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Republic or Empire?

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y.

Nation readers weary of witnessing the agonies of an empire in crisis should welcome “Pariah’s Progress” [Sept. 17], Jackson Lears’s illuminating review of Christopher McKnight Nichols’s new study of twentieth-century anti-interventionist and anti-imperialist advocacy. Unfortunately, Lears, a gifted and influential scholar, has been surprisingly careless in depicting the decisions and initiatives that provoked those responses.

Four decisions bear citing: (1) the 1898 decision to go to war with Spain; (2) the 1898 annexation of the Philippines; (3) the 1917 intervention in the European War; and (4) the 1919 proposal to join the League of Nations.

On the first two, Lears repeats the perennially popular but dangerously wrong-headed view that war with Spain and the annexation of the Philippines were driven by Theodore Roosevelt and his “large policy cronies.” Absent is any mention of the principal “decider” on both questions, President McKinley. More than four decades ago, Walter LaFeber and Thomas McCormick argued persuasively that McKinley took the country to war on his own terms; that he framed the issue as one of restoring political stability to Cuba, which was seen as imperative if the US economy was to recover from the depression of the 1890s.

That wrenching experience, which severely tested the country’s political and social fabric, also forms the context for understanding McKinley’s decision to annex the Philippines. As is clear from the record of his discussion with his peace commissioners, the importance of Manila for seizing commercial opportunities in China was central and reflected the perceived need for expanding US markets as a hedge against a future economic downturn. The record also reveals that McKinley had no enthusiasm for new territory as such.

And what of Theodore Roosevelt? Although the president valued his young assistant secretary of the Navy’s energy and intelligence, Roosevelt was not part of McKinley’s inner circle on policy matters.

Lears is also misleading about US intervention in World War I. He speaks of “Woodrow Wilson’s crusade to make the world ‘safe for democracy,’” leaving unformed readers with the impression that rhetoric used to rally the country in 1917 fully encompassed the forces behind the president’s decision. But the record shows that the impact of the European War on the US economy—evidenced in part by the precipitous collapse of the cotton market—formed the essential context for administration decision-making. In response to the sharp market disruptions in 1914, Wilson bent the rules of officially proclaimed US neutrality so as to link the US economy to the Allied war effort. This resulted in almost unprecedented prosperity. It also ensured that US ships would become targets for German submarine attacks, propelling Wilson to call for intervention.

Concurrently, economic disruptions caused by the war drove home the lesson that international peace and stability were essential for an economy increasingly intertwined with world markets. It then became imperative to ensure against a repeat of the breakdown of peace in 1914. The upshot was not only the idea of a League of Nations but also the realization that implementing that idea would require a seat at the peace conference. Wilson could claim this seat only if the country participated in the war. Thus, in 1917, as in 1898, economics must be seen as an essential part of what has driven the United States toward war and empire.

Although Wilson preferred to speak in the idiom of idealism, evidence suggests that he understood the connection between the League of Nations and the US economy. In a conversation with a trusted senior advisor after he had lost the fight for US participation in the league, Wilson observed that, setting aside idealism, he believed the league offered the only way to stabilize and
The Voting Rights Fight

In a little-noticed yet significant development on election day, Minnesota voters defeated a constitutional amendment that would have required them to present a government-issued photo ID to cast a ballot. It was the first time voters had rejected a voter ID ballot initiative in any state.

In May 2011, a poll showed that 80 percent of Minnesotans supported a photo ID law. “Nearly everyone in the state believed a photo ID was the most common-sense solution to the problem of voter fraud,” says Dan McGrath, executive director of Take Action Minnesota, a progressive coalition that led the campaign against the amendment. “We needed to reframe the issue. We decided to never say the word ‘fraud.’ Instead we would only talk about the cost, complications and consequences of the amendment.” According to the coalition, the photo ID law would have disenfranchised eligible voters (including members of the military and seniors) and dumped an unfunded mandate on counties and impoverished same-day voter registration. On election day, 52 percent of Minnesotans opposed the amendment.

The amendment’s surprising defeat has ramifications beyond Minnesota. “There’s been an assumption of political will for restricting the right to vote,” says McGrath. “No, there’s not.” The amendment backfired on the GOP. “Voter ID did not drive the conservative base to turn out in the way that Republicans thought it would,” adds McGrath. “Instead, it actually inspired progressive voters, who felt under siege, to fight stronger and turn out in higher numbers.” The minority vote nearly doubled in the state, compared with 2008. Minnesota was a microcosm of the national failure of the GOP’s voter suppression strategy.

After the 2010 election, in more than a dozen states Republicans passed voting restrictions aimed at reducing the turnout of Obama’s “coalition of the ascendant”—young voters, African-Americans and Hispanics. The strategy didn’t work as intended. Ten major restrictive voting laws were blocked in court over the past year, and turnout among young, black and Latino voters increased as a share of the electorate in 2012 compared with 2008. The youth vote rose from 18 to 19 percent, and the minority vote increased from 26 to 28 percent; both went heavily for Obama.

