Stefan Collini: What next for the BBC?

London Review OF BOOKS

VOLUME 44 NUMBER 8 21 APRIL 2022 £5.45 US $7.99 CANADA $8.49

Andrew O'Hagan:
My Kingdom for
a Mint Cracknel

Colin Burrow:
Pope's Luck

Emily Witt:
Sheila Heti's
New Cosmology

Tom Crewe:
Totally Tourgenueff

Arianne Shahvisi:
What It Costs to Live

In the latest issue

WAR FOR UKRAINE

'The dichotomy between two explanatory schemas—one emphasizing NATO expansion, the other the long-hidden force of Russian nationalism; one supposedly exculpating Russia, the other muting the role of NATO—is false. The emergence of an assertive and militarized Russian nationalism is inextricable from the process of NATO expansion, because it was in large part propelled and reinforced by it. Russian nationalist fantasies have been enmeshed with geo-strategic calculations, the advancement of oligarchic interests with the self-preservation of the "imitation democratic" system. What weight we assign to these factors can be debated; but that they simultaneously exist should not.'

—Tony Wood

Also in NLR 133/4: politics in Ukraine and Russia; digital feudalism; US & UK lefts; theorizing 'race'; radical criticism; black cinema. Plus book reviews: Hito Steyerl on Stallabrass, *Killing for Show*; William Harris on Issa Shivji's critical life of Nyerere; Joy Neumeyer on Frye's Putin.

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London Review of Books

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In the next issue, which will be dated 12 May: Donald MacKenzie on online advertising; Keith Thomas on witch trials; Azadeh Moaveni reports from the Polish border.

Christopher de Bellaigue is writing a series of books about Suleyman the Magnificent.

Owen Bennett-Jones interviews authors for a weekly show on the New Books Network.

Colin Burrow's most recent book is *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity*.

Anne Carson's *H of H Playbook* is a translation of Euripides' *Herakles*.

Stefan Collini's edition of George Orwell's *Selected Essays* was published last year.

Tom Crewe's first novel, *The New Life*, is due in January.

Lucie Elven's novel *The Weak Spot* is out now.

John Foot's history of Italian fascism, *Blood and Power*, will be published in June.

Jorie Graham teaches at Harvard. Her next book, *[To] The Last [Be] Human*, is out in September.

Emily LaBarge is writing a book about trauma and narrative.

Erin Maglaque is a historian at Sheffield.

Andrew O'Hagan, the *LRB*'s editor at large, teaches at HM Prison Kilmarnock.

Jonathan Parry's *Promised Lands: The British and the Ottoman Middle East* has just been published. He teaches history at Cambridge.

Richard Sanger's most recent collection of poems is *Dark Woods*.

Arianne Shahvisi is writing a book about the philosophy of social justice.

Liam Shaw is a postdoctoral fellow at the MacLean Lab in Oxford, researching bacterial genetics.

Jen Stout is still in Romania.

Mary Wellesley's *Hidden Hands* came out last year. *Encounters with Medieval Women*, co-presented with Irina Dumitrescu, can be found via *LRB* podcast.

Emily Witt is the author of *Future Sex*.

Michael Wood is always working.

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Letters

Paper Cuts

Malin Hay writes about the 'longest strike in the history of the Finnish paper industry' (*LRB*, 24 March). This is a long history. In the early 20th century, Finland was the chief paper supplier for periodicals across the Russian empire. Leading newspapers as far away as Odessa relied on shipments of high-quality Finnish paper for their daily printing. Having looked at thousands of these newspapers, I can attest to the enduring quality of Finnish paper, even for newsprint intended to be ephemeral. A hundred years later it is often dirty and brittle, but still intact and legible.

After the outbreak of the First World War, inflation and strain on the Russian transportation network meant interruptions to the paper supply from Finland. Distant newspapers resorted to buying locally produced but lower quality paper, and it shows: higher daily prices, decaying newsprint, and fewer or smaller pages per issue. Editors at the time reported drops in circulation, despite the immense demand for war news, because of the irregular supply of paper.

Felix Cowan

Champaign, Illinois

Two Cultures

Adam Mars-Jones refers to 'Newton's second law of thermodynamics' (*LRB*, 7 April). The second law of thermodynamics is unusual among scientific laws in that it can't be attributed to a single person, but we can be confident that Isaac Newton didn't have a hand in it, if only because he died about a hundred years before it was formulated. Credit has to go to the tragically short-lived French scientist Nicolas Sadi Carnot (1796-1832), but the second law in its modern form is usually attributed to the German physicist Rudolf Clausius (1822-88), who in the process introduced the slippery concept of entropy. Other names (Kelvin, Carathéodory) are part of the complicated story. It may be true, as Mars-Jones claims, that 'general readers are no more likely to be able to describe [the second law] than they were in 1959, when C.P. Snow lamented the gap between the "two cultures",' but a useful (if facetious) guide to all three laws of thermodynamics was offered in the *American Scientist* in March 1964:

> First law: You can't win, you can only break even.
> Second law: You can only break even at absolute zero.
> Third law: You can't reach absolute zero.

Craig McFarlane

Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

The Little Red Schoolbook

Stephen Sedley refers to the closing speech of Mervyn Griffith-Jones, acting as prosecutor in the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial, in which he alluded to a passage in the novel that clearly described an act of anal intercourse (*LRB*, 10 March). The junior counsel for Penguin Books, Jeremy Hutchinson, was alive to the difficulties the passage posed for the defence. When he raised his concerns with Penguin's main witnesses, the academics Graham Hough and Helen Gardner, they dismissed his interpretation. But another potential witness, Harold Nicolson, wrote in a letter to Hutchinson before the trial:

> I thought at one time that I might be prepared to say that I was certain that Lawrence did not intend the book to be pornographic, but wished to write a lyrical essay on normal sex relationships. On reading it again, however, I realise that Lady Chatterley's relations with the gamekeeper were not any more normal than those which he had imposed upon his unfortunate wife. Rubinstein [Penguin's solicitor] failed to notice this point and was rather shocked when I mentioned it. But I imagine that those whom the attorney general has chosen to brief him will have caught on to the point, and that in cross-examination I should have to admit that the sexual relations between the hero and heroine were not in the least normal, and to that extent the book was 'liable to corrupt' within the meaning of the [Obscene Publications Act 1959].

Penguin called 35 'expert' witnesses to speak to the literary merit and moral significance of Lawrence's novel, though Nicolson was not one of them. Hutchinson recalled his anxiety that Griffith-Jones would cross-examine on the difficult passage and was astonished that in the event it was never raised with any of the defence witnesses. By the time Griffith-Jones made the veiled reference in his speech to the jury it was too late. But at the beginning of the trial Hutchinson thought an acquittal was by no means guaranteed. He believed that Griffith-Jones's reticence may well have had a profound impact on the history of censorship in this country.

Thomas Grant

Maitland Chambers, London WC2

Humble Skill

Jo-Ann Wallace's piece on typing, in particular her emphasis on the importance of anticipation, put me in mind of the work psychologists and physiologists were doing in the 1950s to develop a theory that behaviour is sequentially organised (*LRB*, 24 February). Karl Lashley, having observed that many typing errors, particularly at the end of words, were essentially anticipatory of the next word, argued that the sequencing of behaviour was organised through cognitive plans, not (as the then dominant behaviourist theories proposed) as a chain of letter by letter stimulus-response mechanisms. This is nicely illustrated by Wallace's sense that even as she is typing the word 'anticipation', she is already prepared for 'the falling into place of that concluding "tion" which . . . falls trippingly from the fingers'. Lashley's theory was one of the first nails in the coffin of behaviourism and presaged the 'cognitive revolution' in psychology.

Roger Booker

London SW4

On the Lisburn Road

Susan McKay's Diary about the political situation in Northern Ireland took me back to the mid-1980s, when I was living in the centre of Belfast while trying to make a film (*LRB*, 10 March). I had rented an office near the Lisburn Road and commuted from my digs on a borrowed bike. It was the marching season and the Drumcree stand-off was imminent. The bike didn't have lights. It was midsummer, but starting to get dark, so I decided to pack up and cycle home. I could hear the flutes and drums of an Orange march nearby. When I turned onto the Lisburn Road the parade, about eighty strong, stretched out in front of me. Mindful that I had no lights and that the RUC were strung along the road, I swung out and cycled past the parade. I came up to the Lambeg drums at the front. Beside them was 'security': two or three men with tattoos, rings, leather and muscle. The next thing I knew I was thrown off the bike and given a good kicking. All the while the parade marched past. Lying on the roadside, I uncurled myself and opened my eyes. A policeman was looking down at me. 'Never overtake the Orange Order,' he said and strode away after the parade.

Gerry Harrison

Lewes, East Sussex

I Shall, You Will

My wife says she learned the rule about 'shall' and 'will' from Kennedy's *Latin Primer*, first published in 1875, and I think I must have too (Letters, 10 March and 7 April). The older editions read 'I shall, thou wilt, he will [it was written for boys], we shall, ye will, they will.' By our time this had been modernised somewhat, but the 'shall' and 'will' (and the masculine) remained. It isn't clear where Kennedy got this from. The standard usage in his time was to distinguish between 'will' and 'would', for simple indicative and subjunctive moods, and 'shall' and 'should' as carrying some element of 'ought', irrespective of person. While this was – and still is – quite clear in the case of 'should', it was always much less so for 'shall'. As Dr Johnson observed, 'the explanation of shall, which foreigners and provincials confound with will, is not easy.' And without a clear distinction, Kennedy's usage does make a kind of sense. To say 'You shall' would be to suggest a command. To say 'I will' would be to suggest a lack of commitment or self-control.

John Hendry

Girton College, Cambridge

For first-person use at any rate, 'shall' and 'will' have surely become interchangeable north of the Border (and indeed in Ireland). 'Will I come in?' a hesitant young Scottish reporter asks in David Bone's *Landfall at Sunset* (1955), teetering at the door of his busy London editor. 'God knows!' is the impatient reply.

Conrad Natzio

Woodbridge, Suffolk

Demolition Overdue

In his review of Allen Guelzo's biography of Robert E. Lee, Matthew Karp doesn't mention the relative leniency with which Lee and other Confederate leaders were treated in defeat (*LRB*, 7 April). Jefferson Davis was allowed to return home, where he remained unmolested. Lee lost Arlington, but what about the other Custis properties he had inherited through marriage? He was stripped of his US citizenship, but left to live out his last years comfortably as president of Washington College (later Washington and Lee University). Conviction for high treason was normally followed by hanging and the confiscation of estates; radical Republicans pressed for harsher punishment, but were defeated by Lincoln's stricture, happily followed by his Southern successor, Andrew Johnson, to display 'malice toward none and charity for all'. This grave error allowed the South to remain unreconciled to defeat, paving the way for the emergence of Jim Crow. The naming of ships and forts after Confederate generals in the 20th century marked an effort to mobilise Southern feeling for the old cause in the service of the Union, amounting to a form of pandering.

Lee's attitude towards slavery, as Karp suggests, remained recalcitrant, but was probably worse than he, and Guelzo's book, let on. Had Lee not sued in court to reverse the manumission of slaves granted by Mary Custis's father, on coming into possession of the estate? And his willingness to sacrifice the lives of his troops in battle, almost gratuitously, shocked even some of his own generals. The demolition of the cult of Robert E. Lee is long overdue.

Albion Urdank

Los Angeles

Bronze and Soap

I enjoyed Linda Gregerson's poem 'Melting Equestrian (Cavendish Square)', about the two statues of the Duke of Cumberland ('Butcher Cumberland') that have stood in the square (*LRB*, 24 March). Perhaps I could take the opportunity to note the names of the sculptors: John Cheere (1709-87), who executed the first gilt bronze monument, and the contemporary Korean sculptor Meekyoung Shin, who created the soap version.

Holly Trusted

Public Statues and Sculpture Association
Duns Tew, Oxfordshire

Not All Roses

I was surprised to read Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite's cheery account of Welsh devolution, in particular her suggestion that a 'radical' economic approach has been undertaken by Welsh Labour (*LRB*, 7 April). This seems at odds with reality. Child poverty has worsened in recent years, so that one in three Welsh children now live in poverty, the highest rate in the UK. Educational attainment remains very low, with less than a third of pupils eligible for free school meals achieving five or more A*-C grades at GCSE. In the year to March 2020, homelessness in Wales was at its highest level since records began, with more than thirty thousand households applying for homelessness assistance. It is strange to see a country undergoing such a sustained period of economic decline celebrated as a beacon of radicalism.

Joe Waters

Newport

Beebology

Stefan Collini

The BBC: A People's History
by David Hendy.
Profile, 638 pp., £25, January, 978 1 78125 525 4

This Is the BBC:
Entertaining the Nation, Speaking for Britain? 1922-2022
by Simon J. Potter.
Oxford, 288 pp., £20, April, 978 0 19 289852 4

Attitudes to the BBC are, for the most part, spirit-sappingly predictable. Politicians of all parties believe it is biased against them. One powerful lobby claims it is a hotbed of radicals bent on undermining national identity, another that it is the mouthpiece of the establishment. Some critics denounce the licence fee as insulating the BBC against the bracing winds of competition, while others complain that the corporation has already abandoned its public service remit in the search for profit. One chorus takes up the theme that programming remains 'elitist' and 'middle class', another that it has become demotic and debased. Many people seem to feel that so long as *The Archers* and the shipping forecast are left untouched, then all is right with the world; others seem to think that the problem is precisely that *The Archers* and the shipping forecast have been left untouched for too long. It's not easy to come up with any really new complaints about the BBC.

Faced with this repetitive litany of charge and countercharge, what contribution can historians make? An internal memo in 1952 affirmed that 'the exact nature of the past of the BBC is important in any discussion of its future' and that 'any questioning' of the BBC's role ought to be informed by 'the consideration of the service which this unique institution has so far rendered, and ought to be based not on faulty recollection or hearsay but accurate information'. That's easily said: too easily perhaps, since the pin-striped positivism of such phrases as 'exact nature' and 'accurate information' is not likely to go down well in our more relativistic age, where questions of epistemology are so often treated as dependent on questions of sociology. In any case, what does 'the past of the BBC' consist of? There are institutional continuities, of course, but millions of radio and television broadcasts have evaporated into the ether. A history that confined itself to matters of governance and finance would be like a history of football that concentrates on decisions in club boardrooms without ever mentioning what happened on the pitch, let alone what the matches meant to millions of ardent fans. Listeners and viewers have been no less ardent about some of the BBC's programmes, as a ceaseless correspondence of complaint and enthusiasm has made clear over the decades, but how far can historians capture the subjective experience of the living room and integrate it into institutional accounts?

For historians the BBC represents both a fantasy object and a Borgesian nightmare. As an organisation, it has been one of the great record-keeping bureaucracies in history. The BBC's Written Archives Centre at Caversham is a treasure trove, but it's also a labyrinth in which one expects to find white-haired historians still groping myopically along the endless shelves of files, doomed to uncover material so fascinating that all likelihood of ever finishing any work of scholarship has long since passed.

If ever there was a historian to whom the phrase 'daunting task' acted like a starting pistol it was Asa Briggs, who was commissioned to write an official history of the BBC. The first volume, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, appeared in 1961; the fifth volume, *Competition*, taking the story up to 1974, came out in 1995. The full series amounts to some four thousand densely researched pages. It was a remarkable achievement, especially since it was started at a time when few other historians seemed interested in what radio and television meant for British life in the 20th century. Briggs's history is a monument, but like most monuments it repays repeated visits rather than long residence. In his stately volumes controllers talk to controllers and committees to committees, in unending games of office chess. Others have followed where Briggs led, notably Jean Seaton, who continued the story in livelier vein in *'Pinkoes and Traitors': The BBC and the Nation, 1974-87*, published in 2015, and there have been any number of more specialised studies on such topics as the BBC and popular music, or the BBC during the Second World War.

The corporation's centenary sees the publication of two histories that aspire to tell the whole story in a single volume, if not exactly from the cradle to the grave (though undertakers hover in their closing pages), then at least from the crystal set to iPlayer. David Hendy's book has the strengths of an insider's account, packed with detail and anecdotes, shrewd in its assessment of personalities, light on socioeconomic change. Simon Potter's is more academic and astringent. Potter tends to be critical where Hendy is indulgent, but Hendy's volume is more fun, while Potter's occasionally dips into right-minded solemnity. They both more than earn their place on the ever lengthening shelf of Beebology.

Neither book can avoid the vexed question of the BBC's independence. The corporation is not, in any simple sense, a state broadcaster, but nor is it a free-standing commercial enterprise, raising its own capital and generating its own income, though it is increasingly being driven in that direction. It is, as we are repeatedly reminded, a corporation licensed by royal charter, overseen by a board of governors (subsequently trustees, and then from 2017 members of a new board), and largely funded by the licence fee. Successive governments of both parties have tried to exercise control by haggling over the terms of charter renewal, favouring compliant governors, and setting the level of the licence fee, yet at the same time every government has complained that the BBC has constantly undermined their efforts to govern the country.

During the 20th century, many British institutions – national museums and galleries, the University Grants Committee, the Arts Council – enjoyed a not wholly dissimilar hybrid status. These 'arm's length' arrangements tended to work fairly well when the men who ran them (they were nearly all men) and the men who ran the rest of the country were very much of the same type. Shared backgrounds and cultural attitudes smoothed the way, and the 'just a quiet word in your ear' approach was relied on to sort out differences before they became too pronounced. Potter notes the recommendation of the parliamentary committee overseeing the charter review in 1936 that 'BBC officers should consult civil servants, informally, whenever "the interests of the state appear to be at all closely involved."' Only 'informally', of course: nothing more than a chap having a word with another chap. The extent to which this could compromise the BBC's independence became apparent in the late 1930s when the Foreign Office agitated for foreign-language broadcasts to counter the propaganda of the Axis powers. John Reith, the director general, felt obliged to accept an arrangement that, as Potter puts it, 'included agreeing that news editors would accept specific guidance from civil servants as to which items needed to be included in, or omitted from, different foreign-language services. All this was subsequently enshrined in a secret "gentleman's agreement" between the BBC and the government, unwritten and thus eminently deniable by both parties.'

Those convinced that the BBC will always end up bowing to the government of the day tend to adduce its conduct during the general strike of 1926. The official case against the strike was given ample airtime; the strikers' position was not. When Reith checked with Downing Street to see if the BBC could broadcast a plea by the archbishop of Canterbury for both sides to suspend hostilities in 'a spirit of fellowship' (contradicting the government's hard line that there could be no negotiation until the strike was called off), he was told, in a mild but sinister phrase, 'the prime minister would rather you didn't.' And so, of course, he didn't.

Winston Churchill, the leading anti-union hawk at the time of the strike, pursued an almost lifelong vendetta against the BBC. He was outraged that the corporation could not simply be commandeered to put out the government's line, and in later decades was still insisting that it was an enemy within the gates 'run by reds'. As this may suggest, his interventions were not always well grounded. During the war, he personally rang the duty controller at Broadcasting House to complain about an item he said he had just heard on the nine o'clock news. The controller was able to point out,

politely but firmly, that this seemed unlikely given that it was still only 8.50 p.m.

Another illustration of the BBC's complicated relationship with power is the role of external broadcasting after 1945: was this an impartial news service or an arm of Britain's soft diplomacy? During the Cold War, the Foreign Office funded and set the guidelines for the European Service's broadcasting, while the BBC was supposed to have editorial control over content – an arrangement almost designed to cause friction. As Hendy observes, however, 'potential rows were often defused through personal relationships.' This was the great advantage of being run by chaps who knew other chaps.

But it didn't always work like that. One of Anthony Eden's several miscalculations over Suez was his assumption that he could bully the BBC – which he described in a moment of particular exasperation as 'a nest of communists' – into supporting the invasion by threatening to cut or curtail its External Services broadcasting. The director general, Ian Jacob, rightly sensing that the country was divided on the issue, stood by the corporation's commitment to even-handed reporting. Once American pressure had forced Eden into a humiliating withdrawal from the Canal Zone, the threat evaporated, but the episode did nothing to lessen some politicians' suspicions about the subversive character of the nation's principal broadcaster. The Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s were almost equally antagonistic to the BBC, with Tony Benn 'equating it with the medieval Catholic Church, controlling thought from a middle-class, establishment position'. Harold Wilson, naturally given to suspicion, thought the BBC was somehow conspiring against him, and in the mid-1970s suggested abolishing the licence fee in order to bring the corporation more directly under government control, a frequent reflex of disgruntled politicians.

Predictably, Margaret Thatcher hated the 'British Bastard Corporation', as her husband liked to call it. Coverage of the Falklands War was an inevitable flashpoint, with Thatcher raging against reporters' references to 'British' forces rather than 'our' troops. The tabloid press sensed an opportunity to put the boot in, with the *Sun* wheeling out the tiredest of tropes by damning the BBC's coverage as the work of 'traitors in our midst'. Norman Tebbit's much quoted tirade against the corporation – the 'insufferable, smug, sanctimonious, naive, guilt-ridden, wet, pink orthodoxy of that sunset home of third-rate minds of that third-rate decade, the Sixties' – betrayed a shaky grasp of cultural history. (Michael Foot's description of Tebbit as 'a semi-house-trained polecat' may have revealed an equally shaky grasp of natural history, yet still seemed nearer the mark.) There was no pleasing either side in that divided decade: Arthur Scargill was as hostile to the BBC as Thatcher, denouncing the TV news as 'pure unadulterated bias'. And so it goes on, with complaints and threats stacking up like Brexit-blocked containers.

At the outset, the BBC's fragile autonomy owed as much to commercial calculation as to high-minded planning. By 1922 a number of companies were becoming aware of the potential of new transmitters to send signals not to a specific end point, as with the telegraph, but to anyone within range who had a 'receiver'. Partly to avoid wavelength mayhem, the GPO negotiated with the six main companies who sold receivers to set up an entity to be called the British Broadcasting Company. The manufacturers were to be, in effect, the shareholders, but the new organisation was to have considerable freedom of action, not least because much of its funding was to come from a share of the revenue from the licence which the GPO obliged every owner of a receiver to buy. The company had a de facto monopoly, a situation which brought certain constraints (there was to be no on-air advertising, for example).

It soon became evident that radio was outgrowing the awkward arrangement in which a consortium of wireless manufacturers owned what was already coming to function as a 'public service'. So in 1927, following the recommendation of a committee of inquiry, the company was turned into a public corporation, based on a royal charter, overseen by a board of governors and funded by a share of the income from the licence fee. It was fortunate that the great press barons, such as Harmsworth and Beaverbrook, weren't interested in broadcasting: had they been, they might have contested the BBC's monopoly position more vigorously. In the event, the new arrangement was in place before the immense potential of radio was widely appreciated. In the early years, relatively few households had a licence for a receiver and transmitter coverage was patchy. But by 1936 the BBC could reach 98 per cent of the population.

For the most part, early broadcasting was parasitic on existing genres: there were transmissions of concerts, plays, lectures, variety shows, church services and so on. Perhaps only the 'feature' was truly native to radio, a genre that came into being in the interwar years and flourished in the decade after 1945. But in time the BBC became a great patron of new writing as well as of new music. Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*, broadcast in January 1954, may be the most celebrated piece of literature it's hard to imagine coming into existence without radio; more generally, plays written for radio have adapted or reinvented an established form. But the great filler was music, especially varieties of 'light music'. By the end of the 1930s, as Hendy reports, 'musical comedy, operetta, ballads, film scores, organ recitals, solos, palm-court trios, "seaside" music, military bands, brass bands and small orchestras playing classical highlights had all been homogenised into a capacious category of "light" music that became the centre of gravity in the BBC's output.' For all the recurrent fuss over the broadcaster's political bias, and for all the sneers about the unrealistically highbrow character of some programmes, in the 1930s and 1940s the greater part of airtime was given over to easy listening as represented by programmes such as *Music While You Work*.

The Second World War is often regarded as the BBC's finest hour. It certainly strengthened the position of 'the wireless' in national life. In no other major war can people's experience have been so pervasively mediated, and at the same time made bearable, by listening to the radio, while the BBC's international wartime role enormously enhanced its reputation around the world. Potter is sceptical about the extent to which the corporation managed to defend its independence against government pressure in these years, arguing that it adopted an 'essentially co-operative, and sometimes submissive, approach'. Hendy devotes more than a hundred pages to the period, three chapters that are among the best things in either book. He brings out the way the BBC's subsequent reputation as an impartial news broadcaster went back to the delicate line it had to tread between supporting the war effort and refusing to put out obvious falsehoods for propaganda purposes. And he does justice to, among other things, the romance of sending coded messages to resistance groups in occupied Europe, not least with the following astonishing statistic: the evening before D-Day, 'the BBC started transmitting an unusually long list of messages across the English Channel. Within 24 hours, 1050 acts of railway sabotage had been initiated via the BBC, 950 of which were successful.'

Hendy also gives a vivid picture of daily life at the BBC under wartime conditions. Many of its activities were moved out of London in 1939, the bulk of them to Wood Norton Hall near Evesham. Soon, around a thousand items a week were being produced from the depths of rural Worcestershire, though announcers continued to say 'This is London calling' (clearly, 'This is Wood Norton calling' just wouldn't cut it). Even in this sylvan retreat, safety procedures had to be followed in the event of an air raid. 'The warning signal that went off at Wood Norton consisted of "The Teddy Bears' Picnic" blasted through loudspeakers. As soon as it was heard, all the producers, actors, administrators, secretaries and engineers promptly did as they were told and ran into the nearby woods to lie down in pairs.' I suppose it's what you'd most want to do if you thought you were about to die.

After the war, the two domestic stations that had broadcast throughout, the 'Home' and the 'Forces', were replaced by what was termed 'the pyramid': the Light Programme for popular listening, ascending to the Home Service for the middle range of BBC offerings, and culminating in the intellectually and aesthetically more ambitious Third Programme. Both the conception, and the proportions of the listening public that each station attracted, reflected the class structure of the day. It's difficult now to recapture the centrality of radio to national life in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The war had made news bulletins required listening, a response replicated at moments of national and international crisis ever since. Other kinds of programme became fixed points in many people's days. Launched in 1948, *Mrs Dale's Diary* attracted 'more than half of the available working-class radio audience'. *The Archers*, first broadcast in 1951, soon had an audience of almost ten million; it has been calculated that a quarter of the

adult population were listening when Grace Archer was killed off in 1955. (Some listeners could take things rather literally: the actor who played Phil Archer reported that, after a scene of snogging in the back of a car, he was sent contraceptives through the post.) And radio had its peculiar reverse impact on print: the *Radio Times*, 'the Bradshaw of broadcasting', became the biggest selling weekly in Britain, while the *Listener*, 'the Hansard of broadcasting', had a circulation of more than 50,000, larger at the time than all serious periodicals except the *New Statesman*.

Television had made a faltering start in the 1930s, with its signal only available to those in the Greater London area and very few people owning or renting sets. The fledgling service was closed down for the duration of the war, but when it restarted it was still thought a minor affair, obviously secondary to radio. In 1952, the year before the coronation, there were eight times as many radio-only licences as TV licences, but things rapidly changed. By 1958 'the number of households with television sets exceeded, for the first time, those with sound-only licences. That year BBC expenditure on television also exceeded its budget for radio for the first time.'

The coronation, described by one insider as 'the outside broadcast of all outside broadcasts', played a part in promoting television, though its impact on TV ownership has sometimes been exaggerated. Technological advances (better transmitters) and the availability from 1955 of a second channel (ITV), played a larger part, while increasing affluence and the accompanying 'privatisation of experience' were even more significant. It's still remarkable that more than half the adult population of the country (20.4 million people) are supposed to have watched the coronation on TV, if not always in their own homes. Contrast this with what has been logged as 'the most complained about event in the history of the BBC': not Kenneth Tynan saying 'fuck' on air, or a programme giving equal time to an alleged IRA commander and a loyalist hardliner, or even the proposal to alter the timing of the shipping forecast, but the blanket coverage given to the death of Prince Philip in 2021.

Everyone who has grown up in the broadcasting age has a relationship with particular programmes and personalities. Even more than is the case with reading, whose form is less tied to a particular moment in time, memories of and attitudes to broadcast media are significantly determined by one's generation. I was a young child in the 1950s and then that relatively new phenomenon, a teenager, in the 1960s, so my radio and TV memories were shaped accordingly. I was a bit young fully to appreciate the zany genius of *The Goon Show* (though I can still sing 'The Ying Tong Song'), but I was more than happy to let *Grandstand* structure my Saturday afternoons, with all matches beginning at the divinely appointed time of 3 p.m. The drama of the results coming in by ticker tape had the immediacy of a war room. I was no budding cultural critic: what I heard and watched all seemed as much part of 'reality' as the bus to school or roast potatoes at Sunday lunch. I didn't think it odd that the panellists on *What's My Line?* wore evening dress, nor did it occur to me to be offended by *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, just as I laughed at the byplay between 'Sandy and my fwiend Julian' in *Round the Horne* without understanding the innuendo.

My epiphany occurred late on a Saturday evening in November 1962. I was a spotty 15-year-old with an unsteady grasp of the difference between girls and Martians, and a literary urge whose expression in my homework wasn't appreciated by my teachers. But by the time I went to bed that evening I had been given a glimpse of the kind of person I thought I wanted to become. *That Was the Week That Was* entranced me. It was clever, irreverent, funny, and at the time there were to my mind no higher values (it was all helped by my having an instant crush on Millicent Martin). I'm now more aware of the programme's limitations: driven by overconfident young men such as David Frost and Bernard Levin, much of its content might generously be called 'undergraduate humour'. Though politically impudent, it was of its time and place in its unspoken assumptions about such matters as gender and race. (Tynan called such satire 'anti-reactionary without being progressive'.) But it hit its moment perfectly. It's so often invoked in retrospects of the 1960s that it's sobering to be reminded that it only ran for thirteen months. However popular it may have been with suburban, black-polo-neck-wearing *enragés* like my younger self, *That Was the Week That Was* soon became too much even for the liberal director general, Hugh Carleton Greene; tired of fielding endless complaints, he concluded that it was, after all, possible to be a bit too iconoclastic and he cancelled it after two series. It may be that, as with some poets, an early death contributed to an enduringly glamorous reputation.

If it's hard to get away from nostalgia when discussing broadcasting, good history can at least show that the apparent constancy of the BBC's character is an illusion, hiding radical discontinuities and self-reinventions. It can also remind us that much of the output has always been forgettable, run-of-the-mill stuff. Yet at the same time the effect of studying the history can be to increase rather than diminish one's gratitude for the existence of the BBC. Understandably, neither of these books has much to say about broadcasting in other countries, but more comparative studies would bring out just how exceptional the BBC has been. There can be disagreements about why this is: some credit the licence fee, some point to the sustained dominance of British public life by certain cultivated elites, some cite a long-entrenched hostility to 'free enterprise'. Whatever the explanation, it's hard not to be grateful for what happenstance has delivered over the past century, a sentiment intensified by the briefest exposure to certain 'news' broadcasting in the US or much of the 'entertainment' that dominates TV in some other European countries. That's without raising the contrast with countries where the state broadcaster pumps out the government's propaganda in brazen and uninhibited ways.

Can it continue? Both these books, Potter's especially, show what a semi-commercial behemoth the corporation has become. 'By 2021 the BBC was running ten domestic television channels, 56 radio stations, a substantial online presence, and an international news service broadcast in English and more than forty foreign languages.' This growth has involved fundamental changes to the BBC's nature:

> The public corporation has, over the last thirty years, essentially become a commissioning body. It runs radio and television networks and digital services, but no longer makes many of the programmes that they deliver to audiences. Instead, today it fills broadcast schedules and slots on iPlayer by buying content from over 350 different independent production companies and from its own commercial operation, BBC Studios, which also makes content for other providers.

The BBC is a hybrid in a world of hybrids. It retains some 'public service' obligations, and for many listeners and viewers is still the 'national broadcaster', but it's not obvious that it will be able to sustain this role. An Ofcom survey in 2018 showed that 16 to 34-year-olds were 'consuming' less than half as much BBC 'output' as the national average and in 2019 the number of people in the UK watching Netflix overtook those on iPlayer. The majority of people under thirty are more likely to watch programmes on phones or laptops and never listen to BBC radio at all. On the other hand, in 2020 91 per cent of UK households accessed some BBC services every week, as viewing numbers surged during lockdown.

Perhaps the licence fee, a regressive flat tax tied to an outdated model of a household, should now be regarded simply as 'venture capital for creative production', as a 2005 report called it. Its appropriateness as a way of funding a multimedia empire is obviously open to question, even among those who support the idea of public service broadcasting, though it is difficult to see an alternative funding model that would sustain the distinctive character of the BBC. But of course there are many who have no desire to see that character sustained, and once again the undertakers are polishing the brass on their coffins. Nadine Dorries's recent proposal for the privatisation of Channel 4 is an ominous sign of the way the political wind is blowing.

Potter ends his study by declaring, not wrongly but a little earnestly: 'Anyone who cares about what we read, watch, and listen to, on television, radio, or online, should think about what life would be like without the BBC, and about how the corporation might, in the future, find new and better ways to serve all our needs.' Hendy ends his, fetchingly if a little sentimentally, with the diary entry of a retired nurse in the Second World War who had turned off her radio in protest against its unappealing programmes, but who then, when her set was broken for three weeks, declared herself 'lost . . . as though a friend has gone from the house'. Hendy presents this snippet as 'a simple reminder that we sometimes never know just how much we need or want something until it is gone.' Whether or not we think the BBC is now 'crouching below/Extinction's alp', to adapt a phrase from Larkin's 'The Old Fools', the poem's bleak concluding line may be all the comfort we can give ourselves: 'Well,/We shall find out.' □

A Cosmos Indoors

Andrew O'Hagan

Extinct: A Compendium of Obsolete Objects
edited by Barbara Penner, Adrian Forty, Olivia Horsfall Turner and Miranda Critchley.
Reaktion, 390 pp., £23.99, October 2021, 978 1 78914 452 9

What I most wanted was a SodaStream. A person with a SodaStream was in charge of his destiny to a pretty awesome degree. Same with the Breville sandwich toaster. Instead of a slice of Scottish Pride smeared in beef paste, you could go your own way, killing it softly, taking over the kitchen and incinerating a few squares of plastic cheese and a bit of ham in a sarcophagus before hitting the street like the god of modernity. Guys like that had lava lamps. They had a Casio calculator with trig functions in their schoolbag. These items remain, but with other things, the sense of lost desire can be strong. The future is always behind us, or at least it seemed that way in the days of the space shuttle and the BBC Micro: they could memorably explode or freeze in the middle of the day, reminding us of the relation between obsolescence and novelty.

