the cheap houses, student grants and automatic pension rises lavished on the boomer generation. Demographics, says the author, are against the Conservatives; the young will soon take their revenge. Nonetheless, the author doubts his own wisdom: "No one is getting rich betting against the Tories". Quite. Note how the US Republicans have defied roughly similar trends.

Like their lost leader, Cameron, the authors of *The Case for the Centre Right* believe that their "modernizing" faction - socially liberal but fiscally conservative - is best placed to rule. They argue that

Martin Ivens is the Editor of the TLS

the Brexiteers and the populists had their chance and blew it. So why are they - Cameron's return to office notwithstanding - out of power? Twelve hours before the European referendum vote I bumped into another of *The Case for the Centre Right's* contributors, Andrew Cooper, Cameron's chief pollster and now a board member of a Blairite think tank, Labour Together. Cooper assured me that Remain would win by a double-digit margin. As Riley-Smith makes clear, the modernizers and their "moderate" predecessors never got Europe right.

Michael Portillo, one of Major's "bastards" and a contemporary avatar of socially liberal Toryism, argued in the Noughties that the modernizers were mild Eurosceptics, but were always good club men first. That was the class analysis by a state-school-educated boy of his public-school successors. While some EU members wrung concessions from Brussels, Cameron and his chums played up and played the game.

Riley-Smith writes that Cameron first conceived of a referendum when his veto in 2011 of a euro debt bailout that damaged the interests of the City was bypassed by his European partners. It proved that "UK opposition could be ignored just as the critics claimed". Without a victory to his name Cameron found that his Eurosceptic right wing, along with Ukip, slowly pushed him towards the Brexit door. Cameron's foreign secretary, the former Conservative leader William Hague, interviewed by Riley-Smith, believes that there would have been no need for an in/out referendum had there been a vote on the EU constitutional treaty

negotiated at Lisbon in 2007, saying: "Britain would have voted against the Lisbon treaty, we would have blocked European integration, but we would not then have embarked on trying to leave the EU". Cameron dropped his promise of a referendum on Lisbon after the last remaining hold-out, the Czech Republic, ratified it in November 2009, a few months before Cameron came to power in a coalition government.

From Lisbon to Cameron's renegotiation with Brussels before the Brexit referendum and on to the Brexit departure deal itself, Brussels continually called the Tories' bluff. Cameron never even raised emergency immigration controls with Brussels or the then German chancellor, Angela Merkel, in the midst of the European migrant crisis. Lynton Crosby, the Australian political strategist behind Cameron's outright victory in 2015, urged him to storm out of the talks. "That's not me", replied his boss. "I am a reasonable person." Thatcher, barred from membership of St James's clubs by reason of her sex, was not reasonable. She rudely banged the table until she got her billion-pound rebate back from Brussels. Johnson is not a gentleman and the only rule he observes is to break the rules. Riley-Smith records him telling the Tory conference in October 2019 that Brexit would happen at the end of the month, "come what may". Brussels blinked: "talks were reopened, despite the vehement insistence of EU leaders and Tory critics that changes to [Theresa] May's deal were never going to happen ... Changes emerged". The EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, disputes this.

“
The party's
crisis is one
of competence
as much as
of class

There were other roads not taken. Riley-Smith records that Cameron was advised by Gavin Williamson, his chief parliamentary secretary, and Iain Duncan Smith, a hardline Eurosceptic and former Tory leader, to "do a Harold Wilson": in 1975 the Labour PM made a show of stepping back from active campaigning in the first referendum on European membership, even though he wanted a "Yes" vote. Cameron waved the idea aside. I was in Copenhagen on the day the Danes rejected the Maastricht Treaty, ignoring the advice of every mainstream political party and national newspaper. The Danish prime minister stayed in post, renegotiated his country's terms and got the treaty ratified. Following Brexit Cameron departed abruptly, having ordered the civil service to prepare no Plan B for a Leave vote.

Cameron's best brains, Osborne (a Remainer) and Michael Gove (a Leaver) urged him not to hold an in/out referendum. Other advisers told him to wait a year, until the German and French electoral cycles had played out, so that he could get better terms. He vetoed that plan too. Crosby warned him not to use Project Fear tactics during the campaign, but Osborne publicly threatened an emergency round of cuts and tax hikes in the event of a Leave decision.

Nothing succeeds like respectable failure in the British establishment, hence Cameron's recall as foreign secretary. But the modernizers may still inherit the Earth, despite their record. According to recent research by Tim Bale at Queen Mary University of London, nativists will be disproportionately culled if the Conservatives suffer electoral defeat. The party may only just be beginning for this happy few. ■

Going quiet

A generous portrait of Britain's current prime minister

JAMES O'BRIEN

ALL TO PLAY FOR

The advance of Rishi Sunak

MICHAEL ASHCROFT

528pp. Biteback Publishing. £16.99.

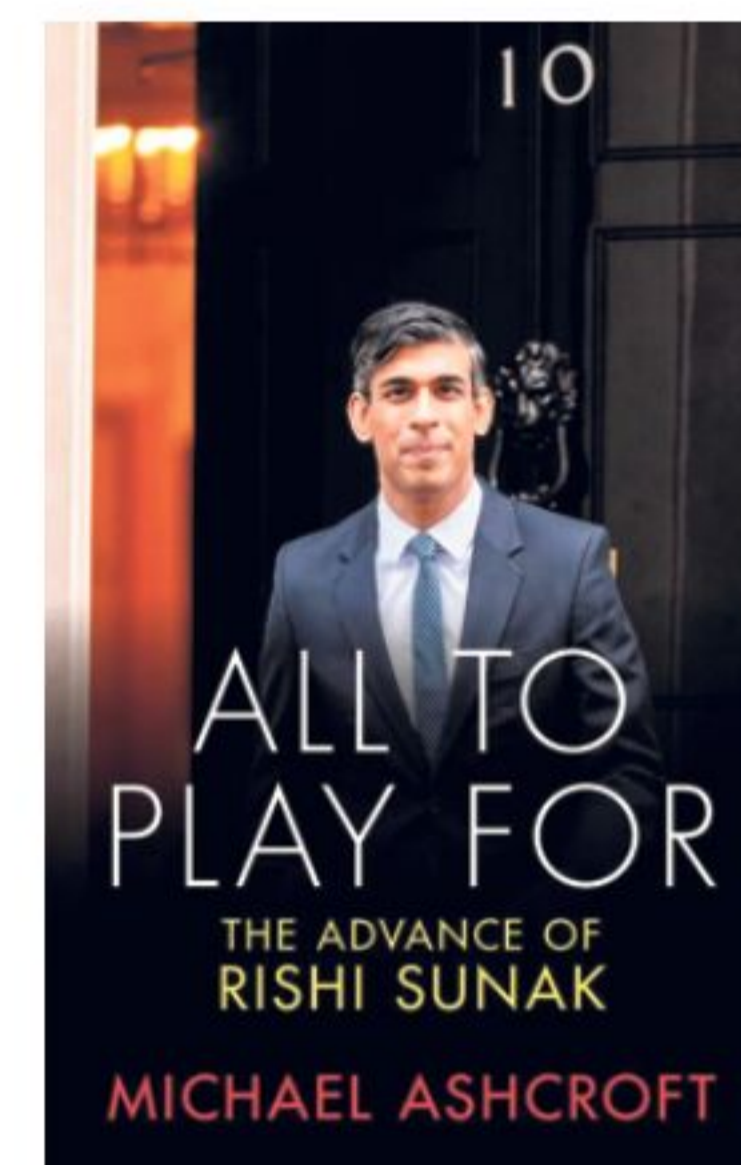
MOVING TARGETS are the hardest to hit, just as political careers still in progress are the hardest to chronicle. In this updated and revised edition of his biography of 2020, *Going for Broke: The rise of Rishi Sunak*, Michael Ashcroft and his researchers rise gamely to the twin challenge of telling an unfinished story while trying to render a dull subject interesting.

That they largely fail is the fault of the author's strained optimism about his party's electoral prospects, an unfeasibly upbeat view of Sunak's personal attributes, and events that unfolded in the weeks between the book's completion and publication - most obviously the way the beleaguered figure cut by the prime minister at the Conservative Party conference in early October contrasted with an ebullient Keir Starmer at the Labour Party one the following week. This juxtaposition is almost fatal to Ashcroft's central thesis that Sunak's personality equips him to see off Starmer in an election that will, he posits, be more "presidential" than any other. It need not, however, detract from the book's other potential strengths: the backstory of a politician who rose almost without trace from obscurity to Downing Street, and the inside story of how the final stage of that journey was accomplished.

I am not sure how much claim Ashcroft can lay to being definitive - his biography of David Cameron

(*Call Me Dave*, 2015) related the now widely discredited tale of the former PM's intimate relations with a pig's head - but he does have a proper crack at exonerating his subject of responsibility for Boris Johnson's defenestration. "Allies" queue up to claim that there was no co-ordination between Sunak and Sajid Javid (then health secretary), whose resignation letters on July 5, 2022, were nine minutes apart. We also learn that Sunak was not motivated by ambition in his rebellion. Instead, we are told, his patience had been exhausted by Johnson's prevarication over the misconduct allegations surrounding the deputy chief whip Chris Pincher, just as his unhappiness about the prime minister he had served as chancellor for two and a half years "advocating tax cuts because the political circumstances dictated it rather than because the economic situation allowed it" suddenly became unbearable. One of Sunak's first acts after becoming prime minister - the reappointment of Suella Braverman as home secretary, six days after she had been forced to resign in disgrace following a security breach - is glossed over here. Presumably that is because it rather undermines the claims of "integrity, professionalism and accountability" that Ashcroft seems keen to claim define Sunak, even as his myriad interviewees and sources fail to define anything akin to "Sunakism".

And this, ultimately, is the obstacle Ashcroft cannot - and could not - overcome. Sunak's hinterland proves too small to have yielded any personal "ideology" and, beyond his subsequent meteoric rise, he is a spectacularly uninteresting subject. He appears, for example, never to have offended *anybody*, or ever to have lost his temper. "If he does feel pissed off", we learn from an adviser, "he just goes quiet." This might well make him a lovely man, as countless colleagues and contemporaries from prep school onwards attest, and perhaps even an exemplary boss, but it is the stuff of a biographer's nightmares. There are 500 pages in this new edition, *All to Play For*, and the only time my jaw came even close to dropping was when Ashcroft revealed that Kuti Miah, who gave the student Rishi a holiday job, "prefers not to use the term 'waiter' in relation to the role Sunak performed, considering it demeaning. Instead, he says, the future PM was more like an "entertainer", whose job was "to ensure diners had a great experience".



Sunak's hedge fund years, under the tutelage of the mercurial investment genius Chris Hohn, provide similarly thin gruel. Ashcroft relates the eye-watering sums of money in play with relish and, as with his subject's graduate job at Goldman Sachs and subsequent MBA at Stanford University, is at great pains to stress how prized the positions achieved by Sunak were. But there is little or no revelation in any of these chapters. Bizarrely, even when Sunak is involved in, or adjacent to, high-octane financial dealings, Ashcroft portrays him as a mild-mannered teddy bear: "It seems unlikely that Sunak took such pleasure in ousting senior figures from their posts: he was of an altogether gentler disposition". He would seem, on this reading, to have been the only hedge funder in history to have made a fortune without ever being ruthless, opportunistic or exceptional.

The family history of both Sunak and his in-laws - the Indian tech billionaires Narayana and Sudha Murty - is fascinating and frequently quite moving, but since it was written Sunak's home secretary has pungently insisted that "multiculturalism has failed", and so soured even this inspiring tale of diasporic achievement. This is, ultimately, the biography of a man and a party leader who Michael Ashcroft desperately wants Sunak to be. He provides so little evidence that his subject deserves the boundless approbation he metes out to him that the book should come with a pair of rose-tinted glasses. Of course, he may yet be proven right. It is still, in spite of everything, all to play for. ■

THE EDWIN MELLEN PRESS

**Emotion in Late Medieval
Jewish Philosophy**

by Dr. Andrew L. Gluck
Hofstra University
ISBN: 978-1-4955-0884-4

Publish your scholarly book with Mellen
peer reviewed

www.mellenpress.com

James O'Brien hosts a radio programme on LBC. His latest book, *How They Broke Britain*, is out now



In the flesh

An exhibition that tells us ‘too little’ about the women in the artist’s life

BREEZE BARRINGTON

RUBENS AND WOMEN

Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, until January 28

ON A VAST, THRONE-LIKE CHAIR sits a young woman. Her posture is straight, her gaze direct. A shimmering white silk gown, intricately embroidered with expensive gold thread, falls in sumptuous folds around her legs and her carefully placed arms reveal reams of gold cloth within capacious sleeves. The sitter’s head seems almost to be perched on a huge starched lace ruff, drawing our attention up to her keen dark eyes, which twinkle in amusement, and her light smile. A pet parrot ruffles its feathers contentedly behind her, but she is elegant, poised. This painting (1606) is of the Marchesa Maria Serra Pallavicino, a wealthy Genoese noblewoman, and it is bursting with symbols of wealth and power. But it is also a very human image. Its subject is not a symbol, but a woman of flesh and blood.

As you walk into *Rubens and Women* at the Dulwich Picture Gallery it is Maria Pallavicino who greets you. This may come as something of a surprise. The title of the show perhaps conjures up ideas of fleshy female nudes and rosy bodies. Though there are plenty of these to be found, the exhibition offers perspectives that confound the Rubenesque stereotype - wives, children and patrons such as Pallavicino. But while these women are found throughout, they are certainly not the focus, and it seems a shame that they don’t play more of a role in shaping the exhibition just as they shaped Rubens’s artistic career. Instead the exhibition is arranged around the types of work that Rubens produced - portraits, religious scenes, classical scenes, large-scale works. As a result it often feels as if the images of women are there as a vehicle to tell a traditional story about Rubens the artist, rather than being the focus themselves: they appear, but little information is given about who they were. Indeed, near the entrance stands a self-portrait, a study for a frieze

commissioned for the Cappella Maggiore of the Jesuit Church in Mantua, in which Rubens audaciously chose to insert himself. Though his is not the first image you see as you enter the gallery rooms, it is the first in the layout of the exhibition: he is the focus.

Hanging on the other side of the wall, facing the self-portrait, we meet another patron, Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia (1615), who co-ruled the Habsburg Netherlands (where Rubens was from) with her husband, Albert, and acted as regent after his death. Something of a fashion icon in her youth, she later joined a lay order of St Francis, and here, exuding intelligence and reserve, she stares directly at the viewer from the shroud of her nun’s habit.

In Isabella’s later years Rubens worked not just as her painter, but as a diplomatic agent and adviser, as he did for Marie de’ Medici, who like Isabella had been queen (the second wife of Henri IV of France) and then regent. The profile sketch of Marie included in the second room was most likely a study for Rubens’s Medici cycle: twenty-four enormous canvases totalling 292 square metres, which now hang in their entirety at the Louvre. They were commissioned for Marie’s new home, the Palais du Luxembourg, when, after years of conflict with her eldest son, Louis XIII, she returned to the French court. The paintings act as a panegyric and an assertion of power after her reconciliation. As a scion of the Medici dynasty, she understood how to deploy art in the power politics of the day, and Rubens was the ideal person to execute such a feat. Yet the studies of both queens capture transitional moments, full of intimacy and private thought.

But the greatest moments of intimacy lie in Rubens’s sketches of his wives and his beloved daughter, Clara Serena, who appears in a movingly tender portrait completed (perhaps posthumously) in the year of her death. The face of Rubens’s second wife, Helena Fourment, recurs throughout the exhibition. They married when she was sixteen and Rubens fifty-three, though this was not unusual for the time. The marriage appears to have been a happy one: Helena married again after his death,

“The Birth of the Milky Way” by Peter Paul Rubens, 1636-8

“The greatest moments of intimacy lie in Rubens’s sketches of his wives

Breeze Barrington is a freelance writer and cultural historian. Her first book, The Graces, about Maria of Modena and communities of female learning at the Jacobite court, is forthcoming

but expressed a wish to be buried beside Rubens rather than her second husband. It is well known that her face haunts the paintings the artist made during their years together. Here she is “Hagar in the Desert” (after 1630), one of “The Three Graces” (1635) and a seated nude. Though she is unlikely to have posed for these works - it would have been far beyond the bounds of propriety for her to pose naked, even for her husband - hers is demonstrably the figure to which he was drawn in his late art.

The middle rooms take us through sketches, experiments and preparatory works for large-scale mythological paintings and religious altarpieces. They detail modes of working, techniques and influences: a Roman sculpture of a “Crouching Venus”, a pencil sketch of Michelangelo’s sculpture “Night”. There are many treasures here. A “Study for a Mary Magdalene” depicts a woman hunched over, arms tightly around her, her face full of anguish. A few deft strokes of the pencil suggest hair cascading around her face, blended white chalk and shadow along her back accentuate her vulnerability and her nakedness. It is one of the most moving pieces in the entire display.

While the exhibition emphasises that Rubens represented women as real people - that he built up close relationships with them - what we in fact see are these women as subject to Rubens’s male gaze. Perhaps this is unavoidable: after all, it is the painter through whom these women come down in history. Yet the tensions remain: between wanting to meet the work on its own terms and wanting to claim Rubens for feminism; between an exhibition about women and an exhibition about the depiction of women.

The catalogue fills in some of these gaps, though it too grapples with these inconsistencies. Where the exhibition tells us little about the women in Rubens’s life, the catalogue overstates their roles. It provides useful background material and supports some aspects of the show. It blends biography of the artist with contextual information about the world he lived in and the role women played in his life. Its fascinating discussion of Rubens’s mother, Maria, a capable and emotionally resilient woman who held the family together under difficult circumstances, shows how much a woman could achieve within the constraints of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century patriarchy. But the further lament that she has been consigned to history as “a supporting actor” seems at odds with the case made for her.

The final room, made up of paintings from classical subjects, provides the kind of feast-for-the-senses celebration of fleshiness with which Rubens is so often associated. This is a room that exudes opulence and plenty - each painting is bountiful in terms of the story told, the food depicted, in its execution and grandeur. Four towering canvases plunge us into the world of goddesses and nymphs. “Diana and her Nymphs” (1636-7) return from the hunt, laden with spoils; “Venus, Mars and Cupid” (mid-1630s, part of Dulwich’s permanent collection) are captured in a new light; three nymphs sit in a pastoral landscape laden with fruit. But it is “The Birth of the Milky Way” (1636-8) that steals the show. It was just one part of Rubens’s largest commission - sixty enormous canvases depicting scenes from mythology - but it is no less impressive as a standalone work. Juno (who looks remarkably like Helena Fourment) seems to float in the starry night sky. Her pink, fleshy body is illuminated in the centre of the canvas. She is the Rubenesque nude par excellence.

Powerful women, interesting women, important women, were everywhere, and including them in the history that they were a part of is paramount, but *Rubens and Women* does this both too little and too much. We do not need to say that women were the most important thing to Rubens in order to demonstrate that they were important, though at the same time it would help to say more about who they were in their own right. It is in the more nuanced moments of *Rubens and Women* that the work, the man and the women can speak for their exceptional selves. ■

Dance until you drop

Powell and Pressburger's tribute to art as a form of possession

MURIEL ZAGHA

THE RED SHOES: BEYOND THE MIRROR

BFI Southbank, London, until January 7

THE BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE is marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's extraordinary dance film *The Red Shoes* with an exhibition held at its Southbank site, co-curated by Claire Smith and Sue Prichard, and designed by Simon Costin. *The Red Shoes* takes its inspiration from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale from 1845 about a young girl who puts on enchanted red shoes that eventually dance her to her death. The film, released in 1948 and set in the world of ballet, gives the story another turn of the screw. The heroine, aspiring dancer Victoria Page (Moirá Shearer), is discovered by the impresario Boris Lermontov (Anton Wallbrook) of the Ballet Lermontov, inspired respectively by Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. The action moves from Covent Garden to Monte Carlo, where the newly promoted prima ballerina Page creates the main role in a new ballet, "The Red Shoes", inspired by the Andersen story.