A backlash against voter suppression added to this increased youth and minority turnout. “When they went after big mama’s voting rights, they made all of us mad,” said the Rev. Tony Minor, Ohio coordinator of the African American Ministers Leadership Council. The black vote rose in Florida, North Carolina, Ohio and Virginia, while the Latino vote grew in Florida, Colorado and Nevada. “There were huge organizing efforts in the black, Hispanic and Asian communities, more than there would’ve been, as a direct result of the voter suppression efforts,” says Matt Barreto, co-founder of Latino Decisions, a Latino polling and research firm.

In late September, Project New America, a Denver center-left research group, tested more than thirty messages on “sporadic, less likely voters who lean Democratic” (which included young, black and Hispanic voters) to see what would motivate them to vote. “One of the most powerful messages across many different demographics was reminding people that their votes were important to counter the extremists who are kicking people off of voter rolls,” the group wrote in a post-election memo.

The increase in voter turnout among these key demographics, however, doesn’t mean that voter suppression laws did not have an impact or would not have decided
the election outcome if the race had been closer. Court rulings and voter education efforts limited the damage but didn’t stop it. A flood of horror stories poured in during early voting and on election day: voters waiting in line for seven hours in Florida, wrongly turned away for lack of photo ID in Pennsylvania, improperly forced to cast provisional ballots in Ohio. The day after the election, 600,000 early votes and provisional ballots remained uncounted in Arizona, most of them in heavily Latino Maricopa County. According to Hart Research Associates, black and Hispanic voters were two to three times more likely than whites to wait more than thirty minutes to cast their ballot.

In-person early voting declined in Florida because of fewer early voting hours, compared with 2008. Florida voter registration dropped by 14 percent because of the twelve months in 2011–12 when the state shut down voter registration drives. The 1-866-Our-Vote hotline received more than 9,000 calls from Pennsylvanians on election day, many from voters wrongly told by poll workers that a photo ID was required in order to vote. Twice as many voters in Philadelphia as in 2008 had to cast provisional ballots because their names were missing from voter rolls. Of all the swing states, Pennsylvania had the sharpest drop in voter turnout, down by more than 7 percent from 2008, which could be attributable to confusion over its suspended voter ID law.

The 2012 election was a case study in how not to run an election. New voting restrictions and confusion over recent court decisions exacerbated problems lingering since 2000: broken voting machines, an antiquated voter registration system, ungodly lines, misinformed poll workers and partisan election officials.

Obama’s ad-lib on election night about long lines at the polls—“by the way, we have to fix that”—energized the movement for election reform. There are smart proposals in Congress, including the Voter Empowerment Act, but it’s unclear what the follow-through will be. The Help America Vote Act of 2002, a response to the 2000 fiasco in Florida, did little to remedy the nation’s election problems. For example, the US Election Assistance Commission, created by HAVA to help states run their elections, has no commissioners, executive director or general counsel, and hasn’t met publicly since 2011. Last year in Congress, Republicans tried to abolish the agency; Democrats have done little to resurrect it. Before Congress tries to pass sweeping election reform, it should take the baby step of getting an election commission back up and running.

Despite Romney’s defeat, GOP-controlled states appear likely to press ahead with new voting restrictions. In Florida, for instance, Governor Rick Scott put his secretary of state—who supported controversial voting restrictions and an ill-considered voter purge—in charge of determining what went wrong with the election. He should start by interviewing his boss. Until conservatives start courting the increasingly diverse electorate, voter suppression will continue to be the party’s main response to demographic change.

The GOP’s war on voting is far from dead. Just three days after the election, the Supreme Court agreed to hear a conservative challenge to Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, which compels parts or all of sixteen states with a history of racial discrimination in voting to clear election-related rule changes
with the federal government. The case will likely be heard early next year. Veteran Court watchers believe the five conservative justices are prepared to overturn Section 5, which Attorney General Eric Holder has called the “keystone of our voting rights.”

Voter suppression attempts over the past two years prove that Section 5 is still needed. Of the nine states covered fully by it, six have passed new voting restrictions since 2010. “The states that passed discriminatory voting laws were disproportionately covered by Section 5,” says Wendy Weiser, director of the democracy program at the Brennan Center for Justice. The Justice Department successfully objected to restrictive voting laws in Florida, South Carolina and Texas under Section 5 this election cycle. And despite clear evidence of its necessity, the landmark act is under attack: it has been challenged more in the past two years than in the previous forty-five years combined, according to Columbia University Law School professor Nate Persily.

Only a Supreme Court divorced from reality—which this Court may well be—would review the record on voting rights since Congress overwhelmingly reauthorized the Voting Rights Act in 2006 and conclude that a key pillar of the law is no longer needed. If anything, Section 5 should be expanded to include states like Ohio and Pennsylvania. Losing Section 5 would greenlight the very kind of voter suppression that proved so unpopular in 2012.

ARI BERMAN

Noted.