Growing up, I worried I didn't have the requisite gear with which to launch myself as a leader of tomorrow's people. I set great store by the small things I did have – a tape recorder, a digital watch – though I worried that Kafka probably didn't have a gonk pencil-topper with crazy hands jiggling under his chin when he was writing *The Castle*. Then, about 1980, things took a definite turn towards the sun, and some saviour presented me with both a Sony Walkman and an Atari home video unit, made for people who were winning so big that the rest of the world would surely spend eternity catching up.

My mum died recently, and I realised, in the middle of it all, that a special world of technophobia had gone with her. She didn't know what the internet was. She had never sent or received an email. Her phone, devious and self-involved, was an instrument of torture to her: making promises it couldn't keep; showing caring messages covered in love hearts that instantly disappeared, never to be found again; lighting up, at all times of day and night, with graphics and noises only her grandchildren could decipher. Every day was a digital Golgotha. She felt scourged by technological advances and nostalgic for simple things that didn't work. The big cupboard in her hall was like outer space, a cosmos indoors, full of junk and old gadgetry floating through time, dead appliances that still hinted at their powers of improvement. I felt she was keeping them for a happier domestic life in the next world, or for the past to return in this one, shaking us out of our need for better radios.

She called one day to ask me to stop sending nice pictures of my holidays to her friend Mary who lived up the road.

'Eh? But I didn't.'

'Yes, you did. Mary knows all about your time in Mexico –'

'New Mexico.'

'Wherever. She has photos of you all in a hotel. Or in a pool. How do you think that makes me feel, that you send her pictures and not me?'

'It's called Instagram, mum.'

'I don't know what it is, but they should ban it.'

Another time, she complained that the woman next door had more TV channels than her. 'That's because she's got a Smart TV, mum,' my brother said. 'We could get you one and you'd have all the channels you want.' The following week it was all set up and Gerry was showing her how to use the remote control. He told her that she could pause the TV while watching *Coronation Street* to go and make a cup of tea. 'Oh, I wouldn't do that,' she said.

'Why not?'

'Because what about all the other people?'

She thought she would be pausing *Coronation Street* for the whole nation. And the funny thing was that none of it was affectation; she genuinely felt the 21st century was a leisurely joke at her expense. She accepted that items existed – hair tongs, for example, or kettles that turned themselves off – which made life a bit better than it used to be, but these things were unusual. Most things were expensive and drove you mad. Existence, for our mum, wasn't about change, it was about everything staying the same, and people too. She loved paying for things with cash, and, when she got a bank card, insisted on keeping it in the purse with her pin number.

She believed, with justification, that young people use material things to fool themselves into thinking they're living their best life. ('You can't take it with you!' was one of her favourite phrases.) If you're eighteen now, obsolescence just tells you how much you've grown. Nobody with an iPhone13 secretly craves an iPhone6, not even for reasons of nostalgia or perversity. Consumers can enjoy things looking old – take the Roberts radio craze – as long as the item has digital capability. But there is a limbo zone of deleted desires, of superseded dreams, that operates a bit like Proust's writing on our sentimental credulity.

Extinct takes the long and often absurdist view. There are mad things we don't miss – arsenic wallpaper (vivid but deadly) – and things we miss every twenty minutes: ashtrays (deadly but vivid). 'In extinction,' Thomas McQuillan writes about Concorde, 'it's not the objects that fail. It's the world that supported them that has gone.' That is certainly true about supersonic flight. I suppose some people in the UK would still like to get to New York in three hours, but when the means of fulfilling that desire becomes defunct, where are you stranded? Concorde was a gas-guzzler, and too expensive. Most of the people who used it are flying around the world on private jets. But, even as an ordinary punter, you can regret Concorde's failure: it was so beautiful, and its forced ending (after a crash) made it the *Hindenburg* of my generation. To judge from a rash of recent novels, young people believe that, in the past, we were all just waiting for the internet: we weren't, and life was quite nice without it, partly because it was calming to know certain things were unavailable, and sane-making to know that the journey towards what you fancied might be quite long, and you might meet people along the way, and you might never even get there. I love the internet, perhaps more than anyone, but my innocence died with its success.

For Lydia Kallipoliti, self-mirroring was there all along in the new things we chose to invest in and build. 'Rather than operating autonomously', she writes in *Extinct*, Cybernetic Anthropomorphic Machines were 'mechanical replicas of the "master" human operator, echoing their movements in an act of orchestrated puppeteering'. History is littered with defunct machines that were meant to better us, in more senses than one. The American engineer Ralph Mosher, we learn, 'introduced additional features to make [robots] more lifelike and to give them a capacity for error, typical of human actions'. To this end, he worked on machines that were tied to the human nervous system, to replicate the logic of hesitation. Mosher envisioned the human-machine union – our neurons 'translating desire into kinesis'. This reminded me of my one-time friends in WikiLeaks, lashed all night to their laptops, their nervous systems wired into these machines that they believed contained their conscience.

The future wants to look like a Stanley Kubrick set, but ends up happening next to an Aga. The ambience of futurity never becomes extinct, though, even when its talismanic objects disappear. As Guang Yu Ren and Edward Denison put it, 'there are some things for which extinction is a mere blip in a broader existential experience that long outlives the subject's original function.' I can still recall the strange, shifting sound of the fax machine in the old *LRB* office, the way it would suddenly begin scrolling out possible futures. 'Yes, why not?' from Susan Sontag. A blast of rage from Harold Pinter. A request from Hitchens and a poem by Heaney. They've now got Seamus's fax machine behind glass in his hometown museum in Bellaghy, and, when I saw it the other day, I recalled the squeal and purr it would cause in Tavistock Square, setting off our grey machine linked to the stars.

As a boy photographer, I had a special love affair with the Kodak Flashcube. I still see it in dreams, the button on the camera depressed by a sticky finger on Christmas morning and 'pop!' – instant history delivered in a tiny miasma of burning plastic and knackered filament, a shock but an upgrade on available light. 'Its fragility disguised its ferocity,' Harriet Harriss writes in one of the best essays here. 'Partnered with Kodak's Instamatic camera, the Flashcube's adaptability, portability and ease of use made interior photography possible for the masses . . . The impact on interior behaviour as well as interior spaces was substantial . . . In the Flashcube's dazzling light, families staged domestic tableaux in an effort to display their nuclear family credentials.'

Nuclear is right: the bulbs could cause first degree burns. And the light couldn't be controlled, not quite, so a radiation red would often fill startled eyes in the snaps. 'If they ever looked at the used Flashcube before discarding it,' Harriss writes, 'subjects would have noticed the scorch marks inside, resembling the remnants of a chip-pan fire in a doll's house.' Which brings us to Ibsen, the poet laureate of the never-quite-extinct. Everyone knows that feeling at four o'clock in the morning when you're suddenly unsure what any of the family's belongings have to do with you. It can add to the grief. 'It's not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that walks in us,' Ibsen wrote. 'It's all sorts of dead ideas, and lifeless old beliefs, and so forth. They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and we can't get rid of them.'

Consider the snail. 'Snails are on the front line of extinction these days,' Richard Taws writes, and it's not just their stuff or their parents, but their existence as a species. *Achatinella apexfulva*, the Hawaiian tree snail, gave up the ghost on 1 January 2019. Maybe the loss of a few Fisher Price toys from the marketplace isn't so bad. But humans can long for things they never wanted very badly in the first place. I yearn every other day for Mint Cracknel, a chocolate bar from the 1970s that was criminally discontinued. I miss Player's Number 6. I mourn flappy airline tickets with your name printed in purple ink. On busy, productive days, I can still hear the compressed suck and thunk of the pneumatic postal system that sent mail from floor to floor in the office job I had when I was sixteen. I miss memos. I crave the Polaroid SX-70 – 'seeing the image take shape produced an overwhelming urge to see and hear the magic repeated,' Deyan Sudjic writes – and I wish I had a serving hatch in my sitting room because then I'd feel properly middle class. Only yesterday, I debated with myself whether to buy a telephone table and set it up in the hall with a red telephone, like the one we had in 1977, the one that never rang until one day it did. My mother had got it connected while we were all at school, and I can hear it ringing still.

So many of the deleted objects were to do with voice. You spoke into them, or they spoke back, or you rolled paper into them and clacked, finding something to say. A suitcase was found at my mother's house. It was full of my college essays, and, sandwiched between the folders, home cassettes of my favourite albums. I had pressed stop, some time in 1990, on each of those tapes, and here they were, frozen mid-song, 32 years after I'd gone, and the bands had gone, and the machines that played the tapes had gone too. Yet nothing seemed more alive to me that week than the contents of the cupboard where the suitcase had been found. I hoped that maybe there would be an old ITT cassette-player at the back, dusty and perfect. If you pressed the green button it would light up with the words 'Batt OK'. □

Promises, Promises

Erin Maglaque

Love: A History in Five Fantasies
by Barbara Rosenwein.
Polity, 220 pp., £20, October 2021, 978 1 5095 3183 7

Poor Emma Bovary, nourished on stories of 'love affairs, lovers, mistresses, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely country houses . . . dark forests, palpitating hearts, vows, sobs, tears and kisses . . . gentlemen brave as lions, gentle as lambs', fancied her husband-to-be a 'white-plumed rider on a black horse'. He turned out to be dull as dishwater. Emma's imagination was held hostage by the 19th-century bourgeois ideal of revelatory, eternal love within marriage. She was enmeshed in a particular set of historical circumstances – a flourishing letter-writing culture, burgeoning female literacy, an emerging awareness of urban bourgeois fashion among the professional classes – which created an especially wide gulf between women's expectations of love and its realities. 'To be in fantasy is to live "as if",' according to Denise Riley, but life may become intolerable when a metaphor collides with the facts.

So love has a history. Does knowing that make it survivable? 'In my view,' Barbara Rosenwein writes, 'knowing love's history may also be – is – a kind of therapy, helping free us from stories that appear to be fixed and true for all time.' Such stories are the terrain of the history of emotions, which is concerned with people's emotional lives; with the changing historical expression and understanding of emotions; and with the ways in which emotions have shaped historical change. Rosenwein, a medievalist, is one of the pioneers of this approach. She edited one of the earliest volumes to trace the history of an individual emotion, *Anger's Past* (1998), and in *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (2006) examined the emergence of groups – readers of Gregory the Great, or the elites at Merovingian courts – who shared a particular view of the emotions, focusing on the language they used to express their emotional expectations and values.

Rosenwein was reacting against the dominant paradigm for understanding emotion in the premodern past: Norbert Elias's *The Civilising Process*. For Elias, the Middle Ages were a time of uninhibited feeling, before regulation and refinement were introduced at the courts and dinner tables of early modern Europe. Rosenwein challenged the idea that emotion is an inalienable psychic drive (though one that could be tamed), arguing instead that it is always culturally constructed. This insight – that emotion is itself an artefact of history, subject to change – has been critical for the field.

Rosenwein's scholarship affirms the possibilities and the limits of language as the medium of historical practice. She has meticulously pieced together the webs of meanings of emotional vocabulary – of anger, grief, love – and the ways those meanings were negotiated over the centuries. She insists that we can't discover what people's feelings were, only the way those feelings were expressed in historical texts – mediated, compromised, qualified. 'We cannot know how all people felt, but we can begin to know how some members of certain ascendant elites thought they and others felt or, at least, thought they ought to feel,' she's written, conscientiously.

More recently, historians of emotion have been reluctant to remain so circumscribed by a poststructuralist emphasis on the textual. Monique Scheer and others have argued that emotions are felt and expressed in movement, gesture, in voluntary and involuntary actions like blushing or crying or fainting. Rosenwein has been sceptical of this, arguing that embodied emotion can't be studied if there is no writing to represent it. Historians have read up on neuroscientific studies of emotion too: Rosenwein can't resist discussing the mirror neurons of monkeys in an otherwise textual history of the idea of the soulmate.

What part of emotion is biological, and what cultural? To what extent are emotions subject to historical change? Can historians adjudicate this boundary between biology and history without training in the neurosciences? How are they to understand ephemeral and material expressions of emotion if they were left unrecorded? The history of emotions has provided an occasion for historians to debate some thorny problems, to examine our desire to attain proximity to our subjects, and prod at the impossibility of ever doing so.

There is something touching about a bunch of nerdy historians inventing a whole methodology to justify their desire to see people in the past as people. Historians are people too. It's as well to keep that in mind when reading studies of the history of emotions, because – tangled in knots over these methodological questions – its practitioners can sound like robots. One recent textbook, *The History of Emotions*, begins: 'Emotions are at the centre of the history of the human being, considered as a biocultural entity that is characterised as a worlded body, in the worlds of other worlded bodies.' One person's biocultural entity is another person's person. Methodology is necessary, of course, but as the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant writes, 'there is nothing more alienating than having one's pleasures disputed by someone with a theory.'

Rosenwein has identified five central 'fantasies' of love that have had particular staying power, even as their meanings have changed. These fantasies are not feelings but 'narratives that organise, justify and make sense of experiences, desires and feelings that are otherwise incoherent and bewildering'. These are the stories people tell themselves and others about love: about like-minded friendship, the transcendent love of God, love as obligation in marriage, obsessive unrequited love, and the insatiable love of eros. Rosenwein argues that we need these cultural scripts – about the need for total authenticity in marriage, say, or the consequences of unrestrained lust – to help us make sense of emotions that are by their nature inchoate and confusing.

'Fantasy' carries with it a suggestion of the irrational, of something before and beyond language. This is the concept of fantasy that allows Joan Scott in *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (2011) to investigate what is not captured by cultural construction, everything that eludes the conscious expression of ideas in language. By describing historical scripts about love as 'fantasies' Rosenwein seems to promise ambiguity, ambivalence and messiness. But for her, a fantasy is a way of naming familiar stories about love that have held particular power over our imaginations. She admits an allergy to the latent.

This means that her love fantasies follow a predictable pattern. Each chapter begins with some combination of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero or Augustine. As we might expect from a medieval historian, she then looks at texts from early Christian martyrs, monks, Abelard and Héloïse, the troubadours, Dante. Next she moves on to David Hume, Goethe, Byron, Casanova, before concluding with a smattering of Netflix scripts and YouTube comments. Is this a history of love? Or a history of certain ideas about love? As the historian of China Eugenia Lean has argued, the 'single emotion' approach risks landing us with an intellectual history of Christian, white, European, mostly male, mostly straight authors.

So we learn that Plato says humans were once shaped like a perfect sphere, each with two faces, two genitals, four legs, four arms, until Zeus cut them in two and doomed them to spend their days seeking out their lost half: a foundation myth of the soulmate. This ideal of like-minded love was applied to friendship centuries later in Montaigne's writing about his best friend, Étienne de la Boétie: 'It is no special reason, nor two, three, four, nor a thousand; it is I know not what quintessence of the entire mixture that, having captured my entire will, brought it to plunge and lose itself in his; and that, once it captured all his will, brought it to plunge and be lost in mine with a like hunger, a like convergence.' In the early 19th-century United States, intimate male friendship was a source of passion and pleasure before marriage. Daniel Webster wished he could return to the days of his youthful friendship with James Hervey Bingham, imagining that they would 'yoke together again; your little bed is just wide enough, we will practise at the same bar and be as friendly a pair of single fellows as ever cracked a nut.'

One fantasy about love is that it allows us to transcend whatever it is that keeps us shackled to the mundane. This idea was especially powerful for medieval religious women. Perpetua was imprisoned for her conversion to Christianity in third-century Carthage. Her father begged her to recant, reminding her of her infant son, who would die without her. But then Christ appeared before her milking a sheep, and offered her

a gift of cheese – at which point her baby was spontaneously weaned, allowing her to die free of earthly obligation. The 14th-century French mystic and poet Marguerite Porete devised a visionary ladder of meditation and self-mortification that allowed her to obliterate her selfhood in loving union with God. The idea of the transcendent power of love was perfected by Dante: Beatrice was both a real person and a miracle, the promise of salvation in the form of a beautiful woman. For medieval writers, the love of Christ offered a way to escape the earthly bonds of motherhood, or selfhood, or secular beauty.

Obsessive love, too, has its own genealogy. The ancients despised the powerlessness that came with desire, and prescribed baths and sleeping around and general debauchery to counter the vulnerability of obsession. For the troubadours intense desire was an organising philosophy: their poetry elevated love to the highest of virtues, to be tamed with elaborate rituals and courtliness. Obsession was given a new form in the Romantic novel. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was a cultural phenomenon, with Werther's obsessive love for Lotte becoming a model for desiring and being desired. When Werther first meets Lotte he is wearing knee breeches, a yellow waistcoat and blue overcoat, and after they become threadbare he buys another outfit just like it. Goethe's male readers dressed in replicas of Werther's outfit, and women daubed themselves with Eau de Werther. After Lotte marries another, Werther shoots himself with her husband's pistol; a rash of copycat suicides followed the book's publication. Rosenwein is pretty cool-headed about all this, comparing such obsession to contemporary talk about love addiction. The cure? Get a hobby.

For the writers in Rosenwein's chapter on insatiable love, sex was the hobby. Pietro Aretino, the Renaissance poet and pornographer, wrote that the penis should be celebrated, 'worn around the neck as a pendant, or pinned onto the cap like a brooch'. His emblem was a satyr's head composed entirely of phalluses. The Enlightenment licensed a new libertinism, especially for the aristocracy. Giacomo Casanova slept with a whole family of sisters, and opened his autobiography: 'In this year 1797, at the age of 72 . . . I have delighted in going astray and I have lived constantly in error.' Rosenwein argues that the fun came to an end with the domestication of love into marriage in the 19th century. But there were refuseniks like Flaubert: 'I want to cover you with love when I next see you, with caresses, with ecstasy,' he wrote to Louise Colet. 'I want to gorge you with all the joys of the flesh, until you faint and die.' Promises, promises. He only saw Louise a handful of times, and admitted: 'I enjoy debauchery and I live like a monk.'

Rosenwein's discussion of marital love centres on the shifting patterns of obligation. In the Middle Ages, she argues, marriage became the only relationship in which earthly love was permitted by the Church. Popular religious dramas taught their audiences to find happiness in domestic obligations, as in a German version of the nativity play:

> Joseph (carrying the cradle): Mary, I have considered it well and brought you a cradle in which we can lay the little child.
> Mary (sings): Joseph, dear husband mine, help me rock the little one.
> Joseph: Happily, my dear wife.

During the Enlightenment, obligation was no longer thought of as sufficient to secure a marriage: love became necessary too. But that didn't mean it came naturally. Men and women bought copybooks filled with models for declarations of love to help them compose their letters. The exemplary vied with a new need for authenticity in emotional expression. Courting Sophia Peabody in the 1830s, Nathaniel Hawthorne told her that her letters 'introduce me deeper and deeper into your being, yet there is no sense of surprise at what I see, and feel, and know, therein. I am familiar with your inner heart, as with my home.' The expectation of total obligation and total transparency made marriage a hard sell to some young women. 'What an unlucky letter "M" is,' Violet Blair complained to a friend in Gilded Age Washington, 'to begin medicine, martyrdom, murder and matrimony.'

'Always, the examples are all wrong, which is why love theory tends to be so conservative – ProustProustProustBovaryBovaryBovaryAbelardEloiseCourtly,' Berlant argued in a 2012 lecture. It's true that the examples given are less interesting than the fact that they can be strung together so seamlessly, less interesting than the fact that there is so much that is mutually intelligible between a 12th-century troubadour's songs and Taylor Swift's. It's not that the scripts and their meanings don't change: of course they do. Rosenwein's chapter on marriage, in particular, shows the ebb and flow between obligation and freely given love across centuries of writing about marriage. But these narratives remain troublingly sticky variations on a theme. We are constantly reminded just how conservative the examples are, how repetitive, how unlikely it is that we will be surprised by any of them.

Five fantasies are not very many, really, when we're talking about ways to organise the imagination. The available plots weren't enough for Eliza Moode, an 18th-century Philadelphian who wrote to a female friend about a man they knew: 'Does he think that all the business of our lives is only to learn how to make a sausage or roast a joint of meat and take care of a house and practise in short good economy? All that is necessary, I avow it. But can't we be that and take charge of our spirits at the same time; must we neglect the most valuable part for fear of offending our masters?'

Rosenwein argues that there is a radical power in writing the history of love, and that it might help us escape such constraints on our emotional imaginations. She urges us to 'strive to change the narrative we cling to as individuals', arguing that history's great power is its ability to show that what we consider natural, inevitable, the only way of telling stories about ourselves, is historically contingent. If those old stories don't work for us, 'we may find – or create – new ones.' The book begins under the sacred sign of Joan Didion's most famous sentence, understood as an aphorism about the therapeutic value of writing: 'We tell ourselves stories in order to live.'

But history isn't therapy. A different critical history of love might account not only for the stories and the fantasies, but for their failures, and for the costs of those failures, for all the ways of loving that can't be reconciled to a handful of narratives. It might explain how the love plot has diminished what is universal and collective to the scale of an individual drama, rather than reaffirm that it is up to the individual to change the story. And anyway, Didion's sentence begins an essay that excoriates the sentimentality of our narrative impulses: she thought it more honest to look coldly on the irreconcilable and reject the urge to tidy it up into a plot. After a banal rendezvous with her lover, Emma Bovary thinks: 'It didn't matter. She was not happy and had never been.' She wonders: 'Why was life so inadequate, why did the things she depended on turn immediately to dust?' A history of love can suggest some answers to her question. But history can't stop our attachments turning to dust. □

A Soft Pear

Tom Crewe

A Nest of Gentlefolk and Other Stories
by Ivan Turgenev, translated by Jessie Coulson.
Riverrun, 568 pp., £9.99, April 2020, 978 1 5294 0405 0

Love and Youth: Essential Stories
by Ivan Turgenev, translated by Nicolas Pasternak Slater and Maya Slater.
Pushkin, 222 pp., £12, October 2020, 978 1 78227 601 2

Around six in the morning on 19 January 1870, at the Roquette Prison in the eleventh arrondissement, Ivan Turgenev watched as a man was prepared for the guillotine. Four months earlier, Jean-Baptiste Troppmann had murdered, for money, the entire Kinck family – the owner of an engineering works, his heavily pregnant wife and their six children – and buried them in a shallow grave at Pantin on the edge of Paris, before being arrested at Le Havre while trying to leave the country. Now, Troppmann was hobbled with leather straps and his hands were tied behind his back. A priest was 'softly reading prayers'. The executioner's elderly assistant went to secure the prisoner with extra straps (he was only 22, and thin), but they didn't have enough holes, so he set about boring new ones:

> His unskilful fingers, swollen with gout, obeyed him badly, and, besides, the hide was new and thick. He would make a hole, try it out – the tongue would not go through: he had to bore a little more. The priest evidently realised that things were not as they should be, and glancing stealthily once or twice over his shoulder, began to draw out the words of the prayers, so as to give the old man time to get things right. At last the operation during which, I frankly confess, I was covered with a cold sweat, was finished and all the tongues went in where required.

Next, Troppmann was seated on a stool. The shirt he had just put on was cut away to his shoulders (he 'twitched them slightly: it was cold in the room') and his hair was trimmed. Turgenev, who was one of several guests of the prison governor, 'could not take my eyes off those hands, once stained with innocent blood, but now lying so helplessly one on top of the other – and particularly that slender, youthful neck'. Some of Troppmann's hair drifted across the floor and settled by Turgenev's boot.

At last they went out the prison gates, meeting 'the great roar of the overjoyed crowd' (around 25,000 people were already on the spot at 3 a.m.), and Turgenev – his legs weakening beneath him – watched Troppmann climb the steps to the guillotine, 'two men pouncing on him from the right and left, like spiders on a fly; I saw him falling forward suddenly and his heels kicking . . . But here I turned away and began to wait.' There was a long pause before 'something suddenly descended with a hollow growl and stopped with an abrupt thud . . . Just as though a huge animal had retched . . . I felt dizzy. Everything swam before my eyes.' Afterwards, Turgenev was told that Troppmann had struggled briefly, throwing his head sideways so that it wouldn't fit under the blade, and biting the finger of one of the executioners as he was dragged by his hair into the correct position. He was also told that spectators had crawled under the guillotine and soaked their handkerchiefs in Troppmann's blood. His fellow guests 'obviously felt relieved . . . But not one of us, absolutely no one, looked like a man who realised that he had been present at the performance of an act of social justice: everyone tried to turn away in spirit and, as it were, shake off the responsibility for this murder.'

It was typical of Turgenev, writing up the experience for a Russian magazine, to dwell on his own weakness: the cold sweat and wobbly legs, his inability to watch the execution, and his near swoon when the blade thudded against the block. He knew he had indulged a grisly curiosity by accepting the invitation: his descriptions of the foolishness of the other guests – running ahead of Troppmann in a corridor to get a better look at him – and the bloodlust of the drink-blotted Parisian crowd serve only to heighten his disgust with himself. He sees the pointless inhumanity of Troppmann's treatment – 'the hideousness of all those undressings, dressings, hair-cutting, those journeys along corridors and up and down staircases' – and the savageness of a public death, as well as his own complicity. The willed blindness of the educated classes, from whose sight executions had been removed, was perfectly symbolised, he knew, by his decision to turn his back on the spectacle. It is the severity of Turgenev's self-judgment, and the sincerity of his self-exposure, that allows him to personify and at the same time to assert societal guilt.

Turgenev was then 51. He was the son of a tyrant. His mother, Varvara Petrovna Lutovinova, was the owner and ruler of some five thousand serfs, whom she made the punchbags for a lifetime of disappointment (she had been abused by her stepfather; Turgenev's father had married her for her money and then neglected her before his premature death). She ordered floggings, denied or demanded marriages, separated families, provoked women to infanticide and sent people to Siberia. Turgenev spent his childhood in terror of her, and of her power over his life and the lives of others. He was aware of the irony in the fact that he was first seduced by a family serf (the mother of his only child, a daughter, was another woman owned by his mother):

> I was very young. I was a virgin and with the desires one has at the age of fifteen . . . It was rather a damp day, not a rainy day: one of those erotic days that [Alphonse] Daudet likes to describe. It began to drizzle. She took – mind you, I was her master and she was my slave – she took hold of me by the hair at the back of my head and said to me 'Come.' What followed was the sensations we have all experienced. But the sweet clasp of my hair accompanied by that single word – that still gives me a sensation of happiness every time I think of it.

In his adult life, this inverted power dynamic repeated itself. Turgenev was passionate – some thought insane – in his subjection to the great opera singer Pauline Viardot, to whom he was attached for forty years. Eventually, after periods of considerable unhappiness, he lived in a mostly comfortable ménage with her and her husband, Louis, and their children (his daughter, whom he named Paulinette, was also enrolled in the family). He followed them doggishly around Europe; in one house, visitors were surprised to find him lodged in the attic. Unlike his mother, Turgenev did not make a fetish of personal dignity. In 1882, he visited the Tolstoys and, at 63, performed the can-can for the children. 'Turgenev – the can-can. Sad,' Tolstoy wrote in his diary. Most of his European friends, by contrast, delighted in his lack of grandeur. 'Adorable' was Henry James's word for him; he was 'the most approachable, the most practicable, the least unsafe man of genius it has been my fortune to meet. He was so simple, so natural, so modest, so destitute of personal pretension . . . that one almost doubted at moments whether he were a man of genius after all.' Maupassant said he was 'simple, good, and straight almost to a fault, ready to do a favour as none before him'. Flaubert called him a 'soft pear', denoting, in James's paraphrase, 'a certain expansive softness', as well as a 'comprehensive indecision'. Turgenev was harder on himself. He 'insisted that he was a coward', a friend reported in 1881, 'and that he had not got a pennyworth of will'.

A liberal and convinced 'Westerner', for most of his adult life Turgenev visited Russia only at intervals. Explaining his decision to go to university in Berlin in 1838, he later explained, with his usual self-censure, that

> I could not breathe the same air as those who stood for the things I hated so much; I could not remain at their side. I expect I had not the necessary stamina, the necessary strength of character, for that. I had to put a certain distance between myself and my enemy so as to be able to attack him more effectively from the distance that separated us. In my eyes this enemy had a clearly defined form and bore a well-known name: this enemy was – serfdom.

His attack on serfdom, when it came, was characteristically indirect: a series of short stories set in the Russian countryside, written from the perspective of a huntsman. The lives of the serfs he encounters are predictable and burdensome, and yet exceptional (because, as Turgenev understood, all lives are exceptional, in some moments). 'Never, surely,' James remarked, 'was a work

with a polemic bearing more consistently low in tone, as painters say . . . No single episode pleads conclusively against the "peculiar institution" of Russia; the lesson is in the cumulative testimony of a multitude of fine touches.' *A Sportsman's Sketches*, published in 1852, became a sensation and may have contributed to the liberation of the serfs in 1861 (Alexander II is said to have claimed it as an influence on his decision). For the rest of his life, Turgenev was the most famous Russian in Europe. His celebrity, but also the novelty of his presence, is reflected in the baffling variety in contemporary spellings of his name: Tourgéneff, Tourguéneff, Tourgenueff, Turgénieff, Turgeniev, Turgenef, Turgeneff, Toogueneff (this last when he was visiting Scotland).

T.S. Eliot wrote in the *Egoist* that Turgenev 'was a perfect example of the benefits of transplantation . . . A position which for a smaller man may be merely a compromise, or a means of disappearance, was for Turgenev . . . a source of authority.' As Orlando Figes shows in *The Europeans: Three Lives and the Making of a Cosmopolitan Culture*, Turgenev used this authority – and his command of French, German and English, as well as some Italian and Spanish – to establish himself as the consummate cultural middleman, a human conveyor belt

Short Cuts

Erwin Schrödinger is best known for his cat, suspended in a state of being both dead and alive. Less well known is 'Schrödinger's paradox', which describes the apparent contradiction between life and the second law of thermodynamics. The second law rules that the entropy – usually glossed as the measure of disorder – of an isolated system must always increase with time. Whatever we do, entropy goes up (as Allen Ginsberg reputedly said, 'You can't break even'). This suggests a compelling hypothesis for the end of the world: the universe will reach maximum entropy and thereafter be a dark place of spent heat where nothing happens. Yet life seems to defy physics. Our bodies produce and maintain an internal order. Ageing cells are succeeded by perfect copies, wounds heal, muscles build with use, synapses form and strengthen as we learn and remember. For eighty years or so, a body is a haven from the thermodynamic void.

In *What Is Life?*, based on a series of public lectures given at Trinity College, Dublin in 1943, Schrödinger accounted for the paradox. The increase of entropy, he said, is a demand made of isolated systems, and living beings are not isolated. For one thing, we eat; we ingest and subsume chunks of our environment. A non-isolated system is permitted to decrease its local entropy as long as there are larger offsets elsewhere. The balance sheet comes out right in the end because of the excretion of higher-entropy waste products – warm shit, steaming piss, moist breath – and our eventual putrefaction.

Food can fuel bodily order because it is a low-entropy source of energy, meaning it provides a budget – both energetic and entropic – for bodily processes. It owes this property to nuclear fusion reactions in the core of the sun, which maintains a temperature imbalance with respect to the earth that allows it to supply the planet with a stream of high-energy, low-entropy photons. These photons are incident on plants, algae and cyanobacteria, whose cells synthesise the basic units of organic matter on which the rest of the food chain depends. We are all solar-powered (or nuclear-powered, if you prefer), and, crucially, stars persist long enough to provide not only the entropy gradients needed for life, but the timescales required for the evolution of interesting versions of it.

Life is energetically expensive. Even if you lie completely still, the cost of living is around 1500 kilocalories per day – the amount of energy it would take to heat eighty litres of water from tap temperature to that of a scalding bath. Most is spent on homeostasis, the processes by which our bodies stay more or less exactly as they are. Homeostasis is sometimes used as a way of defining life itself: living beings can maintain steady internal states despite changeable external conditions. One of the earliest formulations was physiologist Claude Bernard's description, in the 1850s, of a 'milieu intérieur': 'All of the vital mechanisms, however varied they may be, have always one goal, to maintain the uniformity of the conditions of life in the internal environment . . . The stability of the internal environment is the condition for the free and independent life.'

Our bodies can only maintain homeostasis within reasonable bounds, however. Acute challenges lead to disease and death; chronic pressures wear us down. There is a Silicon Valley trend for toying with those limits. Intermittent fasting and icy showers are supposed to induce 'positive stress', allowing tech bros to spend more hours processing code. For everyone else, there's just old-fashioned negative stress, both psychological and biological. Poverty is a major cause. Persistent food insecurity in children leads to a sustained stress response that pushes the body to extreme homeostatic responses, including prolonged and abnormally high levels of cortisol and continuous inflammation. The result is more frequent and prolonged childhood illness. That's in addition to the direct effects of hunger and undernutrition: stunting, fatigue, poor working memory. These effects continue into adolescence, and are associated with a higher risk of depression and suicidal thoughts. Food insecurity in adults increases the risk of hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Long-term exposure to low temperatures strains the body's equilibrium. More people die in the winter months because of respiratory virus epidemics, increased air pollution and cold weather, but studies correcting for these factors show that one in five excess winter deaths in the UK is attributable to low temperatures at home.

While the energy required to keep a body running remains unchanged, the price of doing so is higher than ever. Even before the instability caused by Putin's war, gas markets were failing to meet post-lockdown energy demands. Reserves depleted during the cold winter of 2020-21 haven't been replaced. The UK only imports a fraction of its gas from Russia (5 per cent, compared with 41 per cent for the rest of Europe), but that makes little difference when prices hike on the global market. Natural gas now costs twenty times what it did at the lowest point of the pandemic, and a third more than it did in January. The UK government has responded by lifting the energy price cap by 54 per cent, protecting companies from taking the hit despite the fact that the Big Six – British Gas, EDF, E.ON, npower, Scottish Power and SSE – have made £7 billion in profit over the last five years. With the new cap in place, household fuel bills will rise by £700 over the course of the year, but it won't stop there. Another increase has already been announced for six months' time.

Fuel prices have pushed inflation to a thirty-year high, driving up the cost of a calorie of food. This is the second energy crisis. Apples are up by 25 per cent, margarine by 31 per cent, milk by 7 per cent. Food is more expensive and people have less to spend. Food bank users are turning down rice and pasta because of the cost of boiling a pan of water. Worse is to come. Ammonium nitrate fertiliser has risen from £280 to £1000 a tonne in the last year, reflecting the increased cost of the energy required to produce it. Crop yields will suffer, and food prices will continue to rise.