Meanwhile, Page experiences an increasingly insurmountable tension between her desire to excel as a dancer and her love for the composer Julian Craster (Marius Goring). She leaves the ballet to marry Craster and share with him an ordinary life, but later, under the spell of Lermontov, returns to the company to reprise her role in "The Red Shoes". The film displays all the trademark dazzling qualities of the Powell-Pressburger partnership: visual wit, delight in artifice, a strangeness that often borders on surrealism, a feeling of feverish, compressed energy. What marks it out as different within the Powell-Pressburger oeuvre is its focus on art and performance as forms of possession. Throughout there is a blurring between life and art, between reality and the stage, between Page's commitment to dance and the legend of the Andersen fairy shoes, until eventually Page finds that the red shoes will not allow her to stop dancing and continue to live.

The plight of the performer is central to the story. This inspired the curator Sue Prichard to frame the exhibition around Moira Shearer, focusing less on the towering creative duo of Powell and Pressburger and more on the journey of a young dancer, then a principal at Sadler's Wells, as she crossed over into the world of film-making aged twenty-two. "Such a day for us - but what a day for Moira", wrote the film's publicist Vivienne Knight in her Monte Carlo location diaries. "Really fairy tale stuff. She stepped off the plane as if she flew every day and was whirled by fast car to lunch in Nice surrounded by fellow artistes, excitement and balloons." Shearer's journey from ingenue to assured screen actor is reflected in the film in her character's gradual transformation from raw, fresh-faced debutante into the otherworldly painted idol of her last performance.

For the curator Claire Smith, a celebration of *The Red Shoes* presented an opportunity to "activate the collection" and bring out of the archives a wealth of material, some of which is on show for the first time. There are also loans from private collections, which include delights such as a wonderful letter from Shearer's archive written by her fellow actress Anna Neagle, asking Shearer to kindly return her feather boa because she wishes to strangle Errol Flynn with it. There is also, from Martin Scorsese's Collection, a pair of the red ballet shoes worn by Shearer in the film - it's a surprise to learn, in view of her muscular presence as a dancer, that these are only a size 3.



It can't have been easy to stage such an ambitious show in a cramped space that is not designed for it, but there is much to see. The visit begins with a preliminary walkway that explains the prehistory of the film: Alexander Korda's original project (1937-9) for a screen adaptation of the Andersen story starring Merle Oberon, "She Had to Dance", which was abandoned. Once inside the main exhibition space there are many artfully displayed photographs, posters, costumes and props. There is also a fascinating opportunity to see part of the sketch reel of the film's *pièce de résistance*, "The Ballet of the Red Shoes", a fifteen-minute ballet-on-film sequence that plays out the Andersen story. Choreographed by Robert Helpmann to a score composed by Brian Easdale, with Shearer, Helpmann and Léonide Massine in the star parts, the ballet had its own pictorial script, imagined by the art director Hein Heckroth and executed in the sketches of the artist Ivor Beddoes. More than 500 colour paintings were produced and later narrowed down to a set of key drawings that were photographed and synchronised, bar by bar and frame by frame, to Easdale's score. This was then translated into live action by the dancers, and as each sequence was filmed, the editor Reggie Mills replaced the paper pictures with live performance until the complete ballet emerged.

Across the room from the sketches "The Ballet of the Red Shoes" sequence is screened, reflected in a mirror, itself framed, theatrically, by a replica of the ballet's shoemaker's shop window. The story deals with the creation of a work of art. "The raw material is the body of a dancer", Powell wrote about the centrality of the ballet sequence, which he considered "the reason for the whole film". During the dance Shearer's character enters a sort of performing trance, a dream world where, in the words of Knight: "to her the audience becomes a vast sea and Lermontov a rock against which the waves dash". Some of this hallucinatory quality is expressed in Simon Costin's ghostly apparitions of the red shoes, rotating on a plinth, which punctuates the ballet sequence. The designer has also recreated Page's glamorous dressing table at the Monte Carlo theatre, covered with cosmetics of the period, fragrant with greasepaint and a magnet for selfie takers.

The exhibition acknowledges the debt owed to Shearer and the film by Kate Bush's album *The Red Shoes* (1993) and by Matthew Bourne's ballet adaptation of 2016, which starred Ashley Shaw as

A storyboard design for *The Red Shoes* by Ivor Beddoes

“**Anna Neagle asked Shearer to kindly return her feather boa because she wished to strangle Errol Flynn with it**”

Muriel Zagha is a freelance writer and broadcaster on the visual arts

Page and brought Powell and Pressburger's story together with the music of Bernard Herrmann. In contemporary cinema the idea of performance as obsession as incarnated in *The Red Shoes* has become rare, though there are a few exceptions, perhaps most notably Damien Chazelle's first feature film, *Whiplash* (2014), in which a perfectionistic young jazz drummer is driven to inhuman feats of excellence by his teacher, a Lermontov figure played with satanic intensity by J. K. Simmons. In the relentless beat of the drumsticks, the excruciating quest for the perfect tempo, there is an echo of Lermontov's words to his protégée: "Time rushes by, love rushes by, life rushes by, but the red shoes go on." ■

ABR
AUSTRALIAN BOOK REVIEW

Australia's leading magazine of books and ideas



Digital subs from \$10 a month

Calibre Essay Prize
Worth \$10,000
Three prizes
Closes 22 January 2024

australianbookreview.com.au

The Nazis, and all that jazz

A collage of memory from a Second World War adolescence

JANE YAGER

**AN ORDINARY YOUTH
WALTER KEMPOWSKI**

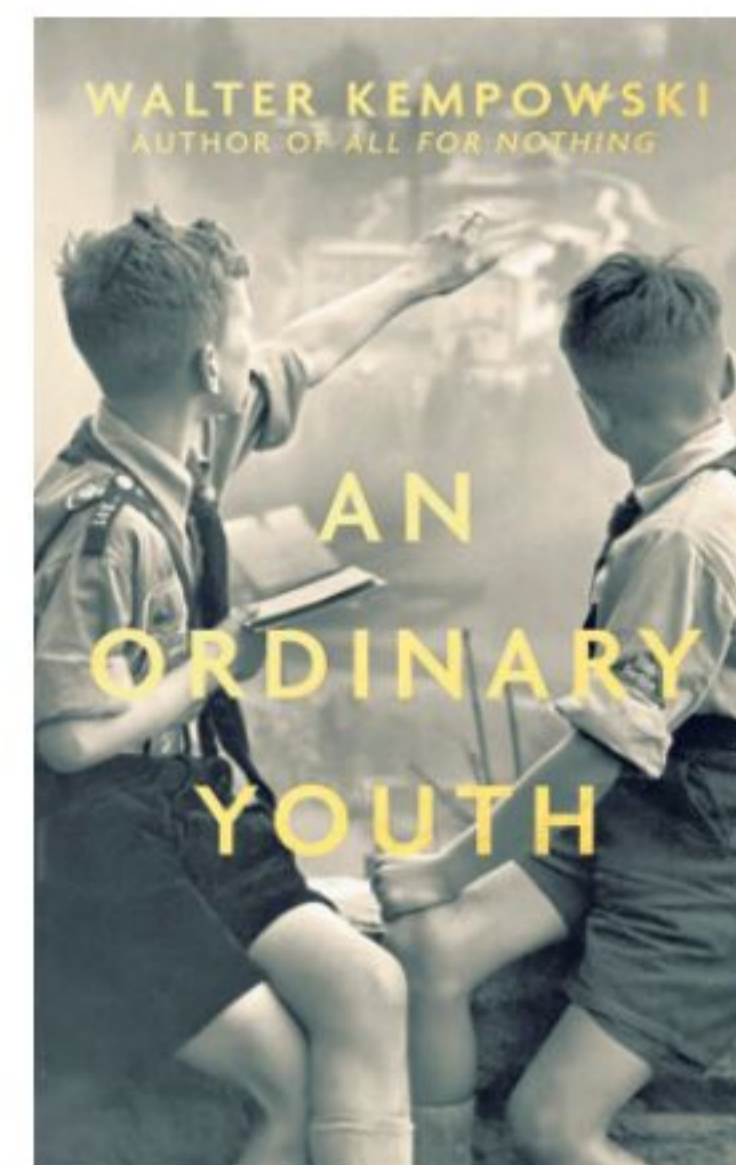
Translated by Michael Lipkin
480pp. Granta. £18.99.

THE GERMAN WRITER Walter Kempowski's autobiographical novel *An Ordinary Youth* (*Tadellöser & Wolff*, 1971) opens in the Baltic port city of Rostock in 1938. The nine-year-old narrator, also named Walter, is the youngest of three children in a bourgeois family, living a life of comfortable routine. On Sundays the children stroll through the city with their father, who owns a shipping company, while their mother bastes the roast at home. But the veneer of normalcy is thin, with signs of impending war at every turn: the children's concerts in the city park have a military theme, Walter's teacher is "always talking about war being glorious and the foxhole being a sacred site", and Walter's father broods obsessively on military history. The only counterpoint to this drumbeat comes from Walter's older brother Robert, a jazz enthusiast who buys banned swing records from second-hand shops and is a part of the rebellious *Swingjugend* ("swing youth") counterculture reviled by the Nazis. By the time the book concludes in

1945, more than 400 pages later, the war has eviscerated any trace of the ordinary in Walter's youth.

Walter Kempowski was born in Rostock in 1929 to a family much like the one described here. He became one of postwar Germany's most acclaimed writers, drawing on his own experiences in a vast body of work that reckoned with the Nazi past through the lives of everyday Germans. *An Ordinary Youth* was to become the first book in Kempowski's *Deutsche Chronik* (German Chronicle), a nine-volume series published in the 1970s and 1980s. In subsequent volumes he moved backwards from *An Ordinary Youth* into his family history, and forwards into the postwar era. The series alternated these autobiographical books with what Kempowski called *Befragungsbücher*, each volume of which comprised a collage of the answers given by hundreds of ordinary Germans to a provocative historical question ("Did you ever see Hitler in person?", "Did you know what was happening?" - i.e. the Holocaust). Kempowski pushed further into the literary technique of collage in his final major work, *Das Echolot* (Echo Soundings; see *TLS*, August 23 & 30, 2019), published in ten volumes between 1993 and 2005. Conceived as a kaleidoscopic "collective diary", it compiles a colossal array of material relating to Germans' experiences during the war, gathered over decades: photographs, journals, letters, memories. Kempowski strikingly eschews any editorial voice, presenting this material without comment.

An Ordinary Youth demonstrates the author's early interest in collage. It is arranged in small vignettes that feel like a montage of fragments of Walter's world: advertising slogans and song lyrics mingle with scraps of dialogue, brief descriptions of objects and places, and signs posted in public places ("Swing dancing prohibited!"). Quotes often go unattributed, leaving the impression that they emanate from a sort of collective voice of the grown-up world. While Kempowski never trivializes the gravity of his subject matter, there is a lightness to his narration, a wit in the tension between the child narrator's keen observations of the world and his limited capacity to interpret them. The book strikes an unusual balance between precise detail



“
The world that Walter observes has many varieties of complicity. A few characters are fervent Nazis; most, however, are ambivalent

Jane Yager is a writer and translator based in Berlin

and the dreamlike texture of childhood recollected from a great distance.

The world that Walter observes has many varieties of complicity. A few characters are fervent Nazis; most, however, are ambivalent, muddled, grasping for justifications for their choices. These include Walter's mother, who wants her Danish son-in-law to know that, just because she is German, it doesn't mean she is a Nazi, yet who reacts defensively to criticism of Hitler. Forced to join the Hitler Youth, Walter rebels against the organization's expectations and is punitively transferred to its "remedial" wing. A leader lists Walter's transgressions: "your hair is always too long, you're never at service, you've been sitting in the jazz club and at the café, eating mousse". Youth jazz culture itself becomes an ambiguous character. At some points the *Swingjugend* seem genuinely subversive of Nazi ideology, at others as if they are frivolously guzzling desserts while horrors unfold around them.

The jazz music of Kempowski's youth is also an artistic influence that shows in his writing style: there is the improvisational energy in his narrative collage, his playful weaving of found pieces of language into his own composition. In the original German, the book riffs on language constantly. Even its title, *Tadellöser & Wolff*, is an invented phrase unique to the private language of Kempowski's family. Because of its heavy use of such wordplay the book was long considered "untranslatable"; in creating an anglophone version of it, Michael Lipkin has at many points had to act as an interpreter, making the translation itself an additional layer in the collage. Although much of the wordplay has inevitably been lost, Lipkin should be applauded for his suppleness and preparedness to riff on the original rather than sticking slavishly to it.

Walter Kempowski cited Walter Benjamin's notion of literary montage and Benjamin's corresponding principle, "I have nothing to say, only to show", as an inspiration for his work. Throughout *An Ordinary Youth* the author presents the narrator's experiences without comment, often to uncomfortable effect. Refusing easy resolution, he leaves readers to dwell in the discomfort of his collage of memory. ■

So many parties!

A diplomat's wife reflects on the early years of the Vietnam War

ALICE JOLLY

**ABSOLUTION
ALICE MCDERMOTT**

368pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.

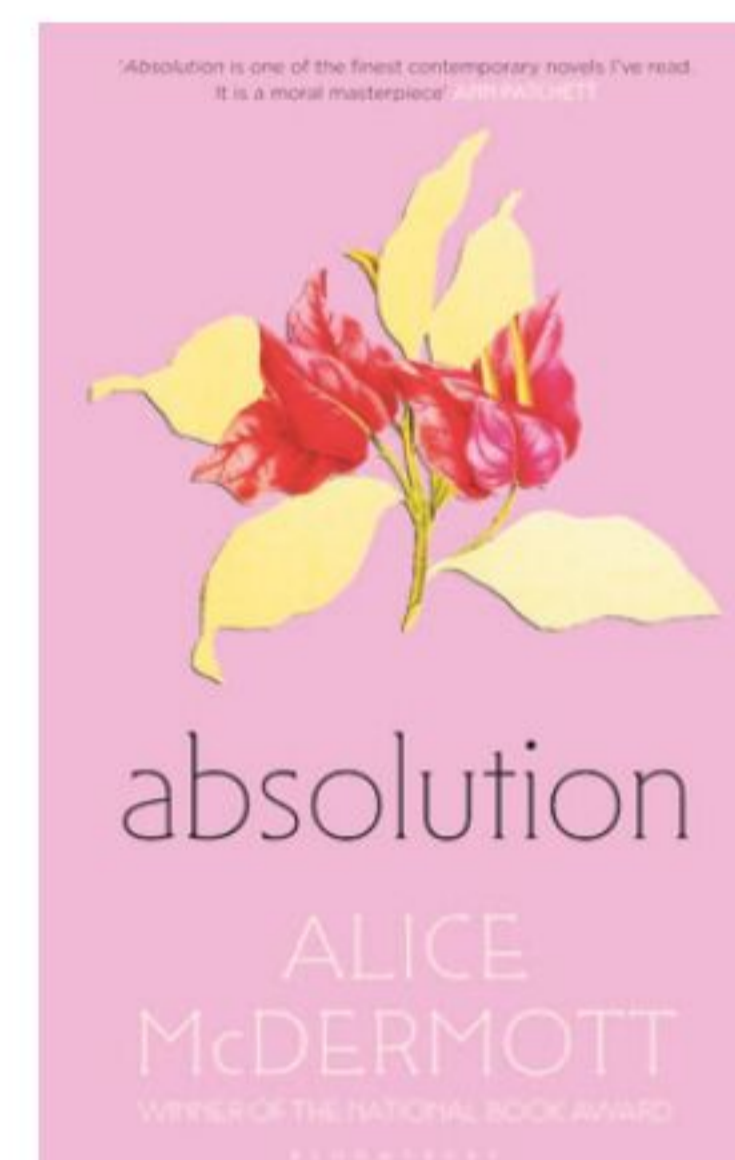
THE AMERICAN NOVELIST Alice McDermott won the National Book Award for her novel *Charming Billy* (1997) and she has been a Pulitzer prize finalist three times. She now returns with a dazzling new novel that illuminates the many and varied moral ambiguities of the US's disastrous attempts to "save" Vietnam from communism.

Absolution opens in 1963, when the twenty-three-year-old Tricia and her husband, Peter, arrive in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) in the early years of the Vietnam War. Tricia soon meets Charlene, a seasoned corporate wife, who is both "feral and regal". Charlene is beautiful, clever and controlling, but also deliciously frank and often kind. In a novel of many beautifully drawn characters, Charlene undoubtedly stands out; but it is Tricia - shy, innocent, out of her depth - who narrates most of the events. She has decided to write her story because, sixty years after her sojourn in Vietnam, she has been contacted by Charlene's daughter. Charlene, we learn, has died, and her daughter is left with questions.

For the young Tricia, Vietnam is an exotic adventure, a "grand fun house". (She has seen Walter Lang's film *The King and I* four times.). She is soon initiated into a world of pretty dresses and afternoons by the pool: "There were so many cocktail parties in those days". This is a Vietnam that "was nothing at all like what it would become".

McDermott's narrative structure allows her to highlight the stark difference between what Tricia saw then and what she now understands. At the time no one mentioned "the distant thudding of artillery we could hear from the other side of the river, even in those days". The Americans' lawns "could have been straight out of suburban Westchester", never mind that the garden walls were crowned by barbed wire. Vietnamese Communists may be "taking potshots at our boys", but young Tricia feels sure that Peter can understand Vietnam because "he had taken two semesters of world religion at Fordham".

Yet the older Tricia stresses: "I was walking on air in those days, but I was not an airhead". Her younger self feels uncomfortable about having a maid, a driver and a gardener, and she sees how "the cocoon in which American dependents dwelled was still polished to a high shine by our sense of ourselves and our great, good nation". Her friendship with Charlene is uneasy. Charlene wants



Alice Jolly's novel *Mary Ann Sate, Imbecile* was runner-up for the *Rathbones Folio* prize in 2019

to help people "born in countries which simply could not measure up", and she identifies Tricia as "a girl of lesser means who would be reflexively - genetically - disposed to do for her whatever she asked". Soon Tricia is busy helping Charlene with her prettily arranged "baskets of cheer".

The distribution of these baskets involves visits to hospitals and eventually to a leper colony outside the city. After this visit, which falls two-thirds of the way through the novel, the narrative thread is taken over by Charlene's daughter. The reader is initially wrong-footed - who wants to hear about contemporary America rather than 1960s Vietnam? - but it soon becomes clear that the apparent drop in narrative tension is a considered part of McDermott's pitch-perfect control of pace and revelation. As the daughter's questions are unwrapped, the darker aspects of Charlene's "goodness" emerge. In a novel of brilliantly uncomfortable scenes, McDermott saves the best until last.

In the end no one is absolved. The older Tricia suggests that Charlene sought only "inconsequential good". She also acknowledges that she herself had "no impulse to shout back at the gobbling whirlwind ... to do more than [was] reasonable about the chaos in the world". Yet still the question remains: is a "white saviour" better than no saviour at all? By using the lives of these two women, who are entirely peripheral to the Vietnam War, to illuminate the grubbiness, moral confusion and arrogance of the US approach to Southeast Asia, Alice McDermott also reveals that, while we may be good at looking after our own families, our compassion too often falters when we are faced with the needs of those in the wider world. ■

Tales of what might have been

A collector of his own past comes up against his present

BEN HUTCHINSON

THE ARCHIVE OF FEELINGS
PETER STAMM

Translated by Michael Hofmann
192pp. Other Press. Paperback, £15.99
(US \$15.99).