WINNING THE TRIBAL VOTE: Three of the four Democratic Senate candidates campaigning hard for tribal votes in 2012 were elected (see “The Return of the Native,” Oct. 22), with an especially strong impact for upset winner Heidi Heitkamp in North Dakota, who won by 1 percent—or just under 3,000 votes. As Theron Thompson, a Dakota Sioux, pointed out at DailyKos, Heitkamp carried the tribal reservation counties by 4,589. Her biggest margins—over 80 percent—were in the counties that include the Standing Rock and Turtle Mountain reservations.

Tribal voters turned out for a candidate who campaigned extensively on reservations and at powwows and who declared, “Fulfilling treaty obligations we made years ago is one of the greatest contributions we can make to Indian well-being.” Upon being elected, Heitkamp announced a strong interest in a seat on the Indian Affairs Committee.

Heitkamp’s efforts paid off for the state as a whole. Vonnie Lone Chief, former press secretary to the Three Affiliated Tribes, wrote after the election, “Standing in the way of North Dakota turning solid red was a determined tribal ground game that matched the winning candidate’s resolve.” Native leaders also claimed a key role in the Montana election, where Senator Jon Tester told the American Indian Media Network before the election that he was counting on the tribal vote, which had been crucial in his first election in 2006. Tester’s 2012 victory margin of 19,000 included a 7,000-vote lead in counties with substantial Indian populations.

DAVID SARASOHN

THE FIFTY-FIRST STATE? On November 6, voters in Puerto Rico approved a nonbinding referendum that would make it the fifty-first state in the union. It was the first time a majority has voted for statehood.

However, statehood remains a divisive issue. Asked if Puerto Rico should maintain its current territorial status, which doesn’t allow the island’s residents to vote in US federal elections, 51 percent of voters demanded some form of change. But when asked what status they would prefer for Puerto Rico, nearly 500,000 of the 1.8 million people who cast ballots left the question blank. If those are added to the votes for other options, such as sovereign free association and independence, then less than 45 percent of the electorate supported statehood. Further complicating the results, Alejandro Javier García Padilla of the Partido Popular Democrático—who’s party opposes statehood and encouraged supporters to leave the question blank—unseated Luis Guillermo Fortuno Bursel, the pro-statehood Republican governor who shepherded the measure onto the ballot.

The push for Puerto Rican statehood faces other barriers. As Dr. Yarí Pérez Marín at the University of Durham explained, it would be costly for the United States to subsidize Puerto Rico’s economy, which would likely suffer under the US tax system. She also notes that over two-thirds of Puerto Ricans are not fluent in English, and there would be strong opposition to the incorporation of a Spanish-speaking state. Moreover, Puerto Rico would gain more legislators in Congress than many existing states.

But there’s one thing Puerto Ricans can agree on, Pérez Marín adds: “On different sides of the spectrum—right, left and in between—people are simply getting tired of being one of the last colonies on earth.”

JEFF ERNSTHAUSEN AND ELISA WOUK ALMINO

Israel’s War on Gaza

Like its predecessor four years ago, Israel’s most recent assault on Gaza began shortly after the US elections, and before the inauguration of President Obama. This time, as then, the attack began shortly before scheduled Israeli elections. In this new crisis, as then, the US role is primary. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak had it right four days after this escalation began. “This effort could not have been concluded without the generous and consistent support of the American administration led by President Obama,” he said. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu certainly calculated that a new Israeli war would compel Obama to publicly reassert Washington’s uncritical backing of every Israeli move, regardless of post–Arab Spring changes in the region, and regardless of Tel Aviv’s violations of international humanitarian law, UN resolutions, the Geneva Conventions or anything else. Even so, it’s unlikely that Netanyahu believes that pushing Washington to defend Israel’s so-called “right to self-defense” will somehow recalibrate his tense relationship with the US president. That tension will no doubt rise if the Israeli leader orders a ground invasion of Gaza.

As before, the Israeli military is using US-made and US

COMMENT
taxpayer–funded F-16s and Apache helicopters; as before, the United States is directly complicit in Israel’s actions. And this time Israel can argue that it’s merely channeling Washington’s latest mode of warfighting. In the past the United States, however hypocritically, often criticized Israel’s “targeted assassinations.” But Obama’s drone warfare, which has killed thousands in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and perhaps beyond, has made disapproval of Israel’s assassination policy impossible. It would take a level of chutzpah beyond even Susan Rice’s to condemn Israeli assassinations when the tactic has become such a hallmark of Obama’s wars.

At press time, the Israeli offensive has killed at least 115 Palestinians—half of them civilians—and injured some 840, including 225 children. Among the injured were eight journalists, including one whose leg was amputated. On November 18 alone, ten members of the Dalu family were killed in Gaza City, all but one of them women and young children. The assault recalls Operation Cast Lead of 2008–09, when more than 1,400 Palestinians, most of them civilians and 313 of them children, were killed, along with thirteen Israelis—almost all soldiers, four of whom were killed by friendly fire.