This is the forecast: disposable incomes are set to fall by 2.2 per cent, the steepest decline since records began in 1956. Universal credit, cut by £20 a week in October, will rise by just 3.1 per cent, while inflation could soon exceed 8 per cent. Households will be around £1100 worse off over the coming year. (The average annual spend on groceries is more than £1300 per person, so those living on the poverty line will effectively have their food budget wiped out.) An additional 1.3 million people, including half a million children, will be tipped into absolute poverty as their household incomes sink below 60 per cent of the median. Like every other we're-all-in-this-together scenario, the reality is nothing of the sort. A poorer person must spend a greater share of their income on basic necessities such as food and fuel: that's what it means to be poor. One can scrimp here and there, but the energy needs of the body set a hard lower limit.

These grim predictions arrive in the midst of existing deprivation. A report by the Food Foundation in 2017 found that, compared to the rest of the EU, the UK had the highest proportion of children living in a 'severely food insecure household'. One in six parents surveyed by the Social Mobility Foundation said that their child or children had to eat less than they would like, skip meals or sometimes go a whole day without eating. Between January and July 2020, nearly 2500 children were admitted to hospital with malnutrition, twice as many as the year before. School meals need to make up for this deficit.

'What do the majority of educated people know about poverty?' Orwell asks in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. He complains that the editor of François Villon's *Le Testament* felt it necessary to add a footnote explaining the line 'Et pain ne voyent qu'aux fenestres.' Responding to criticism of his Spring Statement, Rishi Sunak pointed to 'external factors outside the country' – dwindling gas reserves, the war in Ukraine – as though that justifies his decision to make the poorest pay most. He stumbled when a BBC presenter asked him what he spends on a loaf of bread: 'We all have different breads in my house,' he said. So far, so Marie Antoinette. It's easy, and may not be wrong, to assume that Sunak is punishing those who have fewest options. But I also wonder whether he understands what money means for most people. In a recent publicity stunt, he posed with a supermarket employee's car in an attempt to look normal, then tried to pay for a can of Coke by waving his credit card in front of a barcode scanner.

There is a precedent for the government shafting working-class people after a pandemic. After the Black Death nearly halved the population of England, the demand for labour grew so great that it threatened to give the peasants meaningful bargaining power. In response, Edward III set a cap on earnings to protect the nobility. His successor, the 14-year-old Richard II, or whoever was really in charge, went further, introducing a poll tax to pay for the ongoing skirmishes with France. In 1381, a tax collector went to Fobbing in Essex to demand a silver groat from each inhabitant, and was chased away by an angry crowd. Their resistance provoked the broader revolt against serfdom.

Speaking to Sky News, and trying as usual to show us that he isn't Jeremy Corbyn, Keir Starmer said: 'People don't want a revolution. They do want to know "How am I going to pay my energy bill?"' He proposed a one-off tax on the profits of gas and oil companies, as Macron is doing in France. That would be a start, but given the scale of the crisis, why isn't he talking about renationalisation? Revolutionary measures are what we need. Food and fuel shortages aren't a blip; 'external factors' are here to stay. We need to end our reliance on fossil fuels, ensure our homes are properly insulated and fix the broken link between work and pay. Does it need stating that people shouldn't be asked to work for wages that leave them hungry and cold?

Fobbing is ten miles from my hometown of Southend-on-Sea, the UK's newest city, where a third of children live in poverty, excess winter deaths are double the national average and half of all residents struggle to buy food, clothes and other necessities. It is one of many places where people watch the news with the knowledge that the cost of living is becoming untenable. Suicide rates are on the rise across Essex. A footbridge over a dual carriageway in Southend has become a hotspot in recent years. Fuel prices rose on April Fool's Day. The day before, the bridge was closed for good.

Arianne Shahvisi

transporting in one direction (in his own translations or on his recommendation) Flaubert, Zola, Maupassant, Daudet, the Goncourts, Heine and Whitman, and, in the other, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Goncharov, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky.[1] His piece about Troppmann, describing a French execution for a Russian audience, but criticising the death penalty as it operated in both countries, is an example of this transnational advocacy.

'You know a lot about life, my dear friend,' Flaubert told him in 1873, 'and you know how to express what you know, which is rarer.' Turgenev's work deals with indecision, incapacity and inconsequence; with distraction, disappointment and disillusion. He observed contentment from a distance, apprehending the negative emotional space inhabited by those failing to arrive at it. In his work – seven novels, many novellas and short stories as well as poems and plays (*A Month in the Country* is still regularly performed) – men dream, propagandise, pledge themselves, hesitate, backtrack and fail, often disappointing or betraying the women who love them.

Sometimes, sexual passion cuts across a life, as it cut across Turgenev's. In *Smoke* and *Spring Torrents*, Litvinov and Sanin destroy all their plans for the future when they are taken over by desire (when Sanin falls to his knees before his 'sovereign mistress', she seizes 'his hair with all ten fingers' – an echo of Turgenev's own experience). In *Fathers and Sons*, the bullish young nihilist Bazarov is thrown off course when he falls in love with Anna Sergeevna Odintsova, who is unable to fully respond. Abandoning himself to his medical studies, he attends an autopsy and accidentally, perhaps carelessly, infects himself with typhus. Anna, visiting him on his deathbed, cannot offer solace (instead, she gives an involuntary shudder when he tells her she is beautiful).

Turgenev's willingness to stage political debates in his fiction, combined with a refusal to come down decisively on one side, made him a controversial figure in Russia. The character of Bazarov was attacked from the right as an endorsement of anti-tsarist thought (it was Turgenev who popularised the term 'nihilist' by using it in the novel), and from the left as a malicious parody. Turgenev's depiction of Russians abroad in *Smoke* and the travails of would-be revolutionaries in *Virgin Soil* also drew criticism. It was useless for him to point out that

> the reader always feels ill at ease . . . is easily bewildered and even aggrieved if an author treats his imaginary character like a living person, that is to say, if he sees and displays his good as well as his bad sides, and, above all, if he does not show unmistakable signs of sympathy or antipathy for his own child. The reader feels like getting angry: he is asked not to follow a well-beaten path, but to tread his own path.

For Europeans and Americans, excluded from these controversies if not entirely ignorant of them, Turgenev was for decades a crucial source of information on life in Russia ('What a very Tourguéneffish effect the samovar gives!' Theodore Colville exclaims in William Dean Howells's *Indian Summer*, set in Florence). But he was most admired for the poignancy of his work. 'Read *Lisa* [*A Nest of Gentlefolk*] if you want your heart really broken,' Colville tells the young woman who asks: 'What is Tourguéneffish?' And it's true that Turgenev's sideline in politics was just that. Even when, in *Fathers and Sons*, he does manage to incorporate political discussion effectively into the drama, these are the book's least engaging sections. The political elements in *Smoke* are a distraction from his analysis of adultery. *Virgin Soil* is about the appeal of idealism to damaged or deprived individuals, and only vaguely and tangentially about the ideals themselves. The frailty of the human personality was his real subject. At the time of his death in 1883, Turgenev's reputation – an elite, European reputation – as one of the century's greatest writers seemed secure. 'We know of several excellent critics who to the question, Who is the first novelist of the day? would reply, without hesitation, Ivan Turgénieff,' James wrote in 1873. A little over twenty years later, he observed (note the change of spelling) that 'Turgenev is in a peculiar degree what I may call the novelists' novelist, – an artistic influence extraordinarily valuable and ineradicably established.'

Ineradicably? Turgenev's reputation has been on the slide since the 1880s, when the signing of the first internal copyright convention at Berne in 1886 led to a boom in Russian translations (unlike Britain, France and Germany, Russia stayed out of the convention, so no rights had to be bought, and translations were cheap). As Figes writes, 'the discovery of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy – seemingly more Russian than the Europeanised Turgenev – altered Western expectations of Russian literature. Now . . . readers in the West wanted Russian writers to be roughly primitive and spiritual, motivated by the big ideas about human existence, exotically original, to write at greater length – in sum, unlike anything in the rest of European literature.' As early as 1917, Joseph Conrad was complaining of 'public indifference' to Turgenev's works. Eliot, writing in the same year, mourned that Turgenev was the 'least exploited of Russian novelists'. He hasn't lacked champions, starting with Conrad and Eliot, and including Woolf, Edmund Wilson ('No fiction writer can be read through with a steadier admiration'), Hemingway ('Turgenev to me is the greatest writer there ever was') and V.S. Pritchett. But the patchiness with which he is now published and read, and the misconceptions this has generated – that he is predominantly a portraitist of the Russian landscape and the lives of the serfs (as in *A Sportsman's Sketches*) or a commentator on the problem of Russian progress (as in *Fathers and Sons*) – has meant that it is Turgenev, the notorious Westerner, who is now seen as a Russian antique, while Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov have passed into the realm of the universal.

The republication of *A Nest of Gentlefolk*, with 'First Love' and two other superb long stories, in Jessie Coulson's neglected translations of 1959, in addition to new versions of 'First Love' and five stories from *A Sportsman's Sketches* by Nicolas Pasternak Slater and Maya Slater, prompts us to ask again: 'What is Tourguéneffish?' Edmund Wilson, John Bayley and others have made the point that Turgenev in the original is more 'textured', modulated and idiomatic ('He is interested in words,' Wilson wrote, 'in a way that the other great 19th-century Russian novelists – with the exception of Gogol – are not') than he tends to seem in translation.[2] Turgenev reads very similarly – that is to say, cleanly – in all the available English translations, which suggests that the problem of conveying this texture is insuperable. Richard Freeborn's decision in his translation of *Fathers and Sons* to have Bazarov speak a slangy American does not convince otherwise.

In reading Turgenev in English we are not departing from historical precedent. The vast majority of his 19th-century readers, in company with his most distinguished European and American admirers (James, Flaubert, Zola, George Eliot, Howells, the authorities in Oxford who gave him an honorary doctorate in 1879), read him largely in French or English. His importance for Western literature is unavoidably a mediated one, and it is through translation that we see what made those readers praise him so highly.

So: Turgenev's greatest strength as a writer was his talent for detail, which had several different applications. One of his most distinctive habits is his use of similes drawn from the natural world (the result of much time spent outside, first as a child frightened of his mother and then as a devoted huntsman). Here are a few:

> He'd get hold of one of his ideas with great effort, like a ladybird climbing on to a blade of grass, and he'd sit on it and sit on it, all the time spreading his wings and making ready to fly – and then he'd suddenly fall off and have to start climbing up again.
>
> *Rudin*

> So a quiet and gentle creature, torn, God knows why, from her native soil and immediately abandoned, like a sapling dragged out of the ground and left lying with its roots in the sun, ended her earthly course.
>
> *A Nest of Gentlefolk*

> The same life flowed silently, like water among marsh grasses.
>
> *A Nest of Gentlefolk*

> My fancies played and darted, always round the same images, like martins at daybreak round a bell tower.
>
> 'First Love'

> Indistinct streaks of lightning flickered incessantly in the sky; they did not so much flash as flutter and twitch like the wing of a dying bird.
>
> 'First Love'

> Dunyasha would gladly giggle at him and give him sidelong significant looks as she ran past him all aflutter like a little quail.
>
> *Fathers and Sons*

> He'll come down on you like snow off a roof.
>
> 'Biryuk'

> Nejdanov had no need of lengthy replies; he knew quite well that his friend swallowed every word of his, as the dust in the road swallows each drop of rain.
>
> *Virgin Soil*

When Turgenev was dying of misdiagnosed spinal cancer, he underwent several futile operations, during one of which, he

[1] Penguin, 576 pp., £12.99, April 2020, 978 0 14 197943 4.

2 I have used the following translations: Richard Freeborn's *Rudin* and *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*; Gilbert Gardiner's *On the Eve*; both the revised Constance Garnett and the Freeborn translation of *Fathers and Sons*; Coulson's *A Nest of Gentlefolk*, 'In A Quiet Backwater' and 'First Love'; Michael Pursglove's *Smoke*; Leonard Schapiro's *Spring Torrents*; and Rochelle Townsend's *Virgin Soil*. Also David Magarshack's edition of *Turgenev's Literary Reminiscences and Autobiographical Fragments* from 1958. Where I make a point of a particular passage or phrase, I have consulted more than one translation.

later told Daudet, 'I searched for the words with which I could give you an exact impression of the steel cutting through my skin and entering my flesh . . . something like a knife cutting a banana.' Hearing of this, Edmond de Goncourt marvelled: 'Our old friend Turgenev is a real man of letters.'

Another manifestation of Turgenev's talent for detail was his proclivity for giving miniature portraits of even the most insignificant figures in his books. We learn of a language and music teacher 'who spoke indifferent French and German and played the piano after a fashion, but who made excellent pickled cucumbers'; of one character's mother whose 'left eye was inclined to water, and on the strength of this [she] considered herself a woman of refined sensibility'; of a priest with 'only one not entirely pleasant habit, which was that from time to time he would slowly and carefully raise his hand to swat flies on his face and sometimes managed to squash them.' James cited another example:

> a gentleman who makes a momentary appearance as host at a dinner party, and . . . has our impression of his personality completed by the statement that the soup at his table was filled with little paste figures, representing hearts, triangles and trumpets. In the author's conception, there is a secret affinity between the character of this worthy man and the contortions of his vermicelli.

James's charge – Turgenev 'strikes us as loving details for their own sake, as a bibliomaniac loves the books he never reads' – has some justice, especially when it comes to the detours Turgenev likes to take. These can be tiresome, but they can't be separated from his broader impulse to particularise. It is his restless desire to make the reader see the distinctive way somebody does something, or to convey a small but telling feature of a scene, that gives his prose its aliveness, its capacity to surprise.

Take the undemonstrative driver in the story 'Kasyan from the Beautiful Lands', from *A Sportsman's Sketches*, who, having decided to continue a journey although his cart has a broken axle, 'carefully replaced the snuff-box in his pocket, brought his hat down over his brows without touching it, simply by a movement of his head, and climbed thoughtfully up on to the seat'. It's the bit about the hat, by any measure unnecessary, that makes the driver real (indeed, it was details such as these, lavished on mere serfs, which made such an impression). In 'First Love', in the Riverrun edition, the narrator visits the family newly moved in next door and is met by a servant 'carrying a plate containing the backbone of a herring. Closing with his foot the door leading to the next room, he said abruptly: "Yes?"' It is the herringbone and the servant's hasty, undignified shutting of the door with his foot that capture the grimy disorder of this household, presided over by a princess down on her luck, who is later seen scratching 'her head under her cap with the point of a knitting needle'.[3]

In 'A Quiet Backwater', again translated by Coulson, Vladimir Sergeich Astakhov is invited by Mikhail Nikolaich Ipatov to stay at his house in the country, where he lives with his young daughters and his sister-in-law, Masha. One evening when they are on the terrace, there is a rainstorm and the group run laughing into the drawing room; Turgenev has us notice that 'Ipatov's little daughters laughed loudest of all as they shook the raindrops from their dresses.' Later, Vladimir Sergeich is woken in the night with the news that Masha, disappointed in love, has thrown herself into the pond. He runs downstairs to find the house empty, but before he goes outside (through the doors opening from the drawing room) he spots the two girls: 'Half-dead with fright, they stood in their little white petticoats, their hands clasped and their little feet bare, by a night-light placed on the floor.' The scene that follows makes obvious what Hemingway took from Turgenev:

> He found Ipatov at the edge of the pond; a lantern hung on a branch lit the old man's grey head clearly. He was wringing his hands and staggering like a drunken man; near him a woman lay on the grass writhing and sobbing; there was a bustle of people all round them. Ivan Ilyich was in the water up to his knees, groping along the bottom with a pole; the coachman was undressing, his whole body shivering; two men were dragging a boat along the bank; there was a sharp clatter of hoofs along the village street . . . The wind shrieked past, as though straining to blow out the lanterns, and the pond, black and threatening, splashed noisily . . . The coachman seized one boat-hook, the bailiff another, and both jumped into the boat, pushed off and began dragging the water with their hooks; others lighted them from the bank. It was strange and terrible to see their movements and their shadowy figures in the haze above the disturbed waters of the pond, by the dim and uncertain light of the lanterns . . . Something white showed near the boat.

Turgenev's use of visual detail, his power to make us see, is almost casual. He leaves us to notice, or not, the way the two little girls and their raindrops prefigure Masha's death, or the way the group's earlier rushing in from the rain is inverted by their panicked rushing out to the pond. His description of the scene by the water also relies for its effect on details simply stated, steadily added one to the other without emotional brocading.

But Turgenev is also a master of the detail that gives access not just to a general impression – of disarray in a princess's household – but to individual character and circumstance. It says everything about the contradiction gripping the 16-year-old narrator of 'First Love', lurking in the garden at night in the hope of spying the object of his devotion with her rumoured lover, that when he hears a noise, he murmurs '"Who is there?" . . . almost inaudibly', and when he hears laughter and 'rustling among the leaves', repeats the interrogative 'more softly still'. He doesn't actually want to make the discovery, which he has already half made, that this lover not only exists, but is his own father.

Much of the emotional power of *Fathers and Sons* comes from the small touches that demonstrate the attitude of the elder figures – Arkady's widowed father, Nikolai Petrovich Kirsanov, and Bazarov's parents – to their children. Constance Garnett called her translation *Fathers and Children*, and though this wording has been supplanted in all modern editions, it captures something significant: your child always remains your child. The relationship includes the possibility that, through an excess of tenderness, it is the yearning parent who becomes childish.

We are aware of Nikolai Petrovich's vulnerability from the beginning, as he waits impatiently for his son to arrive from St Petersburg (Arkady has just graduated). Nikolai Petrovich asks his coachman twice if there is any sign of the carriage before sitting down with a sigh, thinking about his dead wife, who did not live to see her son a graduate. When Arkady finally appears, they embrace, and Nikolai Petrovich is so flustered that 'it was as if he were a little lost, and a little shy.' It is only now that Arkady reveals that he has brought a friend, Bazarov – a cleverness on Turgenev's part, because we feel his father's surprise, and then his sadness that the intimacy of the reunion has been lost. The new atmosphere, and Nikolai Petrovich's determination to show he doesn't feel it, is conveyed to us by the way he 'promptly' turns and shakes Bazarov's hand (which hasn't been extended), formally asking his first name and patronymic. From here on, we become familiar with Nikolai Petrovich's smiling uncertainty around Arkady – his pride and enjoyment in him, his earnest desire to understand his friendship with Bazarov, coupled with his own incomprehension. Later, we are given a brief insight into the period preceding the action of the novel. It is never referred to again, but it is all we need:

> For the first time, he clearly perceived the gulf between himself and his son; he foresaw that it would grow wider and wider with every passing day. In vain, then, had he spent whole days reading the latest books during the winters in Petersburg; in vain had he listened to the conversations of young people; in vain had he rejoiced when he'd managed to interject his own ideas into their heated discussions.

About halfway through the novel, the two young men swap hosting duties and Bazarov arrives at his family home with Arkady in tow. Bazarov's parents haven't seen him for three years. (They are a few rungs down the social ladder: his father, a retired army doctor, served in Arkady's grandfather's brigade.) At dinner, Bazarov's mother pays no attention to their guest: 'She leaned her round face . . . on her closed little fist and didn't take her eyes off her son. She sighed repeatedly . . . dying to know how long he intended to stay but . . . afraid to ask him.' When, after only three days, Bazarov signals to his father that he is leaving in the morning, by asking offhandedly for horses to be sent for, Turgenev handles the scene with agonising delicacy. 'I have to go and stay with [Arkady] for a little while. I'll come back here again later,' Bazarov says.

> 'Ah! For a little while . . . All right.' Vasily Ivanovich drew out his handkerchief, and, blowing his nose, bent over nearly to the ground. 'Oh well, everything will be arranged. I thought you were going to be with us . . . a little longer. Three days . . . after three years, it's not very much – it's not very much, Evgeny!'

He can't resist telling Bazarov that his mother had only just asked for fresh flowers for his room:

> (Vasily Ivanovich didn't mention the fact that every morning, just after dawn, he conferred with Timofeich [the servant], standing with his bare feet in slippers, pulling out one dog-eared ruble note after another with trembling fingers and ordering him to make various purchases, with special emphasis on good things to eat and red wine, which, as far as he could tell, the young men liked very much.)
>
> 'Freedom – that's the main thing. That's my rule . . . I don't want to constrain you . . . not . . .'
>
> He suddenly stopped talking and made for the door.
>
> 'We'll see each other soon, Father, honestly.'
>
> But Vasily Ivanovich merely waved his hand without turning around, and went out.

This is what makes the moment later on when Bazarov tells his father that he has almost certainly infected himself with typhus so terrible. The wait to see if the illness will manifest is even worse.

> [Vasily Ivanovich] restrained himself for two whole days, although he didn't like the way his son looked at all; he kept watching him stealthily . . . but by the third day, at dinner, he couldn't bear it any longer. Bazarov was sitting with his eyes downcast, without touching his food.

3 In the translation of 'First Love' by the Slaters, the herringbone is 'gnawed clean', following Constance Garnett's version of 1897. This suggests that the princess has been eating with her hands (for that matter, can one gnaw a herring?). It's curious, too, that they have the servant keeping the door 'open' with his foot, when all the other translations I've read have the door being pushed shut.

'Why aren't you eating, Evgeny?' he inquired, donning a thoroughly nonchalant expression. 'The food has been prepared quite nicely, I think.'

'I don't want anything, so I'm not eating.'

'Don't you have an appetite? How's your head?' Vasily Ivanovich added timidly. 'Does it ache?'

'Yes, it does. Why shouldn't it ache?'

Arina Vlasevna sat up and became alert.

'Please don't be angry, Evgeny,' Vasily Ivanovich continued, 'but won't you let me feel your pulse?'

Bazarov stood up. 'I can tell you without feeling my pulse that I have a fever.'

All is darkness after that, and we are left with the image – again drawn from nature – of Bazarov's parents at the moment of his death: 'Side by side . . . they bowed their poor heads like lambs in the noonday heat.'

It is in Turgenev's use of speaking details – we might call it 'showing not telling' – that his influence on the development of the novel can be detected, perhaps especially as it was transmitted through James, as well as Maupassant, Chekhov and Conrad. He relies on dialogue, his plots consist of deepening relationships among a limited cast, usually over a short period of time. He rarely describes his characters' motivations, entering their heads only to emphasise their internal inarticulacy: they are frequently unable to define their 'nameless' emotions, feeling confused, or unsure, surprising themselves by their actions, sometimes realising their inevitability only after the fact. 'The drama is quite uncommented,' James wrote. Turgenev 'never plays chorus; situations speak for themselves.' In *A Nest of Gentlefolk*, the reader is the first to see that the long disillusioned Lavretsky is falling in love with Liza: 'As she went, Liza had hung her hat on a branch; Lavretsky gazed at that hat, with its long, slightly rumpled ribbons, with strange, almost tender emotion.' In *Fathers and Sons*, we understand Arkady's confused feelings on leaving the home of Anna Sergeevna much better than he does – he has convinced himself he is in love with her, despite knowing that she is attracted to Bazarov, and despite actually being in love with her sister Katya. 'Arkady was the first to go down the front steps; he climbed into Sitnikov's carriage. A butler respectfully helped him into his seat, but he would gladly have hit him or burst into tears.'

The technique is best exemplified in *Virgin Soil*, Turgenev's last, longest and unfairly disregarded novel, in the relationship between the two young unmarried revolutionaries, Mariana and Nejdanov. Mariana has told Nejdanov that they can sleep together, as proof of her commitment to him. They have eloped and are staying in rooms on opposite sides of a hallway.

She went out, but in a minute or two her door opened slightly and he heard her say, 'Good night!' then more softly another 'Good night!' and the key turned in the lock.

Nejdanov sank onto the sofa and covered his face with his hands. Then he got up quickly, went to her door and knocked.

'What is it?' was heard from within.

'Not till tomorrow, Mariana . . . not till tomorrow!'

'Till tomorrow,' she replied softly.

Nejdanov's inability to accept Maria's offer is gradually revealed as unwillingness, another aspect of his mortifying failure fully to realise a revolutionary consciousness. His collapse is described sidelong: it is as though he is being slowly suffocated by those strange, oppressive, nameless emotions that Turgenev's other characters eventually express through action. At last, Nejdanov expresses them too – by suicide.

'They are so short and yet they hold so much,' Virginia Woolf wrote of Turgenev's novels. 'The emotion is so intense and yet so calm. The form is in one sense so perfect, in another so broken.' The brokenness is easy to identify: Turgenev's propensity to brake and reverse a considerable distance into the past in order to describe how a character came to their present position repeatedly stalls narrative momentum and introduces a note of artificiality ('We must now say a few words about Markelov . . .'). This master of showing could not resist a great deal of unnecessary telling. His schooling in the theatre (he wrote eight plays before his first novel) explains his focus on dialogue and the exterior signs of interior states, the limited casts and settings (very often a house in the country), the swift and decisive scenes – but also the formal weaknesses, most obviously this failure to incorporate back stories. It also accounts for some of his creakier stratagems: in his otherwise desultory lecture on *Fathers and Sons*, Nabokov was scornful of the appearance late in the novel of the 'overheard in the arbour' trope ('We have sunk to the level of a comedy of manners'). 'His literary genius,' Nabokov said, 'falls short on the score of literary imagination, that is, of naturally discovering ways of telling the story which would equal the originality of his descriptive art.'

It's a little more complicated to explain what is perfect in Turgenev's work. But, for one thing, he can rival Austen for a romantic finale. This is Lezhnev speaking in *Rudin*:

'You talk like that, Alexandra Pavlovna, because you don't know me. You think I'm a blockhead, a complete blockhead, just wood from the neck up. But don't you know that I'm capable of melting like sugar and spending whole days on my knees?'

'That I confess I'd like to see!'

Lezhnev suddenly stood up.

'Then marry me, Alexandra Pavlovna, and you will see it.'

Alexandra Pavlovna reddened right up to her ears.

'What was that you said, Mikhaylo Mikhaylych?' she murmured in confusion.

'I said something,' answered Lezhnev, 'that has been a long, long while and a thousand times on the tip of my tongue. I've finally said it, and you may do now as you know best. But so as not to embarrass you I'll now leave. If you want to be my wife . . . I'll be out in the garden. If you have no objection, just ask for me to be called: I'll understand . . .'

Alexandra Pavlovna wanted to detain Lezhnev, but he swiftly went out into the garden without putting on his hat, leaned on a gate, and began gazing into the distance.

'Mikhaylo Mikhaylych!' resounded the voice of a maid behind him. 'Please come to the mistress. She's asking for you.'

Mikhaylo Mikhaylych turned round, seized the maid by her head with both hands, to her great astonishment, kissed her on the forehead, and strode off in the direction of Alexandra Pavlovna.

Such happy endings are rare, but that shouldn't obscure the fact that Turgenev's novels, like Austen's, usually depict an intense, pressured moment of youthful, never to be repeated romantic opportunity. 'First love is exactly like a revolution,' he writes in *Spring Torrents*. 'The regular and established order of life is in an instant smashed to fragments; youth stands at the barricade, its bright banner raised high in the air, and sends its ecstatic greetings to the future, whatever it may hold – death or a new life, no matter.' What gives his stories their plangency, the emotional compression and strange calm that Woolf noted, isn't just that they usually end in failure or defeat or sacrifice. It's what happens next: these flurried lives settle into a stillness from which, we are given to understand, they will never be disturbed. As Pritchett wrote, Turgenev 'is moved by the rise and fall of love and not by the fullness of love realised. Hail and farewell. Spring and autumn. No high summer of fulfilment. Therefore no tragedy, only sadness.'

Turgenev had a curious relationship to time. At the age of 36 he was wistful about his 'old age', and, perhaps encouraged by his prematurely white hair, early adopted a languishing pose. He had trouble keeping appointments: 'It was impossible to see much of him,' James recalled, 'without discovering that he was a man of delays.' His characters, too, miss their moment, or prove superfluous to it ('Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District' and 'The Diary of a Superfluous Man' are two of his stories). In this way, Turgenev's work is a kind of commentary, both covert and overt, on Russia, a star with which his characters' fortunes consistently fail to align. Even Bazarov, the progressive, tells Arkady at the end of *Fathers and Sons*: 'Get married as soon as you can, and build your nest, and have as many children as possible. They'll be smart ones, because they'll have been born at the right time, not like you and me.' Russia is slow to change, and life is short. 'Nowhere does time pass as swiftly as in Russia,' Turgenev writes, 'though they say that in prison it passes even more quickly.'

Turgenev believed that all human effort and desire – satisfied or unsatisfied – is rendered irrelevant by the passage of time. This pessimistic view allowed him to resolve his complex feelings about personal agency: from the point of view of the universe, nobody has very much for very long. 'Men's dreams never come true, and their regrets are futile. He who has not drawn a winning number may as well be satisfied with a losing one and not breathe a word about it to anyone.' His stories are often told in recollection by aged narrators, or end by jumping decades into the future: in the present there is no great happiness, or melodramatic anguish; it is merely the case that time has passed and is continuing to pass. It is no more possible to remedy long ago mistakes than to choose a better moment to be born.

Turgenev's dwelling on nature, on the turning of the days and the seasons, is his way of instructing us in our insignificance, at the same time as he holds a magnifying glass to our small and squirming human connections. Woolf put it best: 'As we notice, without seeming to notice, life going on, we feel more intensely for the men and women themselves because they are not the whole of life, but only part of the whole.' 'I am not afraid of looking at the future,' Turgenev wrote on his 42nd birthday.

Only I am conscious of the fact that I am subject to certain eternal and unalterable, but deaf and dumb laws . . . and the small squeak of my consciousness means as little in this life as if I were to babble 'I, I, I' on the shore of the ocean that flows without return. The fly still buzzes, but in another instant – and thirty, forty years is also an instant – it will buzz no more.

In all his work, Turgenev seems to be out ahead of us. 'As a punishment of myself and as a lesson to others,' he wrote after witnessing that execution in Paris, 'I should now like to tell everything I saw.' □

At the Hayward

In Antony, the southern suburb of Paris where Louise Bourgeois spent her childhood, the river water had special properties. The Bièvre, which ran past the Bourgeois home, was thick with tannin, an important ingredient for the family's tapestry restoration business: wool washed in this water is more receptive to dyeing agents – colours set fast and don't fade. Her father's first job was as a landscape architect and he would bring back decorative garden sculptures from his travels across Europe. They always needed to be repaired and straightened up. 'It is partly why I became a sculptor,' Bourgeois said. 'I was so familiar with them.' After the war, he began to collect tapestry fragments, drawing on his wife's knowledge to restore and reshape them (she had worked in her family's tapestry atelier in Aubusson, where the river Creuse, like the Bièvre, coursed with tannin).

Little Louise, sometimes known as Louison, was brought into the family business aged eight as *dessinateur*, at that time an exclusively male role. On Thursdays and Sundays, when she wasn't at school, her job was to draw in the missing sections – often bodies or parts of them. She started with the feet. At fifteen, Bourgeois left school altogether to work in the weaving and restoring ateliers full time, while preparing for the École des Beaux-Arts. The house was filled with stacks of tapestries and as a child she would fold herself inside them to keep warm or to hide – they were 'a form of textile sculpture to be entered', she said, a rich, immersive material.

The Woven Child at the Hayward (until 15 May) is the first large-scale retrospective of Bourgeois's textile works, made from the mid-1990s until her death in 2010. Her work with cloth is varied, prolific and innovative; many pieces offer new iterations of familiar Bourgeois themes – memory, sexuality, identity, the body, pain, love and most of all, perhaps, the compulsion to make. Created late in her life, they are themselves retrospective, made from the stuff of her life – personal garments, domestic linens, needlepoint, embroidered handkerchiefs, scraps of tapestries brought to New York after her father's death. 'Having held onto these objects of clothing for a lifetime,' her assistant, Jerry Gorovoy, wrote shortly before her death, 'by incorporating them into her art she alleviates her fear of separation. This processing is connected to the fear of dying. The need to mark time, which is what these clothes represent, is connected to her awareness of her own fragility.'

As a child, Bourgeois's parents competed with each other to dress her in the latest fashions: 'Chanel, Poiret, lingerie Suisse, furs, foxes, boas'. This elegant and sometimes idiosyncratic style remained with her throughout her life: who could forget the image of her outside her Manhattan townhouse in a brown latex costume of coarse, bulbous forms; or the 1982 Mapplethorpe photograph in which she wears a luxurious fur coat and holds her sculpture *Fillette*: a giant latex phallus she referred to as her 'doll'. It wasn't until she was in her eighties, however, that she began to think of clothes as sculptural elements – intimate, indexical, mnemonic. 'You can retell your life and remember your life by the shape, the weight, the colour, the smell of the clothes in your closet,' she said. 'Fashion is like the weather, the ocean – it changes all the time.'

Bourgeois had all the clothes, fabrics and textiles from her closets brought down to the basement studio and hung over the pipes according to colour. Those that evoked particular places, people or memories remained whole, while others were cut up and repurposed, stitched together, often crudely, to form heads and other corporeal elements. In *Untitled* (1996), eight pieces of clothing are suspended at different heights from a central steel pole; they radiate round it like ghostly, drifting bodies. Two silk slips, one carefully edged in lace; four delicate chemise-like vests, some frilled or with a necktie, others fastened at the side with silk-covered buttons; a pale pink pussy bow shirt; and a shimmering, beaded black cocktail dress hang on cow bones whose rounded joints extend through the arms of the garments. The pink shirt and black dress are gently padded, to remind us that these garments once held bodies. The words 'SEAMSTRESS', 'MISTRESS', 'DISTRESS', 'STRESS' are welded to the base – evidence of her childhood and of its vexing memories (her father was a serial philanderer who carried on a long affair with her young governess, among other tyrannies).

The body is spectral and absent in this work, but in others it is all too present – large, stuffed, heavy, sagging. *Single I* (1996), a body without hands, feet or a head, is made from a number of grey-toned fabrics and hangs upside down in the Hayward's brutalist stairwell, arms extended like Saint Peter, tiny round breasts protruding. High up, over a doorway, *Legs* (2001) is a cluster of three enormous red patchwork limbs suspended from metal wires; in the centre of another room hangs *Spiral Woman* (2003), faded black fabrics stuffed and sewn in a spiral that gives way to a pair of slender, dangling limbs. 'The spiral is somebody who doesn't have a frame of reference,' Bourgeois wrote. 'The only thing is this hanging, this fragility.' A series of eleven heads made between 1998 and 2009 demonstrates her virtuosity and her attention to the particular qualities of fabric. The materials include wool, felt, muslin, tapestry, cotton, terrycloth; the heads appear to grimace, open their mouths in anguish, stare or implore. Some have no face, while others have three. Two heads, covered in raised seams that look like scars, face each other and touch the tips of their extended pink tongues. This is the heroic classical bust made soft and slyly weird.