THE SWISS NOVELIST Peter Stamm has built an international reputation as an author of subtle, psychologically astute novels. Quietly, almost imperceptibly, he pilots his protagonists inwards, towards an iceberg of emotion, identifying – and ultimately shattering – the frozen feelings that lie under the surface of even the best-ordered lives. At what cost, he asks, do we repress our desires and instincts? At what cost do we lie to ourselves?

The protagonist of *The Archive of Feelings* (*Das Archiv der Gefühle*; TLS, April 15, 2022) is an unnamed archivist. Having lost his job at a newspaper, he lives in his late mother's house, where he occupies his days tending to his private archive of quirky ephemera (sample entry: “The Sounds of

Water”). The conceit may sound Borgesian, yet the tone is anything but; more obsessive-compulsive than exuberant and playful, Stamm's narrator asserts control for fear of having none. Defiantly analogue in a digital age, he prefers to collect life's clippings rather than to live it.

The archivist's emotional clock, it gradually becomes clear, was stopped forty years ago by his unrequited feelings for his classmate Franziska. Having gone on to become the pop star Fabienne, Franziska has hovered over all his subsequent attempts at relationships, an unattainable, unrealistic icon of what his life might have been. The plot, such as it is, intersperses the archivist's reduced current life with reminiscences of their (almost) relationship forty years earlier: tales of meaningful near-misses punctuate the narrative. For all his apparent attempts at control it is in his imagination that the narrator comes most alive, as when Franziska suddenly appears next to him walking through the Swiss valleys, only to disappear as quickly as she came. Real emotion cannot compete with its archived avatar.

The pathos of the past conditional, the saddest of all tenses, thus comes to dominate the narrator's story. What might have been, had he been bolder? Could he have lived a happier, fuller existence? His whole way of life – curating his archive, living in his parents' untouched house – is designed “to oppose the passing of time, not to permit oneself to be washed away with the flood of change”. Franziska, before she became Fabienne, embodies the narrator's prelapsarian sense of the immortality of youth: “Time seemed to be so abundant back then, it was as though there was no time”. Veering between flat, affectless narration and moments of sudden lyricism, Stamm's prose (ably translated by Michael Hofmann) mirrors this sense of two competing timelines.

As the narrative progresses and Franziska reappears in the archivist's present life, the boundaries between the existence and imagination begin to



Ben Hutchinson is German Editor at the TLS. His most recent book, On Purpose: Ten lessons on the meaning of life, was published this year

blur. Memories of past relationships fade, to be replaced by half-remembered, half-hearted imitations of emotion, forever overshadowed by the one that got away. In truth it is not clear that Franziska was ever a serious prospect for the protagonist, and at times he is lucid enough to acknowledge as much: “There may be a pattern here or there, but that's an illusion, just like the shape one can make out in the clouds, and which says more about our fear of formlessness than about the condition of the world”. In both philosophical and emotional terms Stamm's narrator is an idealist, always disappointed by the messy, intractable reality of human relations.

By the end of the story his private friend Franziska has morphed into the public figure Fabienne. While it is increasingly hard to know whether the narrator is merely imagining what he relates, the change in name suggests that their relationship has shifted and that the present has finally overtaken the past. Fabienne's closing question – “Are you leading a good, self-determined life?” – brings the story's emotional development to its climax. If the implicit answer is that he has not been, the bitter truth is that his aloofness was self-imposed.

Perhaps, though, Stamm's protagonist, like all his protagonists, simply lived the life he could. The self-pity of the past conditional lures us into thinking that things might have been otherwise, when very often they could not have been. Fiction can offer counterfactual narratives, but it can also teach us to counter narratives with facts. “What people ‘could have done’ is mainly what they've in fact done”, writes Henry James in his story “The Middle Years” (1893). The midlife crisis – on which *The Archive of Feelings* offers a subtle variation – pivots on this sense of thwarted possibility, but it can also allow us to realize that, for better or worse, we create our own possibilities. In the words of Mary Garth in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: “Might, could, would – they are contemptible auxiliaries”. Perhaps, as we grow older, we should archive those auxiliaries. ■

Must you remember?

A Platonic dialogue of youth, age, erasure and art

JAMES CAHILL

BLACKOUTS
JUSTIN TORRES

320pp. Granta. £14.99.

“DO YOU EVER IMAGINE stories to yourself so that you forget where you are?” The narrator of Justin Torres's second novel, a laconic fable about the need to forget and the will to remember, finds this question in a psychological test and cuts it out. It could easily be the epigraph of the novel at large, in which stories accumulate like the fragments of a riddling collage.

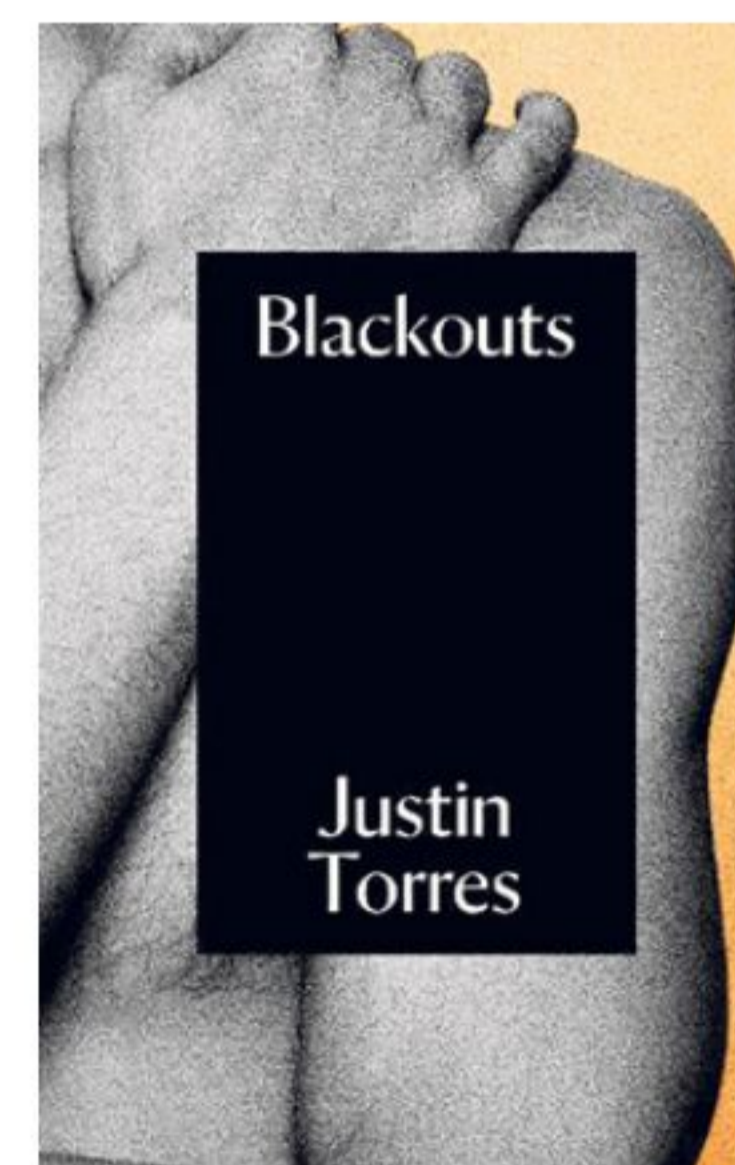
For much of the book two characters – a nameless young man (the narrator) and an old man called Juan Gay – are alone together in a room. The narrator first met Juan years earlier, when he was eighteen and staying in a psychiatric unit, and he has come to find Juan – and to care for him as he dies – in a desolate institutional building, “the Palace”, on the edge of the southwestern desert. The narrator has suffered, we come to learn, from debilitating blackouts, or *ataques*, that may – or may not – have a cultural (specifically, Puerto Rican) derivation. Each character talks about his own life and those of others – partly to forget and partly to excavate himself. “In the Palace”, the narrator observes, “it had come to feel as if life itself might be misplaced.”

The semblance of a story builds tentatively. The Puerto Rican Juan Gay is like a figure in silhouette, heard more than seen – a pensive, mirthful presence

rather than an active character. The dialogue between Juan and the narrator is the book's main act, out of which other tales spiral. Their exchanges have the feel of a modern-day Platonic dialogue – ingenuous, archly wise, erotic. Youth and old age spar affectionately, swapping roles. Among their shared fixations is the story of Jan Gay, a real-life lesbian activist and researcher whom Torres folds into the fictional fabric of *Blackouts*, imagining her to have transiently “adopted” Juan when he was a young boy.

Torres conjures dialogue and incident with crisp brevity. No single episode or exchange is longer than a few pages. The novel takes shape out of stroboscopic flashes and, while these brim with feeling – whether humour or nostalgia or quiet outrage – one longs at times for a more sustained sequence. Still, the sense of syncope (of an interceding blank, like a cinematic fade) has an unassailable thematic logic. The exchanges between the narrator and Juan, in particular, acquire the floating, fitful quality of a dialogue of the mind with itself. Is this a memory or present-tense reality? A dream? And how far is the narrator a fictional double of the author? Torres confronts – perhaps deflects – these questions in a postscript: “I never tried to tell the truth on anyone”.

The two main characters are ventriloquist, channeling each other, their voices occasionally hard to distinguish. Torres's authorial presence, too, is palpable without being intrusive. Images punctuate the text – found photographs that lift us from the interlayered realities of the novel in the manner of diagrams or signposts, albeit with none of the same explicatory force. Many are heavily redacted pages



James Cahill's first novel, Tiepolo Blue, was published in 2022

from *Sex Variants: A study of homosexual patterns* (1941), the surviving portions of this collection of medical case studies forming their own elliptical – and gently humorous – poems of sexual compulsion. The redacted volume is depicted within the narrative. It is the book to which Jan Gay contributed – or surrendered – much of her pioneering research into sexual difference, and Juan (the custodian of her story) is the owner of the blacked-out copy.

“Juan had taught me to laugh at the past”, the narrator admits, “to laugh at my own tendency toward pathos. He modelled a kind of droll humor for me.” *Blackouts* is able both to inhabit and to break out of the solemn-sincere register that characterizes much gay fiction – to meander freely in tone and mood. The characters tease each other and themselves, just as the book undercuts (without undoing) its own gravity. “Darling, the only thing anyone should be embarrassed about is taking themselves too seriously”, Juan quips in one of his more Wildean moments. “Anyway, isn't that what mystery is? Your blackouts, these erasures? Frustration as art?”

Hamlet's pained demand, “Must I remember?”, is ever-present beneath the minimalist verbal surface, as are numerous other literary and artistic reverents. (Endnotes make many of these explicit). But Justin Torres's prose remains free of showy erudition. This may have something to do with the character of the narrator – an ingénue and an initiate. “And my, what dumb guile I have”, he says with fairy-tale archness in the final scene – a parody of Narcissus meeting his reflection. It is the strongest, strangest moment in a novel that excels at emblematic concision. ■

The world was not enough

A Jewish intellectual who fused the secular with the sacred

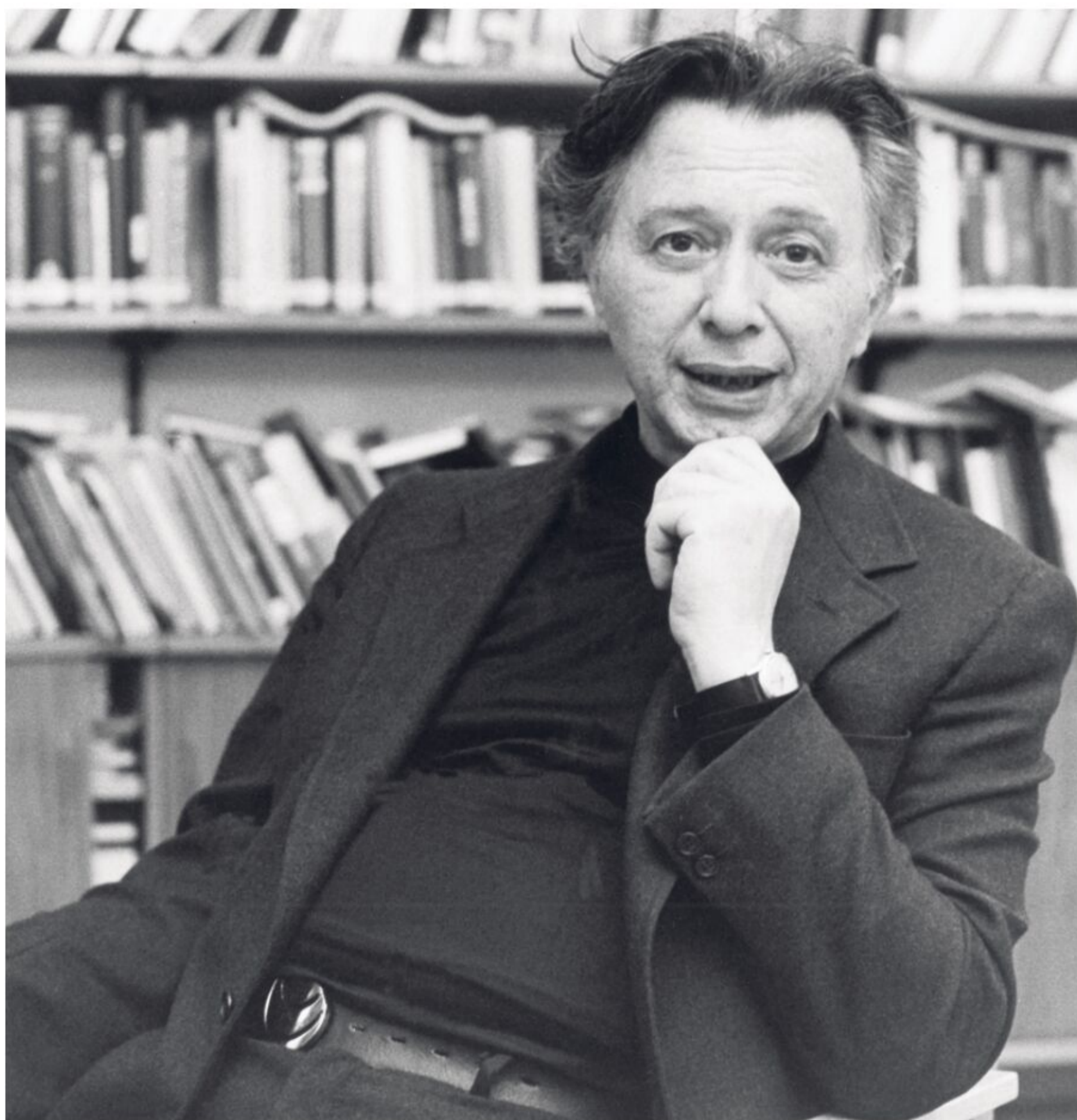
EUGENE R. SHEPPARD

PROFESSOR OF APOCALYPSE

The many lives of Jacob Taubes

JERRY Z. MULLER

656pp. Princeton University Press. £35 (US \$42).



Jacob Taubes, 1978

JACOB TAUBES (1923–87) is now best known for *The Political Theology of Paul*, posthumously published in German in 1993. His portrayal of the apostle Paul as a radical Jew inspired a number of scholars, from Daniel Boyarin to Giorgio Agamben, to reassess this first-century religious figure, regarding him as the key to modern political transformation. In his lifetime, however, Taubes only published one full book, his doctoral dissertation *Abendländische Eschatologie* (1947; *Occidental Eschatology*, 2009). How, then, did he attain such influence?

Much of Taubes's life and legacy developed through encounters with a remarkable set of thinkers and scholars. Born in 1923, he came of age in Switzerland a generation after the German interwar thinkers who figure throughout his postwar oeuvre: Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hans Jonas, Karl Löwith, Gershom Scholem, Ernst Bloch, Martin Buber, Leo Strauss and Carl Schmitt. Astounding stories of how Taubes appeared on the scene at crucial junctures in people's lives have circulated for decades: his disarming charisma; his brilliant insight into the most arcane and difficult works of religion and philosophy; his roles as mentor, teacher and collaborator in storied seminars; and his publications, which demonstrate an astonishing interdisciplinary breadth of interests and erudition. Yet there are just as many stories, if not more, that convey his dishonesty, cruelty, recklessness, unreliability and obsessiveness.

In *Professor of Apocalypse* Jerry Z. Muller accomplishes the nigh-impossible task of contextualizing the manifold reminiscences and myths surrounding Taubes into a clearly periodized and expertly documented account. In addition to synthesizing the published writings by, about and related to Taubes, Muller has scoured archival collections in Europe, North America and Israel, undertaken scores of interviews with family members, colleagues and others who knew Taubes, and obtained full access to the family papers in Berlin. Hundreds of anecdotes emerge, including detailed accounts of job searches, contract negotiations, university department meetings, and personal and health crises, as well as a stream of relationships forged and destroyed.

The tragic fate of his wife, the thinker and writer Susan Taubes (née Feldmann), who drowned herself in 1969, was the conclusion of one such relationship (see facing page). Their correspondence in their early years (between 1950 and 1952) reveals Jacob as intellectual mentor to the ambitious and vibrant young bride. He was attempting to build an academic career while Susan was pursuing postgraduate study; her work took a back seat, despite her writing a doctoral thesis at Harvard on "the absent God" in the work of Simone Weil. They both

held teaching positions at Columbia during the early 1960s, but Jacob transitioned to a career at the Freie Universität Berlin as their marriage unravelled. While they both had affairs, Jacob's appetite for seduction knew no bounds. In the autumn of 1969 Susan had just published her novel *Divorcing* (which was republished in 2020 by NYRB Classics, and which Muller takes to be a thinly veiled autobiographical portrait of her tumultuous relationship with Jacob) when she threw herself into the ocean off Long Island.

Another telling episode involves the bitter rupture between Taubes and his mentor Gershom Scholem, the towering scholar of Jewish mysticism. Taubes broke fundamental bonds of trust with Scholem by disclosing negative comments (real or imagined) to Joseph Weiss, Scholem's talented but unstable doctoral student; Scholem, who had long harboured concerns about Taubes's "lack of discipline", blamed him for pushing Weiss over the edge by imputing a devastatingly dismissive judgement regarding Weiss's dissertation. Taubes desperately sought Scholem's forgiveness, but also menacingly stalked him at every opportunity, to the point where Scholem once locked himself in the bathroom during a dinner party, refusing to come out while Taubes was present.

Was Taubes a creative genius or a charlatan? The figure who emerges from such episodes inhabited several seemingly incompatible worlds. Many saw him as a virtuoso who with little or no preparation could stun his audience by exhibiting mastery of a specialized topic: upon being handed a philosophical or theological tome, for instance, he would review it for a few minutes before rendering a synopsis of the book's main thesis, complete with a systematic critique of the work. While some saw this as merely a cheap parlour trick, the ability to capture the essence of a work so effortlessly surely impresses, even if it does not ripen into more rigorous expression. Muller's biography leaves readers with the impression that Taubes's thought amounted to a series of ideologically motivated, intuitive provocations, a synthesis of half-borrowed and recycled ideas.

While Taubes was a figure of the left, he was also a modern Jewish renegade who came to maturity during National Socialism and the Holocaust. According to his philosophy of history political resistance is signalled by subjugated groups proclaiming End Times, be they exiled Jews in Babylon, Christians under the Roman Empire or German Anabaptists in the early sixteenth century. While these figures are rendered abject by conventional standards of political power, Taubes highlights their political defiance as a necessary compliment to spiritual revolt against "the world as it is given to us". It is hardly accidental that the apocalyptic thunder of *Abendländische Eschatologie* appeared in

the wake of the Holocaust: *Abendland* not only means "West", but also connotes the location where the sun sets, pointing symbolically to Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*.