But the pattern of Israeli attacks goes beyond the shockingly disproportionate casualties. As was true in earlier assaults, Operation Pillar of Defense began with the assassination of a militant Palestinian leader while he was engaged in negotiations for a cease-fire. In 2002 it was Hamas leader Salah Shehadeh, assassinated in his home in Gaza while reading the latest long-term cease-fire proposal. This time it was Ahmed Jabari, who in 2011 had negotiated the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for more than 1,000 Palestinian political prisoners. Jabari was assassinated on November 14 while overseeing Hamas negotiations with Israel for a long-term truce.

So why the escalation? Israeli army chief of staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz told Army Radio last year that Israel would soon need to launch another “swift and painful” attack on Gaza, to restore what he called Israel’s power of “deterrence.” This offensive was long planned. The specific timing of the attack, though, was partly about Netanyahu shoring up his electoral base. He’s seeking re-election in January and has antagonized many Israelis by deliberately dissing President Obama. Netanyahu needs to reassure his far-right supporters (an increasing cohort) that even if he doesn’t bomb Tehran, he can still bomb and assassinate Arabs with impunity. Once again it is Palestinians who will pay the price.

Israel chose this moment to attack despite its increasing isolation. This is not the same Middle East that confronted Israel four years ago; Tel Aviv no longer operates in a region where popular animosity to Israel’s treatment of Palestinians was kept in check by US-backed dictatorships. Hamas has broken with the Syrian regime, and its ties with Iran have been reduced as its strategic connections to the governments of Egypt and Turkey take hold. As a result, Hamas’s important new supporters in Cairo and Ankara happen to be the same governments Washington most urgently needs to keep close. Hamas is now arguably less isolated, certainly in the region, than Israel itself. Witness the solidarity visits to Gaza of Egypt’s prime minister, the Tunisian foreign minister, the emir of Qatar. Witness the Turkish prime minister calling Israel “a terrorist state.”

At press time, negotiations for a cease-fire were accelerating, with Egypt as a key interlocutor. Israel, buttressed by unlimited US support, had little reason to hurry and was holding out for the right to continue its assassination policy. Five days into the assault, former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s son Gilad described in a Jerusalem Post op-ed what Israel should do before any cease-fire is considered: “We need to flatten entire neighborhoods in Gaza. Flatten all of Gaza. The Americans didn’t stop with Hiroshima—the Japanese weren’t surrendering fast enough, so they hit Nagasaki, too…. There should be no electricity in Gaza, no gasoline or moving vehicles, nothing. Then they’d really call for a cease-fire.”

The danger is that Sharon’s is not being marginalized as an extremist advocating genocide. An immediate cease-fire is urgently needed. But there will be further rounds of violence unless Israel ends the siege of Gaza—and its occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Only then will it be possible to negotiate a long-term, just and comprehensive peace.
by the creeping debt crisis, big rallies were staged.

In Madrid, hundreds of thousands of protesters flowed past the Prado for five hours. Many seemed newly aware of a common European struggle. Some waved blue-and-white Greek flags in solidarity with the victims of the most ruthless shock therapy pursued so far. Others held placards painted with Iceland’s national colors, suggesting that the Icelandic default might show the way for the debt-laden euro periphery, especially Greece.

In Portugal and Greece, as in Spain, protesters took aim at the IMF as well as German Chancellor Angela Merkel. “IMF means hunger and misery,” was a slogan in Lisbon. “We are fed up to our ovaries with the IMF,” joked a feminist contingent at the Madrid demonstration. Yet the truth is that IMF leaders, themselves frustrated with austerity madness, might have grabbed a banner and joined the protest. A very public dispute has erupted between the fund and the European Union over the pace of fiscal adjustment and the need for a second restructuring of Greek debt.

At its semiannual meeting in Tokyo in October, the IMF announced that the austerity packages applied throughout southern Europe since 2009 have been counterproductive, undermining economic growth and increasing rather than bringing down public debt ratios. Greece provides ghastly proof of the failed logic of the euro orthodoxy. After three years of shock therapy, the Greek economy is in depression and will have shrunk by more than 22 percent at the end 2013, the IMF warns. Employment in Greece has fallen to 1980 levels, and Greek debt dynamics have only deteriorated. Public sector debt has soared from 144 percent of GDP in 2010 to 170 percent, and unless the official lenders agree to take a haircut in a controlled restructuring of debt—as private lenders did earlier in the year—Greece may be forced to leave the euro. “The IMF has admitted the blunder, but tell that to the Greeks,” said Zoe Lanara, international relations secretary of the Greek General Confederation of Labor at a conference organized in October by left think tank TASC in Dublin.

The incompetence and negligence in the management of the crisis is staggering. In 2010, the troika of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the IMF had calculated a manageable impact on growth of the adjustment packages in Greece, Ireland and Portugal, with fiscal multipliers in the region of 0.5. That means for every 2 billion euros’ worth of cuts and tax increases, which, if multipliers are indeed 1.7, will reduce GDP by another 8 percent. Meanwhile, as Spain prepares to request a bailout package that will activate the European Central Bank’s bond purchasing program, the troika teams in Madrid appear to be designing something similar to the disastrous Irish program. The troika had raised hopes with a promising commitment to recapitalize Spain’s banks, but it now appears that so-called legacy debt—the bad loans inherited from previous bubbles—will not be covered. This means that in Spain, just as in Ireland, the state will be left to provide the capital needed to help banks absorb the impact of a deteriorating housing market. This will feed what the IMF calls a “pernicious feedback loop” where bailouts to stricken banks undermine public sector finances.