In other works, bodies are enclosed in structures (Bourgeois called them 'cells') made of glass, wood, steel mesh, repurposed windows and doors; or arranged in dioramas. Visitors may already be familiar with some of these – small, pink, seam-covered bodies, often female and in various hybrid states – a selection of which were recently displayed at Tate Modern in a room devoted to Bourgeois. I was most surprised by *Couple III* and *Couple IV* (both 1997), large vitrines, each containing two head-

'Together' (2005)

less black fabric figures lying on top of one another, like giant *poupées* abandoned in an inert romance. (If only they could love each other, I thought, quickly ashamed at the idea of their animation.) In *Couple III*, one figure wears an elaborate pink arm brace; in *Couple IV*, one has a wooden leg laced up its thigh in leather. For Bourgeois, the body imagined through fabric was a visible – and haptic – site of pain and loss. 'The subject of pain is the business I am in,' she said. 'To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering. What happens to my body has to be given a formal abstract shape. So you might say, pain is the ransom of formalism.'

Bourgeois described her 'cells' as representations of different types of pain, but they are also highly controlled display mechanisms that marshal how and what we are allowed to see. As in much of her work, the status of the materials is ambiguous: what contains or constricts also shelters and protects. Are we voyeurs, observing moments of private suffering, or has our attention been drawn to something special, arranged with love and care? In *Spider* (1997), a large, circular steel cage is enclosed by the angular legs of one of Bourgeois's spiders, its body nestled in the top of the structure. Fragments of tapestries are fixed to the exterior and interior walls of the cage, and draped over an upholstered chair at its centre. Little Louise, now grown up, has not repaired the missing pieces of the tapestries, however, and it appears some images have been deliberately excised: the face of a king, the crotch of a naked child. Bourgeois's work asks what we do with the past – particularly when it remains painful or in pieces, moth-eaten.

Three of her special edition fabric books – *The Woven Child* (2003), *Ode à l'oubli* (2004) and *Ode à la Bièvre* (2007) – are displayed page by page alongside a series of works from the mid-2000s that continue her spiral and web motifs. In these pieces, all untitled, swathes of coloured and striped cloth have been cut into triangles and tightly stitched together to form circles and patterns, which radiate outwards from fixed points. Some have small fabric flowers at their central nodes. Others have been turned over, revealing the network of intricate seams on the reverse and drawing attention to her labour. 'Where do you place yourself, at the periphery or at the vortex?' Bourgeois asked, with reference to these works:

> Beginning at the outside is the fear of losing control; the winding in is a tightening, a retreating, a compacting to the point of disappearance. Beginning at the centre is affirmation, the move outwards is a representation of giving, and giving up control; of trust, positive energy, or life itself.

In two late works from 2009, *Eternity* and *Eugénie Grandet*, the spiral becomes a clock face. Next to each number in *Eternity* is a pair of torsos, male and female, painted by Bourgeois on a square of fabric and then sewn onto the main piece, a vast white sheet. In blues, pinks, reds and inky blacks, the two bodies face each other – penis erect, stomach swollen – in eternal tumescence. *Eugénie Grandet* is quite different: a small sixteen-piece needlepoint ode to Balzac's lonely heroine. Each white rectangle of fabric – muslin, linen, cotton, striped, checked – is embellished or embroidered with small objects: tiny jewels, flowers, clasps, buttons, needles. There are three clocks, each showing a different time, and another with no hands at all, only a tight bouquet of purple flowers. This is Bourgeois at her most conventionally unconventional, feminine, careful and neat, reminding us that such delicate work is associated with childhood and old age, that it can be an act of devotion. Sewing, Bourgeois wrote, 'is a plea in favour of a/second chance, it is a plea in favour of/X and against Y.' If severing and cutting were connected with the father, sewing was associated with the mother. 'My mother would sit out in the sun and repair a tapestry or a petit point,' she recalled. 'This sense of reparation is very deep within me.' Bourgeois liked to invoke the spider and the caterpillar – creatures that draw transformative materials from within – as emblematic of artists. The woven child, Louise, Louison, is both maker and made, weaver and woven.

Emily LaBarge

Grumpy in October

Jonathan Parry

Entente Imperial: British and French Power in the Age of Empire
by Edward J. Gillin.
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Early in July 1853, eighty thousand Russian troops crossed the River Pruth and invaded the Ottoman Empire. By 15 July they had occupied Bucharest, the capital of Ottoman Wallachia, as well as its other major towns. It was an unprovoked attack, justified on spurious grounds: Tsar Nicholas I claimed that more than ten million Orthodox Christians were imperilled by the indifference and barbarism of their Ottoman overlords. Russia asserted a historic right and duty to protect these people, though the vast majority had expressed no interest in such protection. It refused to leave, despite intense international diplomacy. The motivation for this expansionist gamble was Russia's anxiety about the balance of power across Central and Eastern Europe. The Revolutions of 1848 had demonstrated that Western liberals could stimulate uprisings against the status quo in Italian, Hungarian, Polish and Balkan lands; now the Ottoman Empire, which Russia was used to bullying, was being bullied more effectively by Britain and France. In response to the invasion, Sultan Abdulmejid I declared war on Russia, and Britain and France sent ships to the Bosphorus to protect him against attack. On 30 November 1853, Russian missiles destroyed the Ottoman navy in the Black Sea. The British and French press lamented their countries' humiliation. In March 1854, both of them joined the Ottoman side.

Though the conflict that followed is almost always known as the Crimean War, it was not a war for the liberation of the Crimean peninsula, which Russia had annexed in 1783. Britain and France aimed simply to prevent a maritime attack on the Ottoman capital, Constantinople, by neutralising the Russian naval base on the peninsula – a task which turned out to be not at all simple. It took eleven months. Britain and France agreed on the political need to secure Constantinople, but some British naval strategists would instinctively have preferred a naval blockade and the bombardment of Russia's Baltic ports, and it was the eventual decision to focus on the Baltic theatre that forced Russia to make peace in 1856. British public opinion saw Russian ambitions and values as a threat to Europe as a whole, and particularly to the liberal and national cause in Hungary, Poland and Italy. The press presented the war as a defence of 'English' ideals – liberalism, constitutionalism and international law – against the Russian bear.

There wasn't much British postwar identification with the Crimea either. It never caught the imagination as a 'lieu de mémoire'. In her excellent new book on the afterlife of the conflict, Lara Kriegel shows that memorial tourism was only sporadic.* The peninsula was not on major British trade routes, had no magnificent classical or Renaissance attractions, and, most problematic, remained Russian territory. The Prince and Princess of Wales visited in 1869 but found the battlegrounds strewn with ruins, slowly reverting to agriculture. Most of the 139 burial sites had been neglected; it was another fifteen years before they were consolidated into one memorial on Cathcart's Hill. This was itself never adequately safeguarded: it was ravaged during the Second World War and later by Khrushchev's bulldozers. The military campaign itself was remembered mainly for a single piece of ghastly incompetence – the charge of the light brigade during the Battle of Balaklava. Even before Tennyson's poem appeared in December 1854, its painful lessons were well established. The *Times* noted that the British soldier would always 'do his duty', even when sentenced to probable death by 'some hideous blunder'. During their lifetimes, the surviving chargers were still seen as heroes – in October 1875, they were reunited at Alexandra Palace for an afternoon of celebrations featuring another war veteran, an Arab horse, together with trapeze artists and a banquet topped off with Balaklava pudding – but this was because the experience of most other Crimean soldiers was tediously inglorious: the long, cold, muddy siege of a faraway naval base. Tony Richardson's cinematic treatment in 1968 was the sharpest of several 20th-century attempts to reinterpret the charge as a symbol of officer-class arrogance and privilege. The light brigade's failure is still a touchstone: in February, the defence secretary, Ben Wallace, made reference to the Crimean War while puffing the Ukraine conflict as a glorious stand against Russian expansionism; the *Daily Mail* retorted by using the charge to illustrate the foolishness of intervention in remote quarrels.

Russia's late 18th-century expansion into the Crimea and most of present-day Ukraine had been paralleled, further north, by the partition of Poland after a series of agreements between Russia, Austria and Prussia. These agreements were possible, in large part, because of the disruption of European diplomacy caused by bitter Anglo-French discord. During the Crimean War, there was pressure on Britain and France to make amends for Poland's disappearance from the map. Domestic radicals and influential Polish expatriate networks wanted its independence restored, but nothing happened. Nor did the allies instigate any national uprisings against the Russians around the Black Sea coast – two decades earlier, the ambitious young British diplomat David Urquhart had been sacked for making such an attempt in Circassia, just east of the Crimea, which Russia was then trying to subjugate. British and French caution reflected an anxiety that a Balkan war of nationalities would destroy Ottoman rule. At the 1856 peace talks, Palmerston tried to keep Russia out of Circassia and if possible Georgia, but was frustrated because France supported Russian claims.

So the Anglo-French alliance of the 1850s did not seek to bring liberalism and nationalism to Russia's borderlands. Did it have any wider meaning? Was it an aberration? On 17 April 1855, Queen Victoria held a ball at Windsor Castle to celebrate the state visit of Napoleon III. Its location was the magnificent Waterloo Chamber, a symbol of Britain's global ascendancy. If Napoleon III, nephew of the original, minded dancing with George III's granddaughter in this setting, he was careful not to say so. The visit suggested that after many centuries Anglo-French hostility was finally at an end – but not that war would automatically give way to peace, since the Crimean conflict killed half a million people. The alliance wasn't without tensions. In 1853 there had been a media scare that Napoleon III might be planning to invade Britain across the Channel. Britain's decision to work with him was shaped by a concern that, unrestrained by British counsel, France would compromise with Russia in order to divide up the East between them.

On the other hand, if Britain and France united, they might reshape the world themselves, representing the forces of modernity. One useful way of analysing the scope of Anglo-French global ambitions in the 19th century is to focus on the role of technology. This is the approach taken by Edward Gillin, a historian of science, in his entertaining overview. The Crimean crisis can itself be seen as an attempt by these two technologically superior countries to intimidate the Ottomans into accepting their political guidance in return for military protection. Technology also allowed unprecedented media coverage of the war, much of it illustrated: Queen Victoria was given a documentary photograph album. In April 1855 a daily telegraph link from the battlefield to Constantinople was established. Two months later a British newspaper of the same name appeared, exploiting widespread anger at the incompetence of the war effort. It is still complaining to this day.

The war established a precedent for attempts to impose Western power on recalcitrant forces elsewhere in the world. (It was a fitting irony that Napoleon III's son, the prince imperial, was killed serving with the British army during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879.) The most infamous of these forays was the joint British and French attack on China in 1859-60, after the Chinese emperor resisted a trade treaty insisted on by the two powers, who had just bombarded Canton. More than 200 ships arrived with 23,000 men and modern artillery, attacked the forts on the river Pei-ho, and opened a path to Peking. After the Chinese captured and tortured a *Times* correspondent, the allied forces razed the fleeing emperor's Summer Palace to the ground (the British couldn't resist blaming the French for the worst of the looting). Much priceless art was destroyed, though some magnificent pieces were shipped back to royal residences in Britain and France, together with five Pekinese dogs – the one given to Queen Victoria was christened Looty. Such vandalism was not the expedition's intention, but it left a permanent and painful legacy.

The greatest monument to Anglo-French technological co-operation in these years was the Suez Canal, planned during the Crimean War, funded by a French company established in 1858, and opened in 1869. The canal is too often (but not here) seen as a French attempt to challenge British commercial and political predominance in Egypt – hardly a realistic aim by this point. Though the British government was initially hostile and investors were sceptical about its viability, the appeal of a seaway connecting the Mediterranean with India was overwhelming for the world's greatest economic power, once it became clear that it could indeed be completed. The publicity for the canal also gave an enormous fillip to the ambitions of finance capitalists in London and Paris, who now looked to fund infrastructure projects anywhere in the world where steam power offered plausible prospects of returns. Napoleon III had already allowed investment banks to tap French public savings for domestic railway construction and war loans. After the Crimean War,

* *The Crimean War and Its Afterlife: Making Modern Britain* by Lara Kriegel (Cambridge, 347 pp., £90, February, 978 1 108 84222 8). The book is made up of six case studies showing how the war's icons have been reinterpreted over the years. As well as the charge of the light brigade and Crimean tourism and burial sites, it covers the Victoria Cross and the reputations of Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole.

these banks set their sights further afield, and in 1863 the first investment banking consortia were established in Britain. Back in 1851, an early beneficiary of the new telegraph cable across the Channel had been Paul Julius Reuter, who saw that profits could be made from the swift communication of information – particularly stock market prices – between the two capitals.

In both countries, scientists and commercial men urged the benefits of standardising other sorts of data, arguing that global trade and communication would be enhanced by greater uniformity in measurement. In 1884, an international conference agreed to organise global time around the Greenwich Meridian. Many Frenchmen wanted the world to accept the metric measurements of weights and distance that France had adopted in a bout of rationalising revolutionary fervour. Metres, litres and grams were all defined by reference to the Earth's dimensions. When Britain obstructed these strange notions, Richard Cobden lamented his countrymen's 'Chinese conservatism'. On the whole, however, co-operation outweighed controversy. The French dominated the natural sciences and mathematics, but admired the British steam engine and its manifold applications. At the Great Exhibition in 1851, many Britons agreed that French luxury goods were superior to homegrown mass-produced articles. For two French economists, Joseph Garnier and Hippolyte Dussard, the exhibition's lesson was that 'the United States can feed the world, England can clothe it, and France can beautify it.' Gillin traces the ramifications of these lines of thought to the 1860 Anglo-French Commercial Treaty, which weakened traditional tariff barriers to trade, but also to Ruskin's worship of the medieval cathedrals of northern France, which he saw as antidotes to the modern materialist spirit.

The 1860 treaty opened Britain to many beautiful things, not least to French wine, which by 1898 was producing 35 per cent of the total consumed in England, against 5 per cent in sherry-and-port-sodden 1843. Champagne became so popular that by 1890 the major vineyards had altered its taste to suit London appetites, drastically reducing the sugar content and adding more fizz. To discerning Frenchmen, such adjustments were painful: 'Le champagne, on ne le prépare pas comme une omelette,' one manufacturer commented ruefully. In London, the 1890s were a boom-time for French-style hotels and restaurants: César Ritz and Georges Escoffier revived the Savoy and established its culinary reputation, before going on to found the Carlton and the Ritz. Six decades earlier, the French émigré Alexis Soyer had become the first celebrity chef, employed initially by Whig aristocrats and then at their new party headquarters, the Reform Club. Many British noble families had cultivated French habits and culture since before the revolution, as a signifier of cosmopolitanism and taste. As the 19th century went on, and Continental travel became easier for the middle classes, France was naturally the most popular destination.

Of course, national rivalry, articulated through long-standing stereotypes, often imperilled collaboration. This was certainly the case in the Crimea; each side accused the other of misjudgments at the Battle of the Alma. No British officer at that time had fought a war that wasn't against the French, and Captain Kingscote ridiculed the appearance of the French officers, 'like monkeys, girthed up as tight as they can be and sticking out above and below like balloons'. The 1860 treaty, a political gesture symbolic of its moment, fell foul of ideologues on both sides and was replaced in 1882 by less ambitious arrangements, as France turned back to protectionism.

The rapidity of technological progress also occasionally undermined British self-confidence about its invulnerability to French military power. The Crimean War made it clear that, despite the Waterloo myth, Britain wasn't very good at fighting. By January 1855, France had four times as many soldiers in the field. They were also better organised. One day the French provided 35,000 loaves for hungry British troops. In the winter of 1854-55, British fatality rates in the Crimea were double those of the French. Britain fell back on reassuring tropes of naval superiority, until Napoleon III completed his great new harbour at Cherbourg and floated the first ironclad warship, *La Gloire*. Britain's sail ships now seemed irrelevant. Palmerston had to rally public opinion with a spending spree on ironclads and fortifications including four sea forts in the Solent, which have still not found their raison d'être, even as luxury hotels.

There is, however, another way of conceiving of the Anglo-French international political project after 1815, one focused on geography and geopolitics. Both countries wanted peace: France was saddled with war reparation payments, while Britain's industrial and commercial growth made it the greatest beneficiary of the new global status quo. Over the next two decades, British and French politicians agreed to share responsibility for the Atlantic coastline, particularly Iberia and the Low Countries, the main Anglo-French battlegrounds during the recent wars. They created Belgium as a model liberal constitutional monarchy following a southern rebellion against the king of the Netherlands, and settled a Spanish civil war in favour of the constitutionalists, all while minimising the local influence of Russia, Austria and Prussia. British recognition of France's interests along the European coast also helped persuade it not to seek revenge for Waterloo by intriguing with Russia. International historians of the 19th century place great emphasis on a 'Concert of Europe' – represented in action at the Congress of Vienna – but its main concern was to stabilise Central and Eastern Europe. Britain and France quickly worked out how to check the interference of the eastern powers further west.

Dealing with the affairs of Spain and Portugal also required the two countries to agree on a new liberal settlement for the Americas. In the 18th century, the Atlantic powers had greedily competed to dominate and exploit the New World's trade and resources, but after 1815 Britain and France belatedly accepted that this competition had badly damaged them (as well as almost everything they touched). It had lost them the most important parts of their North American empires: Britain had ousted France from Canada, and France had assisted with Britain's ousting from what was now the United States. Post-Napoleon, France tried briefly to use its power in Spain to maintain some influence in Spanish South America, now the site of multiple rebellions against European rule. By the 1820s, it accepted that the rebels, helped by British naval and commercial power, had won their independence. The Atlantic trade boomed, and British cotton products flooded into the new South American states. In the 1830s, Britain abolished slavery in the West Indies and stepped up its naval and diplomatic assault on the Atlantic slave trade. In support of this, Britain and France signed agreements in 1831 and 1833 permitting mutual rights of search and arrest on their countries' trading vessels in the Atlantic. Britain reconstituted an enlarged Canada as a liberal and increasingly self-governing colony after the French minority rebelled in 1837, in co-operation with France.

We should see this emerging collaboration in Western Europe and the Americas as the foundation stone of Atlanticism. This was a distinctive Anglo-French project that the US eventually joined once it expanded its horizons. It was based on common strategic interests and on the Enlightenment values of which Britain and France were the leading exponents: free institutions, international law and socio-economic evolution powered by commercial and intellectual exchange. It assumed that Russia, Austria and Prussia could not seriously obstruct the advance of these principles and would eventually have to bow to them. Disraeli said Anglo-French co-operation was 'the key and cornerstone of modern civilisation'.

This informal Anglo-French understanding is rarely given proper attention because politicians and newspaper editors in both countries did their best – as they often still do – to pretend it wasn't happening. The same thing occurred when the US joined the party. Memories of past conflicts were so visceral – and so easy to exploit in speeches and headlines – that they continued to dominate the discourse. There were many legitimate reasons for each country to be suspicious of the territorial and economic ambitions of the other two. Britain and France were both perplexed by US expansion across the continent, especially the acquisition of Texas in 1845, though neither could prevent it since the Texans were in favour. In addition, though the creation of a liberal North Atlantic world was an Enlightenment project, each of the three states felt that it had made the pre-eminent contribution to liberal thought through its own political revolution – Britain in 1688, America in 1776, France in 1789 – and that this was manifestly superior to the other two.

Ever since, so many politicians and journalists in the three countries have gleefully ridiculed their rivals' behaviour that it's easy to forget that for nearly two hundred years it has been almost inconceivable that they could ever go to war with one another. Initially, the logic of co-operation rested on two planks. The first was British naval power. From its bases in Halifax and Bermuda, and later at Esquimalt on the western Canadian coast, Britain could – if the US ever chose to invade Canada – blockade and bombard Boston, New York, Washington and San Francisco into severe deprivation or worse. Britain was also usually confident that its ships could keep the French fleet confined to harbour in any war (though it was not quite so confident that it could manage both these tasks at the same time). It was unnecessary and counterproductive to draw attention to such possibilities, however, because each country derived obvious worldwide trading benefits from the absence of conflict between them. In the 19th century, some wars were acceptable to the British and French publics, but only if they could be justified by liberal rhetoric, took place far away, and did not cost much – something that technological superiority over non-Western peoples helped to ensure.

Second, co-operation was promoted by representative politics itself. Nineteenth-century politicians constantly had to interact with legislative assemblies. Taxpayers wanted to prioritise peace, commerce, low taxes and the preservation of capital and property. Political language often incorporated

appeals to prestige and honour, but hardly ever to the glory of combat. The language of patriotism helped bolster state legitimacy, while also allowing shrewd practitioners to prevent hotheads from taking control of the narrative. Such language could be used to establish a national consensus, which was often a valuable diplomatic weapon. Alternatively, it could reveal that no consensus existed, which encouraged compromise. Palmerston is often thought of as a populist, but he lost office twice in the 1850s because he supported a French entente. Far from imperilling Western collaboration, the rituals of the liberal parliamentary order have provided its bedrock.

There is another reason for thinking of the Anglo-French project as an Atlanticist one. Though it's common to see the relationship between the two countries as waxing and waning over the decades (as Gillin does), its strengths and strains are better understood if we think less about time and more about place. There has been a sustained understanding on Western Europe and the Americas, but the Mediterranean has proved infinitely more troublesome for both states. France had dominated it in the 18th century; in 1798, Napoleon occupied Egypt in order to challenge Britain's new Indian empire. Nelson retaliated by destroying the French fleet; Britain soon took Malta and Corfu and became a Mediterranean naval power in order to protect the route to India. Thereafter, neither country quite trusted the other's activities in Greece, which the European powers permitted to leave the Ottoman Empire, or in Lebanon, which they did not. For more than seventy years, both accepted the status quo that Egypt should be a buffer state under nominal Ottoman sovereignty: British domination of commerce and the Red Sea thoroughfare was disguised by a varnish of French culture. But the inrush of Anglo-French finance capital in search of unrealistically high interest rates after the Crimean War led to Egyptian bankruptcy and political disorder. The subsequent British occupation in 1882 poisoned relations with France for more than twenty years. Finally, an entente was engineered in 1904, presided over by Edward VII, Britain's most famous devotee of French champagne and Parisian boudoirs. It resolved the Mediterranean tensions, but at the cost of Britain ceding naval superiority there so that it could protect both countries against the German threat along the Atlantic coast. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, Britain had no way of rejecting French claims to Syria and Lebanon as a counterweight to British Egypt and Iraq. During the two world wars, agents of both powers engaged in very damaging conspiracies and plots against each other in Syria and Palestine, even while their alliance continued elsewhere.

If we see Anglo-French relations functioning in different ways in different geopolitical contexts – Atlantic, Mediterranean and domestic – this may provide some comfort as we confront the post-Brexit situation. The Brexiters' shrill rejection of Theresa May's deal with the European Union, which aimed at preventing costly trade friction and at preserving the integrity of the UK, led to the defenestration of most of the Conservative Party's foreign policy experts: Ken Clarke, David Gauke, Oliver Letwin, David Lidington and Rory Stewart. With them went the liberal Tory realist tradition of foreign policy which had been a constant of British statecraft since it became a world power. Instead we are in the hands of Jacob Rees-Mogg, the minister for Brexit opportunities, who told us last autumn that 'the French are always grumpy in October, the anniversaries of Trafalgar and Agincourt.'

The reality, however, is that two countries which share a long frontier and common pursuits have many reasons to co-operate day to day. Border communities have done so for centuries, despite the irritations and difficulties caused by distant officials. The long-running dispute about the right of French fishermen to fish in Jersey waters after Brexit may yet be settled by a modest increase in the number of licences awarded to French boats; in November 2021, the president of the Ille-et-Vilaine Fisheries Committee said that his members would prefer to negotiate directly with Jersey than rely on EU mechanisms. In 1991, in preparation for the opening of the Channel Tunnel, Britain and France reached an agreement on border policing which, supplemented in 2000 and 2003, still generally functions well (in spite of a dysfunctional British Home Office). The number of registered French residents in the UK in 2021, though lower than before Brexit, is roughly the same as in 2011 – the British census in that year revealed that there were more than two and a half times as many French-born residents as there had been in 1991. Sporting contacts remain highly developed, unsurprisingly given that France imported rugby and cycling from Britain. As for the nationalist posturers and their references to ingrained Anglo-French hostility, it's likely that Brexit will eventually reduce the purchase of such language. Most voters will be unimpressed if a government that boasts of its success in reclaiming sovereignty simultaneously blames the EU for every domestic setback. The Ukraine crisis has in any case changed the mood by making the need for Western co-operation abundantly clear.

Since the 1960s, Britain and France have shared two fundamental Atlanticist aims: to keep the US committed to European defence, and to check any German impulses to accommodate Russia, whether through Ostpolitik in the 1970s or energy dependency under Merkel. During the Cold War, the guarantee of US protection occasionally disguised this common aim, allowing British and French politicians the luxury of spats which gave their domestic audiences the comforting impression that their countries were still independent global powers. The prevailing uncertainty since the 1990s has required more direct Anglo-French collaboration, including a Joint Nuclear Weapons Commission established in 1993 and the 2010 Lancaster House treaties on security and defence integration. Work on cyber security is ongoing. Although the EU amplifies French power to a degree, French politicians also need to maintain a distinct identity from it, given the amount of domestic Euroscepticism. The Ukraine tragedy seems to have secured

the two great Anglo-French objectives, tying the US to Europe more completely than it probably wishes, and forcing Germany to confront the reality of Russian imperialism. It has also soothed French anger at Britain's recent agreement with the US and Australia on military security in the Indo-Pacific.

Evangelists for Atlanticism have always assumed that their gospel – the free exchange of goods, labour and ideas – will win converts further and further east. Ukraine's refusal to accept Russian dictation appears to provide fresh evidence for the dynamism of the West as a concept. Plainly it has unifying power in contrast to Russian oppression. The image of the Russian 'other' is all the more potent for having been presented in so many forms over the years: tsarist, Bolshevik, imperialist, kleptocratic, barbaric. Some new form of security arrangement against it is clearly necessary, but 'Western' may not be the right word for it. The current coalition against Russia relies on a degree of co-operation with Poland and Turkey which recalls France's 18th-century *barrière de l'est*, forged with the Ottomans, the Poles and the Swedes against Russia, but also against the Austrian Habsburgs. Absorbing all of Eastern Europe into the EU as properly valued member states must eventually create something unthinkable in 1957, when the EEC set its borders at the familiar gateways of Passau and Trieste. For this to happen, European politicians would need to cultivate more sensitivity in dealing with varying cultures and economic circumstances than British newspapers showed when discussing Italy in the late 19th century. Having boasted of Britain's role in establishing a liberal constitutional monarchy there, they tended to succumb to racial and religious stereotyping when articulating their disappointment at its failure to develop appropriately. For most Britons, the West hardly extended beyond the Rhine, leaving aside a few historic Baltic ports, German university towns and Italian city-states.

Presently, we share many of our talking points with the 1850s. Faced with unpredictable Eastern autocrats, is the West too pusillanimous or too insensitively ambitious? Are Russia's desires for a 'sphere of influence' acceptable? Should we fear its military machine or deride its underlying feebleness, stemming from its rejection of representative politics? It seems likely that Russian nationalism, insecurity, opacity and unpredictability will be a force in international politics for years to come, and that enormous care will be needed in dealing with it. This is partly a matter of the natural and nuclear resources at its disposal, but also of its complex relationship with the greater power of China. Growing Chinese influence outside Europe was not something anyone needed to worry about in the 1850s. Those who boast about the spread of Western power over the last two centuries might reflect on the astonishment of the philistine soldiers at the Summer Palace, or Cobden's free market liberals, if they were to be confronted with the world of 2022 and the survival of 'Chinese conservatism'. □

In Tulcea

As refugees began to flee Ukraine on 24 February, reporters headed for the major crossings into Poland and Hungary – Záhony, Barabás, Medyka – and for Siret in northern Romania. I had been on a fellowship programme in Moscow, which advised us to leave the country, so I headed for Isaccea, a small Romanian town on the Danube, close to the Black Sea. Few other journalists were going this way. Isaccea is a ramshackle port town, dwarfed by huge electricity pylons. The river is half a mile wide here, and if you arrive from Ukraine by ferry – the Danube marks the border between the two countries – as around a thousand people a day did at the start of the invasion, it's the substation you see first. From the shore, you can see the new arrivals, all in puffer jackets and blankets, crowding to the front of the ferry.

When they get off, they're offered sandwiches, hot dogs, hygiene products, coffee, tea and sim cards. After this some head inland. The landscape is mostly farmland and forest, and vineyards rising up under the Măcin mountains. The whitewashed Orthodox monasteries stand out against the faded brown of late winter. They are the destination for some refugees: anyone with room to spare is encouraged to offer it up. The government sends people on to Bucharest, for instance, if they want to continue their journey. But otherwise it's the luck of the draw: you might end up in a repurposed classroom or a private home.

Some are taken to the nearby city of Tulcea. Here, the Danube begins to divide. Tulcea, which has seventy thousand inhabitants, sits on a bend of the Sfântu Gheorghe (Saint George). Approaching from the west, you see the cooling towers of the alumina refinery close to the main road. A small lake is encircled with warehouses and cranes, but downtown the waterfront has a shabby, relaxed Black Sea feel. Tourist boats bob by the quayside, waiting for the season to start. The delta is a site of great ecological importance and Tulcea is the jumping-off point for most visitors. It's the sort of place you pass through. But it has its attractions: winding, cobbled streets; red-tiled rooftops and the golden domes of churches; the pale minaret of the late Ottoman Azizyie mosque. The Independence Monument, commemorating Romanian independence in 1877, stands on the site of the ancient city of Aegyssus.

Dobrogea has a complicated history, and remains home to disparate groups: some Ukrainians have been surprised to find themselves billeted in Russian-speaking households in the villages along the delta. Around twenty thousand Lipovans still live here, descendants of the Old Believers who fled Catherine the Great. Ukrainians have also settled in Dobrogea over the years. These communities have kept to themselves for the most part, fiercely preserving their distinct identity. When Romania's unofficial princess, Margareta, visited the border post recently in her position as head of the Romanian Red Cross, she was greeted in Tulcea by ethnic Ukrainians in full regalia: *vinok* flower headdresses, embroidered tunics, Cossack sheepskin hats. They carried a huge platter of bread and salt, a traditional Slavic welcome, and spoke of the plight of their 'brothers and sisters'.

I spoke to a group of refugees unpacking their things in the Ukrainian Union house on Tulcea's long Strada Corneliu Gavrilov. They told me they had come from Mykolaiv, Odessa and Izmail. There was a stark difference between those from Izmail – a city on another branch of the Danube that once belonged to Romania – and those from Mykolaiv, a port city further into Ukraine that has been besieged and bombarded since the start of the invasion. I found that those who had suffered most wanted to talk most. Some of the women from Mykolaiv had spent days or weeks in basements before making their escape. When I interviewed them, they were overwhelmed with rage. They repeatedly referred to Russian propaganda: 'Who are we being saved from? Ourselves? Who are all these fascists? Isn't it they who are fascist, these Russians?' The idea that Ukrainians were being 'protected' by Putin was particularly enraging. 'I am Russian-speaking, from Russian-speaking Odessa,' a young woman told me, 'but my state is Ukrainian. Is this so hard to understand?' I didn't say it, but this wasn't a reality shared by most of the people I had met in Moscow, who seemed wildly deluded about Ukraine's political identity.

I have been spending most days at the Isaccea port. When the ferry arrives – there are eight a day – the foot passengers get off first, followed by buses and cars with 'Children!' signs in Russian taped to the windows. A retired sailor from Odessa told me that although his generation has deep roots in Russia, and broadly supported the Donbas separatists, his children look to the West. The war has destroyed what remained of his former affiliation, what he described as 'the life that is past'. No Ukrainian person I have spoken to during five weeks at the border has expressed anything other than hatred for Russia.

Romanian-Ukrainian ties, however, grow stronger every day. Many refugees weren't sure what to expect and seem overwhelmed by the welcome. Orlivka, on the Ukrainian bank of the Danube, where they caught the ferry, was once Romanian, as was much of that part of Bessarabia. Snake Island, in the Black Sea, was the subject of a forty-year border dispute – resolved but not forgotten. And the treatment of the Moldovan and Romanian minorities in Ukraine is a recurrent theme in the Kremlin-controlled media. There are exceptions to this outpouring of goodwill – stories (as yet unverified) of Roma refugees facing hostility from volunteers at Isaccea, for instance – but it is hard not to be impressed by the scale and enthusiasm of the response.

In Orlivka, locals have been working with Romanian volunteers to get supplies to towns and hospitals deeper in Ukraine. When I visited, an old green canvas tent, painted with a white cross and flying the Ukrainian flag, was pitched at the side of the road to provide assistance to those waiting to cross the border. It was a poor sight compared to the brand new tents around Isaccea, with pub-garden space heaters running all hours. In Orlivka, people gathered round a wood-burning stove to warm their hands. The temperature at night was below zero. A young soldier, sitting on a sagging camp bed, announced that his wife had just had a baby girl and held up his phone. Cheers went up. Everyone spoke Romanian, though you could get by with Russian and Ukrainian. One volunteer told me he wasn't worried about being bombed because a major Gazprom pipeline runs just a few kilometres away. 'Putin wouldn't bomb his own pipeline.'

The volunteers I met were energetic but anxious. One woman, who had taken in three Ukrainians, said: 'We might be next.' In Tulcea, a friend showed me what he calls his 'bunker'. It's just the cellar of his house, where he stores pickled vegetables and homemade tomato sauce, but he was only half-joking. His business, like many here, relies on tourism. Who will be taking their holiday in the delta this year? People living near the border keep a bag packed, ready for a quick getaway. Some were trying to stock up on iodine tablets. Romania has been a member of Nato for eighteen years and an attack here would start a spiralling, catastrophic war. But such logic is not as reassuring as it once was. In the days before the invasion, even as the US issued dire warnings, the general feeling – from Moscow to Kyiv, Tallinn to Bucharest – was that an all-out attack on major Ukrainian cities was impossible. On the morning of 24 February, we all woke up feeling stupid.