As for Taubes's own religious life, he was estranged from regular adherence to rabbinic law and beliefs. But no simple abandonment of Judaism followed suit. Instead his public and scholarly voice managed to disquiet readers who thought of religion, especially Judaism and Christianity, as a matter that had been contained by modern individualist and consensual liberal arrangements. Whatever transcendental worlds could be posited, Taubes always saw them as shapes of "unhappy consciousness" unless they emerged from the full meaning of apocalypse - namely, the catastrophically unfolding death of the world as we know it.

Taubes's antinomian Jewish character - he saw purported fault lines between the secular and the sacred as illusory and pernicious - found expression in his famous set of lectures on the apostle Paul, delivered in 1986. Taubes's Paul is a radical Jew who agitated against Pharisaic and early rabbinic conceptions of law and authority, defining himself in dialectical "relation to the law he rejects". Harnessing that antinomian impulse, he spread his teaching to non-Jewish subjects of the Roman Empire. Paul had long been of interest to Taubes, and Muller even unearths his father Zwi Taubes's earlier scholarly interest in the apostle. For Taubes *files*, Paul's revolutionary push was expressed in terms of the Jewish subjugation under Roman imperial authority. As Taubes humorously asserted, Paul's notoriously difficult Greek is understandable only if you can read Yiddish.

The force of Paul's vitriol against the law, as seen by Taubes, expresses not only his desire for the complete degradation of Roman authority and values, but also his yearning for a world transformed and redeemed. The first step towards this must be to clear away any attachments to the current order of things. Paul's warning that "the Kingdom of God is near" is meant to inspire a redemptive vision of what might come, but also to convey the need to see the present order as spiritually empty, an alien place of undiluted subjugation. Ever the exilic trespasser, Taubes lived and thought in dynamic entanglement of the religious and the secular.

Taubes's brand of self-conscious, theologically infused Marxism is evident in how he lived as a Jew in postwar West Germany. Among the most striking images offered here is one taken in 1986. At a gathering of friends in Berlin he is seen wearing a striped ritual garment made out of woven wool (a tallit katan). The caption under the picture tells us that "the tallit katan" is "typically worn under the shirt, but here [it appears] on full display". Muller is surely correct in diagnosing Taubes's propensity towards exhibitionism - he took pathological delight in transgressing norms and mores, whether they were dietary laws or sartorial customs - but I would suggest another plausible interpretation: Taubes wanted to defy expectations of how a Jew in Berlin should appear. When wearing the garb on the outside, many Jews want to remind themselves to live piously. In the more complicated case of Taubes, however, he seems to out on the symbol of pious observance while rebelling against it. He had contempt for the bourgeois, assimilationist ethos adopted by German Jewish orthodoxy, wherein one had to downplay or hide alien markers of religious identification in public, outside the synagogue or home. His fashion taste exemplifies a determined resistance against conventions and norms of the world as given - a world that for him, as for his Paul, must be seen as incapable of gradual redemptive transformation.

Jerry Z. Muller's critical biography of a difficult and significant intellectual personality, published in English and translated into German, stands as an impressive scholarly achievement. Now the task is to tease out what in Taubes continues to inspire and frustrate so many new readers. ■

“
As Taubes humorously asserted, Paul's notoriously difficult Greek is understandable only if you can read Yiddish

Eugene R. Sheppard is Associate Professor of Modern Jewish History and Thought in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University. He is the author of Leo Strauss and the Politics of Exile: The making of a political philosopher, 2006



Dark dark things

A lament for the 'authentic talent' of Susan Taubes

JESS COTTON

LAMENT FOR JULIA

And other stories

SUSAN TAUBES

240pp. NYRB Classics. Paperback, \$16.95.

**THE PHILOSOPHICAL PATHOS
OF SUSAN TAUBES**

Between nihilism and hope

ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

504pp. Stanford University Press. £81 (\$90).

IN NEW YORK CITY in 1961, Susan Taubes joined a circle of women writers led by her friend Susan Sontag who read and exchanged works in progress. At the time Taubes was teaching comparative mythology and religion at Barnard College and living alone, having recently separated from her husband, the philosopher Jacob Taubes (see facing page). She would soon begin writing *Lament for Julia*, a dark comic novella that remained unpublished in her lifetime. Sontag saw Taubes as her double, but Taubes was a more private figure. Her writing lacks the resolute authority of Sontag's essays; instead it is caustically lyrical, shot through with a sense of historical stasis, existential rootlessness and the claustrophobic nature of marriage.

Born in Budapest in 1928, Taubes arrived in the US in 1939 with her psychoanalyst father, Sándor Feldman, whose father, Mózes, was the grand rabbi of Budapest. She undertook studies first at Byrn Mawr and later at Harvard (where she encountered Sontag on the steps of the Widener Library), and was an exceptional, dedicated student of philosophy. As an undergraduate in 1948 she met Jacob, whom she married the following year and with whom she formed an intense intellectual bond. The work of Martin Heidegger and Simone Weil was the centre of Taubes's intellectual interest in the 1950s, before she turned her attention to fiction.

Taubes committed suicide in 1969, shortly after the appearance of *Divorcing*, the only one of her novels to be published in her lifetime. For decades she has remained marginalized within a group of

writers - including Sontag, Elizabeth Hardwick and Renata Adler - who produced stylistically experimental studies of the divisions and conflicts of female selfhood in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In his review of *Divorcing* for the *New York Times* Hugh Kenner dismissed it as fashionable nonsense written by "lady novelists" in Sontag's style. Samuel Beckett, however, in a letter of support to the French publisher Les Éditions des Minuit, recognized Taubes as "an authentic talent".

Since its republication in 2020 *Divorcing* has achieved literary cult status. The novel, which opens with its protagonist, Sophie Blind, speaking from beyond the grave, circles the contradictions and rifts in Blind's life - her broken marriage in present-day New York and her prewar Mitteleuropean childhood. Blind anatomizes the collapse of her marriage and the senselessness of her life, and ponders "Why there had to be a twentieth century". Her commitment to anomie and rejection of life's cruel optimisms are total and compelling. Taubes's fiction returns both to the entrapment of femininity and to exile as a spiritually dislocating condition. After the Nazi occupation of Budapest she felt that the city could never be her home again; but she never truly belonged in the US or felt that English could be a surrogate language for her.

In *Lament for Julia* her fraught relation to the constraints of womanhood and domesticity plays out as an elaborate drama between the protagonist, Julia Klopps - from whom we never hear directly - and a disembodied narrator, a sexless spirit who assumes the role of her protector. The effect is something like Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* crossed with one of Beckett's more obscure voice plays. The backdrop is an ordinary, gothic American household. Julia lives in a world of "paralytic stupor" - surrounded by taxidermy and parents who assume "a rigid posture like wax dummies". Her obsessive narrator takes charge of this stilled climate until the onset of Julia's "monthly flow", when the teenager begins to elude the spirit's clutches and the violence that hides behind the façade of paternal possession breaks through it.

The short stories that follow *Lament for Julia* in this new edition all have a folkloric twist to them. They are preoccupied by the uses and abuses of love and feature tyrannical psychoanalyst fathers who

Susan Taubes

“
Taubes's own family history reads like a parable of paternal power run amok

Jess Cotton is a London-based writer and an Early Career Fellow at the University of Cambridge

use their knowledge not as a force for liberation and understanding, but to overpower and constrain. Familial and national history press up against one another; fathers and doubles multiply. Taubes's family history reads like a parable - of institutional paternal power run amok - and she uses fiction (which her father regarded as a sickness) to recover a more accommodating kind of faith and way of being in the world. The strangest and most haunting of the tales - "Swan", which takes place in an insane asylum where a young woman, the psychiatrist's daughter, enters the cell of a patient who dies before her in unknown circumstances; and "Medea", which reworks the Greek tragedy in a contemporary US psychiatric context - exemplify Taubes's belief, as she wrote to Jacob in 1950, that "human passions are dark dark things".

Until recently much of Taubes's work has remained in boxes in the archives of the Leibniz Center for Literary and Cultural Research in Berlin. The bulk of her philosophical writing consists of the letters that she sent to Jacob between 1950 and 1952, when he was teaching in Jerusalem and she had returned to the US to pursue her dissertation on Weil. These letters offer an insight into her philosophical thinking about living in a state of exile and her expression of the difficulty of living a meaningful religious life within the confines of Orthodox Judaism - a difficulty she came to see as constituting an untenable political compromise. Weil's negative theology and her double estrangement, first from Catholicism and later from Judaism, provided a model for Taubes, whose relation to Judaism was constantly shifting, particularly in relation to the theopolitical challenges of Zionism. As with Weil, at the centre of Taubes's intellectual and fictional work lies an ethics of refusal and negativity.

She is remembered for the most part as a novelist, but in *The Philosophical Pathos of Susan Taubes* Elliot R. Wolfson makes the additional case for her as an important voice in twentieth-century Jewish thought. The letters that she sent to Jacob during his time in Jerusalem form the basis of this study, which largely concerns the Gnosticism that takes hold of her imagination in the early 1950s. Sontag (who had an affair with Jacob) cattily dismissed Taubes as lacking Weil's genius. But Wolfson wants to show how Taubes's work, like Weil's, articulates "the marker of being Jewish" as "not primarily religious, cultural, or political", but "the ethical directive to uphold the dignity of the other".

The chapters are organized around her reflections on nationalism, antitheology, tragedy and death. In Wolfson's well-researched study we see how Taubes's interest in Gnosticism provided her with a theory to formulate a philosophical position that might account for her historical rootlessness. Wolfson draws parallels, too, between Taubes's stylistic and philosophical disaffection and Jacob's own theopolitical positions, which touched on the apocalyptic, the Gnostic and the antinomian, and later also on the erotics of thought, which he taught alongside Sontag at Columbia University in the 1960s. This gained him a cult following as well as accusations of charlatanry.

Elliot R. Wolfson's study brings Taubes out from under the shadow of the intellectual figures in her life and establishes her as a thinker in her own right. It does seem a little strange, however, that so much of the material it examines is confined to a short window of time - between 1950 and 1952 - and it often feels as if the letters are read in a dutiful, not always overly selective way. It would have been interesting to see how these ideas shifted in the 1960s; indeed, to see Taubes in dialogue with her fellow women writers. One of the most alluring aspects of her work is the way its psychoanalytic, philosophical and religious categories slide into one another as they address questions of deracination and violence. A philosophical framework illuminates the depth of her thinking, but her narrative experiments also reveal what was at stake imaginatively in living through what she called "the moral catastrophe of the twentieth century". ■

This sporting afterlife

A search for consolation through football

DAVID HORSPOOL

A FAN FOR ALL SEASONS

A journey through life and sport

JON HARVEY

288pp. Yellow Jersey. £18.99.

TO MANY, sport provides a welcome distraction from reality. In Britain lovers of sport, even if they have no inclination to take part themselves, can be distracted almost permanently. The football season seems to get longer every year, and for those brief summer weeks “off” there is cricket, tennis, cycling, golf, the horses, the dogs, snooker, to get us through. Sometimes it’s hard to tell whether sport is the distraction or life is.

Jon Harvey loves all those sports and more, but for him they are a cruel reminder as well as an escape. Until 2015 the person with whom he shared all those passions, who had instilled many of them, was his older brother, Dan. That year Dan died suddenly, his general ill health turning out to be something much more serious than his family had realized. Harvey was the person who called the police when there was no answer at his brother’s flat. Dan had died alone and, naturally, Harvey feels guilty. He had tried to get his brother help with an



undiagnosed mental health condition, hoping that would lead him to take better physical care of himself. But Dan had resisted: “If he’d said yes to the

Crystal Palace fans at Wembley for the FA Cup semi-final, 2022

visits [from a social worker], might that simple binary choice have helped save him? I’ll never know. These thoughts rage in my head every evening”.

Clearly, Dan didn’t want to talk about his health. Instead he and his brother talked about sport: “Any sport. All sport. It was a crutch he could lean on: diversion, salvation and an unbreakable bond between us”. When Dan died, Harvey lost his sporting right-hand man as well as his brother. His decision to “take over” Dan’s Crystal Palace ticket for the following season might seem entirely understandable, except that one thing the brothers did not have in common was their choice of football team. Despite growing up in Croydon, where Palace are the local team, Harvey became a Tottenham Hotspur fan. (His brother even took him to his first home game.) Taking over the ticket is not just a bit of sporting continuity: it is a tribute.

Inspired by his experience following in his brother’s footsteps and sitting in his seat, Harvey embarks on a sporting odyssey, attending some events that he had once visited with his brother and others that he knows Dan would have liked to see. Others still, such as the World Rubik’s Cube championships in Paris (“‘Paris’ was stretching it ... the Eiffel Tower was not so much as a matchstick on the horizon”), he visited on a whim. It is testimony to Harvey’s honesty and open-mindedness that his experience among the Rubik’s solvers doesn’t feel a stretch from the rest of his sporting journey.

Along the way, as with any male fan dropping sensitive or awkward information into a discussion of Palace’s chances in the Cup or what you fancy in the 3.30 at Sandown, we learn a bit more about Dan, his foibles and vulnerabilities as well as his infectious sense of humour and sporting obsessions; we learn too about the Harveys’ father, an alcoholic fantasist who could be relied on to let his family down. Harvey himself is more elusive: a likeable, sensitive narrator who is charmingly modest about his achievements as a comedy writer for satirical hit television shows such as *Have I Got News for You* and *The Thick of It*, and understandably silent about his political alter ego, Count Binface (who placed ninth in the London mayoral elections in 2021).

For a book motivated by grief, *A Fan for All Seasons* is breezy to a fault. Harvey cannot see a pun without deploying it (on his father: “So far I’ve only mentioned him in passing, in reference to his passing”). Mixed metaphors are also a bit of a weakness: “Shows like these had formed the bedrock of Britain’s pop culture tapestry”; the Grand National “completes the jigsaw puzzle of what made Dan tick”. Some of his jokes need an elaborate set-up for questionable returns. When the Crystal Palace goalkeeper Wayne Hennessey lets a shot past, Harvey takes the time to remind us that this was the footballer who was accused of making a Nazi salute and defended himself on the grounds that he didn’t know what that was: “as the ball whistled past him into the top corner, it made sense that he’d be clueless about his far right”.

For all the compulsive wisecracking, the book is redeemed by the honesty and passion at its heart. Jon Harvey is an excellent recreator of the atmosphere at a packed stadium or a hushed theatre (not for a play, of course: for the snooker at the Crucible in Sheffield). He manages to convey the shabby, clapped-out aura of the “wrong” darts championship, under the British Darts Organisation at the Lakeside Country Club, Frimley Green, without sneering at it. Most affectingly of all, he shows how sport can play its part in grieving, becoming much more than a distraction. To the author, as to so many, sport has become a consolation. ■

“
Sometimes
it’s hard
to tell whether
sport is the
distraction
or life is

David Horspool is
History Editor of the
TLS. His latest book is
More Than a Game:
A history of how
sport made Britain



www.michaelmarksawards.org

The British Library and The Wordsworth Trust, with the generous support of the Michael Marks Charitable Trust, present

The Michael Marks Awards for Poetry Pamphlets 2023

in association with The TLS and the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies.

The Awards are designed to raise the profile of poetry pamphlets, recognising the enormous contribution they make to the world of poetry.

The Michael Marks Poetry Award Shortlist

Blake Morrison, *Skin & Blister* (Mariscat Press)
Fahad Al-Amoudi, *When the Flies Come* (ignitionpress)
Kate Hendry, *MX SIMP* (Mariscat Press)
Courtney Conrad, *I Am Evidence* (Bloodaxe Books/Mslexia)
Clementine E Burnley, *Radical Pairings* (ignitionpress)
Sammy Weaver, *Angola, America* (Seren)

The Michael Marks Publishers’ Award Shortlist

Out-Spoken Press
Guillemot Press
The Emma Press
Mariscat Press

For a round-up of the pamphlets submitted this year, see the article by judge Imogen Cassels on page 22 inside this issue of The TLS.

The Michael Marks Awards 2023 winners will be announced, along with the winner of the Michael Marks Illustration Award, at a public event on Wednesday 13th December. The Environmental Poet of the Year, Jane Burn, will also read from her Michael Marks Award-winning pamphlet *A Thousand Miles from the Sea*, which will go on sale at the British Library on the night.

Wednesday 13th December, 6:15pm for a 7pm start

This is a public, free event at the British Library, which will also be live-broadcast.
Tickets for both in-person and online events must be pre-booked via the Awards’ website:

www.michaelmarksawards.org

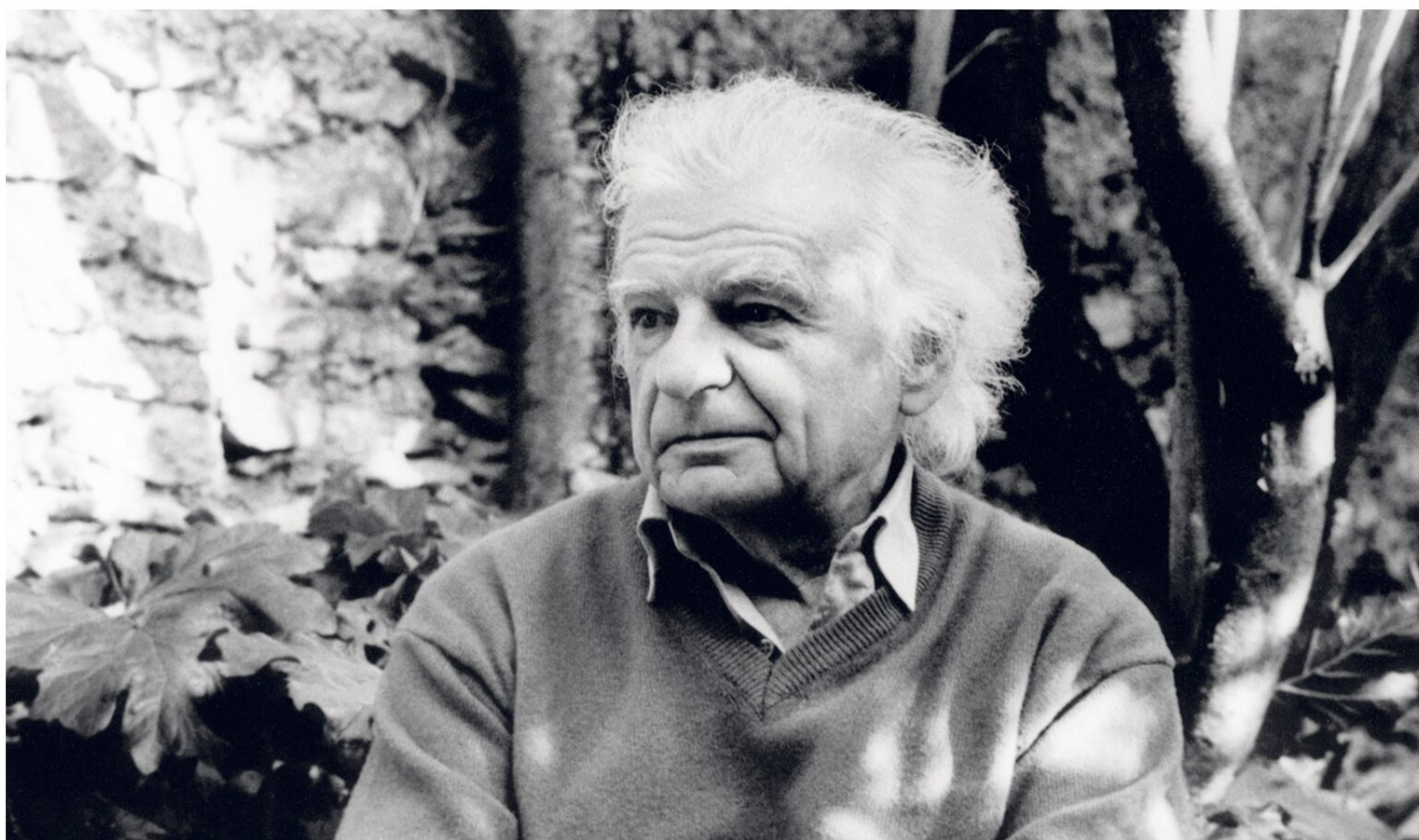
TLS

wordsworth
GRASMERE



LIBRARY
HILLINGDON





Poetry and hope

The Pléiade edition of Yves Bonnefoy, crafted by its author

EMILY MCLAUGHLIN

ŒUVRES POÉTIQUES
YVES BONNEFOY

1,808pp. Gallimard. €85.