Despite applause from Brussels and Berlin for its steady progress in deficit reduction, Ireland holds sobering lessons. Its exports have helped it avoid outright depression, but with debt at around 140 percent of GNP, Dublin may be as close to insolvency as Athens, warn the unions. “We are in the sixth year of contraction of domestic demand, and they are still cutting spending. If the IMF is right and multipliers are 1.7, this will be devastating for Ireland,” said Michael Taft of the Irish union Unite.

The IMF 2013 forecast for Portugal, meanwhile, has been revised downward to a full-blown recession with a 3 percent fall in GDP. Only Latvia—recovering strongly and keen to join the eurozone after its own dose of shock treatment—remains to vindicate the EU orthodoxy’s penchant for austerity, wage cuts and internal devaluation. Yet the tiny Baltic state was close to expiring on the operating table, losing a quarter of GDP and one-seventh of its youth to emigration. Even with its current growth rates, it will take five years to get back to where it started.

Notwithstanding the discouraging evidence from the eurozone, pressure is being piled on the Obama administration to agree to a “grand bargain” of fiscal consolidation with the Republicans in Congress. Here, too, the IMF has warned that a front-loaded fiscal adjustment could abort an already weak recovery. Given that interest rates on US bonds are at rock bottom, Congress could instead be legislating public investment programs at virtually no cost. “The European monetary union has created its own constraints and needs to be overhauled, but the US should be using fiscal policy to boost growth,” says Greek economist Dimitri Papadimitriou, president of the Keynesian Levy Economics Institute at Bard College.

The IMF’s methodology, at least, is being hastily adapted to the landscape of destruction and strife across the EU periphery. Yet it is still not clear that the European leaders will change tack. In Greece, the troika ordered more than 9 billion euros’ worth of cuts and tax increases, which, if multipliers are indeed 1.7, will reduce GDP by another 8 percent. Meanwhile, as Spain prepares to request a bailout package that will activate the European Central Bank’s bond purchasing program, the troika teams in Madrid appear to be designing something similar to the disastrous Irish program. The troika had raised hopes with a promising commitment to recapitalize Spain’s banks, but it now appears that so-called legacy debt—the bad loans inherited from previous bubbles—will not be covered. This means that in Spain, just as in Ireland, the state will be left to provide the capital needed to help banks absorb the impact of a deteriorating housing market. This will feed what the IMF calls a “pernicious feedback loop” where bailouts to stricken banks undermine public sector finances.

As Spain slides further into recession (the IMF forecasts a 1.3 percent drop in GDP next year, after a 1.5 percent contraction in 2012), concerns about debt sustainability will deepen and the bank will be forced to intervene at increasing intervals against a backdrop of mass unrest. That is a recipe for backlash in Germany that could end the eurozone once and for all.

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Andy Robinson, a reporter for the Barcelona daily La Vanguardia, has written on Spain for The Guardian and the New Statesman.
Embedded

Unless General Petraeus packs a particularly formidable pistol in his pocket, it is unlikely that Paula Broadwell was shocked when the two consummated their affair. But clearly she was awed. Like a schoolgirl in a swoon, she longed to tell. She became her love object’s biographer and called the book All In. At every opportunity she advertised her “unprecedented access,” her position “by his side,” their jogs, their playful jousts, his “mentorship,” her ability to keep up, in the Hindu Kush, “embedded,” the buttons on her fitted blouse straining to contain her bosom, the sandbags of ambition and ideology inhibiting any realistic assessment of the general or the wars he directed. As Jon Stewart quipped about her book, “The real controversy here is, Is he awesome or incredibly awesome?” And, by association, Is she awesome or incredibly awesome—a question she aimed to answer by doing sixty push-ups in formal wear.

Now that it’s come undone, the affair emblemsize the wartime culture that made, and unmade, them both: the hubris, the indifference to reality; the social rot and inevitable failure. In retrospect, it all seems so obvious. Of course they had an affair… like, of course Colin Powell lied about Saddam’s WMDs; of course bombing creates enemies; of course people hate their occupiers; of course the earth is scorched, children die, soldiers are broken, the war is lost. In farce as in tragedy, the end is in the beginning, but who was there who might have refused to suspend disbelief?

Not the general’s subordinates, who did think Broadwell’s pro-pinquity a little odd. Not Broadwell’s writing partner, The Washington Post’s Vernon Loeb, so narcotized churning her dispatches into chapters he sensed nothing. Not the journalists whose familiarity with embedding inoculated the word from innuendo and whose obsession with access makes the “in” a mark not of the sycophant but of the star. Not the elite media clique whom Petraeus “mesmerized” (David Ignatius) or made… feel special” (Erin Burnett) or won with his “Boy Scout’s charm” (Alissa Rubin and Dexter Filkins). Not the legions of fawners who proclaimed he has “the heart of a lion” (Gen. Barry McCaffrey), the mien of “a brainy ascetic” (The New York Times) and a gift so great that “almost everything he touches seems to turn to gold” (ABC).