Towards the end of March, I sat watching TV with a group of locals in Tulcea. Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary general of Nato, was making a speech. 'We cannot take peace for granted,' he said, announcing the deployment of four new battlegroups in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia. It was, he added, a 'fundamentally changed security environment'. The Romanians in the room listened warily. Many of these troops have now been deployed to the Mihail Kogălniceanu air base in Constanta, seventy miles south of Tulcea: hundreds of Belgian and French soldiers, plus equipment and vehicles. (The base is also home to two thousand American troops.) Three days after Stoltenberg's speech, four British Typhoon jets arrived for an 'air policing mission on the Romanian Black Sea coast'. The *Wall Street Journal* described this as 'a new front line for Nato in Romania'.

The number of people crossing at Isaccea each day has dwindled to a few hundred; some are even making the return journey, convinced it's safe to go back. The volunteer operation continues, but there is a sense of things winding down. No one is hopeful though. Odessa is a big prize for the Russians and the forces retreating from Kyiv are redoubling their efforts near the Black Sea.

8 April

Jen Stout

Where are those crowns?

John Foot

Holy War: The Untold Story of Catholic Italy's Crusade against the Egyptian Orthodox Church
by Ian Campbell.
Hurst, 449 pp., £30, November 2021, 978 1 78738 477 4

In May 1937, troops under Italian command moved into the remote area around the monastery of Debre Libanos in Ethiopia. They had been sent there by Rodolfo Graziani, one of the commanders of the Italian invasion of the country in October 1935 and now the viceroy of Italian East Africa. In February 1937 he had survived an assassination attempt in Addis Ababa. In retaliation, the Italians had killed at least 19,000 people over the next three days (a fifth of the city's population), a massacre that became known by the date on which it began, Yekatit 12. People were burned alive in their homes or beaten to death in the streets. Others were placed in detention camps, where conditions were appalling, and tortured or executed. But this wasn't enough for Graziani. He claimed that his attempted assassination had been planned by the Ethiopian Church and, as he recovered in hospital, began to plan the destruction of its most important centre, the monastery at Debre Libanos, founded in the 13th century. The pretext for the attack was that the two men who had tried to kill Graziani in Addis had supposedly passed through the lands surrounding the monastery as they made their escape (Debre Libanos is sixty miles or so north of the city). The plan – which survives in the archives of the Italian administration – was to kill the entire religious community there. Graziani's subordinate General Maletti was chosen to carry out the massacre, commanding a Muslim battalion made up of Eritreans, Libyans and Somalis. It is an uncomfortable truth for those on the far right who look up to Mussolini, while also promoting Islamophobia, that the Italian army enabled a form of jihad against the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Pilgrims gathered at the monastery every year to celebrate the feast day of its founder, St Tekle Haymanot, on 20 May. Maletti began to round up people as they arrived at the site. On 19 May, Graziani ordered the summary execution of 'all monks without distinction'. 'Please assure me this has been done,' he went on, 'informing me of the number of them.' Orders were also given to burn the buildings and bodies. The massacre is described by Ian Campbell in *Holy War*, in horrific detail. In order to hide the extent of the killing, most of the victims were taken from the monastery in trucks. They were shot, mainly with machine guns, and buried where they fell in mass graves. Those who refused to get into the trucks were shot on the spot. Many of the victims were elderly, some were children and all were unarmed. Campbell estimates that between 1200 and 1600 'pilgrims and clergy' were killed that day. He shows that what happened at Debre Libanos was part of a series of massacres aimed at destroying the Ethiopian Church as an institution. Villages and homes in other parts of the country were attacked; churches were burned down and sacked. Graziani reported back to Rome in bureaucratic language, repeatedly using the phrase 'all prisoners have been shot.' Italy's 'total war' in Ethiopia prefigured the way the Nazi army would act; far from being a meek follower of Hitler, Mussolini was ahead of him.

Campbell underlines the parallels between historic crusades and the massacres, but there are closer comparisons. The burnings, the pleasure in violence, the extremity of the destruction are reminiscent of the methods used by the squads who brought fascism to power in Italy itself in 1921-22. In Ethiopia, these squads were given free rein against an 'uncivilised' and 'heretical' external enemy, and they went about their task with gusto and frightening efficiency. The violence and destruction seems to have brought pleasure to some of the perpetrators – many of them took photographs showing their victims with severed heads or limbs.

Despite this savage repression, resistance to the Italians continued. In fact, the strategy of massacres backfired, pushing the Church in Ethiopia (what remained of it) into a much more active role against the Italian occupiers. This, in turn, led to a policy reversal by the Italians, who tried to incorporate the Ethiopian clergy into the occupying regime. But the damage had been done. 'Catholicism, now clearly identified with the enemy, had become as unpopular there as it had been after the religious wars of the early 17th century,' Campbell writes. 'For the Roman Church, the great crusade had been a disaster.'

In 1941, the Italians were kicked out of Ethiopia after a humiliating military defeat. Haile Selassie, who had lived in exile in Bath since leaving the country in 1936, returned and in his first speeches remembered the 'young men, the women, the priests and monks whom the Italians pitilessly massacred'. Ethiopia tried several times in the 1940s to have named Italians charged through the UN War Crimes Commission, not just for these massacres but for the use of poison gas and the bombing of hospitals during the initial invasion, as well as the 'total destruction of Abyssinian chiefs and notables', as Graziani put it in a telegram to another army officer. But their efforts were thwarted by geopolitical considerations. Britain played a leading role in this: Ethiopia wanted Pietro Badoglio, Graziani's predecessor as viceroy of East Africa and the prime minister of Italy between 1943 and 1944, to be tried, but after the war Britain considered him a valuable counterweight to Italian communism.

Campbell's account of the massacre of Debre Libanos is the centrepiece of more than twenty years of work. He has travelled to many of the massacre and burial sites over a period of decades, talked to the last surviving witnesses and examined the Italian archives. He argues that the systematic destruction of the Ethiopian Church was part of a holy war launched by the Catholic Church in alliance with the fascists. At times, this interpretation is pushed too far. The Church's support of fascism – especially after the Lateran Pacts of 1929, which ended the historic split between the Catholic Church and the the Italian state – is sometimes seen as amounting to complete backing for Italy's actions in Ethiopia. Certainly, some Catholics and clergy were in favour of the slaughter as part of a so-called 'civilising mission'. But this wasn't true of the whole Church; the pope, Pius XI, seems to have been reluctant to lend his support.

Graziani still has a reputation in Italy, and even abroad, as a heroic soldier, seen separately from the regime he served so faithfully. He is not often remembered as a war criminal. There is even a mausoleum and memorial park in his native village of Affile, south of Rome, opened only ten years ago and built with the help of public funds. Somehow, the idea of Italy as a nation of Captain Corellis, mandolin-carrying, reluctant invaders, still survives.

One of the most fascinating episodes in the book concerns the looting of artefacts and relics from Ethiopia (the Italians also purloined cash for their own bank accounts). When Graziani returned to Italy in 1938 he took 79 crates of stolen material with him. Campbell describes some photographs of an exhibition at the Museo Coloniale in Rome in 1939 in which a number of what look like Ethiopian crowns can be seen in a glass case. They were almost certainly pinched from Debre Libanos, which, as one of the holiest places in the Ethiopian Church, housed a number of treasures. But it is another photograph that really raises questions. This one depicts two famous Italian partisans next to what appear to be the same crowns, still with their museum labels attached.

As Mussolini and Graziani fled north in the wake of the liberation of Italy in 1945, they took as much money and as many treasures with them as they could carry. When Mussolini was captured by Italian partisans disguised as German soldiers in April 1945, near a place called Dongo on Lake Como, he had money and other possessions with him, which became known as the Gold of Dongo. Mussolini was shot the next day, probably by the communist partisan Walter Audisio, who is one of the men standing in front of the crowns. But what happened to the Gold of Dongo? Nobody knows. Where are those crowns now?

In defeat Graziani was much smarter than Mussolini. He made sure he surrendered to the Allies, rather than being captured by the partisans. This meant he survived, and despite being sentenced to nineteen years for collaborating with the Nazis he only served a few months in prison (there was no equivalent of the Nuremberg trials for Italian fascists). After his release he became an active member of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano, and wrote a bestselling memoir in which he claimed he had merely been 'defending the fatherland'. For many, he remained a war hero, his image encapsulated in the much reproduced photo of him in uniform, hair swept back, jaw jutting, sleeves rolled up. At his funeral in 1955 there was an open show of fascism on the streets of Rome for the first time in years, with mourners raising their arms in the fascist salute. Nobody mentioned Debre Libanos. □

On Snow

Anne Carson

One cold dark night there was a story about a knocking at the outer gate. Despite cries of Yes! Yes! Coming! someone still knocked and the snow that had piled on the gate was blown halfway up the door itself, with no meaning as to the blind knocking or the thick snow or why it did not stop. I knew I should be writing a straightforward story, or even a poem, but I didn't. I should get back to words, I thought, plain words.

I had been looking at the New Testament in an 1801 edition of Johannes Leusden's side-by-side (Greek and Latin) version, which I'd found on my bookshelf in a fragile state that did not allow the pages to be turned quickly. Little flecks broke off. I opened it at random to 1 Corinthians 10, a letter of Paul's about idolatry. The letter spoke of people who wandered in the wilderness eating 'pneumatic' bread and drinking from a 'pneumatic' rock – or so I was translating it in my head, the word for 'spiritual' being *pneumatikos* in Greek, from *pneuma*, 'breath'. Can either bread or rock be made of breath? Anyway who can drink from a rock? A sort of dreariness, like a heavy smell of coats, comes down on the word 'spiritual' and makes religion impossible for me. The page is turned. Flecks fall.

Before turning the page though, I noticed that Paul's text, in the verse following the pneumatic rock, was at pains to identify the rock with Christ (that is, God) and to explain that the rock was 'following' these people through the desert so they could drink from it. How very awkward, I thought. I wondered why God couldn't come up with a better water arrangement for these people and why Paul couldn't find a more graceful image of God's care. Presumably Paul wants people to seek and cherish God's care? But to visualise the longed-for Other bumping along behind your desert caravan in the form of a rock might just make you morose or confused.

Confused and morose myself, not least of all because of that continued knocking at the gate, and in need of a fresh idea, I opened the New Testament again and found Psalm 119:81-3. This seemed to be another text about people in the wilderness:

> My soul fainteth for thy salvation: but I hope in thy word.
> Mine eyes fail for thy word saying, When wilt thou comfort me?
> For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes.

And all at once I recognised it as a passage I had worked on before, at a time when snow was not my concern – I'd been invited to give a lecture on (as I recall) 'the idea of the university', a topic about which I knew little, and so began to compose a lecture more concerned with the word 'idea' than the concept of the 'university'. I'm not clear on whether I ever delivered this lecture: I can't find it among my papers. Three days before the lecture date my mother died. I fell to my knees in the kitchen. Astoundedness was like a silvery-white fog that seeped up and over all those days. I had visited her only a week before, the long train, then bus, then taxi trip. She seemed OK. Forbidden by her doctor from her nightly glass of Armagnac she'd taken to dabbing it behind her ears. The word 'idea' comes from ancient Greek 'to see'. Was there a way to get out of giving that lecture, I wondered.

Psalm 119:83 is an outcry: 'For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes' in the King James version. In more modern versions, 'I am like a wineskin shrivelled by smoke'; or 'Though I am shrivelled like a leather flask in the smoke'; or 'I am useless as a discarded wineskin.' The notion seems to be that without God the psalmist or his life becomes dry, sooty, wrinkled and worn, dark and dismal, parched, disfigured, miserable, bereft of spiritual moisture. There is a strand of tradition that reads 'hoar frost' in place of 'smoke' but no one knows what to do with that. The same week my mother died my boyfriend left. (Beware the conversation that begins: 'Do you think people should be completely honest with one another?') We'd been together a number of years but he was young and closeness to death made him queasy. Do I blame him? I admit I was not a very erotic person at the time. And well, my quotient of astoundedness was full. He drove me to the funeral and more or less kept going. I more or less waved goodbye.

There was no question I had to get out of giving that lecture.

The odd thing is, I can't remember if I did or did not (get out of the lecture). The chronology is a blur. I do remember sitting in an armchair, at the very brink of an armchair, hands fisted in my lap, facing the professor of religious studies who had commissioned the lecture. I was pleading for a cancellation or deferral. He sat tightly contained on the far side of his big desk. He was pale. Alarmed. He may have been a priest. Tears poured down my face. I told him of my mother's outlandish little red car coat. He was not a chaotic person. A large feeling of cul-de-sac filled the room. Beyond that I can recover only a few mental screenshots of me speaking about bottles and smoke to a dusty lecture hall of people with crossed legs, but these may be shards of some anxiety dream, not a credible memory.

Historically the first instance of the noun 'idea' in ancient Greek is in an epinician ode of Pindar (Olympian 10:103) praising an Olympic victor 'beautiful with respect to his *idea*', that is, in his appearance. Plato's use of the word to designate things like 'the form of the good' is familiar. Slightly stranger perhaps, Demokritos' choice of *atomoi ideai* (literally 'uncut shapes') to mean the indivisible elements of his atomic theory. Best of all is Matthew's phrasing in the final chapter of his Gospel (28:3) to describe the look of the angel who came down from heaven, rolled back the door of Christ's tomb and sat on it:

> ἦν δὲ ἡ ἰδέα αὐτοῦ ὡς ἀστραπή
> (The idea of him was like lightning.)

'And his garment shone white as snow,' continues Matthew's Gospel, reminding me to go to the door and see who was knocking – has it stopped? – but there is a sense of suspension in the night air, as of a person not quite turning away to go back on their own footprints through the deepening snow. Snow can deepen fast on nights like this. The reason I went to visit my mother, the week before her death, was a dream I had. A young man in red epaulets was ministering to a room of restless guests who lay fully clothed in bathtubs. Waking suddenly (3 a.m.) I knew the young man in red epaulets as the night clerk in the hotel where I stayed when I visited her. Strange choice for a psychopomp, I thought, as hours later the train glided west in a weak tarnish of dawn. There was ground fog everywhere, then afternoon sunlight (the bus) so deep you could enter it as a lake. Finally a taxi gliding past people in their kitchens.

The weekend was spent watching her sleep, oxygen shunting on and off. When awake she glared wildly, or ate small dabs of ice cream or, once, spent a few minutes studying a photograph I'd brought her (of myself at a posh artist's retreat on Lake Como) then said, 'Why did you wear your glasses?' I was not with her when she died. I assume the young man in red epaulets showed up and that he let her wear her car coat. She loved that red car coat.

Last thing: one Sunday evening about a year before all this we were on the telephone, my mother and I; it was just after we sold the house and she'd moved to the facility, where she was allowed a small sensible room and a few possessions. As we talked I was watching snow drift down the dusk outside, counting it, one hundred and five, one hundred and six, one hundred and seven, when out of a pause she said: 'It's funny to have no home' – funny being a funny word for what she meant. I say this now to remind myself how words can squirt sideways, mute and mad; you think they are tools, or toys, or tame, and all at once they burn all your clothes off and you're standing there singed and ridiculous in the glare of the lightning. I hung up the phone. I stared at the snow for some time. I expect she did too. □

Critics in the Sky

Emily Witt

Pure Colour
by Sheila Heti.
Harvill Secker, 216 pp., £16.99, February, 978 1 78730 280 8

Sheila Heti writes novels about the burden of freedom. Her characters navigate their lives as if the world were new and traditions obsolete; they can't trust history, but they don't trust intuition either. In *How Should a Person Be?* (2010), the main character, also called Sheila, tries to answer the question posed by the title through minute observation of her closest friends. In *The Chairs Are Where the People Go* (2011), a nonfiction book co-written with Misha Glouberman, Heti documents Glouberman's beliefs and aphorisms as a series of life lessons. 'I thought the world should have a book about everything he knows,' she writes in her foreword. (Chapter headings include 'People's Protective Bubbles Are Okay' and 'Don't Pretend There Is No Leader'.) In her novel *Motherhood* (2018), the narrator weighs up the pros and cons of having children with recourse to the *I Ching* and interviews with friends who are mothers.

The ceaseless metaphysical self-inquiry of Heti's books is a maddening, but accurate, depiction of a world in which one cannot boil an egg or clean a toilet or get married without wondering whether there might be a more optimal way of doing it explained in a video on the internet. Heti writes for a generation that seeks guidance from fortune-tellers, self-help books, behavioural science, evolutionary biology, make-up tutorials and lists of the food famous people consume in a given day. Despite their freedom, her characters bear little resemblance to the 20th-century existentialists who seem to be their intellectual predecessors. They are not the daughters of Simone de Beauvoir, shaping their lives through determined acts of will. Instead, they grapple with an unstable sense of self, their certainty easily swayed by whoever is nearby. They want to escape the dysfunction and hierarchy of the patriarchal family but fear that rejecting inherited norms will leave them with no family at all. They wonder if art can give purpose to solitude, if it's more dependable than fickle human ties.

Pure Colour is unusual among Heti's books in taking on two life experiences in which agency is useless: unrequited love and the death of a parent. The challenge for the main character, Mira, is not deciding what to do but accepting that nothing can be done. *Pure Colour*, like *Motherhood* before it, is also a book about getting older. What had seemed a lark, a great project of hanging out with friends and trying new things, loses its significance in time. Mira is coming to terms with how small life ends up being.

The novel begins with the outline of a cosmology, its own Book of Genesis. God has created the heavens and the Earth, and then stepped back to contemplate his creation. 'This is the moment we are living in – the moment of God standing back,' Heti writes. She calls this 'the first draft of existence' and suspects it might be nearing its end. A looming apocalypse, then, which situates us in the present, the era in which 'the world was failing at its one task – of remaining a world.' The seasons had become 'postmodern', she writes in a passage on climate change – something that has become an almost perfunctory gesture in the contemporary novel: 'The ice cubes were melting. The species were dying. The last of the fossil fuels were being burned up. A person collapsing in the street might be collapsing from any one of a hundred things. New things to die of were being added each day.'

As God prepares to edit the first draft of existence, he splits himself into an alternative holy trinity of 'three critics in the sky: a large bird who critiques from above, a large fish who critiques from the middle, and a large bear who critiques while cradling creation in his arms'. Each human, in turn, tends towards one of these archetypes. A fish concerns herself with the condition of the many instead of the condition of the individual. A bear 'is like a child holding on to their very best doll' – they keep a few people close. A bird considers the world an abstraction and is 'interested in beauty, order, harmony and meaning'. It's the kind of taxonomy one might find in an internet dating profile alongside attachment styles, love languages, Enneagram numbers and astrological signs. Mira is a bird, 'torn between her love for the mysterious Annie, who seems to Mira a distant fish, and her love for her father, who appears as a warm bear'.

A couple of pages later we are back in the familiar setting of a Heti novel: a Toronto-like city where young people hang out with their friends and balance their artistic ambitions with ordinary jobs. Mira has moved out of her childhood home and works at a shop that sells Tiffany lamps. She begins a course of study at an international satellite of the elite 'American Academy of American Critics' (I laughed). 'In the large room, students stood on desks, declaiming,' Heti writes. 'They knew they had to develop a style of writing and thinking that could survive down the ages, and at the same time penetrate their own generation so incisively.' The joke's on them – smartphones are about to arrive, and with them a new medium through which 'people who had far more charisma than they did would let flow an endless stream of images and words'. Another side effect of ageing is nostalgia. Heti is looking back on Mira's young adulthood, when social circles were smaller and 'it was enough to know just four or five people and to have slept with two or three of them,' when she didn't have hundreds of online 'friends' further muddling the question of how a person should be.

It is in this small world of students gathering to eat vegan peanut stew that Mira meets Annie. Of Annie, we learn only that she grew up in an orphanage in a faraway American city (the pleasure of Heti's jokes is that they are scattered at random) and that she seems to be an older writer granted microcelebrity status by the students of the American Academy of American Critics. The lack of human detail makes Annie more of a concept than a person, but the blank quality of Heti's prose is compelling in the same way that a prairie or a snowbank is compelling. Its lack of sharp edges comes with a sense of reassurance, that a child would be safe here, and that she is never going to say anything that will hurt you. Having been raised with the suffocating love of her bear dad, Mira is drawn to the outward-facing energy of Annie, a fish (I can't say whether Heti's use of categories that have their own associations on Grindr and *RuPaul's Drag Race* is intentional or not, but the gay-slang connotations of 'bear' and the out-of-style 'fishy' don't seem to apply here).

Mira falls in love with Annie, a love out of proportion. 'With a few people in one's life, too much happens emotionally – more than even makes sense to happen, given how little has actually occurred.' Their relationship doesn't progress. Mira is starting to realise that the world is going to disappoint her: the love, work and money she had expected will not arrive. She suffers from what Lauren Berlant called 'cruel optimism' – a condition where 'something you desire is actually an obstacle to your own flourishing.' 'Nothing would be as we hoped it would be,' Heti writes, 'here in the first draft of existence.' The sun still rises, but very little else can be counted on.

In *Motherhood*, Heti wrote of the sense of abandonment her narrator felt when her friends had children. The desertion of their shared social project leaves her surprised. Books, on the other hand, never let someone down. 'The lonely fill up their lives with books. I don't live in nature. I don't live in culture. I don't live in my relationships. I live in books.' In *Pure Colour*, which questions the idea of the 'chosen family' as an adequate replacement for the biological one, the disillusionment with friendship seems even more pronounced. As Mira gets older, the group of friends who ate peanut stew together grows apart, and she questions the worth of what they shared. 'All that time, all that stupid time, I should have been with my father.'

She thinks this after her father has died. He is as abstract an entity as Annie. Like a Disney heroine, Mira doesn't seem to have a mother or siblings. She was everything to her father, 'her lonely father, who had no woman besides Mira'. In life, Mira tried to put distance between them. After his death, she allows herself the depth of intimacy she couldn't handle when he was alive, including sexual ideation. In order to converse with her father directly, Heti tells us, Mira uploads herself to a leaf on a tree and enters the cosmic plane of the afterlife. I don't think we need to understand exactly what this means, except that while she remains in the leaf Mira is liberated from ordinary constraints of space and time, and can speak to her father directly. (Perhaps

it is worth noting that 'leaf' rhymes with 'grief'.)

In the leaf, Mira and her dead father discuss God and consciousness. Their theological arguments about faith versus reason are not given a particular religious context, and their ahistoricism has a naive quality, like the revelations of a person on acid. Mira and her father contemplate the second draft of the world, when it will be given over to plants, or birds, or whatever replaces humans. 'We are the tragic ones who think it's a tragedy that the human animal will be gone,' Mira says, echoing Dr Malcolm in *Jurassic Park*. 'But that doesn't mean it's a tragedy on a worldwide scale.' The second draft of creation will not be mired in our petty concerns: 'You are sad because art, which is love, will be gone, but you only need art because you are stuck in the first draft,' Mira's father tells her. 'You are sad because your father had to die, but in the next draft you won't be sad, because there won't be fathers.' Sometimes Annie comes to sit under the tree with her new girlfriend. Mira watches from the leaf, heartbroken and envious: 'Mira was going to be the one who didn't get what she wanted, while this woman would.'

As the novel progressed, I began to wonder whether the pandemic has made us revanchist. 'What you want are fixers, but what is needed is to follow the traditions with faith,' Mira's father tells her, as they converse in the leaf. 'Part of human life is following the traditions of family. That's part of the real plot of it. If you follow the traditions, you don't need fixers, who will kill you eventually.' Fixers aren't quite defined – they are 'coming from the world of psychology, from those who know nothing about the traditions and don't care, and would smash them if they could, and would institute a whole series of reforms'. Heti doesn't mention Covid-19 explicitly, but the pandemic had a way of throwing us back into dependence on our nearest relations. Whatever passed for social life in 2019 turned out to be a mirage, just a lot of noise, and its sudden disappearance left me with the same feeling that Mira seems to be describing in *Pure Colour*: a sense of disappointment in the primacy of biological ties – that the people who love you the most are the ones who sort of have to, that love given freely is often unreliable – and fear about what happens to a childless person when their parents die. Mira thinks about the entities that will witness the second draft of creation. 'How strange and sad our world will seem to them then – if they even find out about it – that we once had to create people with our own bodies, in order for there to be, among the billions of people already living, someone who could love us, and someone we could love in turn.' This isn't a repudiation of anything in *Motherhood*, which concludes with the narrator accepting that she won't have children, or even a compelling argument for having children. It's just an expression of disappointment.

But then Mira remembers that Annie is an orphan, and that being an orphan has freed her to believe in the possibility of communal life that Mira has lost faith in. It is Annie who helps Mira find her way out of the leaf in a jewel of a scene where the two meet to drink tea and eat chocolate. 'Even if they weren't as close as two people possibly could be, still they were sitting at the very same table, and that was pretty good. It didn't have to be as close as possible for it to be something good.' But when Mira opens her heart to Annie, going so far as to show up at her house dressed in a bedraggled leaf costume as proof of her love, Annie has nothing much to give her in return, just the usual coldness. Now she's older, Mira doesn't take it so personally. There is comfort, it turns out, in resignation, in not trying to make a second draft of one's life, of believing in a god who has a plan instead of prevaricating over every choice. Life didn't turn out quite the way Mira wanted, but she resigns herself to the fact that just as the world doesn't progress to something better, life doesn't necessarily either. It is just itself:

> It was a delusion to think she had created the world and everything in it; that she had made up its rules and was always to blame. Where had that idea come from? Or did everyone feel that way, a little bit, for it was actually God who was feeling it – the God who had *in fact* created the world, while we picked up on his shame for having made it, in some ways, poorly, and mistook his feeling of responsibility for our own.

□

In Hereford

Seven centuries ago, an artist made a perforation with a compass on a large piece of parchment. The pinprick formed the centre of his universe. Around it he drew the circular shape of a city, with crenellated towers – Jerusalem. Radiating outwards from this point, the artist and perhaps six others portrayed the world as they knew it. It was a circular world, hemmed by a great ocean. They drew distant and fabulous places – Troy, the Red Sea, the Cretan Labyrinth – as well as some less fabulous ones, such as 'Carlua' (Carlisle) and 'H'ford' (Hereford). The parchment is now known as the Mappa Mundi and it can still be seen in 'H'ford', where it was probably made around 1300. It is worth the visit just to see the tiny pinprick at the map's centre, an in principio moment visible centuries later.

'Mappa Mundi' can be translated as 'map (or cloth) of the world'. Cloth might be more appropriate because the Mappa isn't a 'map' in the way we would now understand it. It wasn't made to show you the way to anywhere, except perhaps to heaven. It describes both space and time, biblical history, classical mythology, spiritual truth. Maps often tell us more about their makers than they do about the world. Modern European maps, for example, put Europe at the top and centre. Medieval European maps put our north to the left, east to the top and south to the right, with Jerusalem at the centre. In the bottom left-hand corner of the Mappa Mundi, at the world's edge, there are some blob-like islands – Anglia, Scotia, Hibernia – but not much is happening there. A little further away, however, towards modern-day Norway, we see a figure, labelled 'Gansmir', in a pointed hat wearing a pair of skis. An inscription reads 'super egea currit' ('he runs along *egeas*'), which shows an unfamiliarity with skis or Latin or both. It's possible that it is meant to read 'super aquas current' ('they will run upon the waters').

Not far from Gansmir, in the region roughly approximate to western Russia, we can see a large bear; it has an almost embarrassed expression. A little further on, east of Hungary, we find an improbable ostrich. The inscription reads: 'Ostrich: head of a goose, body of a crane, feet of a calf; eats iron.' Pliny the Elder said the bird 'has a remarkable ability to digest anything it swallows'. This Europe is not one we would recognise. It is principally defined by its water systems; our modern borders are nowhere to be seen. A mermaid swims in the Mediterranean.

A detail of the Mappa Mundi

Some of the creatures have recognisable names, but would be hard to identify in a line-up. The crocodile looks more like a cow wearing a lizard mask. It is being ridden by a man wielding an axe. Hugh of St Victor claimed that the inhabitants of 'Meroe' in the Nile domesticated 'cocodrillios' and rode them across the river. Other creatures are entirely unmoored from reality, like the manticore, which supposedly has a 'triple set of teeth, the face of a human, yellow eyes . . . a lion's body, a scorpion's tail, a hissing voice', but is depicted on the map with a sleek, leonine body and the face of a surprised-looking man, with a short beard, wearing a crown. The fabled sets of teeth aren't visible. In the upper reaches you can find the bonnacon – a benign beast with the paws of a leopard and the body of a bull, its horns curving inwards. The bonnacon is shown expelling faeces, a feat which, the inscription notes, it commonly performs in self-defence.

The map's humanoid creatures are some of its most compelling. There are dog-headed men (seemingly engaged in conversation) as well as a 'monocule' or Sciapod: a man with only one foot, extended into the air. He cuts a lonely figure, as does the Blemmye, a creature with no head but a 'face' in the middle of its body. In a region between Armenia and China (near neighbours in this rendering) we can see a stork person, with a human body, stork's feet and a beak on its human face.

As well as places and creatures, the map also shows events: the expulsion from the Garden of Eden; the quest for the Golden Fleece; Noah's Ark filled with humans and beasts. And beyond the circular edge of the world, events both within and outside time occur: the Last Judgment at the top and, in the right-hand corner, a huntsman on horseback, departing the scene. He is followed by a forester and a dog. The forester addresses him, 'passe avant' ('continue on'), but the huntsman looks back wistfully at the universe above him. Some scholars think this scene refers to a specific historical incident involving Bishop Thomas of Cantilupe, who was a keen huntsman, but I prefer to see the rider as allegorical, a figure who searches for salvation in the heavenly realm and is exhorted to leave the sinful world behind.

The passage of the centuries has etched new biases and alliances on the parchment. The town of 'H'ford' is nearly rubbed away, presumably by generations of visitors who jabbed at the map to mark their place in the world (a familiar impulse). The area of Paris and France, meanwhile, has been scored by a knife. Nineteenth-century scholars, among them the authors of *Medieval Geography* (1873), believed this 'might have been perpetrated by some over-patriotic Briton at a time when feeling ran high against France'. This impulse might be familiar to some, too, but the diagnosis of 'feeling . . . against France' reflected their own mentality. The last time I visited the map at Hereford Cathedral, I passed a sign outside a pub that read: 'Brexit Beer Deal: Tell the Bar Staff What You Want and Get Something Completely Different.' Hereford voted overwhelmingly for Leave.

Maps and their ghosts remind us that our sense of the world, and our place within it, are contingent. The Mappa Mundi is the largest surviving medieval map. An even greater mappa mundi, the Ebstorf Map, was destroyed in the Allied bombing of Hanover on the night of 9 October 1943. It survives only in black and white photographs and some disappointing colour facsimiles.

Mary Wellesley

The Dining-Room Table

Lucie Elven

The Fool and Other Moral Tales
by Anne Serre, translated by Mark Hutchinson.
Les Fugitives, 228 pp., £10.99, June 2021, 978 1 83801 415 5

The Beginners
by Anne Serre, translated by Mark Hutchinson.
New Directions, 128 pp., $14.95, July 2021, 978 0 8112 3031 5

Anne Serre was ten when her mother died in 1971. She claims to have no memory of the preceding years. 'My father sank into a depression,' she told the *White Review* in 2020, 'and my sisters and I . . . tried with all our might – like all children in this type of situation, I think – to protect him, resuscitate him.' He took a job as the deputy headmaster of a secondary school in Orléans, and the family moved into a staff apartment. When she had nothing to do at the weekends, Serre roamed the empty school and wrote a book – in part, she says, to seduce her philosophy teacher.

Her first book, *The Governesses*, published in France in 1992, began as a short story.* Even now it comes to little more than a hundred pages. Three governesses, 'mistresses of games and pleasures', are employed to entertain the four young sons of the Austeur family. Although they have individual names (Eléonore, Laura and Inès), the governesses work as one. When they are at a loose end they like to 'stroll through the garden together' discussing their favourite topic of conversation (men). They talk to outsiders (men) at the gate 'in turn, though it's practically the same voice' and hope that one will venture into 'the trap of their vast, lunar privacy'. If he does, they 'devour' him sexually and leave him for dead. They are unwittingly destructive: 'They'd love to find him again, restore him to his former state, dip back into him and draw out that sense of bliss without which they feel bereft.' The governesses keep 'vowing' to redress their unbalanced natures, 'to learn Latin or Hebrew' for instance, or to be more like Madame Austeur, who always dresses in grey.

But the governesses' pursuit of excitement is what animates the household. Their 'gargantuan appetite' brings passion to a family where the parents 'prefer to live apart, so long as they are together'. In return, Monsieur Austeur 'reins them in so that everything is once more orderly, composed'. All the characters play their part in the family romance and each depends on the others: when the governesses first arrive and find themselves lost in the grounds, all they need to do is 'climb a tree and look for the smoke from Monsieur Austeur's cigar'. Together, they achieve an unconventional harmony – Monsieur and Madame Austeur, the little boys and the little maids, the governesses – and the elderly gentleman who watches them across the garden through his telescope and records his observations.

Château Austeur is the book's entire world, as well as the stage for the governesses' exploits, and regularly changes its aspect, one minute sensible, the next out of all proportion; straightforward then cartoonish. When Madame Austeur is put out that her husband has given over the upstairs salons to the governesses' acrobatics, she responds by roaming 'through the gardens in her long grey gown, pulling out flowers by their roots. That evening at dinner, however, after Monsieur Austeur had placated her with a discreet caress between the hallway and the dining room, she was all smiles.' This zigzag pattern of events, which Italo Calvino identified as a feature of folktales, creates 'incessant motion' within a restricted space. Play is more real here than reality: three pages are dedicated to the governesses' game of pretending to leave 'just to stir up the household', while 'relationships that endure' are said to have 'a beginning, a climax and the inevitable downfall'. Everything is in a state of terminal undoing.

So it is with the governesses. At the book's midpoint, after an evening of exhibitionism directed at the voyeur with the telescope, in which 'they part their buttocks for the figure observing them', Laura dreams of opening a 'large, royal blue door . . . onto an unfamiliar stretch of countryside'. Nine months after this fertile dream, she gives birth, and the 'centre of the house' shifts. 'Perhaps that was why she'd had this child: in order to change the roles in the household?' Then, 'there came a day when, much to everyone's surprise, the elderly gentleman withdrew, for he was tired of watching the governesses.' He directs his telescope instead at a fern leaf and a hare. Without his spectatorship, the governesses languish ('We're fading,' they announce, in a rare piece of direct speech). 'The gardens shrank, the little boys toppled over, the house lost its walls, Monsieur Austeur his cigar, Madame Austeur her grey dress, the maids the platters they had been carrying.' There is no moral in the ending – Serre has jettisoned that element from the folktale genre. Like Leonora Carrington, she does not mimic life, but has an interest in stories as machines with their own life on the page. But stories like Carrington's 'The Debutante' fantasise about freedom (the freedom of a hyena to give a ball, of a girl to read her book in peace) while Serre's governesses are fated to play out their role. 'Who can be said to have free will?' she writes elsewhere.