IN HIS EARLY EIGHTIES the French poet Yves Bonnefoy started work on a book frequently known as the “writer’s tomb”: the Pléiade edition of his *Œuvres poétiques*, which has recently been published. The Pléiade signals a writer’s accession to the French *panthéon* of literary greats, but is normally planned and compiled after the writer’s death. Making all the key decisions about it, and relying on his editors for the annotations, Bonnefoy shaped the volume that would be the foremost record of his work and communicate the vision of poetry that he hoped would survive him.

Bonnefoy died in 2016. As a final dispatch appearing in the centenary year of his birth, his *Œuvres poétiques* sends a strikingly hopeful message. Bonnefoy was aware of how fractious and dangerous our world is, and how unevenly spread suffering is. He returned frequently in his writings to the waves of violence unleashed in the West across the twentieth century by the erosion of a common sense of the value of human life. He is also candid in accepting that poetry is now seen by many as irrelevant and archaic: “The sound has been cut”, he writes. And yet, as he prepared his Pléiade, he continued to affirm what he had said as far back as 1959: “I would like to reunite or even equate poetry and hope”.

At the centre of the *Œuvres poétiques* is the idea that poetry is a process of perceptual adjustment. The material that Bonnefoy includes, and the way that he organises it, reinforces the idea that poetry is not simply the art of composing verse, but a special way of seeing the world. Indeed, his *Œuvres poétiques* contains not only verse, but also prose poetry, some essays and some poetry translations. Almost all the texts appear in chronological order, breaking up the generic blocks imposed by previous editions and drawing attention to how his writing oscillates between different genres. In structuring his Pléiade like this, Bonnefoy insists that essay writing and translation, just as much as verse and prose poetry, can reflect on, experiment with and reattune our perception of existence.

Bonnefoy embraces the notion of the poet as *vates*, or seer. He argues that the special mode of seeing that poetry cultivates comes not from giving

free rein to language – as the surrealists did – but from an awareness of how it structures our perception. His work explores how language abstracts and objectifies what we see, distancing us from the physical world and causing us to think about things in terms of their utility. A late essay, “Le Lieu d’herbes”, likens this process to an optical illusion: we live in an ever-shifting, material world, but our vision turns this scene into a series of static objects, a bare playing field for the pursuit of our desires. And it is because Bonnefoy believes that language distorts our view of the world in this way that he sees poetry in such curative or even redemptive terms. For him poetry is a way of treating the failures in our perception that prevent us from feeling our involvement in the physical world.

Bonnefoy made it his life’s work to communicate just how salutary is the fleeting realization of our immersion in a physical world. This is best demonstrated in his collection *Dans le leurre du seuil*, inspired by the poet’s relationship with Lucille Vines and their life at the old Cistercian abbey at Valsaintes in Provence, which they renovated together. The series of love poems at its centre presents love and sex as an experience of ecstasy, recalling the etymological root of *ekstasis* in Greek: “standing outside oneself”. They explore how the poet’s desire to take possession of his lover is quickly superseded by the endless addresses and appeals he makes to her. The dynamics of love are not something that he controls, but rather something that shapes him. He realizes that myriad, rhythmic acts of relation are what define us as lovers or as people in general. And so, unexpectedly, the sentimental European love lyric becomes the springboard for an exploration of worldly interconnection. For all their lofty ambition, though, these poems remain personal and intimately erotic: they suggest that the pulse of sex is so charged for us precisely because it makes us feel the creative force of contact, the way that our relations with others remake us in powerful ways.

Reading these love poems in the Pléiade we get a clearer sense of the context in which they were written. Daniel Lançon’s notes stress how important the renovation of the old abbey was to their creation. “It’s always only been a matter of Valsaintes”, Bonnefoy says in a letter. A reader can see how the poet’s interest in architecture combines with his interest in the physicality of the human voice and bodily acts of address to produce a vision of poetry as a form of theatre, as a space where different forces interact. In a similar way Lançon describes

Yves Bonnefoy, 1991

“
Bonnefoy embraces the notion of the poet as *vates*, or seer

Emily McLaughlin is Associate Professor of French Studies at Wadham College, Oxford. She is the author of *Yves Bonnefoy and Jean-Luc Nancy: Ontological performance*, 2020

the huge box of drafts and notes, full of different kinds of voices, from which *Dans le leurre du seuil* emerged, and observes that the final text was always viewed as part of a vast “choral work” by the poet. He points to two very different kinds of material support – the house and the papers – from which the collection of poetry emerged. We are reminded that *Dans le leurre du seuil* explores the “choral” nature of all existence, and how any form of human expression, however refined, emerges from the co-operation of diverse parts.

The publication of the Pléiade shows such ideas in a new light. Up until the late 1990s Bonnefoy’s work was viewed as highly canonical but curiously idiosyncratic because of how it embraced the materiality of existence and distanced itself from the textual focus of the post-structuralist boom. Today, however, we might be more inclined to critique the theoretical avant-garde of that era for failing to perceive the prescience of his work. Crucial essays such as “L’Acte et le lieu de la poésie” or “La Parole poétique”, for example, anticipate recent developments in non-anthropocentric and new materialist thought. “La Parole poétique” argues that, because verse explores the interplay of sound and sense, it allows us to hear matter and meaning reverberating together, and reminds us that the intellect is just one force interacting with other forces. Bonnefoy suggests that this shift in our perception allows us, if only for a moment, to bypass the endless confrontations between human consciousness and matter, to bypass the linguistic mechanisms of distancing and objectification that breed violence and exploitation. The poem becomes not just a space of interaction, but an ecosystem. Bonnefoy never simply writes about the importance of interaction. He shows us how the act of writing can survive in a dangerous and destructive world – and help that world to survive – if it is prepared to understand the dynamics of its own emergence.

This is what Bonnefoy sought to communicate in one of his most significant poems, “L’Heure présente”, which was written towards the end of his life as he was planning his Pléiade. Reflecting on the legacy of poetry in general, the poem considers what it can hope to pass on to the next generation of readers and writers. It ends with these lines:

Heure présente, ne renonce pas,
Prends tes mots des mains errantes de la foudre,
Écoute-les faire du rien parole,
Risque-toi
Dans même la confiance que rien ne prouve,

Lègue-nous de ne pas mourir désespérés.

Present hour, do not renounce,
Take back your words from the lightning’s errant hands,
Listen to them making of nothing speech,
Risk, risk,
Even the confidence that nothing can prove,

Will us not to die despairing.
(Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic)

These lines deliver a public address. They urge readers today not to give up on the creative power of poetry. They are also more personal, whispered out into the universe, urging the present moment of existence to keep renewing itself. However we read these lines, they propose that the unpredictability of the present moment offers important lessons in creativity, faith and hope. Yves Bonnefoy suggests that the way the lightning unfurls in the present makes us feel the unpredictable, atmospheric and resonant dynamics of its emergence. A singular gesture, it is an utterance that has no prior model or needs no authority to legitimize it. Bonnefoy urges us to be like lightning, to do the same as we speak, affirming the unpredictable generativity of our relationships with the world and with one another. Therein, he suggests, lies our hope. At the end of the poet’s life this thought allows him to face the instability of the present and the destruction of old age and death, and to keep despair at bay. ■

Elusive magnetism

Poetry pamphlets and the Michael Marks awards in 2023

IMOGEN CASSELS

JUDGEMENT IS BUILT INTO thinking and writing about reading: as William Empson reminds us, a reader inevitably relies “on each particular poem to show you the way in which it is trying to be good”. Empson’s note is a concise guide to the ideal approach to literary criticism, but it has a broader application too: if a book is bad or boring you will put it down and struggle to finish it, or give up on it completely. It has either neglected to show you how it is trying to be good or demonstrated its ambition, but failed to fulfil it. Our reading habits evidently respond to the mercurial, semi-conscious quirks of judgement all the time - including when faced with a box of 130 or so poetry pamphlets, each of which demands to be read in full.

I read for the Michael Marks award, then, with my usual habits and tastes, albeit with an added effort to maintain readerly best behaviour: be fair, be open-minded, be patient. In fact, I needn’t have worried, since so many of this year’s entries had that elusive magnetism that makes poetry *poetry*, easily demonstrating the ways in which they were trying to be good and making for a sturdy shortlist.

Kate Hendry’s *MX SIMP* (Mariscat Press; short-listed) takes its name from the medical abbreviation

for a simple mastectomy and plays on the doubtfulness of that simplicity with a warm, dark humour. Hendry draws attention to cancer’s interactions with the everyday: the beloved, predictable roll call of friends and family who say “FECK” and send “a wave from round the corner and a list of crime novels / such as *Lady in the Lake* by Laura Lippman” (“Breaking the News”), or the Edinburgh Cancer Centre, which resembles “the lobby of a cheap hotel offering / deals for romantic breaks [...] with purple faux-leather armchairs / for restless couples” (“First Date with My CT Scanner”). On re-reading, *MX SIMP* is a touchingly understated rendition of the nightmarish, traumatizing experience of cancer treatment. Hendry’s stylishness also influences her poems’ forms: “Wheel of Thanks”, for instance, with its repeated “thanks” to the nurse, the radiographer, makes a refrain of that inexhaustible word.

MX SIMP is one of several beautiful productions from Mariscat Press, which gives its poets generous margins and thoughtful design touches: Hendry’s inside cover is printed with a facsimile of hospital gown fabric. Also from Mariscat this year was Blake Morrison’s *Skin & Blister* (shortlisted). This pamphlet might be understood as a companion piece to Morrison’s memoir, *Two Sisters* (TLS, February 17, 2023), which also remembers his sister Gillian.

“**A pamphlet allows the reader to slip emotional density, experimental heft, poetic force and even joy into a pocket or a satchel**”

Comprising a sestina and set of twenty sonnets, *Skin & Blister* wears its familiar poetic forms lightly, to the extent that they are almost worn out: by grief’s weariness as much as its futility. The twentieth sonnet finds its poet “failing to compose a final sonnet, / not because there’s nothing more to say / or I feel stupid talking to a ghost [...] but because you’ve had enough”.

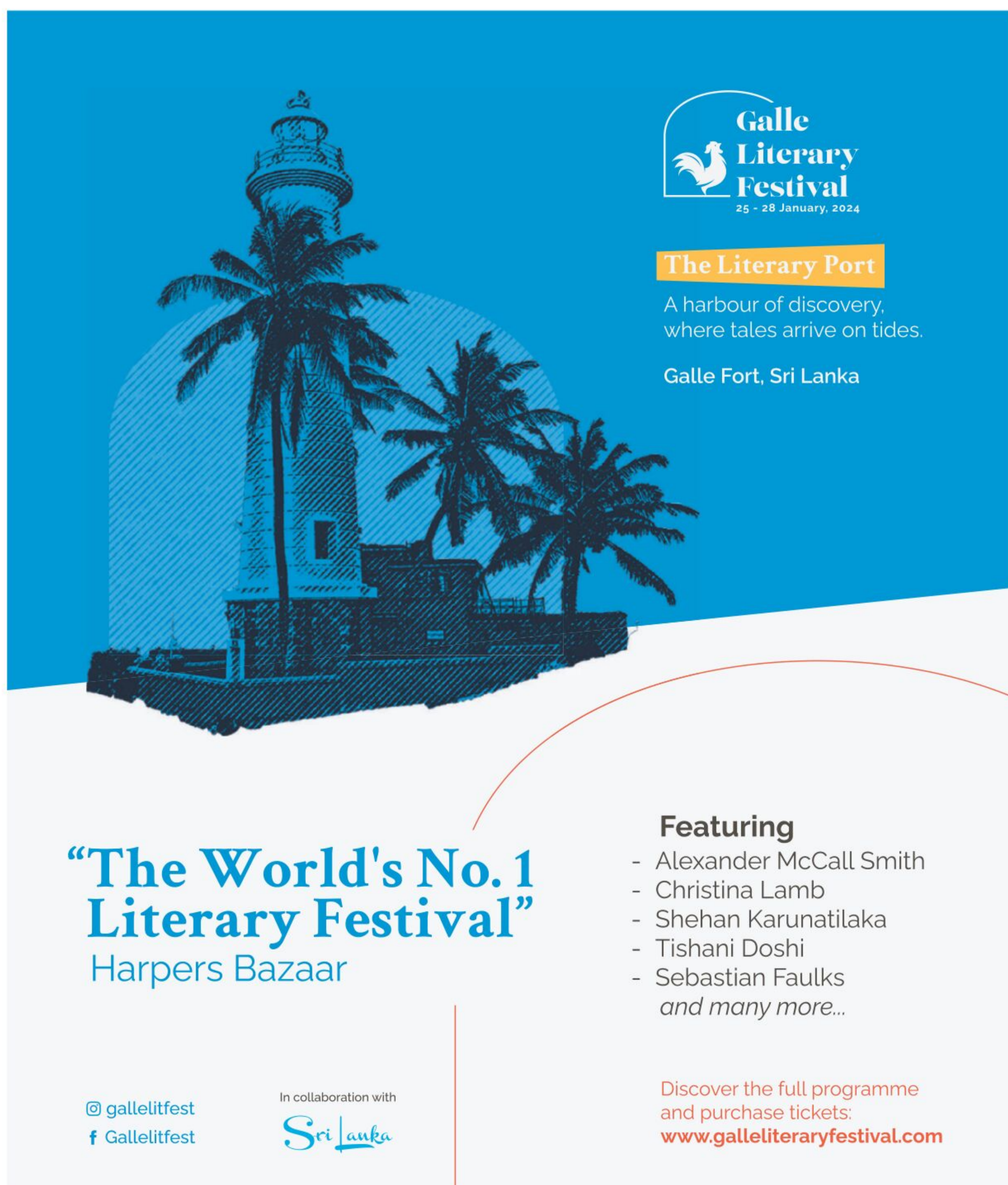
Moving past specific memories and places to touch on abstract knots in the project of so-called grief writing, Morrison is unafraid of the strange or awkward; in the photo that frames the eighth sonnet he and his sister “look / to be flirting” as a cold-eyed woman at the back of the picture takes its subjects “not for siblings / but a girl making out with a new boyfriend”. This could be discomfiting, but Morrison recharges it with the longing the left-behind have for the departed, as well as for their own innocence, also lost to bereavement.

Guillemot Press likes to call its pamphlets “booklings”, which is cute, but also suggests something important about the pamphlet as a form. Pamphlets of poetry are more than stepping stones on the way to a “real” book, offering instead a useful constellation of possibilities to which any writer might well turn for a new project: something slender, drafty, experimental, ephemeral or just winningly, portably short. Guillemot’s recent “booklings” include a debut from Prerana Kumar and volumes by Jennifer Lee Tsai and Nancy Campbell. All are printed and bound near Guillemot’s HQ in rural Cornwall, are composed of papers derived variously from recycled paper fibres, upcycled leather waste and spent beer grain, and feature cover designs developed with a range of artists.

Kumar’s *Ixora* focuses on the connections between mothers and children, sisters, domestic work and the “legacy stories” of cultural history, all with a graphic, textile beauty: a mother’s stomach is “freshly / embroidered, one forked thread / hanging over the cliff of her navel” (“Creation Fable”); cooking is made “weaving” in time to the songs of Mohammad Rafi, as descaling a mackerel’s “briny webs” is blent with “thread[ing] garlands of marigold[s]” (“Moonflower”). Campbell’s *Uneasy Pieces*, too, is concerned with latent networks of ideas. These note-perfect prose poems are indeed “uneasy pieces”, consciously strange bedfellows, spanning different cities, decades, bodies and desires, which seem to change both between and within poems. “Desire is a bronze hare” in “sculptures of Ancient Rome”, confronted with its own living image: “Every day this spring, walking in the fields, I have heard skylarks and seen a hare couch as still as this bronze hare in the grass”.

Kat Dixon-Ward’s *Pond* (Veer) is a forensic look at the intricacies of a single ecosystem: the personified “Pond”, who “tells me she is old [...] rust in her piping, stiff toads in her pockets”. *Pond* is witty and worldly, still capable of “well[ing] up, / unexpectedly”, “on the backs of roofs / in the park, or curled / in the eddies of rivers / on the tube, where the people flood”, there being apparently no place so urban the water cycle cannot determine it. Laboni Islam’s *Trimming the Wick* begins instead with “Salt” and saltwater: the sea, which “adds salt to everything” and eerily moves “inland, salting the fields so rice stops growing, / salting the wells”, corrupting fresh water and fertile land, and making the poet’s “love [...] a complicated country, barely above sea level”.

Islam’s pamphlet is part of an impressive set from ignitionpress, alongside Clementine E Burnley’s *Radical Pairings* and Fahad Al-Amoudi’s *When the Flies Come* (both shortlisted). The technical skill, innovation and breadth of expression on show from ignitionpress’s list is testimony to its editorial



Galle Literary Festival
25 - 28 January, 2024

The Literary Port
A harbour of discovery,
where tales arrive on tides.
Galle Fort, Sri Lanka

“The World’s No. 1 Literary Festival”
Harpers Bazaar

Featuring

- Alexander McCall Smith
- Christina Lamb
- Shehan Karunatilaka
- Tishani Doshi
- Sebastian Faulks
- and many more...