All were so busy sucking up in the proverbial sense that none imagined that a star general might want the real thing, and could have it, from a homecoming queen and West Point grad as hungry to get ahead as he, and even more risk-centric. “I like to jump out of airplanes, ski in avalanche territory, and have even interviewed ‘terrorists,’” Broadwell puffed to the girlfriend networking maven and blogger Claudia Chan this summer, round about the time she was sending hissy e-mails to MacDill AFB’s “volunteer social liaison,” Jill Kelley. It is hard to resist the daytime drama, with loud twins, the weird, shirtless FBI agent friend and another general, tripped up on his way to becoming Supreme Allied Commander of NATO by 20,000 pages of flirty e-mails to Kelley.

“I look at the world as a series of webs to be connected,” Broadwell had told Chan. “The more one can play the connector…the more valuable you make yourself to each of the networks that want to be connected.” She described herself as “pathologically helpful,” patching together a worldview owing in part to Malcolm Gladwell, in part to Oprah and in large part to David Petraeus. It could not but lend itself to B-grade showbiz.

Broadwell didn’t anticipate the true value of her “connector” role. Rarely does a sex scandal rip the veil from an entire world. Usually it is compartmentalized: the soldier who rapes another soldier; who takes up with the captain’s wife and plots to kill him; who forces prisoners to masturbate, all “isolated incidents” however much they blare a pattern. While the Petraeus legend unraveled, the former deputy commander of the 82nd Airborne, Brig. Gen. Jeffrey Sinclair, sat in a Fort Bragg courtroom for hearings to determine if he will face trial for forcible sodomy, wrongful sexual conduct and adultery with five women. One of them, a captain, testified to a three-year affair that soured when the general had another dalliance, shoved his penis into her mouth at work after she complained, and threatened to kill her and her family if she told anyone. No one talks much about General Sinclair.

There can be no branding Petraeus a bad apple. He had an ordinary affair so far as we know, and actually was one of the better generals in Iraq, a contrast winner because he thought it unwise to punish rank-and-file Baathists and argued that it’s better to protect civilians than to kill them. For that the press and political class called him brilliant. The characterization held even after he went to Centcom and Afghanistan and decided it was better to call in death from the sky and secure fiefdoms for racketeers loathed and feared by the population, all the while touting progress.

Petraeus doesn’t look so smart or successful now; neither does his successor, Jill Kelley’s BFF, General Allen, nor the stenographers picking at the bones of reputations they helped build. About 25,000 Taliban still thwart 104,900 coalition troops, having gained ground they didn’t hold while in power. Even Republicans are saying maybe it’s time to pull out; the thrill is gone.

Seduction was as central as fear to the sales job for America’s twenty-first-century wars. Our troops would be in and out. They would be heroes for a people with short or no memories. All cried, “Support Our Troops!” but things went to hell anyway. Petraeus took the national stage in 2006, one last chance for glory. If they even knew, few cared that he’d been calculating his rise from the time he graduated West Point and married the academy superintendent’s daughter. If any had even heard of Broadwell, her striving would similarly have earned a shrug. David and Paula were American dreamers, but their network, interlocked with Jill, her twin and their suburban posse, turns out to be a dystopian throwback, a kind of Military Mad Men, where the men are reckless and regard any woman with big tits and a nice smile as a genius, where the women are auxiliaries or schemers, dispensing tips about thank-you cards and how to make it in “a man’s world”; where everyone is incompetent. Military strategists and GIs have been complaining for years about a failure in generalship and a culture that rewards kowtowing. The scandal bright-lines their arguments. Most people don’t know how to plan a battle or collect international intelligence; they do know a few things about how to conduct a decent affair. If the director of the CIA and a Reserve intelligence officer can’t even do that, what good are the institutions that groomed them?

That’s the bright side. Still, it is a shame that Petraeus and Broadwell have given adultery a bad name.
Katha Pollitt
Remember Savita Halappanavar

By now the whole world knows about Savita Halappanavar, the young woman who died of septic shock in an Irish hospital on October 28, after doctors refused to complete her in-process miscarriage by performing an abortion. This was not a case of choosing between the fetus and the woman—the seventeen-week fetus was doomed, and nothing could have saved it. But it still had a heartbeat, and abortion is banned in Ireland. I can’t get over the mental image of Savita’s three days of agony. Her husband described it to The Irish Times:

“The doctor told us the cervix was fully dilated, amniotic fluid was leaking and unfortunately the baby wouldn’t survive.” The doctor, he says, said it should be over in a few hours. There followed three days, he says, of the foetal heartbeat being checked several times a day.

“Savita was really in agony. She was very upset, but she accepted she was losing the baby. When the consultant came on the ward rounds on Monday morning Savita asked if they could not save the baby could they induce to end the pregnancy. The consultant said, ‘As long as there is a foetal heartbeat we can’t do anything.’