The Governesses was called 'promising' by *Le Monde* but Serre's subsequent work received a hushed reception in France. Though she has said they were only ever intended as exercises, or musical scales, her early stories, collected in *Un voyage en ballon* in 1993, are helpful guides to her work, which is often described as 'fabulist': not because they contain animal allegories but because of Serre's stylistic habits. The narrator is usually obtrusive: Serre has described her narrators as being 'armed' and 'valiant', like medieval knights. They switch between the imperious passé simple and idiomatic phrases like 'ma foi' (my word). Sometimes she summons up a listener to comment on the narration: 'Let's not debate this forever,' one teases, after quibbling about a word choice. Characters are referred to by their initials and sometimes disappear without explanation. As in fables, emotional states are revealed through behaviour: 'I whistled as I left my mother. My step was light, I leapt into the mountains.' Describing the long journey taken by three sisters to their father's funeral, the narrator remarks that 'there is the possibility of a picnic all the same because, ultimately, one can be going to a funeral and feel peckish. Dignified, they take out a ham, spread a checked tablecloth . . . and, still dignified – is one allowed to sing before a funeral? No – they wipe their knives melancholically on their skirts.' Landscapes are half-metaphorical.

But, even in these early stories, there is more going on than the word 'fable' would suggest. One story begins with an ending ('On the last day of their love, Clara and Pierre Glendinning went for a walk in the countryside') and one ends with a beginning ('I think I will be born anew in my mother's house'). Another is composed entirely of questions, arranged in stanzas and apparently directed at someone who has gone away leaving few instructions: 'Does the name Patricia Nothingdale mean anything to you?/Do you know that this person presented herself to me as having rights over you?/Which rights?' In other books – *Eva Lone* (1993), *La Petite Épée du coeur* (1995), *Film*, *Au secours* (both 1998) and *Le Cheval blanc d'Uffington* (2002) – Serre can be analytical, metatextual, abstract. *Au secours* is contrived as an offer of rescue to the painter Paula Rego. 'How could I be your friend if I didn't miss you?' When she discovers a hole in the bottom of her boat, the narrator's offer becomes a plea to be rescued by Rego – as well as a meditation on a life dedicated to invention. A number of Serre's protagonists are called 'Anne' or 'Anna', and 'mon ami Mark', who shares the name of her friend and translator Mark Hutchinson, sometimes makes an appearance. Islands recur, so does fate, suicide, sequences of women, hot air balloons, knives with ivory handles, absent interlocutors, driving alone and the comparison of characters with literary and artistic figures: Carson McCullers, Elizabeth Taylor, Romy Schneider, Maigret.

Le Cheval blanc d'Uffington deals with an author who has secluded herself on an island to avoid strong sensation, choosing to write about the world instead of experiencing it. 'For a year, I had incessantly questioned myself as to how to preserve my own joy without it hurting me and it was extremely difficult.' While music 'sucks her into a well', writing allows Anne not to forget her old life completely. When she visits the mainland in an attempt to rejoin the world, she realises the risk she had incurred by 'turning streets on which she's walked into written streets', remembering that even at the time it had seemed like 'a miracle to find herself intact and in good health the morning after'. Guided by instinct, she sets off on a tour of churches. At one, she meets her dead mother, at the next, her friend John. Her observations are childlike and, soon enough, she develops an affinity for a little girl. 'I was so scared that she would take me over to the side of childhood,' Anne says, 'that I became more brusque. I spoke to her as though to a man; she spoke to me as though to a man; we were two men. I was amazed at her understanding of my desires.' This is not enough to make Anne want to become a mother, however, or to make the girl the subject of her story. Instead, the plot centres on a missing man, someone she used to know. But perhaps she is just looking for a form: 'When I tell a story and there I am carried off as if on a speeding sailboat, a runaway horse charging, I keep in mind that I have the unfortunate habit of saying *rosebud* instead of *table*.' Itself composed of five or six lines (spine, flank, three legs, a square, beaky face) cleaved in chalk, the white horse makes an appearance when, having lost the group on a walk in the Auvergne, Anne finds it spread out in front of her and is reminded of a 'love story that had not happened':

> At almost every turn, I stumbled against him so often on my path that, meeting him incessantly and incessantly avoiding him, I ended

* It was translated into English by Mark Hutchinson in 2018.

> up drawing a kind of hollow shape. And the body of my love was so gigantic that it made me laugh. It was like Gulliver's body, around which a whole little armed, frightened and fascinated people is deployed, or like the Uffington White Horse, drawn by the Celts into the mountain itself, that covers such a distance that you can't see it from the earth, only from the sky. To go from one church to the next . . . was to go from the angle of his shoulder to his elbow, then from his elbow to his hand, and so on, so that in a certain way the body of my love covered the earth.

Serre is posing a question about what is essential to a story and to a life, and what remains if one element (geography, for example) is subtracted, then another. The 'hollow shape' that is carved out is unfulfilled desire.

In 2003, Serre wrote a defence of smoking in *Libération*, in which she described the way cigarettes give shape to life in mental institutions and prisons, offering the possibility of small humanising gestures. (When asked about this later, Serre said that she didn't know what had come over her, dabbling in reality in that way.) In the two short pieces she wrote soon afterwards, *Le Narrateur* (2004) and *Le Mat* (2005), English translations of which are included in *The Fool and Other Moral Tales*, she goes back to thinking about fiction. Both of them deal with stock characters. The figure of the fool, like his Tarot counterpart, represents a kind of chaos. Serre relates, in the first person, his appearances in her life, and claims that 'the childlike ruses I adopted' to escape his clutches constituted a practice that, over time, meant 'I became a writer.' Once you have evaded the fool, 'you can move freely on the mountain plateau of independent-mindedness, without being afraid you will meet some terrifying ghost from the past.'

In *Le Narrateur*, the narrator is treated as just another stock character. He avoids the judgment of others by watching from a distance rather than participating ('he has never voted'). Serre visits on him the indignity of becoming a character among many: 'He tries to walk at the same pace, laugh at the same things, take an interest in the same discoveries,' but 'he can sense their mistrust.' The others are troubled by his 'enigmatic presence' and speculate about his true nature: 'A shady character? A gangster? An ex-con?' When the narrator does take part, for example, in an orgy, he tells his lovers whom they remind him of, as though his role is to make the connections between one episode and the next. Thrown among other people, he is revealed to be a self-satisfied fraudster, 'a perfect little saint, insufferable, always merry, always friendly, always polite', much like 'those serial killers who . . . to everyone's surprise, turn out to be good husbands, good fathers, good friends – it was a question of protecting behind indestructible walls the rites being acted out in his secret room.' (Hutchinson's translations retain as far as possible the rhythms of Serre's prose, but I wonder if we will soon see a novella called *The Translator*. She likes an intermediary.)

After her next book, *Un chapeau léopard* (2008), Serre began to receive more acclaim in France, though the only change, as far as I can see, is that she began to talk more openly about her work. *The Beginners* (*Les Débutants*, 2011) opens like a news report: 'In August 2002, Anna Lore, age 43, fell madly in love with Thomas, age 56.' Their past lives seem to fall away, including Anna's marriage to Guillaume ('she had a childlike trust in him, he looked on her as a marvel'). The 'space around Anna' changes after Thomas texts her: 'This went on for two hours, at the end of which she sent a cautious, "I'd rather we let a little time pass first." Feeling relieved, she was making her way back up the rue de Seine when he replied: "Another ten years?" Six days later, she phoned him.'

Anna becomes useless with love, like a romantic heroine: 'Could anyone imagine Phèdre with a job?' But the similarities stop there. After much dithering as to whether she should leave Guillaume, he leaves her, his voice becoming 'that of a manager, a boss, a high court judge'. Worst of all, 'for the first time, he thought like an ordinary man and ascribed ordinary behaviour to her.' The separation is inconceivable to Anna, but as she considers the relationship (Serre uses repetition to show her stitching and unstitching the past), she begins to see that it was only ever two monologues. And yet, she insists, 'in twenty years they'd never had a single misunderstanding.'

Putting down one of Serre's books is like coming up for air. The theorist André Belleau argues that, unlike novels, short stories collapse time in the service of a singular event; Serre's stories of all lengths do this. (She's noted that her longer books are always roughly the same 120 pages.) Her first sentences are 'packed tight, like an egg in its shell', middles are significant (when Guillaume leaves Anna, she remarks that 'for this to have happened at the middle of the book, it could only have occurred at the very centre of her being'), and endings mean breakdowns.

One of Serre's most tightly packed lines opens 'The Wishing Table': 'I was seven the first time I saw my father dressed as a girl.' The story begins as an account of a household where incest is central to family life: if the orgiastic frenzy is paused, when the three daughters go on holiday with their grandparents, for example, 'we would become fretful.' The architecture of the house becomes warped by it: 'Our little house on the rue Alban-Berg, with its polished furniture and the dining-room table where Maman would recline, Papa's study, which we never tired of entering, and the hallway with the huge mirror in which Maman would examine her naked reflection – how we longed to be back there!' The abuse carried out by both parents is documented with enthusiasm. As in *The Governesses*, there is a certain order to proceedings, the situation 'was obviously dysfunctional and yet functioned so well'. The narrative glides from room to room – no door is kept locked.

The desires of the neglected mother and the power trips of the father drive the family dynamic. She is an exhibitionist who stays indoors (or perhaps she is an exhibitionist because she always stays indoors), who 'seemed very much in love with Papa, but he was hard on her':

> The moment he was home, she would plead with him, 'Touch me! Touch me, my love!' while they sat watching television together on the sofa. Whereupon Papa would brutally squeeze one of her breasts, or, without glancing around, tug violently at the curls of her bush.

Dr Mars, 'one of our allies', pops by between house calls to 'follow Maman into the dining room, shove her down against the table and thrust himself violently inside her'. In response, the narrator explains that her mother 'had an unhappy childhood; she needed a bit of madness.' If the reader is shocked, the narrator is not, nor, Serre has said, is she trying to produce that impression. Living without an external pattern to follow, she experiences everything as new. To recall her childhood a 'fecklessness – a certain forgetfulness even –' is necessary. She even worries that in documenting 'the broad strokes of our family life' she is 'circumscribing' her mother's 'form'.

As in *The Beginners*, there is a rupture in the middle of the story – in this case, a physical separation. The narrator decides to leave home at the age of fifteen, giving only the slightest explanation: 'If I left my family early it was because I was ready to lead my own life.' The second part of the story considers what 'living' might mean after such a childhood. 'My life ran along songlines like the ones in dreams', she tells us. 'I lied because I'd always lied.' Updates from her siblings punctuate her days: 'Mother frail. Permanently bedridden.' 'Mother delirious.' 'Mother dead.' She describes this news as 'alarming', but reports that 'for many years I had no real feelings.'

This second phase of her life is characterised by the repeated words 'never', 'anything', 'never', 'nobody'. People are interchangeable – 'red-headed men, dark-haired men with singsong accents, strange men, men in fast cars' – and so are places: 'One man took me to Nevers, another to Nîmes, to another I said: "I'll go wherever you're going," then left him along the way.' The tone here is different from that of the matter-of-fact first part of the story. It's as though the narrator is employing a lyrical language, rather than a rational one, because her life is now a series of contingencies. 'It's a gift I've always had, at fifteen, at twenty, at twenty-five: finding a decent hotel with nothing to go on but my own intuition, something inexpensive, a godsend, always a godsend.'

But she doesn't regret her childhood: 'It's not out of loyalty to my parents that I insist on the beauty of that period in my life. Our union was so intense and so compact, our sexual complicity so steadfast, like a firm handshake, that I've been leaning on it for support ever since, on the dark lake of our dining-room table.' The past, steadier than the present, is what the narrator chooses to record; she finds that writing is a 'gleaming banister' she can cling to. 'Why is it that so many people in my life have wound up insane? . . . Wasn't it obvious to them, as it was to me, that this dark lake and its black waters would save us, so long as we kept peering down into it?' She enacts the metaphor when she visits Lake Maggiore, 'going from one island or one side of the lake to another, as if trying to

encompass and contain, to examine from every conceivable point of view, this enormous table that was much too big for my life'. Like Anne contemplating the chalk horse, the narrator's account of her attempt to fathom the unfathomable has something to do with the fiction writer's attempt to superimpose a complex imaginary life over familiar territory.

Rather than following on from the first part, the second section of the story overlays it, leading to strange refractions. In Rome,

> everything I saw filled me with an intense and piercing pleasure, everywhere I went I found meaningful phenomena on the march: a tree in bloom and birds screeching outside the window of my boardinghouse on the Aventino in May; in another part of Rome, a boardinghouse with a dark, frozen corridor like the hallway in my childhood home.

Seeing her lover from a certain angle suddenly takes her back, only now with the thought that the dining-room table, 'instead of being a thing of frenzied, passionate delight, had been a sacrificial altar, as if I'd been amputated there, tortured and dismembered, but back then had somehow dreamed my way through it all.' Serre seems to be saying that we turn trauma into art without always knowing it to be trauma, and that we write without having full awareness of our subject matter.

The image of a castle recurs. The narrator first sees it during a sexual encounter with the family optician, then, when her father dies, she has 'a feeling of something being born, a surge, a castle springing up inside me, with its towers, its crenellated walls, and its drawbridge raised'. It returns at the end, after she visits her sister:

> She nattered on about my new haircut, about her son, her pregnancy, the labour and the delivery, the work her husband did in the garden then again about her son, again about the labour and the delivery, her husband and the garden, without once leaving a gap in which our eyes might meet and address the question that was written there, a question so serious and profound that it would have been terrifying to have to confront it: 'How are you?'

On her way home, she sees the spires of a cathedral and remembers the optician, 'busying himself on top of me, inside me, beneath me, while I observed a bird on the other side of the car door'. Dissociation has become the basis for fiction and so, the narrator notes, 'everything was right with the world . . . you only had to pay – as I had always known and believed – close attention for a terrible joy to be born in your life, for a work of art to be forged from your body.' The narrator can create art as long as she accepts that she is condemned to look into her past. It might seem that she is paying 'attention' to the wrong thing – the bird and the towers – but writing allows connection and disconnection, and the metaphor of the castle encapsulates that split.

After such steep and circling work, Serre returned in *Dialogue d'été* (2014) and *Voyage avec Vila-Matas* (2017) to unpacking the act of writing. *The Governesses*, her first book to be translated into English, came out in 2018, leading some American reviewers to argue that her work hadn't been translated until then because of the squeamishness of the Anglophone mainstream. France isn't straightforwardly less squeamish, and in fact the change of language seems to make Serre's work more palatable, even as it makes it more enigmatic. *Grande Tiqueté* (2020) might prove to be untranslatable. It is written in an invented language inspired by the archaic dialect Serre's father spoke as he was dying. She believes she could understand it because it was addressed to her. She writes in the foreword that her father taught French, Latin and Greek. 'One day he picked up a hitchhiker, a German, and it turned out this man was also a Latin teacher. They spoke that language for the whole car journey, from Bordeaux to Orléans.' When they needed to use a modern word, 'telephone' or 'petrol', say, they would use a classical metaphor. Like nonsense verse, *Grande Tiqueté* takes more pleasure in sonic randomness and confluence than in meaning. The actual story, as far as I can tell, is about three companions who set out on an adventure and meet a virgin, a sailor, a mother and a hanged man called Alistair – according to Serre the book is both 'a conjuring' (etymologically, a banding together) and 'an exorcism' (a driving away).

That same year, her collection *Au coeur d'un été tout en or* won the Prix Goncourt de la Nouvelle. Each of its stories, which are at most a few pages long, takes its first line from another writer (Arthur Conan Doyle, Marie NDiaye, Robert Walser). In the course of this repurposing, Serre seems to shed her fabulist narratorial armour. Good things happen: a mother becomes unrecognisable – more affectionate and practical and chicken-roasting – overnight; a therapist turns out to be a forgotten cousin; a girl decides to leave a boyfriend who is a little deranged. The girl thinks about why she chose to be with someone who perplexed her friends and caused her to forget she had grandparents and a family. 'Did occasionally adopting a different face to my own give me strength when I found my own, when it was my own that I displayed?' □

At the Movies

Joachim Trier's Oslo films – *Reprise* (2006), *Oslo August 31st* (2011) and *The Worst Person in the World* (2021) – didn't start out as a trilogy, but when one of his actors suggested that they formed one, Trier liked the idea. It's not so obvious what links them, except for being set in Oslo and adding up to three, but the idea grows on you. Trier said he was thinking of *Scenes from a Marriage* when he made the new film, and together they do feel rather like Bergman for another time. A shallower, more shifting time, dominated by privileged bafflement rather than existential angst. I don't mean the films are shallow or shifting – as Walter Benjamin said, a depiction of confusion is not the same as a confused depiction – but the characters are constantly surprised by the ordinary, and the concept of depth seems new on them. Trier has spoken about presenting a world of 'failed ambition' and 'a sense of expectation', but the new film goes further than that. If there's one thing its heroine knows for sure it's that she doesn't know what she wants.

Julie is played by Renate Reinsve with an amiable calm that fails to conceal worry – she conveys the failure so well that in 2021 she was named Best Actress at Cannes. It keeps looking as if the calm will conquer the worry, and in one memorable sequence Julie is walking along a street – she walks along a lot of streets – with a face that seems entirely impassive. Then, as we look more closely, we see that she is crying. She turns thirty early in the film, which depicts four years of her life. What came before is summarised in an elegant montage. She is a medical student who decides to become a psychologist, and then a psychologist who decides to become a photographer: each change is signalled by a new boyfriend. Then she meets Aksel – played by Anders Danielsen Lie, the actor who suggested the idea of the trilogy to Trier – and the story begins. Aksel is the creator of an 'underground' comic-book hero called Bobcat, and later complains bitterly about the 'sanitised and safe' screen adaptation. 'In underground comics you shit,' he explains, and the film studio was having none of that. The relationship lasts for a while, happy as long as Aksel doesn't talk about having children, and his male friends aren't too unthinking about their privilege. 'If men had periods, that's all we'd hear about,' Julie says. She writes an article about oral sex that Aksel admiringly calls 'intellectual Viagra'.

But then this agreeable relationship is not dangerous enough for Julie. She wants adventure, and at this moment the film gets really silly. Unlike Julie, Trier knows exactly what he wants but it is a distinct risk to make his characters look so thin. Julie meets a barista called Eivind (Herbert Nordrum), and they scare and delight each other with the thought of an affair. Just toying with the idea makes Eivind feel like 'the world's worst person' of the film's title, and without having sex the pair do really transgressive things like smelling each other's sweat and watching each other pee.

For Julie and Eivind this is a real romance. They can't stop thinking about each other, even if they don't connect again right away. Then Julie decides to leave Aksel and we arrive at the film's much discussed high point, a long sequence during which Julie is the only person who moves, while everyone else is frozen in a still. She passes a woman on a staircase, people on the street, cars in the middle of the road. Nothing moves. Except Eivind. She finds him in the café where he works and the two of them walk through the city, spending a long time together in a park. Then Julie goes home and we realise that this has all happened in less than a minute, the time it took for Aksel to look away and turn back. Time itself was frozen, a version of the set-up for Ambrose Bierce's story 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' and Borges's 'The Secret Miracle'. We could imagine that Julie took the trip only in her mind, but it's not easy to reconcile this with what we've seen and probably not worth trying. Major decisions take you out of the world, or put the world on hold. Sometimes your life is a movie while the lives of others are just pictures.

Julie and Eivind set up house together, and they too live pretty cheerily for a while. There are a few pointless episodes before the film heads into the darker territory it seems to have been longing for even in its lightest moments. This is what Trier calls the 'story worth telling', as if the rest of the film had not been quite that. Aksel is dying of pancreatic cancer; while Julie does not go back to him, they do have long regretful conversations, regretful more generally about the fact that time passes and people die. 'I'd given up long before I got sick,' Aksel says. All he has now, he says, is 'knowledge and memories of stupid, futile things'. Julie for her part is scared because she's pregnant and doesn't know how she feels about it.

The film has a rather arch, literary feel because it's divided into twelve sections called chapters, with a prologue and an epilogue. Trier says he likes the idea of a 'faux-novelistic framework', and a more interesting instance of this is his insertion, at certain intervals, of a woman's voice reporting in the third person what we're hearing the characters say in the projected world of the film. The effect is the reverse of literary. The movie is pretending to be a novel, but entirely (and no doubt deliberately) without success. It feels increasingly like a movie, and if the characters don't understand themselves then the narrator paraphrasing their speech can't understand them either. Everyone is lost, but they have lots of things to say about it.

All of this makes the epilogue effective in a way that the rather too talkative chapter about Aksel's sickness is not. Julie has left Eivind and is now working as a photographer – after all, it turns out she is a bit more professional and consistent than she and the film have let on. 'I feel like I never see anything through,' she says to Aksel. We might ask why it's useful to see things through if there isn't anything you care about, but the film invites another question. Julie is working as the still photographer on a film set. Her job is to photograph the lead actress when she isn't acting, or at least not acting for the camera. When she snaps the actress leaving the studio, Julie is surprised to see that the man waiting for her is Eivind, with a baby and pram, completing a picture of the normal, fertile family.

We don't know how Julie feels about this, and the film isn't going to tell us. She goes home and brings up a photograph of the actress on her computer screen. We can't see Julie's face; we view her from the side, look at her looking. No drama. No talk. This is where Julie's (and Reinsve's) calm is at its most impressive, deferring all recourse to meaning. We might risk a minor prophecy, though. Julie will be back at work tomorrow, living her unsettled, incomplete life. And the day after.

Michael Wood

The Thief and the Trousers

Owen Bennett-Jones

Stonehouse: Cabinet Minister, Fraudster, Spy
by Julian Hayes.
Robinson, 384 pp., £25, July 2021, 978 1 4721 4654 0

John Stonehouse, My Father: The True Story of the Runaway MP
by Julia Stonehouse.
Icon, 384 pp., £10.99, May, 978 1 78578 819 2

In 1970 the Labour MP for Morpeth, Will Owen, was charged with being an agent of the StB, Czechoslovakia's secret service. The man who had named him was Josef Frolik, a Czechoslovak defector, who said Owen was on a £500 monthly retainer organised by Robert Husak, another intelligence officer at the Czechoslovak embassy in London. Owen, Frolik said, had been passing secrets to the Czechoslovaks since 1954. During his trial at the Old Bailey, Owen acknowledged receiving money but denied that he had given away any classified information. He was acquitted. Frolik also named a Labour minister, the postmaster general, John Stonehouse – who, he said, had been recruited in the late 1950s after being compromised by a homosexual honeytrap on a trip to Prague.

Instead of having Stonehouse prosecuted, Harold Wilson asked him to the Number Ten sitting room for a chat. The prime minister wasn't inclined to believe the accusations. It turned out that Frolik had never actually met Stonehouse, and there was no evidence that Stonehouse was homosexual. In his memoir, *Death of an Idealist* (1975), Stonehouse said he had been shocked when Wilson confronted him. He admitted having had a number of meetings with Czechoslovak officials, including Husak, who on one occasion appeared uninvited in Stonehouse's room in a Czechoslovak hotel. But, he maintained, there was nothing untoward in these encounters – and if the Czechoslovaks had been trying to recruit him, they failed. Wilson later told the House of Commons that an inquiry had found no evidence against him. Even so, after Wilson lost the 1970 election, Stonehouse was quietly dropped from the shadow cabinet.

Ten years later, with Thatcher in power, a second Czechoslovak defector said that Stonehouse had been a paid agent from 1962 onwards, and that as parliamentary secretary at the Ministry of Aviation between 1964 and 1967 he had supplied information on aircraft as well as general government plans and policies. Thatcher was told that Stonehouse had apparently been paid a total of £5000 – close to £100,000 in today's money. Her attorney general was sure that Stonehouse had been a spy but he lacked evidence admissible in court. Perhaps swayed by the highly embarrassing exposure of Anthony Blunt the year before, Thatcher agreed that Stonehouse shouldn't be confronted with the new information or prosecuted.

When the StB files were finally opened up in 2008, there were hundreds of pages on Stonehouse, including a five-page report in Stonehouse's handwriting providing detailed information on members of the African National Congress, an organisation he knew well. There were also typed letters, reports and the minutes of a Labour shadow cabinet meeting on nuclear disarmament in 1963. The Czechoslovak files suggest that Stonehouse was an agent lured by money. In his authorised history of MI5, published in 2009, Christopher Andrew concluded that Stonehouse had indeed spied for the Czechoslovaks, becoming 'the only British politician (so far as is known) to have acted as a foreign agent while holding ministerial office'.

Julian Hayes, Stonehouse's great nephew, has also consulted the StB files. He explains that the second defecting StB agent was Karel Pravec, who took over from Husak as Stonehouse's handler in 1968 but found it increasingly difficult to secure meetings with him. By the late 1960s Stonehouse seemed to think that his seniority in government was making his contact with the Czechoslovaks risky. He had never been an ideologically motivated communist, and the files suggest that the StB felt he was trying to obtain as much money as he could while supplying as little information as possible. 'We paid him a lot of money and didn't get anything from him,' Pravec wrote in one report.

But for some, the StB records don't settle the matter. Stonehouse's daughter Julia has seen the same files as Hayes and Andrew and concludes that her father was wrongly accused. Indeed, she thinks the papers show that Stonehouse wasn't a spy. Even going by her own account of their contents, however, the most she can legitimately claim is that although there are repeated references to his spying, the references might be wrong. Czechoslovak intelligence officers must have made things up about her father in order to impress their superiors and steal money they pretended was for him. She points out that Stonehouse's file contains a misspelled street name and the wrong house number – how then could messages have been delivered? Hayes answers this by pointing out that the Czechoslovaks were often frustrated that they couldn't get hold of Stonehouse and the mistake might help explain why. Despite Julia Stonehouse's book being heavily footnoted and Hayes's having no references at all, a neutral reading of the two accounts leaves Hayes's version seeming rather more likely.

Stonehouse's father was an active trade unionist and his mother was the Labour mayor of Southampton. They enrolled John in the Woodcraft Folk, the ideologically correct version of the Boy Scouts in which children sat around a bonfire singing the Internationale and the Red Flag. To start with, John followed in his parents' footsteps, joining the Labour Party at the age of sixteen and the Co-operative Movement, where he soon became the youngest member of the Board of Management. It was here that he fought his first political battles. Infuriated by an entrenched Communist Party majority, Stonehouse believed that the Co-op was losing out to emerging supermarkets such as Tesco. His attempts to drag the Co-op into competitiveness were repeatedly blocked by, in his words, 'evil' communist opponents. He was elected to the presidency of the London Co-operative Society but the Communist Party elements eventually wore him down, forcing his resignation. After a spell in the RAF during the war, he went to the LSE before spending a couple of years as an anti-colonial activist in Africa. He was elected to Parliament in 1957 at the age of 32, becoming Britain's youngest MP. He steadily climbed the political ladder and was an increasingly prominent soft-left member of Wilson's governments.

As he makes clear in *Death of an Idealist*, being dropped from the shadow cabinet hit Stonehouse hard. But he didn't take the reversal lying down. He turned his focus to making money, first through a business offering consultancy services for export promotion and then, more controversially, by establishing the British Bangladesh Trust Limited, which he hoped to turn into a bank. The idea began after he helped establish a charity that raised hundreds of thousands of pounds from British Bengalis to help the Bangladeshi independence struggle. Bangladesh's government, which took office in 1972, was sufficiently grateful to Stonehouse to grant him citizenship. But the bank was problematic. There were regulatory obstacles, and a shortage of cash deposits from British Bengalis. The police started investigating possible fraud, and the pressure on Stonehouse built up. Even though he wasn't charged, the fraud inquiry made it even harder to raise funds, so Stonehouse started putting in his own money. It was partly to save face: he couldn't face the embarrassment of the bank collapsing. By 1974, Julia Stonehouse writes, her father was in a 'dire financial predicament'. There was another source of pressure too: Frolik was about to publish a memoir and Stonehouse must have wondered if he would be named in it.

Stonehouse tried to disappear. His meticulous preparations were modelled in part on Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* (1971): he obtained the birth certificates of two dead constituents and applied for passports and bank accounts in their names, forging reference letters in the name of a terminally ill MP. He even managed to secure the right for one of his fake identities to emigrate to Australia. Taking large amounts of money out of his businesses, he transferred the funds into 27 different accounts. In disguise – new clothes, thick spectacles – he flew to Florida, booked into a hotel and walked into the sea. It later emerged that after swimming parallel to the shoreline he had emerged a little way down the beach before rearranging his hair with a centre parting and heading for the airport, eventually reaching Sydney. As intended, most people, including his wife,

thought he had committed suicide, and a ceremonial service was held in the House of Commons.

But despite his best efforts there was a flaw in the plan. Lord Lucan had vanished just two weeks before Stonehouse and people were on the lookout. So when a bank employee on his lunch break noticed a tall, self-assured Englishman going in and out of a number of different banks in central Melbourne, he called the police. They were told by the British authorities that two prominent Englishmen had gone missing and that there was a way of telling them apart: one had a scar on his leg. Stonehouse was detained and the police told him to take down his trousers. They found no scar. Satisfied that they had not apprehended Lord Lucan, the authorities set about establishing Stonehouse's identity. In the interview, he resorted to bluster, telling anyone who would listen that he was a member of Her Majesty's Privy Council who deserved respect. After unsuccessful bids for asylum in Sweden and Mauritius he was extradited back to the UK, where he recruited a barrister to represent him, the young Geoffrey Robertson. Robertson later recalled that Stonehouse had by this point 'lost faith in socialism, he'd lost faith in himself, he'd lost faith in the political process . . . and there was suddenly a loss of belief in all the portentous things he'd done in life.'

He had also grossly mistreated his wife. Julia Stonehouse explains that, after he'd been rumbled in Sydney, he called her mother to say that he was alive after all and that she should join him. Also, could she bring his mistress with her? In Australia, when his wife complained about the mistress, Stonehouse knocked her to the ground, grabbed her by the hair and repeatedly banged her head against the floor. She tried to call for help, so he ripped the phone off the wall and hit her with it. Julia Stonehouse argues that her father's behaviour can be explained by the stress of being in love with two women at the same time, as well as his addiction to tranquillisers.

Why did he run away? Unsympathetic critics may find it easy to explain. Proud and egotistical, Stonehouse simply wanted to flee from failure and start a new life. He said as much to the Australian police: 'In order to escape from exceptional political and business pressures which I suffered in England, I wished to establish a new identity and live and work in a more congenial country.' In an interview with the BBC, he gave a more florid account: 'Lots of MPs go on fact-finding tours overseas. I have been on a fact-finding tour about myself.' Later, in a statement to the House of Commons, Stonehouse explained that he'd 'assumed a new, parallel personality that took over from me, which was foreign to me, and which despised the humbug and shame of the past years of my public life'. But as became clear during his trial, which opened on 27 April 1976, when it came to planning his disappearance he had acted rationally and effectively. As Robertson put it, 'if it were madness, there was too much method in it to ever convince a jury.' In *Death of an Idealist* Stonehouse simply blamed others: it was, he said, the hypocrisy of the political and business life of Britain that had caused his breakdown.

Stonehouse was charged with 21 counts of fraud, deception and theft. He decided he didn't need Robertson and would be better off representing himself. It was a bad decision. His absurd six-day monologue in his own defence irritated the judge and, Robertson believes, contributed to his seven-year sentence. Locked up in Wormwood Scrubs, Stonehouse reluctantly resigned as a member of the Privy Council and – rather belatedly – gave up his seat in Parliament.

After his conviction, Stonehouse tried to make a living through writing. He had brought out his first book before his ministerial career took off: *Prohibited Immigrant* (1960) recounted his anti-colonial campaigning in Africa. Now behind bars, he started writing about himself again. Both *Death of an Idealist* and the excruciatingly boring *My Trial* were self-pitying attempts to clear his name. 'I was innocent,' he wrote in memoir number two. 'But in my heart, I felt that if the people of England really needed to express their orchestrated venom on me then perhaps I could still perform some service in accepting the role of sacrificial lamb.' Next came four spy thrillers. According to one of his publishers, John Calder, Stonehouse was convinced they would be bestsellers. They weren't – probably because they were written in the style of the boys' own adventures he had read as a child. 'As the gypsy dancing girls regrouped for another seemingly spontaneous demonstration of native energy,' Stonehouse wrote in *Oil on the Rift* (1987), 'he mused on the vagaries of fate.' In *The Ultimate* (1976), written under the pen name James Lund, Stonehouse described an IRA mortar attack on a cabinet meeting at Number Ten. The similarities between his story and what actually happened in February 1991 when John Major's cabinet was nearly blown up by a mortar fired from a vehicle in Whitehall are so uncanny that one can't help wondering if someone in the IRA had read *The Ultimate* and taken the idea from there. Two other thrillers, *Ralph* (1982) and *The Baring Fault* (1986), published under his own name, dealt with a tricky topic for Stonehouse: both are stories about British politicians spying for the Soviet bloc, one of them initially compromised by a honeytrap.

After his early release from prison in 1979, Stonehouse remained in the public eye, appearing on radio and TV to talk about his story. He tried to stay politically relevant, joining the newly created SDP, but was never taken seriously again. His political career, books and businesses hadn't amounted to much. Even if he was a spy, he wasn't a significant one. As for his political legacy, his obituarists had nothing weightier to work with than his introduction, as postmaster general, of the second-class stamp. Until the end, he was still sending House of Commons Christmas cards to friends, as if hankering after past glories. On 25 March 1988 Stonehouse collapsed in Birmingham before he was due to appear on a TV show about missing people. He died three weeks later. For both Julian Hayes and Julia Stonehouse, his story is a matter of intense interest. For the rest of us he is little more than a trivia question: 'Which British MP faked his own death on a Florida beach?' □

Puppeteer Poet

Colin Burrow

Alexander Pope in the Making
by Joseph Hone.
Oxford, 240 pp., £60, January 2021, ℔978 0 19 884231 6

The Poet and the Publisher: The Case of Alexander Pope, Esq., of Twickenham v. Edmund Curll, Bookseller in Grub Street
by Pat Rogers.
Reaktion, 470 pp., £25, May 2021, 978 1 78914 416 1

'Pope has had bad luck,' F.R. Leavis once declared. It's true that his reputation suffered a big dip in the 19th century, but otherwise he did pretty well for himself, all things considered. He was only four foot six and suffered from curvature of the spine in an age when physical disabilities were often taken to imply moral deformity. He was a Catholic during years in which Catholics could not attend university, or live within ten miles of London, or (in one of the most bizarre legislative expressions of Protestant paranoia) own a horse worth more than £5.