Discover the full programme and purchase tickets:
www.galleliteraryfestival.com

In collaboration with
Sri Lanka

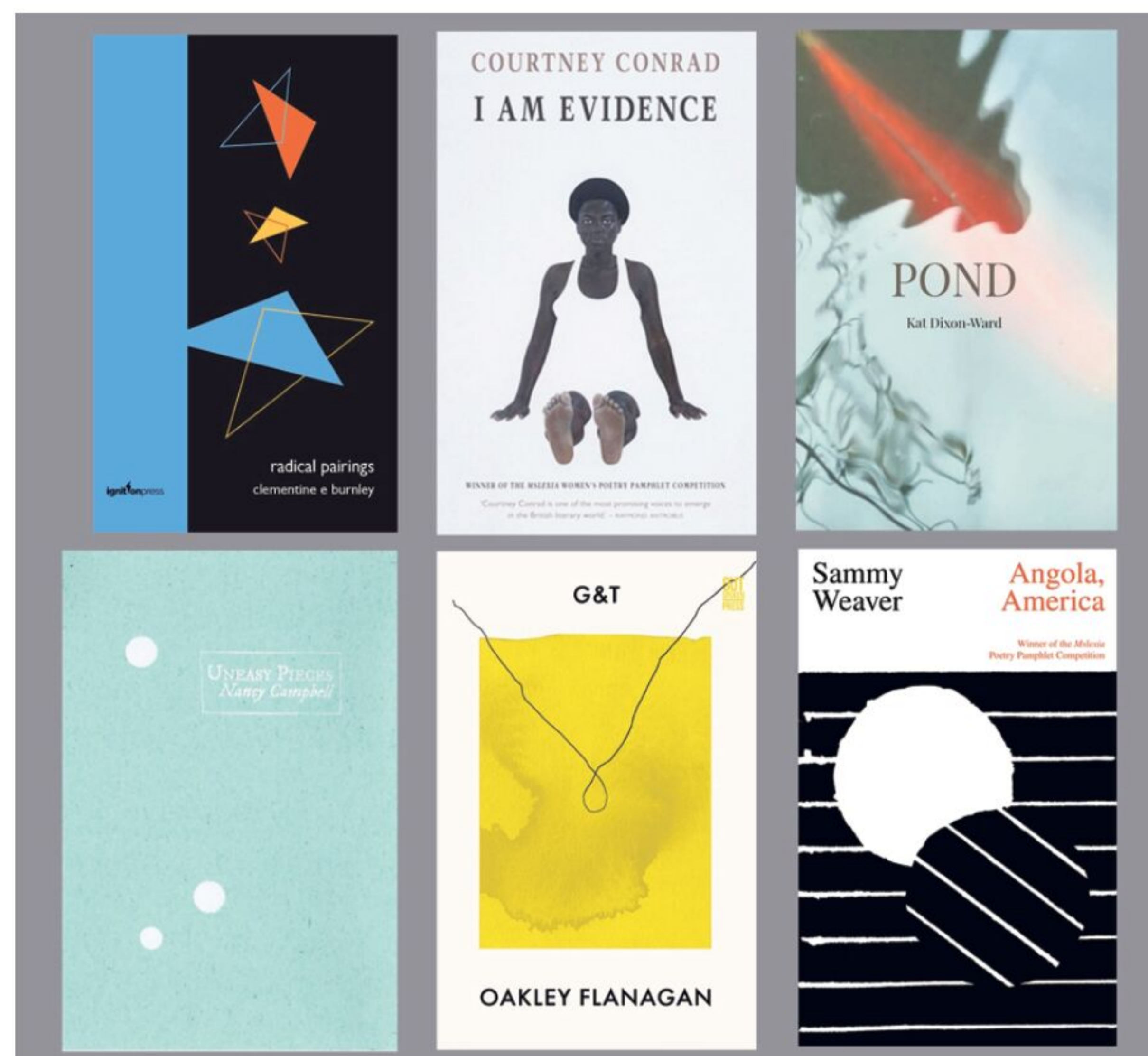
@gallelitfest
f Gallelitfest

Imogen Cassels is the author of several pamphlets, including Chesapeake, 2021, VOSS, 2020, Arcades, 2018, and Mother; beautiful things, 2017. She lives in London

acumen and the vision of its poets. Taking its name from the “radical pair hypothesis”, a proposal for how migratory songbirds detect the direction of the Earth’s magnetic field through sensors in their retinas, *Radical Pairings* looks both back in time and space, and straight ahead: “if time is circular”, for instance, the speaker can surprise her mother “in Piazza San Marco”, in a “striped sepia baby doll dress”, when “she’s not my mother then” (“a night-migrating songbird navigates great distances alone”). Burnley’s work understands the inbuilt plurality of home - for migrating birds, and for subjects left “in the aftermath of empires” to whom “language is a broken promise” and borders are falsely “ruler-straight” (“Protectorates”).

Al-Amoudi’s *When the Flies Come* is interspersed with imagined letters home, rendered in the voice of a young Ethiopian prince, Alemayehu, who was forcibly removed from his country in 1868 and detained in Britain until his death at the age of eighteen. The Foreign Office forbade the prince from communicating with his family; the letters here, in prose and verse, are painful because their real-life equivalent could not exist. “You wrote nothing / that would survive you”, Al-Amoudi writes in his own “Letter to Alemayehu” or “Black Epistle”, “Except you did write something, a letter / asking to watch a football match, / the answer to which is // yes”. Across the negative space created by stanza breaks, Al-Amoudi moves fluidly from the constrained but generative particulars of archival history to the reparative inventions of imagination, where “we laugh until we can no longer breathe” and the “text will assume its own // reality”. Between Alemayehu’s letter-forms are poems for grief, for family, for Marvin Gaye and for bugs. *When the Flies Come* asks who gets to write letters home, and what those words will or might look like.

Correspondence is central, too, to Sammy Weaver’s *Angola, America* (Seren; shortlisted). The pamphlet is named for the Louisiana State Penitentiary, which occupies the site of a former slave plantation, and tracks the development of a friendship between a Black man on death row and a white woman in the UK. There are records here of “the first letter you sent / addressed *Dear stranger / friend?*” and the tiny beauty of handwriting, its “loops / & hooks”, “each *i* / dotted with a little moon” (“[correspondence: letter]”). Bearing witness to the state’s violence against incarcerated Black citizens, *Angola, America* is unsparing in its depiction of death row’s horrors and incisive in its examination of white privilege (the correspondent’s “witnessing at relative



C. K. Stead’s most recent collection of poems, *This Side of Silence*, was published in the UK this year

distance”, asking “what must it take to cure this culture of lacuna?”.

The answer, the reader comes to hope, is partially the work of the poems themselves. Reading more than 100 pamphlets and gathering them together for review, it is hard not to detect emergent patterns, poetry coalescing into correspondences and linked documentary acts. Oakley Flanagan’s pamphlet-length poem *G&T* (Out-Spoken Press) refracts

the poet’s experience of queerness, playing with pagination and tripping up the reader even with the transition from the poem’s first phrase - “Last night I drank too much” - to the detail that follows: “cleaning fluid with a man / I didn’t know”. Flanagan moves fluidly between forms and moods; there are encounters recounted in clear-eyed prose, but also stubborn blocks of text that are all refrain. One poem is simply Hamlet’s “it is as easy as lying” underscored with a regretful, wounded footnote.

The title of Courtney Conrad’s *I Am Evidence* (Mslexia/Bloodaxe; shortlisted) immediately makes clear the documentary nature of its contents. Its exploration of the dual “vibrancy and violence” of Caribbean diasporic experiences, both in Jamaica and in the UK, is admirably confident; Conrad’s language embodies multiple interlocking voices with a hypermobile fluidity: “mosquito bullets zip through windows / from untrained militants weh escape / through zinned-up alleyways like rats”, but “blame begin not where the stray bullet darts from” (“When Yuh Point Finga, Three Point Back”). The forms Conrad employs are expansive and original: one poem takes the shape of a series of “Classifieds”, another a recipe for “Snapper”, which ends by leaving “[m]y reality inedible”.

A pamphlet is almost weightless, which means its contents can reliably belie its (physical) weight, allowing the reader to slip emotional density, experimental heft, poetic force and even joy into a pocket or a satchel. Its very shape, as well as that shape’s unassuming associations, makes poetry seem more readable - a good thing when there are so many contemporary poets, like those who submitted to this year’s awards, worth reading. ■

Invocation

Suburb or Sabine farm, not all our hard work alters, though it orders, as best it can your rhythms that answer in feather, fin and flower motions of sun and moon. Look where tides advancing under the causeway flush the bay. Sun silvers the ferns, domestic grass pricks up to greet the mower, and my timber house creaks on its jacks. That once I crossed the rust-red river, heard steel speak and saw scavengers wait on the dying; that I command at peace diagrams of dissolving stars or proceed white-coated against the militant Crab - such purpose itself commends. But blood must keep even as Caesar’s your lyric measure precisely or lose itself among the abstract spaces where no bird builds, nor predator patrols the sandy shallows, nor sap rises to inform a tree.

C. K. STEAD



The Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation 2023

THE SHORTLIST

	<p>“... how the lessons of history remain unlearned ...”</p> <p><i>The Turban and the Hat</i> by Sonallah Ibrahim Translated by Bruce Fudge (Seagull Books)</p>		<p>“... a compelling and often disturbing read ...”</p> <p><i>Firefly</i> by Jabbour Douaihy Translated by Paula Haydar & Nadine Sinno (Seagull Books)</p>
	<p>“... an odyssey covering three continents and over a century of history”</p> <p><i>King of India</i> by Jabbour Douaihy Translated by Paula Haydar (Interlink Books)</p>		<p>“... a searing chronicle of today, in personal testimonies”</p> <p><i>What Have You Left Behind?</i> by Bushra al-Maqtari Translated by Sawad Hussain (Fitzcarraldo Editions)</p>
	<p>“... a dark tragi-comic novel ... exorcising disturbing memories”</p> <p><i>Mister N</i> by Najwa Barakat Translated by Luke Leafgren (And Other Stories)</p>		<p>“... a Palestinian author, telling more than just a story ...”</p> <p><i>Thunderbird</i> (Books 1 & 2) by Sonia Nimr Translated by M Lynx Qualey (Univ.Texas Press)</p>

THE JUDGES

<p>Ros Schwartz (Chair) Award-winning translator from French of over 100 fiction and nonfiction titles</p> <p>Tony Calderbank Translator, many years British Council director in South Sudan, Bahrain and Libya</p>	<p>Sarah Enany Winner; Saif Ghobash Banipal Prize 2021, Assistant Professor, English Department, Cairo University</p> <p>Barbara Schwepke Founder, Gingko Library and Haus Publishing</p>
---	---



The Prize is administered by the UK’s Society of Authors, alongside the other UK literary translation prizes. For all information go to www.banipaltrust.org.uk/prize/

Living in the moment

RWANDA

KIBOGO SCHOLASTIQUE MUKASONGA

Translated by Mark Polizzotti
184pp. Daunt. Paperback, £9.99.

On a hillside in Rwanda during Belgian colonial rule, a group of villagers struggling to survive a merciless drought seek desperately to coax the rain back to their parched fields. The *padri*, or missionary priests, exhort them to put their faith in Yezu and Maria. They must carry a statue of Maria on a litter across the hillside while singing hymns. But some have their doubts and would rather appeal to the spirit of Kibogo, a prince from long ago who rose into the sky to unleash the rain.

“Who will you believe? What the *padri* say, or what your mother relates in the evening after dark?” That question, posed by a mysterious woman rumoured to be Kibogo’s virgin bride, encapsulates the central tension that runs through this vivid novel by the Rwandan author Scholastique Mukasonga, fluidly translated from the French by Mark Polizzotti.

Original in both structure and tone, *Kibogo* resists easy categorization. Mukasonga’s deceptively simple prose, lightly sprinkled with irony, combines elements of folk tale, myth, soap opera and social satire; from a grim premiss featuring starvation and colonial oppression, a surprisingly funny story unfolds. For the first few pages readers may feel mildly disorientated by the profusion of words in Kinyarwanda and unfamiliar proper nouns, for here a particular famine or rain has a unique name, just as a person does. But we soon get our bearings.

From a group portrait of a rural community, with its stock cast of bickering elders and pious matrons, emerge several memorable figures: a defrocked seminarian who subversively mingles pagan and Christian worship; a woman living on the margins of society who may or may not possess supernatural powers; a visiting anthropologist intent on finding evidence of human sacrifice. Mukasonga pokes gentle fun at the patriarchal mindset. For girls, being provided with husbands naturally “fulfilled their fondest wishes”, while in one scene a man returning home must submit to the prolonged embraces of his mother and sisters, letting “his body be felt all over, as politesse dictates”.

This is not a novel of easy judgement or resolution. Several important characters meet ambiguous fates and, as the story unfolds, the ever-shifting legend of Kibogo himself, told and retold from different perspectives and to different listeners, takes on new meanings.

Unlike several of Mukasonga’s previous works set in the more recent past, *Kibogo* does not tackle the tragic history of relations between Hutu and Tutsi. Instead it plunges readers into a vanished Rwanda where the fault lines lie not between ethnic groups, but between home-grown and imposed beliefs, tradition and change, accommodation and defiance.

Estelle Shirbon

SISTERS

TAKE TWO

CAROLINE THONGER AND VIVIAN THONGER

Illustrations by Alan Thomas
150pp. CB Editions.
Paperback, £10.

Take Two is a collaboration, a shared enterprise. Here we have the memories of two sisters, Caroline and Vivian Thonger (“The mother saw she had a fat child and a sick child”), gathered in scraps and shards to build a fragmented picture of troubled childhood. The Thongers are British-Germans, living in north London after the war - “How ghastly England is!” - though how the girls’ parents, Richard and Ursula, met is not explained. The darker story, of the German grandparents, is briefly given at the end.

Flick through *Take Two* and it looks like a slim volume of prose poetry. Some of it reads that way too:

Tell you about picking my way down the joins, rubbing small blisters where air was trapped behind the wallpaper, that poor stale air. / Tell you about the pattern, repeating imaginary countryside scenes. / ... Tell you about the bucolic cluster closest to my face that I rubbed and picked and licked until only peasant ghosts were left.

Some of it is funny: we learn that the girls’ great-aunt, referred to as Tante Daisy, “simply fell forward into her pudding” and died, doing so in front of her daughters - “very inconsiderate ... But that’s so typical of Daisy - only ever thinking about herself”. The speaker here is Daisy’s sister, Caroline and Vivian’s grandmother.

It isn’t always possible to tell which sister is writing, but that doesn’t matter - or, rather, the blurring is deliberate. So too how their memories connect: the weight of meaning is generally clear, even if the narrative links are withheld. Schoolgirlish episodes such as “Bathroom secrets”, in which a trio of schoolfriends are introduced to a new bidet with calamitously damp results, are juxtaposed with sadder aspects of family life. The collage of impressions is faithful to the fact that

children rarely know what is happening in their parents’ lives, and faithful also to the powerful emotions of childhood. The parents seem like monsters at times. Perhaps they were.

Reading *Take Two* is like catching the corner of a picture out of the corner of your eye. The material is compelling, but however vivid the vignettes, however scrupulously the individual scenes are composed, you ache to know more. As an experiment in family memoir it feels stylistically adventurous, but ultimately timid in revelation. Ordinary things happen, then shocking things happen, and either way we’re left to wonder about their effects on the sisters. In an odd way the pile-up of violent accidents begins to feel cartoonish, too stark, too unexplained, too little reflected about. I wondered whether the collaboration itself was inhibiting, as if these familiar events had yet to be fully processed by the writers together. CB Editions has produced an attractive volume with wittily idiosyncratic drawings. I especially liked the coat hanger that features on the cover and is captioned in the text: “floral pattern, used to discipline teenage girls”.

Norma Clarke

SISTERS, AGAIN

THE FUNNY THING ABOUT DEATH JO CAULFIELD

288pp. Polygon. £16.99.

“It seems a stupid thing to say”, writes the actress and comedian Jo Caulfield in *The Funny Thing About Death*, “but I was shocked at how awful grief feels.” Her powerfully influential older sibling, Annie, died of cancer in 2016, aged fifty-seven. This book conveys the awfulness of grief, but Caulfield’s admiration for Annie - a fellow writer and tremendous wit - makes an even greater impression. At one point she mentions the nun who taught Annie history at convent school. “Sister Theresa said there was always one child you taught who you never forgot, who was special. For her it was Annie. ‘It was her intelligence’, Sister Theresa said. ‘Such intelligence and bravery. A fierce girl.’” Caulfield captures both qualities in her affectionate tribute.

Because their father worked for the Educational Corps, Jo, Annie and their brother, James (now a Catholic priest), grew up on RAF bases across the country. Home life was lively and the three of them seemed to enjoy considerable intellectual freedom (bar the limitations, for the girls, of their forced convent education). An early anecdote hints at Annie’s deep well of inventiveness: aged

about ten, with Jo four and a half years younger, she explains that the cracks in the ground they’re playing on are dangerous: they’ll “separate and you’ll fall all the way to Africa”. Little Jo was convinced, and landed herself in trouble for frightening a neighbour’s child with the same story.

Annie had always wanted to write, and clearly had unbridled energy for hard work and adventure. After leaving school she headed to Paris, and later published books about her time in the Middle East, Benin, Northern Ireland and Australia. At university she wrote and produced her own plays, signed with an agent, won commissions and, after a few years of grafting at various placeholder jobs (including a stint cooking for the painter Bridget Riley’s studio assistants), she landed a “proper” job at Riverside Studios in London, reading scripts. Her TV work began then, and that included comedy writing. Her credits included episodes of *This Life* (1996) and *The Real McCoy* (1991).

A shared sense of humour bound the sisters together: Annie was “acerbic and adorable at the same time and always ready to laugh at herself”. But she could be cutting, especially when alcohol got the better of her. Caulfield skirts around their father’s drinking and is discreet about her sister’s years of binge drinking. Annie faced difficulties with unwavering stoicism, a commitment to friendship and a lust for living in the moment. The narrative loosens up towards the end and Caulfield speaks perceptively about the intricate nature of mourning: “Over and over again you want to say how much you miss them. But each time you miss them, it is its own emotion”.

Julia Bueno

HAOLES

EVERY DROP IS A MAN'S NIGHTMARE MEGAN KAMALEI KAKIMOTO

272pp. Granta. £12.99.

The title story of Megan Kamalei Kakimoto’s first collection of stories, set in her native Hawaii, shows a girl at that hot moment during adolescence when her periods first arrive, sexual feelings course through her and she becomes preoccupied with the “shame” of her changing body: its weight, its blood, its hair, all the things that need taming and trimming for her to be acceptable as a woman. Poised between childhood and adulthood, she is a liminal figure who, like all Kakimoto’s protagonists, is divided between the desire to honour tradition and an inability to escape Hawaii’s brand of capitalism, which defangs native



“You found me, you should’ve never lost me” by George Alexander, 2022; from *The Land Carries Our Ancestors* (192pp. Princeton University Press. £38. US \$45.)

culture for tourists while glossing over a history of colonial subjugation. In “Temporary Dwellers” a teenager falls in love with a refugee from a neighbouring island whose inhabitants are exiled when the US government turns their home into a bombing range. It soon becomes apparent that the vulnerability of Kakimoto’s crisis-ridden characters is that of Hawaii itself.

The stories are scattered with Kānaka words, most frequently *haole*, which translates as “non-native”. Midway through the book, we learn that “Today haoles outnumber Kānaka ‘Ōiwi one hundred to one”. Gripped by a fear of extinction, many of Kakimoto’s Indigenous characters slide into madness: the girl from the title story believes she has given birth to a “pig-baby”; in “Madwomen” a mother concocts stories about a sea monster to terrify her “hapa-haole” son.



Resenting the child's resemblance to his white father, she sees in his self-regard all the obliviousness of *haole* men, ignorant of traditions passed down over generations. Finally she takes him to the sea. But is she teaching him to swim or will she leave him to drown?

An anxiety about parenthood haunts Kakimoto's collection. In "Hotel Molokai" the "unbridled euphoria" of one woman stems from her childlessness. It is not only the "dilution" of Hawaiian blood that causes unease, but the difficulty of transmitting the mythological elements of a culture that has been expropriated and reduced to cliché. What makes this even harder is that, unsurprisingly, given Hawaii's history, some of its legends are menacing and punitive. The spiky opening story, "A Catalogue of Kānaka Superstitions, as Told by Your Mother", comprises a list of prohibitions. In the collection's key tale, "Aiko, the Writer", the ghost of the writer's grandmother chastises her for pondering the success she would achieve if she gave readers "what they want" from Indigenous authors: colourful folklore, in particular the potent

tale of the Night Marchers. Kakimoto resists divulging this story, substituting it with one about the complexities of honouring a culture rich in fantasy while living under a capitalist system that brooks no alternative, disallowing even the imaginative space to contemplate other ways of being.