“Again on Tuesday morning, the ward rounds and the same discussion. The consultant said it was the law, that this is a Catholic country. Savita [a Hindu] said: ‘I am neither Irish nor Catholic’ but they said there was nothing they could do.”

University Hospital, Galway, where this shameful event took place, isn’t a Catholic hospital, but no matter: Ireland’s abortion law is Catholic law. Could there be a clearer demonstration that when you get right down to it, the church does not value women, and neither does Ireland? Even a dying fetus counted for more than the life of this young, vibrant woman.

Ah, but, you say, the Irish abortion ban has an exception to save a woman’s life. Not exactly. In 1992, the government tried to bar a 14-year-old girl raped by a neighbor from traveling with her parents to Britain for an abortion. The case went to the Supreme Court, which decided that abortion was legal when the pregnancy is a “real and substantial risk to the mother’s life,” and that this included suicide, which the girl in this case had threatened. The government was supposed to re-examine its abortion law, but why make waves? Twenty years later, the original law still stands. In effect, this means a doctor who performs an abortion to save a patient’s life could be arrested and required to prove that his judgment was correct at trial. It takes a brave doctor, one confident of his medical judgment, to take this risk. The bishop of the diocese of Phoenix forced the resignation of hospital administrator Sister Margaret McBride and then excommunicated her, after she OK’d a medically necessary abortion at St. Joseph’s in 2010. If McBride had been on vacation, would someone else have stepped up to the plate?

When pregnancy kills a woman, her fetus dies, too. So what is the point of denying a life-saving abortion except to underline that she is the vessel, and the fetus is the human being?

Anti-choice apologists don’t like to put it so bluntly. Instead they say that modern medicine means abortion is never necessary to save a woman’s life. The church likes to point to its own exceptions: the termination of a pregnancy is acceptable if it is the indirect result of a life-saving medical procedure, such as removing a fallopian tube that contains an ectopic pregnancy or removing a cancerous pregnant womb (but not, nota bene, the removal of an ectopic pregnancy directly, by medications, or by surgery that removes the embryo and preserves the tube and the woman’s fertility. That would be immoral). Even these exceptions were hotly debated until the 1930s, as Italian Ob/Gyns begged the church for guidance that would let them save women’s lives in these medical emergencies when no baby could ever result.

Anti-choicers speak out of both sides of their mouths about the life exception. They like to argue that abortion is never medically necessary; but they also argue that even strict bans permit abortion to save women’s lives. Then they change the subject, like Irish Bishop John Fleming: “Ireland, without abortion, is recognised as one of the safest countries in the world to be a pregnant mother,” he wrote in The Irish Times. “Clearly, if the life of the mother is threatened, by illness or some other medical condition, the care provided by medical professionals will make sure that she receives all the medical care needed.”

Anti-choicers would like to portray Savita’s death as simple malpractice. On blogs and social media, alternate explanations fly round: she should have been given antibiotics sooner; she would have died anyway. But nothing can change the fact that the standard of care is to remove the fetus to prevent infection. And nothing can change the fact that Savita Halappanavar is dead.

With pressure mounting—an international day of protest is called for November 21—Ireland may make some gestures toward clarifying its guidelines for medical professionals to help them decide what constitutes a life-threatening situation. But a technical fix like that isn’t what Irish women need. Abortion bans are simply incompatible with women’s health. Here in the United States, restrictive laws and policies are putting women in danger. According to a report for the National Women’s Law Center, women at Catholic-affiliated hospitals, which follow the official Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services, have been denied immediate and standard treatment for miscarriages and ectopic pregnancies. Expanded conscience clauses, and proposals like Ohio’s “heartbeat bill,” will only increase women’s risk. The next Savita could be right here at home.
first read the poems of Louise Glück in 1966. They were very early poems, and I was very young, having brought out but one issue of the quarterly magazine I had launched with a few friends several months before. (Glück, born in 1943, was young too.) The poems arrived with a letter from Glück’s teacher, Stanley Kunitz, who urged me to publish them, recommending their “strong voice” and “intensity.” He did not characterize the poems as “confessional” or attempt to link them with any school or predecessors in a tradition. Clearly he believed the poems would speak for themselves, and they did. Though Glück would write very different kinds of poems in later years—and speak with misgiving about the work she brought together for the volume *Firstborn* in 1968 (which included the poems I had published in *Salmagundi*)—I am not surprised that poets like Robert Lowell and Ben Belitt wrote to say how much they admired those early poems that appeared in our pages.