Pope was born in 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution, which for Catholics was rather less glorious than it was to their Protestant countrymen. Despite his size, his religion, and the sinister nominative determinism of his name, he managed while still in his twenties to publish his *Pastorals* (1709), *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) and the mock-heroic *Rape of the Lock* (1712-14). These created all kinds of sensation in a London hungry for literary sensations. Pope belonged to the first generation of poets to benefit from the 1710 copyright act, which, though intended principally to protect the interests of stationers, enabled authors to sell the copyright of their writings to publishers, who might hope to benefit from the right to print them for an extended period. In 1714 he negotiated a contract with Bernard Lintot (who was hoping to buy himself a poet who could rival John Dryden in merit and popularity) for a translation of Homer. This was probably the best deal ever struck by an English poet. The fee for the copyright combined with income from the sale of subscription copies of the *Iliad* made Pope around £5000. That was an eye-watering sum. The contract for Milton's *Paradise Lost* in 1667 paid him two instalments of £5 and may have got his widow a further £8. The average annual income for an agricultural labourer in 1710 was a little over £17, and a solicitor at that time might earn around £113 a year. Pope published his *Works* in 1717, something which no English poet under thirty had ever done before, and by 1719 had earned enough to move to a riverside villa in Twickenham. Here he got himself a beautiful Great Dane called Bounce, one of whose offspring was given to Frederick, Prince of Wales, along with a collar inscribed: 'I am his highness's dog at Kew;/ Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?' Who could have been luckier?

Pope loved Bounce and I'm sure Bounce loved Pope. But not everyone has done so. Lytton Strachey said his satires 'resembled nothing so much as spoonfuls of boiling oil, ladled out by a fiendish monkey at an upstairs window upon such of the passers-by whom the wretch had a grudge against', and the jeers about A. P--E being an apelike imitator of the ancients or having the body and manners of a lower primate echoed around him throughout his life. But despite all that, Pope still looks like the most self-consciously canonical of 18th-century English poets, even though the canon has been exploded outwards, and even though the number of people who really love reading him is now, I would guess, less than a thousandth of what it was in 1720.

He achieved this status through roughly equal measures of will, luck and brilliance. He absorbed and imitated Jonson, Milton, Spenser, Waller, Cowley, and above all Dryden (who converted to Catholicism late in life), and by doing so he associated himself with the English poets who were being marketed and sold as classics by high-status printers such as Jacob Tonson. He modernised works by Chaucer and Donne, tapping their canonical kudos while making them speak Popish English. He translated Homer as Dryden had translated Virgil, and made him speak Popish too. After Agamemnon has said that he will seize Briseis, Pope's Achilles is tossed on the horns of antithesis in a way that is not quite Homer but very like Pope:

> Achilles heard, with grief and rage oppress,
> His heart swell'd high, and labour'd in his breast.
> Distracting thoughts by turns his bosom ruled,
> Now fired by wrath, and now by reason cool'd.

This reads like a rational cooling of Dryden's ebullient translation of the same passage:

> At this th' Impatient Hero sowrly smil'd:
> His Heart, impetuous in his Bosom boil'd,
> And justled by two Tides of equal sway,
> Stood, for a while, suspended in his way
> Betwixt his Reason, and his Rage untam'd;
> One whisper'd soft, and one aloud reclaim'd.

Pope understood that to be included in the English canon which publishers of the age were establishing you shouldn't overtly claim to be a child of Dryden or part of a literary genealogy of greatness. Doing that in an explicit way would just invite your enemies to mock you. The strategy he adopted was to allude to and echo his illustrious predecessors (as he does here with 'reason . . . rage . . . bosom'), while suggesting that he exerted a civilising influence on them. His readers could congratulate themselves on recognising his allusions, acknowledge his excellence and rejoice in the higher civility of their own age all at once.

Pope stole another trick from Dryden. He constructed a rival line of contemporary dunce-poets, who *were* explicitly presented as a genealogy. This lineage of poets (who not coincidentally are now hardly ever read) – Flecknoe, Mac Flecknoe aka Thomas Shadwell, Colley Cibber, piddling Theobald, Richard Blackmore – teems through the Grub Street grunge of Pope's greatest poem, the mock-heroic satire on books and fools and publishing called *The Dunciad*. The dynasty of dunces established the notion that literary traditions and bloodlines do exist, since other people belonged to the genealogy of folly. It also implicitly suggested that Pope belonged to the rival tribe of greatness.

So Pope made his own luck. But he was also brilliant. He had a sharper social intelligence than any other English poet, except possibly Chaucer. He wrote in an age of Party – in the political rather than Downing Street sense – and his kind of intelligence was exactly attuned to an environment in which different groups of people knew different things and supported distinct political causes. He knew precisely the overtones and undertones his target readers would hear in any given line, and that enabled him to suggest innumerable things without actually saying them. This was a great skill, although it can turn modern readers off. He often alludes to people and events which he knew his audience knew but which not many readers now know (Charles Gildon, anyone?). So Pope needs notes, and, as Samuel Johnson complained, notes refrigerate the mind by interruption, even if (as in Pope's *Dunciad Variorum*) the notes are hilarious spoof scholarly annotations written by imaginary pedants about people one hasn't heard of.

But, setting aside the problem of not knowing who Pope's enemies were, the sense that Pope often gives of anticipating exactly how his readers are going to react to his words can be slightly creepy, as though he's a puppeteer deliberately tweaking your lips into a smile or a grimace of assent. The great set-piece description of the heroine Belinda's dressing table in *The Rape of the Lock* is the best instance of his controlling brilliance, the only fault in which is its complete faultlessness:

> This Casket *India*'s glowing Gems unlocks,
> And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box.
> The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,
> Transform'd to *Combs*, the speckled and the white.
> Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,
> Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.

This is a masterly satire on the bathos of global consumerism: objects from all around the world are yoked together by a violence which is deliberately suppressed by the descriptive language: 'The tortoise here and elephant unite' as though they

want to, rather than having their tusks and shells cut off and shipped to England. And they all go to make . . . the paraphernalia on a girl's dressing table. 'Bibles' (plural: how many doesn't matter) dissolve into 'billet-doux', texts so much more sacred to a young woman in the age of Queen Anne than all those dreary epistles from the apostles – and the word 'Bibles' virtually has a tag hovering above it which says 'Smile at the incongruity here.' You do as you're told of course, and smile. But a laugh that's not entirely choreographed by an author is more fun than a laugh that comes from something that flags itself as perfectly mirth-provoking.

What saves Pope from the charge of being too darn conscious of everything he's doing is the surreal excess of his savagery. Sometimes the puppeteer loosens the strings and the show turns into a tableau of uncontrollably animated monsters of the mind – as when he describes the Goddess Dullness, who presides over *The Dunciad Variorum* and

> beholds the Chaos dark and deep,
> Where nameless somethings in their causes sleep [. . .]
> How Hints, like spawn, scarce quick in embryo lie,
> How new-born Nonsense first is taught to cry,
> Maggots half-form'd, in rhyme exactly meet,
> And learn to crawl upon poetic feet.
> Here one poor Word a hundred clenches makes,
> And ductile dullness new meanders takes.

This is meant to be recognised as a rewrite of the realm of Chaos in *Paradise Lost*, but the rewrite takes over so much of the partially uncontrolled creative force of that wild, whirling space in Milton's universe that Pope himself seems overrun by its energy. The writing loses itself in the realm of its duncistical enemies: the 'clenches' or puns on 'maggots' (both 'grub' and 'perverse fancies' in the language of the period) are teeming with life, tottering on their poetic (metrical and physical) feet, as Pope superanimates the creative processes of his enemies in order to turn their energy to chaos. These moments when the division between satirist and target melts down into a shared fearsome creative spawn of the imagination are the points at which even those who don't want to like Pope more or less have to like Pope.

The other thing that saves Pope from being a cardboard cut-out Augustan rationalist is his cruelty. Like many people with high levels of social intelligence he knew exactly how to make one person feel rotten while making everyone else laugh; but (like my grandmother, who was the mistress of the conversational dum-dum bullet – an apparently innocent remark that silently enters the flesh and then explodes inside, with infinite psychological destruction), he didn't always realise how much a perfectly targeted cruel remark could make his victims hate him. His cruelty was always knowing, and it always rested on knowing exactly what his audience knew about its target. This knowingness augments the savagery because it displays very clearly that your enemy is not just *your* enemy, but your friends' enemy too, and that your friends know the dark secrets to which you are cryptically alluding. So at the start of Book 2 of *The Dunciad* Pope's hero sits on a throne which directly recalls Satan's bad eminence in *Paradise Lost*:

> High on a gorgeous seat, that far out-shone
> Henley's gilt tub, or Flecknoe's Irish throne,
> Or that where on her Curlls the public pours,
> All-bounteous, fragrant grains and golden showers . . .

The publisher Edmund Curll was put in the pillory in February 1728 for publishing the memoirs of John Ker, which were supposed to contain secrets of state. 'Golden showers' are a perfectly pitched Popean pitcher of piss (or rotten eggs, or other fragrant matter) showered on the head of his enemy. The fact that they're presented like a complimentary golden bouquet just makes the insult worse: Jove's descent to Danaë in a shower of gold is transformed by the curious alchemy of Pope's imagination into a shower of filth. Presenting the insult with mock seriousness as an elevating compliment exponentially increases the hurt, since it implicitly says to the unfortunate Curll: 'The fact that you were put in the stocks and showered with heaven knows what is the talk of the town, and no matter how obliquely or gildedly I allude to it all my knowing readers will instantly understand just what I mean.'

As Joseph Hone shows in *Alexander Pope in the Making*, Pope began his writing life as a predominantly manuscript poet writing for 'tight-knit recusant networks' in the Thames Valley. Hone argues that for the early part of his career Pope not only wrote for but shared the political attitudes of these Catholic and often outright Jacobite patrons and friends. After the failed Jacobite rising of 1715, Hone argues, Pope 'countered the

Time Frame

Jorie Graham

The American experiment will end in 2030 she said
looking into the cards,
the charts, the stars, the mathematics of it, looking
into our palms, into all of our
palms, into the leaves at the
bottom of
the empty cup – searching its emptiness, its piles of dead
bodies or is it grass at the edge
of the field where the abandoned radio is crackling
at the winter-stilled waters, the winter-killed
will of God – in the new world now the old world –
staring quietly without emotion into the rotten meat
in the abandoned shops, moving aside with one easy gesture
the broken furniture, the fourth wall
smashed
& all
the private lives of the highrise apartments
exposed to the city then
wind. Ash everywhere. The sounds of
crying. Loud then
soft. It will not seem like it's
dying
right away, she said. What is the 'it' you refer to I
ask. Is it a place. Is it
an idea. A place is
an idea, an idea is for a while a place. Look
she says, there are
two fates. One is the idea one is the place.
And everywhere I see water.
As in blessing? As in baptism?
As in renewal? No,
as in the meadows disappear under the sea.
Then I heard a sound in the far
distance where her gaze rested. Are those
drums? Are we in the distant past or the distant
future I ask. The witches float in the air
above us. There are three. Of
course there are three. They have returned. No,
your ability to see them
has returned. Your
willingness. She asked for
cold wine and a railway schedule. It was time
she said, to move on, her gaze
looking out at the avenues and smaller streets,
at the silk dresses on the mannequins in
storefronts, all of them, across the
planet, the verandas poking out under the
hemlocks, violin strings crossing from
one century to another, although now I could hear they were
sirens all along,
invisible and desperate the warnings
in their rise & fall –
are you not listening
are you not listening –
yes those are sirens in the streets but here,
up close, in the recording of the
orchestra, the violin solo
has begun, it is screaming from one
ruined soul to another to beware, to pull the
bloody bodies from the invisible
where we are putting them daily –
no, every minute, no,
faster – we are o-
bliterating the one chance we had to be
good. There it is. The word. It brings us up
short. I notice she is gone. The
American project she had said, putting the words
out into the kitchen air with some measure of
kindness. It was not the only one, she sd, but it was
the last one.
After it, time ran out. We both looked out the window
still shocked by the beauty of the moonlight

changing political circumstances of Hanoverian Britain by rebranding his topical works as timeless literary classics'. In 1715 he published a spoof key to *The Rape of the Lock* which with solemn absurdity interpreted the poem as a Jacobite allegory. That was a way of getting his retaliation in first against anyone else who tried to read sedition into his writing. In the *Works* of 1717 he revised earlier manuscript poems 'to lessen their topical resonance'. He entirely suppressed his early epic *Alcander, Prince of Rhodes*, and did so at the suggestion of the notable Jacobite Francis Atterbury. Hone argues that this poem was suppressed 'out of fear, not aesthetic embarrassment', and was at least implicitly Jacobite – though in the absence of the work itself it's hard to be sure. Even Pope's 'classic' phase as a translator of Homer may have had a swirling tide of Jacobite conspiracy beneath it: Hone suggests that the process of drumming up subscribers for Pope's Homer from 1714 onwards may have been used to raise funds for the Jacobite cause.

How much of a Jacobite was Pope? Perhaps both more and less than Hone suggests. There's no smoking gun which shows definitively that Pope actively supported the return of the Stuart line to the throne, though of course the absence of a smoking gun can sometimes just mean that the perpetrator has thrown it into the Thames. There is a wider point about self-censorship here, however. Self-censorship isn't always simply a matter of cutting lines that reveal hidden or forbidden beliefs. It can be a matter of imagining what your words might be taken to mean by a group of hostile readers, and revising them to avoid that potential interpretation. Publication in print encourages a poet to hear his own words with others' ears, and a changing climate of opinion can make more or less innocent remarks originally directed to a small group sound subversive to a wider body of readers. By 1715 Pope knew that his hostile readers – whose ranks were growing almost as rapidly as those of his admirers – would seek to pin a Jacobite label on anything he wrote that seemed even faintly Tory or Catholic. They even referred to his 'Popish translation of Homer'. It's not surprising that he carefully reconsidered his earlier works in the changed political environment which followed the death of Queen Anne in 1714. To think of Pope as revising not to suppress his heterodox political beliefs but to close off opportunities for malicious readers would make a lot of sense, given his social intelligence: his ability to make his friends hear what he wanted them to hear in his words was matched by an ability to imagine what his enemies might hear there too. This is not to deny that his early Catholic and Jacobite readership mattered. As Hone suggests, that readership was a crucial component in Pope's art, however he tried to hide it. His early experience writing for a group of recusants enabled him to develop his later style of nudges, winks and insinuations to those in the know. That mode is well-suited to poems written for small groups of like-minded readers who have something to hide.

This might also suggest that Pope, later in his career, did not seek simply to be a 'timeless classic', but retained a kind of literary Jacobitism (akin to that which runs through the works Dryden wrote after his conversion to Catholicism) which is more a style of insinuation than a matter of overt political action or beliefs. That form of stylistic, doctrinally deniable, quasi-Jacobitism can be heard rumbling right through his career until the apocalyptic ending of the revised *Dunciad* of 1742:

> Lo! Thy dread Empire, CHAOS! is restor'd;
> Light dies before thy uncreating word:
> Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
> And Universal Darkness buries All.

After the accession of George I in 1714, to say in public that you thought the House of Stuart should be on the throne rather than a load of dim and philistine Protestant Germans was to give yourself a first-class ticket to the pillory or worse; but to attack a false lineage of dunce-poets who had usurped the throne of wit and brought lambent Dullness into the realm, and who seemed coincidentally to be mostly Whig supporters of Hanoverian rule, well, that was just fine and dandy, and in these high matters *honi soit qui mal y pense*. Anyone who said this was treasonous Jacobitism could be told that it was really all about poetic lineages and the purely literary-critical distinction between the dull and the great.

To make himself a 'classic' author Pope had to tack and weave through the shoals of politics and religion. He also had to work the market for printed books. He did this with more success than any other writer of his age, but that didn't mean it was ever easy. When he represented the Grub Street printing presses in *The Dunciad* as a heaving mass of grubby plagiarists and pirates ready to bury the classic author in filth he

in this Spring. Are we running out
of Springs I had wanted to
ask. Is the oxygen. Will there be no more open
channels. Can one not live
beneath. A little life in the
morning. Crazed police cars in the distance
but here this sunflower
which seeded itself,
seeded its mathematics & religion in our tiny
backyard,
will do. The creaking
doorhandle we love,
the spider we help come back after each wind
by letting the hanging vine
which needs to be trimmed
just stay – *just stay* I whisper to myself –
stay under, don't startle
time, the century
will go by – you can mind
your own business. You can finger the rolled up
leaf, feel its veins, you can watch the engines go by
over all the bridges
above you.
You can remain unassimilated. The
American project she said, will end
in 2030. Said find land away from here. Find
trustworthy water.
Have it in place
by then. I paid her.
I saw the bills go into the pocket
in her purse. Her shoes were so worn.
Her terror was nowhere. I looked at my garden.
It was dry here and there.
The shoots were starting up. Like a
dream they were poking through the rusty
fence.
I am spending my life, I thought. I am un-
prepared. It is running thru
my fingers. The wind is
still wild. My bones hurt sometimes
causing pain. It is not terror.
I feel for the cash in my pocket.
I do not have time to prepare.
I am comfortable.
Time passes and I am still here. I am
getting by. I replace one
calendar with another. I put seed out
for birds and sometimes one
comes. Once I saw two.
The spider is still here. I remember how geese
used to fly over. It meant something.
I remember when there were planes
& I could see them catch the light up there. What a
paradise. Some people had
enough. They were not happy but they were
able to come and go
at will.
They could leave
their houses. At any time. Anytime. And go
where they wished. Sometimes
we shared ideas. It
filled the time. We agreed or we did not.
They were not afraid. I was not
afraid. Summer would come soon.
It would get warmer. It might rain too hard.
When it flooded we worked to fix it.
We did as we saw fit.
Hi neighbour we would say across the fence
to the one tending their portion of the
disaster.
It will be ok again soon,
one of us would say. We were allowed to
speak then. It was permitted.
One of us might dream. One of us might
despair. But we cleaned up the
debris together & the next day sun came
& we were able to sit in it
as long as our hearts desired.

wasn't entirely making it up. He struggled throughout his life to prevent or suppress pirated versions and parodies of his works, which could simultaneously lose him money and damage his reputation. He was probably not alone among 18th-century authors in wanting to poison the publishers who threatened him in this way, but he was probably the only poet to have actually done so. In March 1716 he met 'spindle-shanked Edmund Curll, muck-raking publisher', along with his own favoured publisher, Lintot, at a tavern. Curll had just published a set of three *Court Poems* which he ascribed to Pope ('the laudable translator of Homer'), although only one was in fact by Pope. Pope had warned Curll off the unauthorised publication, but he went ahead regardless, for regardlessness came naturally to him. Pope took his revenge by lacing Curll's glass of sack with an emetic, which the miraculously meticulous Pat Rogers, for whom no detail in the long series of bouts of Curll v. Pope is too small, thinks was probably antimony potassium tartrate. So now you know. Pope then went off and wrote a gleeful pamphlet, composed exactly in the manner of publications favoured by Curll, describing the publisher's deathbed farewells to those he held dear, and his highly pathetical speeches of remorse. These all reached a mighty climax: 'The poor Man continued for some Hours with all his disconsolate Family about him in Tears, expecting his final Dissolution; when of a sudden he was surprisingly relieved by a plentiful foetid Stool, which obliged them all to retire out of the Room.'

The feud between Pope and Curll lasted for decades. Rogers sets out the detail, blow by blow, courtroom style, with such even-handedness that one ends up feeling a bit sorry for Curll, who was not only poisoned by Pope in 1716, but was blanket-tossed by the pupils of Westminster School for having tried to print without permission a funeral oration by their head boy. So who cares if he pirated texts by Swift, or repeatedly issued pornographic works under titles like *Eunuchism* and *Onanism Display'd*, or *The Nun in Her Smock*, or invented keys to *The Dunciad* and *Gulliver's Travels*, or published a scurrilous *Popiad*, as well as the almost unimaginably ingrown *Curliad: a Hypercritic upon the Dunciad Variorum*? Rogers shows how the fiercely personal quarrel intersected with politics and religion. Curll, though an opportunist, was no friend of Tories and hit Pope hard with accusations of Jacobitism in 1716 when anti-Catholic paranoia was at its most intense. Rogers also asks the vital question about pots and kettles: was Pope – who sought and won a reputation as a 'classic' poet – as much a manipulator of markets and of publishing fashions as his Grub Street enemy Curll?

By the 1730s the publisher and the poet were locked together in such a vicious dogfight that it's hard to tell whose teeth were sunk into whose hide or which was the lower sort of cur. The key episode was the publication of Pope's letters. Pope wanted to publish a carefully curated collection of his letters to people of note. These would display his critical sagacity and his social connections. But he didn't want to look too much like a papistical peacock blowing his own trumpet, so held off from printing an authorised edition himself. He was also worried that some of his letters, if published in unedited form, could be used against him. In 1726 Curll had got hold of a clutch of Pope's letters, which he gladly printed, since Pope's name made money, and the opportunity to make money while pissing off Pope was for Curll simply irresistible. Then, in 1733, he advertised his intention of publishing a Life of Pope, for which 'nothing shall be wanting but his (universally desired) Death,' and asked people to supply him with 'Memoirs &c' to fuel it.

Pope, knowing that a Life by Curll would not be a garland of compliments, struck back in the most bizarre manner. He responded to Curll's advertisement under the pseudonym 'P.T.' and wrote offering the publisher a cache of letters by Alexander Pope. He then hired someone, possibly the out-of-work actor and artist James Worsdale, to dress up as a clergyman and deliver to Curll by night some printed copies of Pope's letters as well as some manuscripts. Curll duly advertised these and sold them under the title *Mr Pope's Literary Correspondence*.

As Claudio says in *Measure for Measure*, 'Our natures do pursue,/Like rats that ravin down their proper bane,/A thirsty evil; and when we drink we die,' and Curll, by gobbling up Pope's letters, seemed to have ingested another dose of poison. Since it appeared that some of the letters in the collection of epistles to and from Pope were by members of the nobility, Curll was accused of breach of privilege and summoned before the House of Lords. How Pope must have chuckled. But he didn't get the last laugh. Curll triumphantly vindicated himself, and the Lords found no breach of privilege in the published letters. P.T. (alias Pope, no doubt biting his lip) then wrote to congratulate Curll on his 'victory over the Lords, the Pope and the Devil'. Curll exultantly went on to publish a series of volumes of Pope's letters in 1735-36, while Pope repeatedly complained in public about 'the Follies and Impertinence of Edmund Curll's Edition'. He published a narrative account of the affair which set out in the hoitiest of toity manners his horror at the piratical proceedings of that filthy Grub Street publisher Edmund Curll, who had (though Pope did not confess this) been provoked in his malfeasance in publishing Pope's letters by one Alexander Pope.

Curll's great strength was that he never gave up. It was also his weakness. He eventually overreached by republishing a collection of letters between Pope and Swift which had been illicitly printed in Dublin. Pope scented blood, and in the summer of 1741 initiated a humdinger of a court case in Chancery, in which he claimed that he owned the copyright of his letters. He enlisted as his barrister the future Lord Mansfield, who later in life made one of the key decisions in the evolution of English copyright law. The decision in Pope v. Curll was also a crucial one. It established what is still, more or less, the position under English law with respect to the copyright of letters. The recipient owns the physical object, having received as it were a gift of paper and ink from the correspondent, but what came to be called the intellectual property (the words and the right to benefit from publication of them) remains the property of the author. Hence Curll could not legitimately publish Pope's letters even if he had purchased the autograph copies of them from a third party. Only Pope could publish Pope's letters. The decision enabled Pope to become a 'classic' author, whose *Works* and whose *Letters* – published, of course, purely to correct the appalling distortions of the monster Curll – could sit together on the shelves of the great and the good. The cost of this skulduggery to Pope's reputation was immense: it was a major reason for the collapse of his critical standing in the 19th century. But perhaps it is from such acts of skulduggery that classic authors are made. □

Life Soup

Liam Shaw

Slime: A Natural History
by Susanne Wedlich, translated by Ayça Türkoğlu.
Granta, 326 pp., £20, November 2021, 978 1 78378 670 1

A few hours after Jean-Paul Sartre was injected with mescaline by his friend Daniel Lagache, a psychiatrist at the Sainte-Anne Hospital in Paris, Simone de Beauvoir phoned to check in on the first-time tripper. Her call came as a reprieve. As Sartre told her in a scrambled voice, she had interrupted a losing battle against a mass of octopuses. He had been promised a safe experience. An intern who had also taken mescaline found himself gambolling through fields of flowers, so Sartre's nightmarish visions could hardly be the drug's fault. But he had never liked slimy sea creatures. As a child he had almost fainted after seeing an engraving of a moonlit quay with a shadowy sea monster emerging to drag a hapless drunk to his death.

The blurriness of Sartre's poor vision was fertile ground for his hallucinations. Indistinct shapes could morph into scuttling cephalopods and crustaceans. After his mescaline experience, he claimed to have continued to hallucinate three or four crabs who followed him around for a year. Each morning, he later told John Gerassi, he would greet them: 'My little ones, how did you sleep?' He got used to the crabs, but other sea creatures – molluscs in particular – remained objects of horror. Sliminess had something to do with it. *Being and Nothingness* (1943) concludes with the idea of the *visqueux*. Sliminess is horrible to Sartre because it has neither the reassuring inertia of a solid nor the yielding shapelessness of a liquid, but a clinging contamination that envelops and consumes the investigator. The *visqueux*, for Sartre, is the ultimate 'revenge' of unconscious matter ('being-in-itself') against conscious matter ('being-for-itself').

There are mucilaginous monsters in Susanne Wedlich's *Slime* that Sartre might have found even more horrendous than octopuses. The hagfish transforms seawater into a suffocating slime 'that will even gag a shark'. *Anomalocaris* was a metre-long armoured shrimp-like creature – mercifully extinct – that once roamed the Cambrian seas 'like a wolf', embracing its prey to feed them into its razor-studded mouth. The cellular slime-mould *Dictyostelium discoideum*, formed when hundreds of thousands of amoebae coalesce into a 'faceless, see-through slug', is an existentialist nightmare straight out of a B-movie shocker: Revenge of the Being-in-Itself.

Early in her book, Wedlich admits that she can't give an easy definition of slime. A purely physical one doesn't work. We don't learn much by defining slime as 'an extremely aqueous and viscously fluid hydrogel'. Slime is also phenomenological, 'a thing in between a feeling and a description'. We may agree that mucus and mayonnaise have the same viscosity, but disagree as to whether this makes my sandwich disgusting. Cultural differences show up clearly in food, but they hide in other areas too. Slimy things are everywhere, but there is no universal concept of sliminess.

Since cells are jellied bags of proteins, there's no such thing as a slime-free creature. A 'natural history' of slime, as Wedlich's English subtitle promises, fast overflows its boundaries and threatens to become a history of all life on earth. Rather than agonise over how to narrow the lens, she goes the other way, including things that may not be slimy per se so long as they catch her attention 'in a slime-like way'. The original German title ('The Book of Slime') describes it better. Wedlich appeals to slime's own lack of 'hard borders or distinct divisions' to explain the book's organisation into loose chapters that can be read 'in sequence or independently'. The excuse is unnecessary: the book isn't marred by its formlessness.

Although *Slime* focuses on biology, Wedlich first deals with her readers' presumed revulsion. As Sartre noted, 'sliminess' for most of us denotes a host of human and moral characteristics: a handshake, a smile or a thought can all be 'slimy'. It is a type of contaminated morality. (During the Second World War, Wittgenstein remarked disconcertingly to a friend: 'Things will be terrible when the war is over, whoever wins. Of course, very terrible if the Nazis won, but terribly *slimy* if the Allies win.') According to Sartre, we might assume that we have, on the one hand, the physical experience of sliminess, and, on the other, slimy behaviours and attitudes. By projecting our knowledge of the human world onto sliminess we imbue slime with a moral character. But this begs the question. In order to make the connection between the physical and the moral, Sartre argues that we have to be able to perceive a certain moral baseness in both. He draws two conclusions: that moral qualities are always charged with physical sensation, and that the physical sensation of sliminess has an innate moral quality. If he's right, I think it's unlikely to be separable from the way our bodies are made: slimy on the inside, with a non-slimy outside. If we were conscious slugs that wore our sliminess externally, we might have an equal but opposite revulsion: for the dry, the hard, the parched.

A huge variety of slimy things could trigger our revulsion, but only some do. Sartre claimed in *Being and Nothingness* that 'observation' of young children proved they were instinctively repulsed by all that is slimy. It seems more likely he was universalising his own particular phobias. As Wedlich points out, young children will quite happily eat worms; only if they grow up in a culture in which worms are taboo will they learn to stop. 'We are born to be disgusted' by slime, but must be taught which slime ought to disgust us. Human bodies are never slimier than during sex, but most of us don't experience this as a difficulty. To describe humanity as slimy is true (if misanthropic); to single out certain practices or bodies as 'slimy' is to reveal one's prejudices. The misogyny of Sartre's warning against the 'sweet and feminine' *visqueux* is one of the slimiest moments in his writing.

There does seem to be something universal about the feeling of disgust that slime provokes, even if its valences differ. That 'slime' is an easily translatable concept helps Wedlich's case. She links it to the risk of contamination: our bodies use mucus as a barrier to soak up pathogens which are themselves slimy. Her translator, Ayça Türkoğlu, deploys an impressive and viscous vocabulary. Both German and English have slimy words for slimy things. The smack and suck of saliva make for squelching prose. Frogspawn looks like 'slimy star snot'. Differences in translation do exist, however. German-speaking friends tell me that *schleim* is more neutral than in English; you can tuck into a warm bowl of *Haferschleim*, for example ('oat slime', or oatmeal). And even in English, slime has ebbed and flowed. Wycliffe's 14th-century translation of the Bible has God creating Adam 'of the sliym of erthe'. In most later versions, the first man emerges from 'dust'. The imagery has stuck in modern Christianity. 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust' is an oddly desiccated summary of life's viscous circle: a euphemism posing as a proverb.

It's unclear why 'sliym' slipped out of the English Eden. Perhaps it made the account in Genesis too close to spontaneous generation. Lucretius wrote of the way moist soil could have given rise to humans without the need for divine intervention. In contrast, dust is inert, needing an injection of moist vitality to come alive. As Daryn Lehoux argued in *Creatures Born of Mud and Slime* (2017), spontaneous generation was 'the last stand' of the ancient scientific worldview. Wedlich is careful to distinguish the slime that 'just happens' when mud and water mix from 'true' biological slimes. But without knowing the origin of the substance in front of you, inorganic slime can often seem part of what William Ian Miller, in *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), called 'the organic world of generative rot . . . life soup, fecundity itself'. For most of history, as Lehoux points out, spontaneous generation was a fact, not a theory. The distinction between muddy slime and living slime makes sense in a modern biological framework. It didn't always.

Lorenz Oken, a German natural philosopher born in 1779, thought that life had not only begun as a primordial slime but that this slime could still be found forming today. He argued that this slime 'has its origins in, and is in its essence of, the sea, not mixed with it through the dissolution of rotting substances'. For Oken, the 'whole ocean' was alive. In England he was accused of heresy for suggesting that 'globules of slime' were the basis of life. Coleridge avidly read (and annotated) Oken's works, judging him 'a man of genial Talents'. But in one marginal note he asks: 'Was Oken drunk when he wrote this?' Coleridge

rejected Oken's idea of monadic slime-globules as an explanation for the stuff of life. Next to a passage about 'Life-Atoms', Coleridge writes that 'Atheism has driven Oken mad: unless Oken was mad. And Atheism found *him*.' Yet the image of a slime-filled sea was widespread at the time. Even before reading Oken, Coleridge had written in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* that 'slimy things did crawl with legs/Upon the slimy sea.' This slime is notably non-Okenian, arising because the sea is rotting, rather than being the stuff of life. Later in the poem, his shipmates all dead, the Mariner is not entirely alone: 'a thousand thousand slimy things/Lived on; and so did I.' (In the *Lyrical Ballads* version there are a 'million million' of them.)

Every era finds a different way to enlist slime into its prevailing theories. Slime can soak up any number of metaphysical preconceptions and hold them in sticky suspension. In the early 20th century, the spiritualist movement picked up on ideas about 'cellular slime' to ground its metaphysical claims. The 'milky-white emissions' of ectoplasm that showed up beautifully in photographs convinced figures like Arthur Conan Doyle that the spirit world could tangibly intersect with our own. Wedlich mentions props such as 'fluttering gauze', but doesn't explain that the production of ectoplasm was often intensely visceral. The medium's medium was cheesecloth, sometimes fisted into a tight ball and swallowed, to be regurgitated in a clotted white string steeped in gastric juices. The sliminess of ectoplasm came not only from a ferment of philosophical and scientific ideas, but from the practical constraints of what mediums could accomplish with nothing up their sleeves.

The age of molecular biology was less kind to slime. One of the most important tools of the field in its formative years was X-ray crystallography, which allowed researchers to work out the structure of proteins. It works best on small, well-ordered, soluble molecules. Slime proteins are not only large and messy, but have evolved to bind water. It has taken recent improvements in other methods to allow glimpses of the tangles that they form inside us. Despite being up to 99 per cent water by mass, slimes are far from structureless. They are made of molecules that expand thousands of times when wet, holding water in a loose interlocking network – or, as Wedlich puts it, 'water in chains'.

The discovery of the structure of DNA in 1953 was a particularly bad moment for slime. To the early molecular biologists, the double helix was proof that, despite a superficial sliminess, at the fundamental level life was about information. As Matthew Cobb has written, a generation which had spent the Second World War cracking codes and programming computers was primed to use these new metaphors for biology. The later elucidation of gene regulation in *E. coli* by François Jacob and Jacques Monod showed the way cells could convert sugary ooze into discrete logic: IF glucose is not present AND lactose is THEN make lactase to digest it. It was as if, once you drained away the slime, bacteria were revealed as tiny circuit boards, digital computers whirring away beneath the stickiness.