Kate Webb

SANDY BODIES

WALKING THE BONES OF BRITAIN

A 3 billion year journey from the Outer Hebrides to the Thames Estuary

CHRISTOPHER SOMERVILLE

432pp. Doubleday. £25.

Christopher Somerville, the walking correspondent for *The Times*, has written more than forty books about the British landscape and seasons. Here he adds a genre to his repertoire: popular science, specifically geology. Determined to get to grips with a subject that bored him at school, he walks from

the Isle of Lewis to southeast Essex, noting traces of the geology that underpins everything he sees.

This is an enthusiastic account filled with colourful metaphors (boulders have "rough sandy bodies studded with specks of white quartz like globules of fat in coarse salami"). There is a self-deprecatory tone as Somerville relates his initial ignorance, as well as the events and encounters of his trek. "I couldn't just carry on going 'Wow!' and 'Amazing!' all along this journey through the geological bones of Britain without trying to grasp the processes that lay behind, or rather underneath, those extremely ancient stripy gneisses and gritty red sandstones", he writes.

Somerville's route takes in the Cuillins on Skye, the Great Glen Way, the summit of Ben Nevis, St Cuthbert's Way, the Pennine Way and the Chilterns. The areas he passes through become increasingly built up, culminating in a visit to the HS2 works at Chalfont Lane, near Denham, and a crossing through London. He presents a holistic picture of how geology is connected to weather, wildlife and land use. And he is fascinated by human history. In the Outer Hebrides his imagination is captured by the crofters and peat cutters who worked under Lord Leverhulme during the late nineteenth century. Scientific explanations are broken up by references to cultural landmarks - Somerville consciously walks in the footsteps of Boswell and Johnson, visits HMS *Beagle* and remarks on passing Hannah Hauxwell's farm and two sites described in *Wuthering Heights*.

The physical book is sumptuous, with helpful supplementary materials including colour photographs, a timeline, maps and walking route resources that welcome readers to repeat the expedition. Above all else Somerville conveys a sense of wonder at deep time. With the climate crisis provoking apocalyptic anxiety, it seems as if more and more authors are retreating to the primal and permanent: the ground beneath our feet. Yet, as he learns at Wallasea Island in Essex - which in the early 2010s underwent an ambitious marine wetland restoration - humans are still shaping the landscape, even creating it anew. Solid rock is no eternal force.

Rebecca Foster

LA CAMPAGNE

LA VIE

A year in rural France
JOHN LEWIS-STEMPEL
208pp. Doubleday. £16.99.

Such a poetic, sound-filled book scarcely needs a conventional index. The real one is surely the unnumbered list of birds that visit John Lewis-Stempel's garden in the Charente, and whose calls and songs animate virtually every page

of *La Vie: A year in rural France*. There is a music playlist too (Charles Trenet, Jacques Brel, Serge Gainsbourg, France Gall...) but the greater singers are the birds, and chief among them is the stone curlew. I've seen them in Norfolk and think of them as avian Sissy Spaceks, all eyes and knees, flutey-voiced; to Lewis-Stempel, a far from polyglot Englishman abroad, they are the clearest sign that he has indeed fetched up amid alien corn.

La Vie documents a year of assiduous farm work. We follow the author as he plants the right spuds in his *potager* and makes *pineau*, the aperitif without which life in the southwest is inconceivable. But, despite the title and structure, this is no farmer's calendar. It is a meditation on sound and language, a book that at one time might have appeared with a CD-Rom of local audio attached. Pointless addition, because it's all there in the text: "Such is the music of the morning in rural France: biblical stones hitting a harrow, the cry of the *chasse*, the song of a robin in a pollarded lime tree, the high notes of bells from a Romanesque twelfth-century church, named for an obscure saint". He insists that the bells do not *bong* like English bells, but *ting*, high and "intellectual".

Lewis-Stempel speaks some French, of course, but when he tries out "wah" [*oie*] and "loo" [*loup*] for goose and wolf, the locals don't understand him: this is a corner of France where *Tintin* still has to be translated into Saintongeais. The language of the phrasebook and the language of place are different things, though, and Lewis-Stempel, our finest nature and farming writer, is much more fluent in the latter. The tonality of the book changes season by season. The oddly shocking moment when a sunning fire salamander - not a mythological creature - spooks his horse isn't repeated.

There's a gentler cadence to the later chapters. It all ends on a train back from Paris, the author's roots tightening and drawing him home. The last thing he thinks of, apart from all the food in the hayloft, is the cry of the stone curlew. It's so well camouflaged that when it closes its yellow eyes, it disappears. Close an eye on *La Vie*, though, and it still echoes in the mind.

Brian Morton

PROMISCUOUS

TOLKA

LIAM HARRISON, SEÁN HAYES AND CATHERINE HEARN, EDITORS

Biannual. €22 per year.

Tolka is an Irish journal promising "formally promiscuous non-fiction". It is in fact slightly more promiscuous than that label might suggest, in that it also takes in fiction and interviews. There is

unquestionably a spirit of invention to be found in its most recent issues. Among the most innovative contributions is that of Brenda Romero, who has a background in video-game design: "What We Shared" is a make-your-own-adventure-style story about women trafficked into Barbados in the 1990s and forced into sex work. It's possible to find oneself in a sort of closed doom loop while reading this clever, if dispiriting, reflection on the plight of the protagonist, caught between unscrupulous kidnappers and a corrupt police force, but there are flickers of hope and escape built in.

In keeping with the idea of technological incursions on the art of storytelling, Issue 5 prints an interview with Joanna Walsh and an extract from her experiments with AI programs; feeding them her existing work seems to extend or at least complicate the definition of autofiction. Walsh talks incisively, in this context, about ideas of femininity as "a transferable glitch" and the representation - or lack thereof - of minorities in the work that many of the better-known AI programs are currently fed on.

There are things one wouldn't find anywhere else, which is surely the mark of a journal having carved out a niche for itself. A high-energy love letter by Podge Meehan to the Limerick institution the Rubberbandits - a sort of anarchic comedy/hip-hop collective who wear plastic bags on their heads - is one such example. The interviews feature some of the most interesting Irish writers currently working - Issue 4's is between Colin Barrett and Nicole Flattery, Issue 5's between Wendy Erskine and Louise Kennedy - but they are depressurized and informal to a point where focus is lost at times.

There are other starry names here too - Max Porter and Eimear McBride both appear, although neither is quite firing on all cylinders. Some of the best writing is in fact found in translation, with an extract from the Italian of Walter Siti, translated by Brian Robert Moore, in which an old body-builder is "a sick bison with a bottle of milk in hand", as well as in an essay by Mark O'Connell about the fate of James Joyce's great-aunts' house, the setting for his story "The Dead", and more broadly about Dublin being haunted by Joyce and the "ambulatory intimacy" of his writing.

Almost inevitably, pandemic stories rear their heads, as does a lingering air of eschatology, sometimes with compelling results, not least in Sydney Weinberg's "Subterranean Employment Blues", which seems to sum up the mood of many of the pieces here fairly neatly: "We loathe and mistrust one another, yet somehow we are desperate to save the world". It's a difficult time for literary magazines; let's hope *Tolka* has a good deal more promiscuity to offer. ■

Declan Ryan

Staying alive

The enduring appeal of a band who were never hip

JANE YAGER

BEE GEES

Children of the world

BOB STANLEY

400pp. Nine Eight. £22.



IN 1965, when the Bee Gees were an obscure trio of teenage brothers, playing to small crowds at suburban veterans' clubs in Australia, the car they were travelling in overturned on the highway at 80mph. Word of their death reached Sydney radio stations and the on-air condolences began. But all three brothers Gibb - Barry, 18, and twins Robin and Maurice, 15 - had walked away from the accident largely unscathed. Barry would later recall that when they turned up alive, the Australian pop world appeared "almost ... annoyed to see us after crying their eyes out for nothing".

As Bob Stanley notes in *Bee Gees: Children of the world*, the car crash was just one in a long list of disasters to have dogged the Gibbs' early lives. Born in the late 1940s on the Isle of Man, the future Bee Gees - three of five siblings - had a transient and impoverished childhood, moving first to Manchester and later to Australia. Along the way they experienced so many third-degree burns, near-drownings, collisions and other calamities that "it seems miraculous that all the kids made it through to adulthood". Similarly, the Bee Gees' musical career, which spanned almost half a century, would recover time and again from brushes with professional near-death.

The Gibbs began singing three-part harmonies as a pre-teen skiffle act in 1950s Manchester. As 1960s teen heartthrobs they took on the name Bee Gees and sang Beatles-influenced pop ballads, heavy on string arrangements and mellotron. At the end of the decade they broke up. Reunited a few years later, their 1970s incarnation embraced soul, funk, the Miami disco sound and falsetto vocals. In the

1980s they wrote hits for country stars before returning from the wilderness with *E.S.P.* (1987) a synth-pop album that Stanley calls "maybe the most 80s-sounding record of the decade." In the 1990s they hit the UK Top 5 for the fourth decade running with soft, highly produced R&B. The end came in 2003, when Maurice died.

The Bee Gees reached the height of their fame with the soundtrack to the film that defined the disco era, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). It earned them three No 1 hits in the US: "Stayin' Alive", "How Deep Is Your Love" and "Night Fever". By 1979 the band were living in a "bubble of super fame", sporting a look of "white suits, chest hair, medallions and teeth". Their omnipresence was also their downfall: far more than acts such as Donna Summer and Chic, they bore the brunt of the anti-disco backlash that soon followed. In summer 1979 a Chicago DJ popularised the slogan "Disco Sucks" and detonated a crate of disco records on a stadium playing field during a baseball game. This inspired copycat stunts around the US, and the Bee Gees became a laughing stock: one version of the "Disco Sucks" T-shirt read "Kill the Bee Gees".

There were reasons not to like disco. But it was also a genre rooted in gay culture and in African-American and Latin American music, and the intensity of the turn against falsettos and satin shirts on the eve of the 1980s now appears homophobic and racist. Stanley sees political shifts at play - the chastened post-Vietnam cultural softness of the Jimmy Carter era giving way to the resurgent heteromascularity of Ronald Reagan's 1980s.

By the late 1980s the Bee Gees were back. In a

The Bee Gees, 1977

“**They were sporting a look of white suits, chest hair, medallions and teeth**”

1989 interview Barry hoped that "the image of being disco wimps is now gone", but their reputation never fully recovered. Gifted and prolific songwriters, they produced a vast catalogue of hits for themselves and others, yet a certain suspicion lingered. Music critics hedged their compliments.

Stanley is on a mission to right this wrong, to get the Bee Gees "their rightful place at the head of pop's table". Stanley is a musician as well as a writer, a member of the indie band Saint Etienne, and *Bee Gees* takes a songwriter's approach to biography. Writing with affectionate humour, Stanley devotes at least as much attention to the music as to the brothers' private lives, reading their songs closely and preferring to parse a lyric rather than pass comment on stardom.

Stanley's defence of the Bee Gees' "meaningless songs" is astute. He admits that lyrics like "In my brain I see your face" have a naive syntax, and that the band "used English as if it [were] a second language", but the Bee Gees also "understood pop music better than almost any other songwriters of the late twentieth century. Pop music isn't poetry. It's about conveying emotion in the most compact way possible".

Despite the exuberance of the disco sound to which the Bee Gees are joined in the popular imagination, the Gibbs had maudlin tendencies as songwriters. Their first hit, the 1967 neo-folk ballad "New York Mining Disaster 1941", marked the "unlikeliest, gloomiest, most minimal debut hit by a major act since Elvis Presley's 'Heartbreak Hotel'". Disaster crops up again in 1969 in the seven-minute-long "Odessa (City on the Black Sea)", with Robin Gibb lamenting the fate of a sea captain from Hull who is wrecked in the Baltic, floats on an iceberg in the North Atlantic and sees his wife run off to Finland with a vicar. What any of this has to do with Odessa isn't clear. The oddness of the lyrics lies not just in their syntax, but in their placelessness. Where were the Gibbs even from? At least four places on three continents - the Isle of Man, Manchester, Redcliffe, in Australia, and Miami - had claims to be called home.

The brothers' transient origins, their love of the commercial mainstream, their ability to shape-shift across genres and eras, the childlike quality they retained in middle age - all these things led their detractors to regard them as inauthentic. The Bee Gees were always unhip, yet they have endured. Over the decades songs written by the Gibbs have delivered hits for Dolly Parton, Al Green, Nina Simone, Pet Shop Boys, Destiny's Child, Celine Dion and Boyzone, among others. Bob Stanley makes a strong case for the Bee Gees' impact on twentieth-century music, but his portrayal also reveals them as harbingers of the global pop of the twenty-first. He repeatedly emphasises that the Bee Gees' lyrics sound like translationese. In this they anticipate the present era, where pop is sung in a global lingua franca, where influences and trends encircle the earth, and where the children of the world are often adrift in it. ■

Jane Yager is a writer and translator based in Berlin



The Bibliographical Society Research Grants and Fellowships 2024 Applications are invited for the following awards:

Katharine F. Pantzer Jr Awards in the History of the Printed Book

A generous bequest funds a Fellowship (up to £4000) and a Scholarship (up to £1500) for research on the bibliographical or book-historical study of the printed book in the hand-press period (up to c.1830). Applicants should be established scholars in the field, either university-based or independent.

Major Grants (several awards of up to £2000 each) support bibliographical research, for example book history, textual transmission, publishing, printing, bookbinding, book ownership and book collecting.

All of the above awards are intended to assist with immediate research needs, such as travelling expenses, and longer-term support, for example prolonged visits to libraries and archives. Part of the Pantzer Fellowship may be used to pay for teaching cover. There are no restrictions on applicants' age or nationality.

Applications for all of the above awards must be received by 19 January 2024.

The Society also accepts applications throughout the year for **Minor Grants** (£50-£250) and for **Subventions** (up to £250) for conference organizers.

Further details of all awards, the application procedure and application forms may be found at <http://www.bibsoc.org.uk/fellowships>

Terrible beauty

IRINA DUMITRESCU

KNOWING MY DOWNMARKET tastes in procrastination material, the YouTube algorithm has begun offering me videos about celebrity plastic surgery. The genre is standardized. An expert - either a plastic surgeon or a frequent customer - shows pictures of a star over the years, alerts us to rising cheekbones and disappearing nose bumps, and finishes by calculating the total cost of all the procedures over the years. I'm always surprised at how little it takes to buy so many new faces.

Reader, I watch them. I have learnt about the many adjustments that can be made to an eyebrow, the endless metamorphoses of an upper lip. The pleasure is, I admit, voyeuristic and a little mean, but I can't bring myself to feel guilty about it. After decades of being surrounded by images of perfect women it's a relief to see that much of that oppressive perfection was handmade. But I am even more fascinated by the desire to be and stay beautiful. It's a cannibal longing: the more a person strives for beauty, the more it seems to consume them. Maybe I want beauty to stay unfair, unbidden, a gift and a shock.

I recently re-read John Gardner's novel *Grendel* (1971), a philosophical retelling of the Beowulf story from the point of view of its main monster. Gardner's Grendel is smart but vicious, and there is little in the story to interrupt his cold cynicism about himself or the humans he chomps on. That is, until Wealhtheow comes in wearing "a robe of threaded silver", a peace bride offered to Hrothgar by her brother. She enters a tense face-off between two armies, "moving slowly,

as if walking in a dream", writes Gardner. "Her smooth long hair was red as fire and soft as the ruddy sheen on dragon's gold. Her face was gentle, mysteriously calm. The night became more still."

There are two things in the novel that interrupt Grendel's bitterness - poetry and Wealhtheow. "She tore me apart", he thinks, just as the song of Hrothgar's court poet had done. Maybe it is her calm that does it, or her willing self-sacrifice. The men around her are mindless brutes led by canny thugs. If they think it is only of themselves. She is willing to embrace an old, faltering king in order to save her brother's life. Her idealized portrait stands in contrast to the only other woman in the story, Grendel's dam, a grotesque and wordless archetype of the smothering mother.

It's saying something that Gardner managed to feature even fewer, and less complex, female characters than his medieval source. But for all that his portrayal of Wealhtheow is compelling. In one scene Hrothgar watches her serving mead to the warriors and also feels that she works like a poem, "present beauty that made time's flow seem illusory, some lower law that now had been suspended". The drunken men stop their arguing because they feel it too, "softened, reminded of their humanness, exactly as they might have been softened by the cry of a child in danger, or an old man's suffering, or spring". Her beauty is an organizing, civilizing force among human beings. It arrests their everyday brutality, forces them to feel when they would rather hurt. But Grendel experiences it as an assault.

Gardner understood that beauty, at its peak, is frightening. He might have found the idea in other medieval works such as the Middle English romance

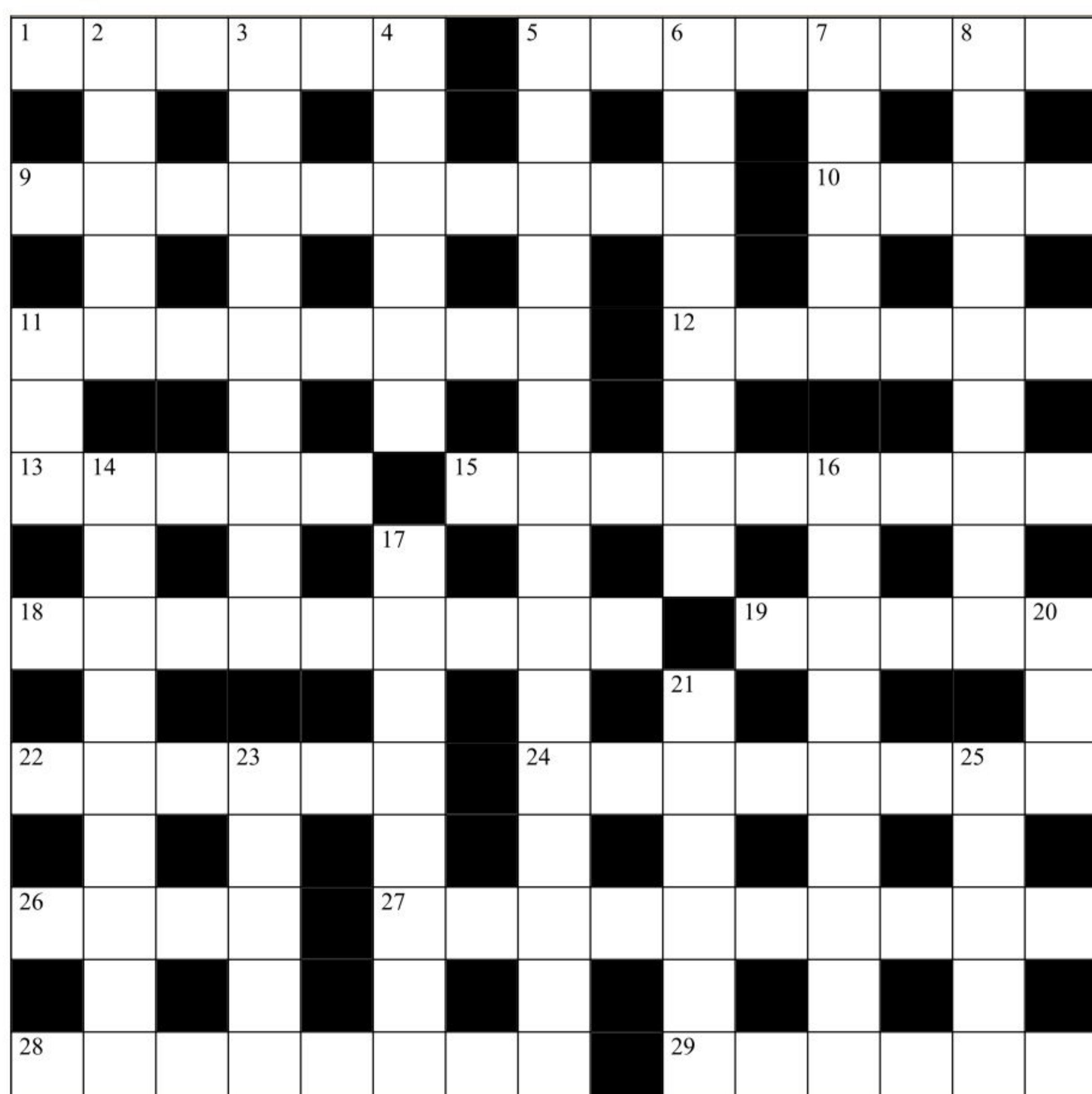
Emaré. Emaré, the fairest in the land, is the daughter of a widowed emperor. He receives a magnificent cloth that an emir's daughter crafted to woo the son of the sultan of Babylon. Richly covered in every kind of jewel imaginable, the cloth is embroidered with stories of difficult love: Amadas and Ydoine are pictured in one corner, Tristan and Isolde in another, Floris and Blancheflour in a third, and in the fourth are the emir's daughter and the man she loves.

After receiving the cloth the emperor makes his daughter a robe of it. Once in it, Emaré seems "non earthly wommon" - like no earthly woman - and her father promptly asks her to marry him. She refuses and is put out to sea. In good romance fashion she goes on to have a series of adventures in faraway lands. She marries the king of Wales, has his child, is betrayed by his mother and set afloat again, rescued by a friendly Roman merchant and ultimately reunited with her family.

What I find interesting is how people react to the way she looks. When the king's mother sees Emaré, shining as bright as a summer's day in the resplendent cloth, she exclaims: "I never saw a woman half as fine!" In the same breath, she adds, "Son, this is a fiend, in this worthy clothing", and sets about trying to kill her. Emaré's beauty, heightened by the resplendent robe, renders her almost monstrous, an object to be possessed or destroyed. Even the kind merchant is dazzled by the glittering cloth and thinks that she cannot be a human being, though his generous nature prevails.

Emaré - like her uncannily transformed descendants on YouTube - walks a line between being the most exquisite human and something more than human. Or, as Rainer Maria Rilke put it in his first Duino elegy (in Stephen Mitchell's rendering), "For beauty is nothing / but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure ... Every angel is terrifying." ■

Irina Dumitrescu teaches medieval literature at the University of Bonn



T R I P L E T S G R A C E S
O A A I A T V
A C I D R A N D L E T R E E
K U N E I N
A B L A Z E D E D I C A T E
O S I S
M U S K E T E E R S A G H A
N N N I L E
A D S O E I S E N S T E I N
C A L L I S T O E O T H E N
F E O R A G
G O L D F I N G E R M A G I
O G D E E I E
A T H E N A S A D D L E R S

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1501

The winner of Crossword 1501 is Nigel Cowley, of Lewes

The sender of the first correct solution opened on December 29, 2023, will receive a prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1505, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF or emailed to crosswords@the-tls.co.uk

TLS CROSSWORD 1505 BY PRAXITELES

ACROSS

- 1** Waterhouse, for instance, representing Tristan passing on last drop of potion (6)
5 Most dreary, like Charles's house is in Colombey-les-Deux-Églises (8)
9 Handy vehicle provided by a Beckett character to put on a list I've shortly in each case returned (5, 5)
10 One-sixth of a piece of Plato, boldfaced (4)
11 Solitary in a spot in Jersey (4-4)
12 "Then should the warlike Harry, like himself, / — the port of Mars" (*Henry V*) (6)
13 Talk indecently, as Eliza initially during Ascot's second contest (5)
15 One that's reportedly drunk at home — heavens! (9)
18 One an executioner hacks about (9)
19 Genre apt to be involved with Omar Rayo initially? (2, 3)
22 He wrote plays in which rats drowned around the far end of Brunswick (6)
24 Pal going round about in vehicle resembling a light carriage (8)
26 One that sounds like Epstein's medium? (4)
27 In this place reportedly there's nil reasoning about Egyptian inscriptions (10)
28 Part of Estragon is eschewing struggles (8)
29 Has another go at passing about a note on *Tristram Shandy* for starters (6)

DOWN

- 2** Money spent producing short version of Ionesco play (5)
3 Ain't a Romeo lacking energy? Put another way, he may be! (9)
4 Expressions of impatience and hesitation from Thackeray's bishop (6)
5 Boycott meek traders heartlessly perhaps-do they? (5, 10)
6 This one hacked art out, but no Academician (8)
7 One turning up in Fresno, okay? (5)
8 "His expression and stoop are like those of a —, but he is not that" (*Our Mutual Friend*) (9)
11 Pascal's dancing performance (3)
14 End unravelled in material, say, one worn by Pinocchio (6, 3)
16 Gold coins obtained by Moriarty, as Holmes described him, at start of story (9)
17 One's models made from mostly scorched earth (8)
20 Draw articulated body part (3)
21 One, OK, involved with 19 mostly, or another genre entirely (6)
23 One sculpted nickel, not carbon (5)
25 One knocking back drink at end of beerfest (5)

Paris reviewed

Here's a literary anniversary we should salute, in a better-late-than-never-at-all spirit, before the year is out: the first issues of the *Paris Review* appeared in 1953. Among its co-founders, George Plimpton would go on to edit this magazine for an admirable five decades; it has been overseen by five others since Plimpton's death in 2003, the latest being Emily Stokes, appointed in 2021.

A magazine of many parts, the *Paris Review* has become celebrated for the series of interviews with notable writers that began in those first issues. E. M. Forster, François Mauriac, Graham Greene, Irwin Shaw: most prominently placed on those bold covers in 1953 were the names of the interviewees in a series that has come to be seen as the magazine's "chief glory".

That's what Lorna Sage called the *Paris Review's* long and often entertaining interviews, in the *TLS* in 1985. Many would agree. Sage also noted, however, that these prestigious encounters (there have been some distinguished interviewees, too) have had the unfortunate side effect of making everything else that the *Review* does well - poems, stories, various different kinds of illustration - "look unfairly one-dimensional, like lower-case writing".

How could it be otherwise, we wonder, when the honoured guests in your pages include T. S. Eliot, Alberto Moravia, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway? The last was asked if there was symbolism in his novels ("I suppose there are symbols since critics keep finding them"), and if he thought of himself as being in competition with other writers ("Never"). Eliot, meanwhile, was asked the question that really matters: if he composes on a typewriter ("Partly").

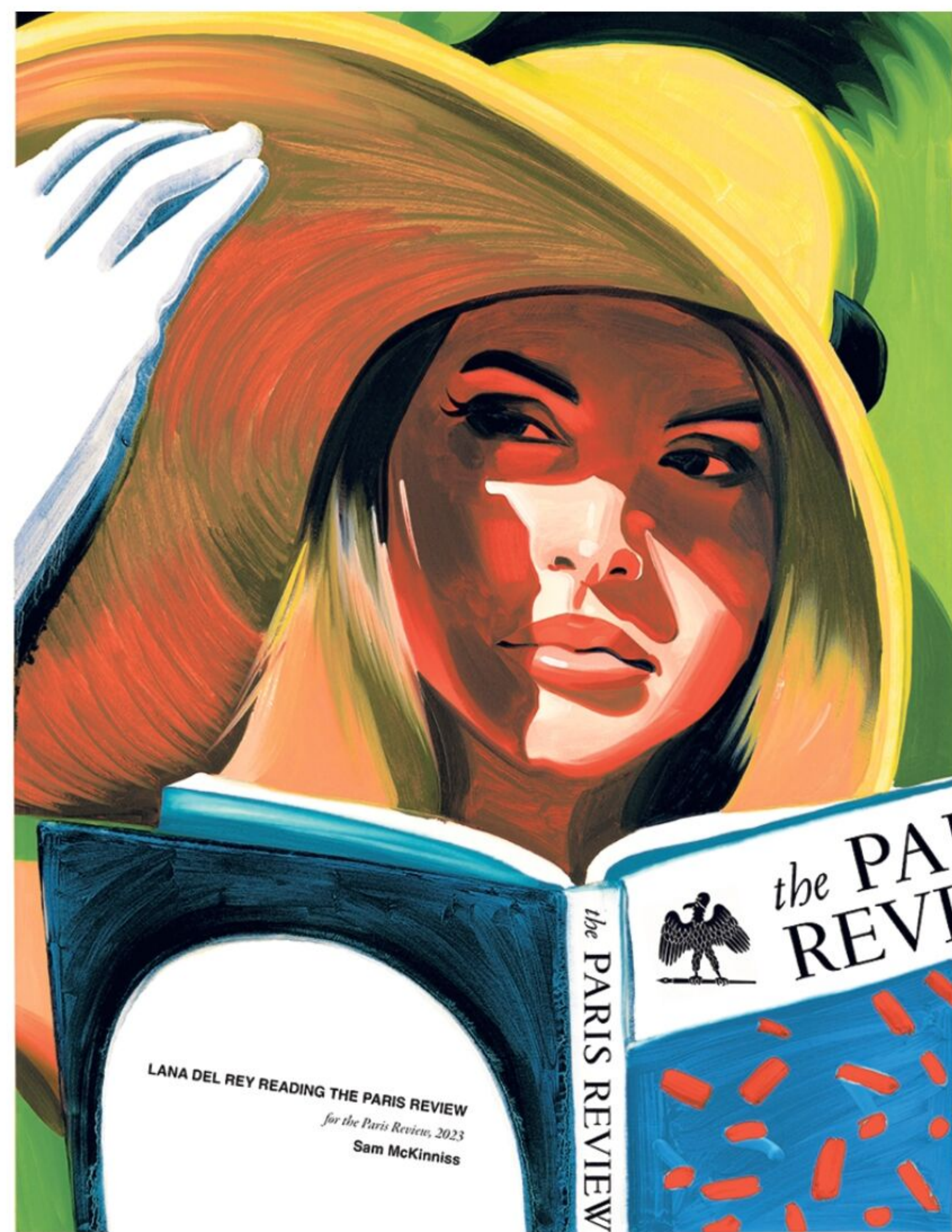
This is to speak only of the 1950s, when almost all the interviews belonged to a series called "The Art of Fiction", and the only three women subjected to the process were Dorothy Parker, Françoise Sagan and Isak Dinesen. The pool of interviewees and genres gradually widened, thus revealing that Mary McCarthy thought Simone de Beauvoir "pathetic" and "odious" (1962); that in Elizabeth Bishop's view "there's nothing more embarrassing than being a poet" (1981); and that Joan Didion hated D. H. Lawrence ("he just had a clotted and sentimental mind", 1978) and never started writing a novel, "except the first", without first rereading Conrad's *Victory* (2006).

The *Paris Review* for fall 2023, meanwhile, includes an interview with Lynn Nottage ("The Art of

Theater No. 19") and another with Robert Glück ("The Art of Fiction No. 260"). Both writers mention the rough times they have weathered. Nottage recalls of her studies at the Yale School of Drama, for example, in the late 1980s, that she was "probably the youngest person in the entire program, and one of the only Black women since the thirties". Lloyd Richards, the school's dean, "called me into his office to tell me how much he hated my play ... I felt he'd already decided that I was no Lorraine Hansberry".

Glück, for his part, is asked "Have you faced a lot of rejection as a writer?", and gives the only credible answer: "Next question."

Alongside these interviews and the varied contributions, not necessarily in lower case, from Ishion Hutchinson, Bei Dao, Mónica de la Torre et al, this issue also reproduces the print reproduced here. Sam McKinniss's "Lana Del Rey Reading the *Paris Review*" is the latest in the (recently revived) series of limited-edition prints that began in the 1960s with contributions from artists such as Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha and Helen Frankenthaler. The prints' purpose remains as it was: "publicizing and providing financial support for the magazine". Produced in a signed



and numbered edition of twenty-five, McKinniss's "Lana" may be purchased for \$4,000 from the *Review's* online shop. Financial support might also the form of an annual subscription to the *Paris Review*; prices start from \$59.

You have probably been worrying yourself silly over the Oxford Word of the Year - we know we have. The shortlist revealed last week consisted of eight modish coinages: *Swiftie*, *de-influencing*, *beige flag*, *rizz*, *situationship*, *parasocial*, *heat dome* and *prompt*. We have been trying to slip all of these terms into our everyday conversation. Is boasting about your *Paris Review* subscription a *beige flag* ("a character trait that indicates that a partner or potential partner is boring or lacks originality")? What colour is the flag for a *Swiftie* ("an enthusiastic fan of the singer Taylor Swift")? Are all *Swifties* *parasocial* ("designating a relationship characterized by the one-sided, unreciprocated sense of intimacy felt by a viewer, fan, or follower for a well-known or prominent figure")?

After some debate on social media, a public vote and much deliberating among the language gurus of Oxford University Press, a winner has been declared: it is *rizz* ("style, charm, or attractiveness; the ability to attract a romantic or sexual partner"). *Rizz* is said to be a shortened form of "charisma" - cf *fridge* (from refrigerator) and *flu* (from influenza). The Oxford experts also note that *rizz* can be used verbally - to *rizz up* is to chat up, as Dorothy Parker could have told you, while rolling her eyes. Such a colonization of other parts of speech apparently indicates that a word may be becoming "more prominent in the language". Time will tell if behaving *rizzily* becomes a widely understood character flaw, or a sign that your novel is set in 2024.

Correspondence. We breezily claimed that readers would be able to name many of the books listed in Colin Salter's *100 Novels that Changed the World* (November 3), such are the highly predictable tendencies of these lists. Allan House, emeritus professor of the University of Leeds, writes to put us right. "Over the years I have collected unsystematically seventeen such lists of books ... while there is overlap in their content it would be wrong to assume too great a uniformity." The one book to figure in all of Professor House's lists is *The Great Gatsby*.

Last week we recommended Tony Lurcock's commonplace book *Uncommon Places* as a good Christmas present for the uncommon reader in your life. But how to procure a copy? The compiler himself intervenes to point out that cbeditions.com is the virtual place to go if you do indeed know such an eccentric. By way of further recommendation, we will only note that *Uncommon Places*, in a single entry, features the words *caliginous* and *inspissated* - neither of which is likely to become Oxford Word of the Year any time soon.

M. C.

© The Times Literary Supplement Limited, 2023. Published in print and all other derivative formats by The Times Literary Supplement Limited, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, England. Telephone: 020-7782 5000 E-mail: letters@the-tls.co.uk without whose express permission no part may be reproduced. US copy printed by Stellar Printing Inc, 38-38 9th Street, Long Island City, NY 11101. UK rest of world copy printed by Newsprinters (Broxbourne) Ltd, Great Cambridge Rd, Waltham Cross, EN8 8DY, England. **TLS Subscription rates** (all 12 months/50 issues): **PRINT**: USA USD175, Canada (Air freight) CAD225, UK £115, Rest of World (Airmail) £165. **DIGITAL**: USA USD50, Canada CAD50, UK £50, Rest of World £50. **THE COMPLETE WORKS** (Print and digital): USA USD185, Canada CAD230, UK £120, Rest of World £170. Call +1-844-208-1515 (USA & Canada) or +44 (0) 203 308 9146 (rest of the world) or visit the-tls.co.uk/buy to subscribe. Full subscription terms apply at the-tls.co.uk/terms-conditions

THE BRITISH TRADITION OF 'FREE SPEECH' IS A MYTH.

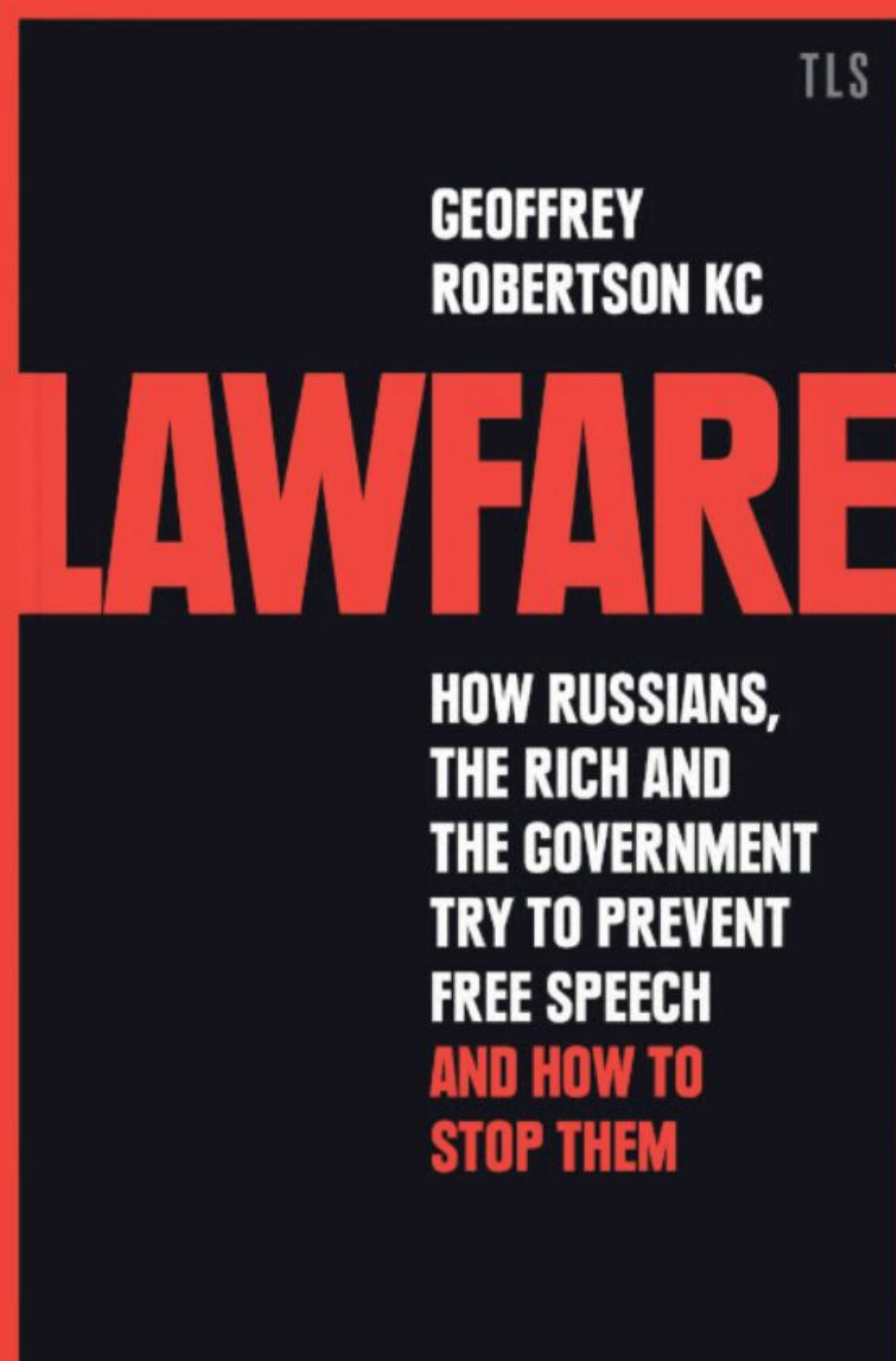
'ESSENTIAL'
Amal Clooney

'AUTHORITATIVE'
Sir Geoffrey Bindman KC

'IMPORTANT'
Baroness Helena Kennedy KC

'COULD HARDLY BE MORE TIMELY'
Alan Rusbridger

OUT NOW



TLS