This logic extended beyond bacteria. The conceptual division of the eukaryotic cell into the 'brain' of the DNA in the nucleus and the 'body' of the cytoplasm enforced a powerful dualism. Since nuclear DNA was what mattered, the rest of the cell was merely a slimy vehicle, devoid of information. In the 1960s, when Lynn Margulis wanted to study heredity in mitochondria, there was disagreement as to whether they even had DNA. Suspecting that mitochondria had once been free-living organisms, Margulis suggested that the eukaryotic cell had arisen from a symbiosis, with the capture and collaboration of the mitochondrial ancestor in the Precambrian era, more than a billion years ago. She wasn't the first to suggest this unorthodox idea, but she was the first to live to see herself vindicated. In 1979 it was found that the mitochondrial genome – a tiny smidgen compared to the huge nuclear genome – uses a slightly different genetic code. Slime can be full of surprises. The theory of symbiogenesis is a reminder of the value of studying the soft edges of biological knowledge.

Margulis also did research into communities of bacteria living together in 'biofilms'. Most bacteria don't live free, floating adrift as single cells, but combine and stick together on surfaces. The earliest fossils of biofilms date back at least 3.5 billion years. Stromatolites are built by successive layers of bacteria in shallow water. As grains of sand and dirt accumulate in each layer, the bacterial sediments build upwards. The result resembles 'a stony pile of pancakes' more than anything we'd recognise as living. Modern stromatolites can still be seen in a few places, such as Shark Bay in Western Australia. They grow so slowly that when Wedlich visits she can easily make out the tracks of camel-drawn wagons that passed over the stromatolites a century ago. Like the scientists in Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*, she says, we may fail to recognise life that doesn't give us the biological clues we expect.

Wedlich excels at drawing such analogies, giving *Slime* an eclectic and rich bibliography. One of the pleasures of a book like this should be following up the references, but because there are no footnotes it's impossible to know where in the bibliography the curious or the sceptical should go for more. (At one point we're told that the womb may not be sterile, 'according to a disputed publication' that we get no further details about.) It's a shame, because Wedlich clearly put effort into choosing these studies: in her acknowledgments she regrets not having space to include a discussion of spiggin, the unique slime secreted by the kidneys of male sticklebacks and used to build their nests. As she notes, there is no evolutionary problem that doesn't seem to have been solved somewhere with slime. □

Country Life

Christopher de Bellaigue

English Pastoral: An Inheritance
by James Rebanks.
Penguin, 304 pp., £9.99, September 2021, 978 0 14 198257 1

Field Work: What Land Does to People and What People Do to Land
by Bella Bathurst.
Profile, 236 pp., £9.99, April, 978 1 78816 214 2

Farmer's Glory, the classic agrarian memoir by A.G. Street, was published in 1932. The traditional mixed farm where Arthur Street spent his boyhood in the first decade of the 20th century was the centre of a self-sufficient community, stout in defence of the four-course rotation and despising anything shop-bought. There was a 'spaciousness and an aura of solid wellbeing' in this intermission between agricultural slumps. The primary concern of a large tenant farmer like Street's father wasn't the bottom line: 'One didn't farm for cash profits, but did one's duty by the land.'

In 1911 the Streets had a row. It's a common pattern in the agricultural world: the cocky son offends his father by trying to teach him how to farm. Arthur decamped to the Canadian Prairies. Cleared of its Indigenous inhabitants (not that Street knew much about them), Manitoba had been divided into one-mile squares between bluffs of poplar and willow scrub. Day after day Street steered his plough through virgin soil, and as 'the strip of black on the east side of that piece of prairie grew slowly wider and wider until it neared the west boundary,' Street fancied he had written 'a signature of which I shall never be ashamed . . . each furrow is such a definite little stride in the world's history.'

In time the Streets were reconciled and on his father's death Arthur took over the farm in Wiltshire. But the days of plenitude were over and in 1928 he abandoned crop rotation, became a dairy farmer and embraced mechanisation. His milking machine had suckers that drew the milk from the udders through a nickel pipe to the churn, six cows at a time. It was a 'beastly business saying goodbye to many old and trusted employees', but Street didn't regret it: he could now beat his competitors on price. As for doing one's duty by the land, the farm now 'presented a dull, green sameness throughout the year. The glorious patchwork of different kinds of grain crops, alternating with green fields or roots, and here and there a brown fallow, was now an expanse of prairie.' Street started contributing to the local papers and went on to write dozens of books, with a column in *Farmers Weekly* and an appearance on *Desert Island Discs*. Only three minutes of the programme survive, which may be just as well. 'The most important thing in my life,' he told Roy Plomley, 'has always been sport, you see: hunting, shooting and fishing. When that permits, we do a little farming. And when that permits, we do a little writing or broadcasting.'

It's hard to imagine anyone nowadays writing a book called *Farmer's Glory*. What did for the public reputation of farmers was the national ambition of self-sufficiency, directed by bureaucrats and financed by subsidies. It was justifiable in wartime; in the peace that followed, even some farmers opposed it. Ripping up hedgerows and dousing fields in chemicals brought a dividend in the form of high yields and cheap food, but it was only achieved by running down the starting capital – the land itself. The problem with replacing mixed farming with intensive monocultures is that it relies on artificial means. James Rebanks writes in *English Pastoral*:

> the farms with thousands of animals had more muck than their land could possibly accommodate, while the crop farms now had no animals, and thus no muck to fertilise plants, so were entirely reliant on [artificial] fertilisers. Livestock in the new systems were now creating muck so acidic that the soil it was spread on began to compact and die. Crop-growing farms were top-dressing with ammonium nitrate and killing their soil.

An East Anglian farmer told me a couple of years ago that 'we farmers are increasingly seen as people who take public money while raping the land.'

Street enlivened *Farmer's Glory* with Wiltshire dialect and rural personalities; Rebanks turns workaday activities – sharpening a scythe on a whetstone – into exotic set pieces. There's a trailerful of irony in his title: as he points out, one definition of *pastoral* is 'a work of art portraying or evoking country life, typically in a romanticised or idealised form for an urban audience'. In 1994, aged twenty, Rebanks too had a tiff with his father – a Cumbrian hill farmer – and went off to Australia. The farm where he spent nights making hay under tractor light confused him with its vastness. 'Tens of thousands of sheep ranched in fields bigger than our entire farm. Herds of six or seven hundred cows.' An Australian boasted: 'We can outcompete everyone else in the world.' Rebanks came home full of contempt for traditional methods and convinced that the death of small farms was a necessary accompaniment to Schumpeter's 'gale of creative destruction'. He describes his change of heart after inheriting his father's farm, his disenchantment with specialisation, industrial methods and the unrelenting pressure to produce more food as cheaply as possible.

Rebanks rejects the two extremes that have dominated public debate for the past decade or so, modern commercial methods and rewilding. (There is, he writes, 'a very thin line between idealism and bullshit'.) He practises something in between, which could be called regenerative farming: shunning fertiliser, reducing field sizes and fencing off river banks. But the price his stock fetches doesn't make up for the hit he takes by farming less intensively than his neighbours. The book's repeated allusions to money worries suggest that, were it not for his success as a writer, Rebanks would find it a lot harder to farm as he does.

The reforms the government has embarked on after leaving the EU and the Common Agricultural Policy will shift the target of subsidies from farming to caring for the environment. But subsidies as a whole will drop, perhaps by as much as half, even for farmers who join the government's Environmental Land Management Schemes – and these will involve spending so much time filling out forms and letting in inspectors that many small farmers won't consider them worthwhile. Farms will get fewer and bigger. Andersons, a farming consultancy, predicts that the number of full-time farm businesses in the UK will fall by 20 per cent in the next decade, from 54,000 in 2020 to 42,300 by 2030. It is likely that the most productive parts of the country, such as the Fens, will be farmed ever more intensively, while uneconomical hill and dairy farms close or amalgamate.

The government and the National Farmers Union are in public agreement that not less than 60 per cent of the food that is consumed in Britain should be produced here, but the recent trade deal with Australia, which will remove tariffs on Australian sugar, beef and lamb over fifteen years, points the other way. Rebanks's area of the northern Lake District is already being depopulated of the old farming families, with tenancies given up, barns being converted to holiday lets and the number of sheep on pastures like the Lowther Valley falling to the lowest level in living memory.

In her new book, Bella Bathurst is determined to concentrate on farmers, not farming policy, but even she finds it impossible to divorce the motivations of the first from the insanity of the second. A senior civil servant at the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs tells her there is 'no one single coherent vision or mission'. 'Whatever farmers think of government,' Bathurst writes, 'the reality is worse, that no one at Defra has ever actually been to the country, and that attitudes to it are split along party lines: Tories want to shoot the wildlife while Labour would rather shoot the inhabitants.'

Farmers can try environmental methods and/or branch out (Glastonbury is the most famous example of diversification). They can double down on intensive production. Or they can sell up. James Dyson might come knocking: his farming, renewable energy

and estate company already owns 35,000 English acres. The effect of all this on the ordinary farmer is what interests Bathurst. She tends to write about people on the periphery: lighthouse builders, wreckers, herself when creeping deafness estranged her from society. On the face of it, *Field Work* is a string of reporting trips – she follows a knackerman, watches an apple farmer prune his trees, hangs out with some agriculture students – that might seem a little dull. But she is skilled at reading the ordinary, and these excursions give her an oblique and original view. While helping a vet called Dan test cows for TB, she learns that the trend for double-muscling – breeding cattle to have twice the natural amount of lean muscle – means the calves of certain breeds can only be born by C-section. This makes Dan's life more dangerous – he was recently double-barrelled (both hooves) and sent flying across a shed, narrowly escaping a broken neck. From Bathurst's day at the Hereford Livestock Market we discover that British Muslims are propping up sheep farming, now that much of the rest of the country prefers cotton-wool chicken manipulated into nuggets. She describes farmers' continual struggle against disease. 'For Britain's urban population, Covid came out of the sky, a once in a century event, random as a meteorite,' but for those in the countryside, inured to successive waves of TB, BSE and foot-and-mouth, it was a 'thing to add to the land's long list of adaptations'. And, Bathurst might have added, a further contribution to the gulf in comprehension between city-dwellers and the minuscule number who continue to live on the land.

You might assume the decision over what to do with a farm when the farmer dies is straightforward, but as Bathurst explains, 'farmers as a rule do not talk.' 'If you know that any mention of the words "inheritance" or "future" is followed by an explosion, then why would you talk? The stakes are far too high. In the past decade borrowing has doubled, but fewer than half of farmers are making a living.' At a meeting organised by the NFU to promote discussion of the undiscussable, Bathurst realises that for many people in the room the farm is

> a character in its own right, a personality larger and more dominant than any single individual . . . and there's something monstrous in the way they describe the place: the autocracy of its demands, the spite of the bad weather or broken machinery, the energy they give it and the debts they owe, the hole in the money getting bigger and bigger until the fear of money's absence is all they can see.

As for leaving the farm to a girl, that's going slowly: 'There is probably no other sector in Britain, from the oil rigs of the North Sea to the codebreakers of GCHQ, which remains as bullishly patriarchal.' That said, of the 2500 full-time students studying agriculture at Harper Adams University in Shropshire, two-thirds are female, and the number of women farmers is growing.

While researching her book Bathurst rented a cottage on a 180-acre Welsh hill farm. Bert Howells, a round-shouldered man in wellingtons and an old Barbour, looked up as her car passed for the first time, 'a clear assessing squint: good or bad, friend or foe'. The collies by his side were called Bryn and Come Here You Useless Bugger. Howells's £4000 deficit after subsidies (this was 2013) was just about offset by the rent from the cottage and selling hay. But for Bert, the fourth Howells to farm here, Rise Farm meant something else:

> He knew the burr in the ash by the hedge that the tups liked to scratch and the hidden places without reeds where the water still sprang. He knew where the earth was at its best and the patch where only docks would grow. He knew which week the blackthorn whitened at the base of the hill and the knuckle of concrete where the trailer always tripped. He knew the high-tide mark for the brook in flood and the years when it had overtopped it. He knew the middens, tips and dumps where the old shed asbestos was buried and exactly what happened to the missing batch of Cymag and dynamite . . . he thought nothing of his knowledge.

Howells got into the habit of visiting Bathurst every week or so. He told her about his father, Gerwyn, who, no matter how hard the young Bert worked, always worked him harder. About his son, David: 'No idea about farming ("heart's not in it"), no idea about land ("stupid notions"), no idea about looking after animals ("up too late")'. 'Bert knew his own father had been a bastard to him,' Bathurst writes with an openness and perplexity that are the more powerful for their rarity in this softly spoken book, 'but he seemed unable to stop himself from hurting both himself and his son in his turn.'

Bathurst stayed at Rise Farm long enough to see Bryn retire, Come Here abscond and replacements arrive. 'The new dogs were young and slippery, tucking themselves like hares into the long grass or rising from pools of shadow to ambush the running ewes. They were collies (one Welsh, one undecided) and still at an early stage in their professional development, keen to make a good impression.' When the price of lamb fell, David suggested planting apple trees on the south-facing hill at the back of the house. 'I never heard anything so stupid,' said Bert, a mess of shingles, diabetes and bitterness. After he died the photos displayed for the mourners showed him on the land he loved and fought against. Not that his house had windows onto the view. Not that he ever took a walk for pleasure in his life. A competent poultry and sheep farmer who reserved his best stockmanship for pigs. A dab hand at bottle-feeding grandchildren (all those lambs).

Agricultural land is exempt from inheritance tax. By the book's end, David and his mother are making a go of Rise Farm. The workshop is occupied by a company making film props. The barns have been emptied of rusting machinery and are let as garages for motorhomes and caravans. The Howells have applied for permission to turn farm buildings into accommodation. The last of the old flock were taken to market when Bert fell ill. But now David has bought a few lambs and five Hereford beef cows, easy calvers who need little help. He is thinking about getting a bull. 'Tentatively at first, he was beginning to digress from Bert's purist views on what a farm should be.' □

Diary

'What do you think about Ottawa now that the convoy's gone? Back to dead?' I was watching a YouTube video by Zot, one of the livestreamers who built up a following during the protests against Covid vaccine mandates that took over the city for three weeks in February, with the help of a large convoy of trucks. Two middle-aged guys – 'Fun Travel 69' and 'Live from the Shed' – called in to the show to exchange dark inferences about the mainstream media (MSM). Someone asked Zot what made him join the protests. 'I'm from Ottawa,' he replied. 'Nothing ever happens in Ottawa.'

Like Zot, I grew up in Ottawa (some call it 'Ottograd') and know what it is to long for disruption, upheaval, anything to shake up the town. The closest thing we had was the invocation of the War Measures Act by Pierre Trudeau in October 1970, after a series of kidnappings by Quebec separatists. Soldiers with machine guns were posted across the city. Now, more than fifty years after his father called in the army, hundreds of enormous rigs were rolling into town and Justin Trudeau was trying not to repeat his dad's heavy-handedness. All three levels of government – federal, provincial and municipal – studiously avoided confrontation (except with one another). You could see why. Close up, the trucks were massive: two storeys high with five, six ladder rungs to reach the cab.

The brainchild of Western Canadian right-wingers who had staged a similar protest two years earlier – the pro-pipeline, anti-environmentalist United We Roll convoy – the Freedom Convoy's message resonated. Following the first critical mass of truckers, blocking off downtown streets, the people the occupation brought out were an extraordinary mix, though overwhelmingly white: born-again Prairie Christians, anti-communist Eastern European immigrants, New Age anti-vaxxers ('my body, my choice'), loudmouth hockey mums, free-thinking Mohawks, dreadlocked weed-smokers, curious small-towners and their snow-suited kids, all brandishing the red maple leaf and other flags. The more fun it looked, the more people came out. Walking down Wellington Street a week into the occupation you could feel the giddiness, the elation. A mass of people who had never set eyes on one another, unless perhaps briefly online, were meeting in the flesh after all the lockdowns. No wonder they were hugging and dancing.

The giddiness only increased when the protesters saw what they could get away with. Not just stopping all traffic, blaring horns day and night and belching diesel fumes, but swarming unmasked into stores, harassing locals, and generally behaving like drunken frat boys. As the days passed, the party atmosphere gave way to greater organisation and less pissing in the streets. Volunteers built a stage across from Parliament Hill, a soup kitchen in Confederation Square and a fuel depot for distributing jerry cans of diesel to keep the trucks running in the freezing weather. A couple of parking lots on the outskirts of town were commandeered for use as encampments and staging posts. The organisers had said they wouldn't budge until all vaccine mandates had been repealed, and it looked like they meant it. As the numbers grew, the declarations became more grandiose: they were going to bring the city to its knees, get rid of the government and – so the signs said – FUCK TRUDEAU! In response, the city laid on rows of portapotties. No one knew how it would end.

Whoever was running the show was good at logistics, if not logic. Most of the vaccine mandates were imposed by the provinces, which have responsibility for healthcare, not the federal government. The only federal mandate concerned cross-border truckers and mirrored requirements imposed by the US: even if Canada were to remove it, the American equivalent would still be in place. Worse was the protesters' delusional 'memorandum of understanding', which envisaged Canada's unelected governor-general dissolving Parliament and negotiating directly with the convoy's organisers. Meanwhile the fun became more family-friendly: bouncy castles, hockey games, horse rides, hot tubs, saunas, hog roasts, a performer on stilts . . . The word went out: bring the kids. It was good for optics, and the organisers knew it would make things harder for the police: no chance of tear gas. Tamara Lich, the key fundraiser and spokesperson for the truckers, is active in far-right politics and sings in a band in Medicine Hat, Alberta; during the protests, she was like a waitress counting her tips – except that she had millions in her hands (she also accepted crypto). A tree-planting comrade of my niece's DJ-ed on the Wellington Street stage, as did the former head nurse at Wakefield Hospital, who is also a bar singer and anti-vaxxer. It was Carnival come early – to Ottawa, of all places.

How did they get away with it for so long? For the first two weeks, the city police pursued a policy of rigorous de-escalation. This meant ceding ground and avoiding conflict at all costs. It was curious, some people felt, that this approach was being adopted now: the Black Lives Matter and Indigenous land rights protests of recent years had been broken up with traditional aggressive policing. TikTok clips emerged of unmasked officers expressing '100 per cent' support for the protesters and even hugging them. Only a small number of the occupiers – a couple of hundred – were actually professional truckers, though many owned vans and trailers. Nor did I see many people of South Asian origin, though Sikh or Pakistani truckers make up twenty per cent of the industry in Canada. Omer Aziz, a writer from a family of truckers, argued in the *Globe and Mail* that the impunity with which the protesters marauded through central neighbourhoods was 'the clearest definition of white privilege'. And where frat boys and hockey mums congregate, homophobia is never far behind. 'If Turdeau wants a man-date, he should go on Grindr.' 'Don't be afraid of the police,' a megaphone roared. 'They won't come after you. No red-blooded Canadian's gonna take orders from Justin Trudeau.'

In fact, the police response was complicated by several factors: jurisdictional disagreements and misunderstandings between the provincial police (in charge of highways) and the federal Mounties (in charge of monitoring extremists), as well as the fact that former Mounties and army officers were advising the organisers and eliciting sympathy from their sometime colleagues. But the main problem was a lack of resources and a lack of foresight. Peak crowd estimates range from eight thousand to fifteen thousand. How could Ottawa's 1200 officers control all those people? It wasn't reassuring to hear that police officers were advising residents who were being harassed for wearing masks to take them off. Locals began to take things into their own hands: a 21-year-old civil servant, Zexi Li, obtained a court injunction to stop the trucks from blasting their horns, and in Ottawa South residents stood in front of a platoon of supply trucks, demanding they remove their Canadian flags.

But people kept pouring into Ottawa, especially on the weekends. Copycat protests sprang up in other cities. There were blockades on the bridge into Detroit and at the Alberta-Montana border. On Wellington Street, the mood was peace and love and Canadian unity, and in a strange way, the extreme weather helped. On the first two weekends of the occupation, the temperature dropped below -20° C. I thought of Victor Hugo on Napoleon's retreat from Moscow: 'Deux ennemis: le Czar et le Nord. Le Nord est pire.' The protesters were winning one battle just by coming out in the cold: for this demographic, being able to deal with the weather is a badge of citizenship. But they also seemed to feel that they were witnessing history. I have never seen so many red maple leaves flying – and the crowds included plenty of flag-averse francophone Quebecois. A few flew it upside down, presumably in protest. When an Aussie on the main stage said that the Canadian flag could now be seen at protests in the US and Australia, a huge roar went up.

Patriotism doesn't come naturally to most Canadians. Twice in my lifetime, Quebec referendums have brought the country to the verge of breaking up, and English-speaking Canadians accept that a loose, unassertive confederation is the best way of keeping the country together. Last summer, the discovery of human remains – the bodies of children who died after being removed from their parents – on the grounds of an Indigenous residential school in Kamloops made it much more difficult to feel any sort of national pride. The flag on Parliament Hill flew at half-mast for months afterwards. Yet now it was being brandished everywhere you turned – often at the end of a hockey stick – and the protesters were singing 'Oh Canada' every chance they got.

Didn't they read the news? Apparently not. Many just wanted positive vibes, finding the MSM a real downer. 'How can they prove all those people died of Covid? I don't know a single person who's died.' Others had curated their internet feeds to show them only what they wanted to believe. Sensing I was missing out, I started following the Twitter accounts and livestreams of journalist-entrepreneurs like Zot. But I was going down a thousand

rabbit holes. There was no one set of facts, just competing versions. Everyone was compulsively documenting events, documenting themselves documenting events, even precipitating events in order to document them and monetise them. Pat King, the most outspoken of the organisers, livestreamed his own arrest. James Bauder, the Prairie born-again Christian who started the convoy, believes God told him to do it in a prayer. Confronted by a journalist about the claim that Covid is a 'plandemic' – GlaxoSmithKline owns the Wuhan lab, Soros and Bill Gates are in on the action etc – Bauder unwittingly called everything into question: 'Just because it's a post does that make it a fact? There are things called postings to see what other people are saying . . . I'm actually looking for validation.'

There were some very dark aspects to the occupation and many of them involved money. It's what kept the whole thing going: diesel is expensive and if the truckers couldn't run their big engines, they were going to get cold quickly and give up. The financial effort began with a crowdfunding campaign through various Christian and right-wing channels. Then came the big endorsements – Canadian conservatives, Ted Cruz, Elon Musk, Donald Trump – and money poured in. It turns out that Canadians, as well as Americans, tune into Fox News. On GoFundMe ten million dollars were raised in a matter of days. When GoFundMe froze the account, the organisers switched to the Christian platform GiveSendGo, which bypasses Canadian banks, and raised another $8.2 million. Hackers investigated and revealed that 55 per cent of the donations came from the US. Americans were directly funding a movement whose stated goal was to overthrow the democratically elected government of a neighbouring country. I doubt most of them could find Ottawa on a map. Mark Carney, the former governor of the Bank of England, called it sedition. But the journalist Justin Ling, himself proprietor of a few choice internet rabbit holes, warned against the assumption that the arguments were imported along with the cash. 'This extremist movement was born in Canada, raised in Canada and has proliferated in Canada.'

Homegrown extremists were certainly in attendance. Pat King spoke about the 'Anglo-Saxon race' and talked freely of 'bullets flying'. A swastika was spotted early on at Parliament Hill, alongside the usual regalia of the American far right: the Confederate flag, the Stars and Stripes, the 'Don't Tread on Me' rattlesnake of the Gadsden flag, which became the symbol for the storming of the US Capitol. These protesters may be Canadian but the world they inhabit has a lot of American furniture – one person detained by the police thought the First Amendment would protect him. More worrying was the discovery of a stash of weapons – long guns, handguns, body armour, ammunition – near the blockade in Alberta and the subsequent arrest of four people, two of them with links to a white supremacist militia, on charges of conspiracy to murder Mounties.

I was in Ottawa because my father had died a week before the protests, and my brothers and I were clearing out his room. On the face of it, no one could have been more MSM than my dad: he worked for decades as Canada correspondent for the *Guardian* and the *Economist*; he was also a frequent contributor (and loyal subscriber) to the *Globe and Mail*. But like many of the protesters I met, he preferred good news to bad (particularly when it came to Africa, his other field of expertise) and loved Ottawa. So, the good news: no other weapons were found. On 14 February, Trudeau invoked the Federal Emergencies Act, which allowed the police to freeze all financial transactions related to the convoy and to compel reluctant towing companies to remove trucks. The police, behaving in exemplary fashion, cordoned off the downtown core, set up checkpoints and gave ultimatums in both official languages telling everyone to leave.

Then, just as they assembled to clear the area, a massive storm hit Ottawa, dumping 30 cm of snow on the city. Officers advanced slowly up Wellington Street in riot gear, one or two steps at a time. The crowd resisted but was forced to retreat. Those who pushed back were carried off. The snow kept coming. 'Il neigeait, il neigeait toujours . . . on ne connaissait plus les chefs ni le drapeau./Hier la grande armée et maintenant troupeau.' (I kept hearing Hugo.) Now and then, Mounties on horseback broke through the line of protesters and the police were able to advance further. The hardcore protesters became hopelessly emotional, yelling insults and sometimes attacking. 'Hold the line, hold the line!' The final diehard truckers, holed up in their cabs, discovered that the police were quite willing to smash their windows in and drag them away. There were fines, arrests. Soon there was the roar of revving engines, high-pitched beeps as trucks went into reverse, then the growl of gears engaging as they gunned it out of town. The fun was over.

Or was it? Commentators seemed to agree that Trumpism had arrived in Canada. In the *New York Times*, Ross Douthat saw the convoy protest as another battle in the new class war: educated elites, or Virtuals, against those who work with their hands, the gilets jaunes or Practicals. This might seem plausible – except these particular Practicals were entirely reliant on digital communication not only for organising and fundraising but also for spreading and reinforcing their views. And the great majority of real Practicals, dependent on vehicles for their work, were strongly opposed to the blockades and the disruption, to say nothing of the anti-vaxxers' demands. It seems unlikely that any single political party will be able to harness the energy of the heterogenous crowd I saw. In the early days a parade of Conservative politicians snapped selfies with these 'ordinary folk', but on 2 February the Tory party ditched its leader, Erin O'Toole, and has since shown itself to be deeply fissured. The people I met wanted a party, but not that kind.

Richard Sanger

Peter Campbell was the resident designer at the *London Review of Books* from its founding in 1979. He continued to write, draw and design for the paper until his death in 2011. A selection of his paintings can now be seen on a website. Some were used as covers for the LRB, many have not been seen before.

petercampbell.org.uk

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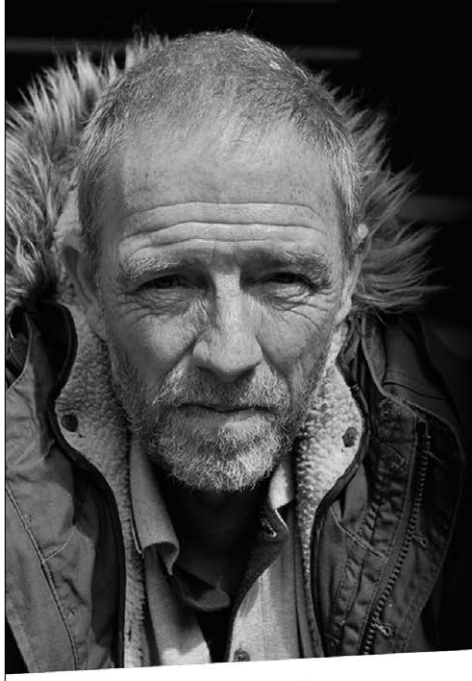

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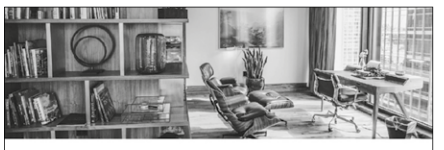
FOR SALE

House for sale in St Margarets, Twickenham, TW1.

St Margarets village between Richmond and Twickenham, approx. 1350 sq.ft. Downstairs: two reception rooms, fitted kitchen and cloakroom, dry basement room. Upstairs: spacious family bathroom, currently ensuite to the master bedroom. Second double bedroom with small walk-in shower room. Spacious third bedroom located in the loft extension. The house retains many period features, such as fireplaces, sash windows and original exposed floorboards. Small front garden with an attractive, secluded rear garden. A small shed attached to the side of the house ideal for bicycle storage etc. Popular local park situated at the end of the road. River Thames is only a short walk away. St Margarets railway station on the South Western mainline route to London Waterloo within a few minutes' walk.

Price £925,000.
Contact: ruth_vanloen@yahoo.co.uk

HOLIDAYS



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http://www.provencemagique.com
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Farmhouse in Provence. Five kilometres from Apt. Stunning views, secluded, sleeps seven. info@provencehilltop.com.

Tyne Valley, Northumberland holiday cottage. Thomas Bewick landscape and village connections. Details at https://www.elmhurst-ovingham.co.uk

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Email: maisondelacamp@gmail.com
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HOLIDAYS (continued)

Paris St Germain – charming last floor, view, well furnished. Maximum of three people. nicusit3@gmail.com

Rome (Aventino) apartment (living/dining room, bedroom, two bathrooms, kitchen) short-term rentals. www.paulahowarth.net howarth.paula@gmail.com +39 338 122 1191

North Norfolk charming brick and flint cottage, sleeps four, in peaceful Kelling near Holt. Weeks and short breaks. Visit violetcottagekelling.co.uk

Tuscan farmhouse. Beautiful landscape. Near Arezzo/ Perugia. Sleeps seven. £450 pw. 0207 267 7622. www.casasanlorenzo.net

Self-catering for two (+ cot) in the quiet, rural Shropshire Hills. Walks from the door; views from the balcony; songs from the birds. www.ferndaleflat.co.uk, email wendy@brogden.info, phone 01584 841649.

Converted apartment in medieval castle one hour from Turin.

Due to current uncertainty in travel restrictions, we invite prospective guests to plan for potential disruptions in travel. Cancellation conditions will be relaxed.
The area is rich in medieval abbeys and churches, wineries, and natural attractions. Ideal for hiking, birdwatching, writers' retreats. Sleeps up to eight. Spring to autumn stays, own car is essential.
Base price €100 per day for up to four guests, €15/ day each additional guest. Cold weather heating surcharge. Enquire about longer stay prices.
For more information, email filipporadicati@gmail.com or visit www.castellobrozolo.com, or find us on Airbnb.

ACCOMMODATION WANTED

Literary translator
needs two-bedroom London or Bristol home for five years, to become a single adoptive mother. Adopter shortfall in UK, but no maternity pay for self-employed adopters, so artists need solidarity to be therapeutic parents! References, deposit. languagejunction@gmail.com

WRITING AND ARTS RETREATS

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'Really superb' – Fintan O'Toole

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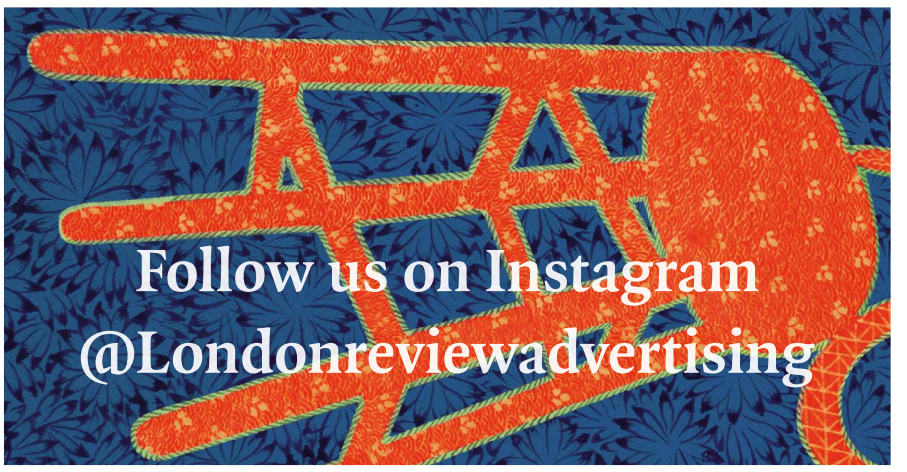
Contact: Gerardine or Eugene Kielt at Laurel Villa, Magherafelt Co. Derry

W: www.laurel-villa.com T: +44 (0)28 79301459
E: info@laurel-villa.com



WRITING AND ARTS RETREATS (cont.)

CASA ANA

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July 9 – 16 (novel writing)
July 23 – August 5
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November 12 – 25

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Early booking strongly recommended
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PERSONALS

Black male escort, companion, translator, interested in the arts, books, literature, film, theatre, educated, discreet, 58. Women only 60 and older. Based London, will travel. Contact initially by email: harnessingpeacocks@yahoo.com

Unconventional woman of a certain age hoping to find part-time amusement. harrietwilson162@yahoo.com

Too long in the company of fictive characters and too long widowed: writer, male, early seventies, seeks flesh and blood woman, probably sixties, for autumnal romance: terry.thepen@gmail.com

Attractive, savvy SWM, fit 70s, values arts and travel. Seeks adventurous, sensual, 60+ female friend in London-Paris-Brussels area. niceoption99@gmail.com

NYC, M 28, obsessive LRB reader. You do the math. tennisisproletariat@gmail.com

Manhattan artist, MF, 70s, seeks local man, any age, for friendship or romance. Ability to hold opposing ideas simultaneously in mind, conversational ability, and a sense of the absurd would work wonderfully and are offered in return. Nice counts too. Code43211@outlook.com

SF, 65, lovely creative interesting sensual world traveller would like to curl up with a Renaissance man who feels like a warm bear, occasionally rising to produce gorgeous food with great joy. lynnyoga@juno.com.

Late 20s asexual man looking to meet fellow asexual woman around same age. Since you read the LRB, we'll probably get along. NYC area preferred but not required. wottonreinfred@protonmail.com

London gent with cat (Thunderpaws) seeks delight, tower optional: be@hgp.is

M60s, London-living with no evident signs of mental illness, seeks woman with winning smile and mellifluous voice as companion for travel, dining etc. richardsheridan58@yahoo.com

Beautiful blue-eyed blonde. 64, sensuous, long legs, long hair, educated, loves to travel and has throughout the world . . . Seeking wonderful, accomplished man. melinda68@hotmail.com

Chain free, period facade, copious rooms sophie.lewis@yahoo.co.uk

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