Though intensity has been a characteristic feature of Glück’s work from the beginning of what is now a long career, the poems have inspired a wide range of epithets. Often they are said to be “chilling,” “supremely reticent,” “distant,” “scrupulous,” “on guard.” And yet the early poems, with their mainly short lines and controlled air of violence and disparagement, seemed to me at first, and now again, to be anything but reticent or aloof. It’s comical, actually, to think of Glück, at any point in her career, as being “on guard” or “distant.” The early poems seethe with opening lines like “Sometimes at night I think of how we did/ It, me nailed in her like steel,” or “Time and again, time and again I tie/ My heart to that headboard/ While my quilted cries/ Harden against his hand.” That a standard, largely misguided line about a major poet should harden into dogma and be repeated, over and over again, is bizarre, as in a 2009 *New York Times* review featuring the assertion that “All these years… Glück has been writing her stark, emaciated verse,” as if the poet-critic responsible for that observation didn’t know the difference between emaciation and a disciplined refusal of mere ornament, and hadn’t noticed the obvious marks of fullness and feeling in poems frequently anthologized. Emaciated? Not these closing lines from “Mock Orange” (1985), to select but one famous example:

And the scent of mock orange drifts through the window.

How can I rest?

How can I be content

when there is still

that odor in the world?

Nothing emaciated there, surely, the senses on display excitable and shivering with expectation, the lines chaste but quick, anxious, alert. Nor is there chill or detachment in the

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poem “Metamorphosis” (1985), where the speaker observes “the angel of death” flying “low over my father’s bed”—especially in these closing lines:

For once, your body doesn’t frighten me.
From time to time, I run my hand over your face lightly, like a dustcloth.
What can shock me now? I feel no coldness that can’t be explained. Against your cheek, my hand is warm and full of tenderness.

Such tenderness is not the accent we familiarly associate with this poet, but it is present throughout her work, as are the accents of obsession, and fear, and strenuous self-interrogation. There is nothing pinched or withholding in this poet. What’s pinched is the standard line on her, and the emphasis in a recent London Review of Books essay on Glück’s studied inhibitions is simply incomprehensible.

Glück’s latest volume, a collected poems bringing together all of the work included in her previous eleven books, through A Village Life (2009), reminds us that she has been not only a resourceful and versatile poet but also an astonishingly brave one. Brave in what sense? In the way she has steadily enlarged her range and idiom, working, to be sure, within the compass of her own nature, but ever testing the limits of her gift, so that the impression made by the work as a whole is not of limitation but of an overwhelming fullness of invention and abundance of life. Glück’s poems at their best have always moved between recoil and affirmation, sensuous immediacy and reflection. She has found ways to engage with the world as it is without capitulating to its felt demand that she renounce any alternative sense of what is real. For a poet who can often seem earthbound and defiantly unillusioned, she has been powerfully responsive to the lure of the daily miracle and the sudden upsurge of overmastering emotion. Though one would never think to say of her work that it represents a triumph over reality, the poems often refuse to abide by the decorums associated with realism or straightforward first-person lyric. It is not simply that Glück is adept at speaking in the voices of flowers, or gods, or men, or other improbably loquacious personae. More to the point is that reality has existed for Glück simultaneously as foundation and irritant. She acknowledges what seems to her indisputably true—like the fact of death, or the loss of love—while refusing to concede that the soul is merely what Wallace Stevens once called a “rustic memorial of a belief” long consigned to irrelevance. Fierce in her determination to see things as they are, she fashions poems that suggest how much more there is to know than she can say. Incorrigibly committed to lucidity and alert against even the slightest imprecision, she ventures in and ventures out as if full comprehensibility were a chimera and an obstacle to true understanding.

It is customary, in coming to terms with a poet’s life’s work, to think about stages. But Glück has not progressed in discrete stages, and her trajectory has confounded readers who early expected one thing, only to be surprised by the swerves and eruptions that have marked her progress. Though it makes sense to speak of Robert Lowell’s early, middle and late periods, no such pattern is discernible in Glück’s development. Better to say of her that she has remained true to a number of obsessions without any recourse to self-imitation or self-parody. In their response to the volume Meadowlands (1996), many readers noted Glück’s wit, her penchant for comedy or farce. The turn to domestic comedy, it was said, had liberated in her something unsuspected. Who knew that such a poet would betray an appetite for anachronism and for the weird, playful intrusion into what was, after all, an obviously heartfelt book about the death of a marriage? And yet Glück had often shown a gift for comedy, though she had never been the “stand-up vampire” she was once said to resemble. The comedy, to be sure, was rarely raucous, and often it had to do with the deadpan use of a homely term like “happiness” to describe a situation that was required, as a formal gesture, a poet’s sense of the entire enterprise she is invested in as a sort of charade, somewhat like the poem itself, which pretends to explicate an experience too painful and inchoate to master. Even the frail tokens of emotion (“the heart once given freely,” “a consecration/ at once moving and hopefully doomed”) are transparently formulaic and unconvincing, designed to betray the poet’s inability to believe in her own dryly inadequate pretend account of something momentous. There is comedy in the disparity between surface (or ostensive intention) and feeling: in “Earthly Love,” it comes from the feeling that the chosen vehicle (the poem) is too theoretical and confident to get at what is sought. Say, if you like, that Glück is always wise to herself and thus finds ways to signal her disdain for the very wisdom to which she lays claim. She is one of those stoic comedians who both proclaim and suffer their own inclinations and take a modest delight in unmasking them. Comedy for us is in the spectacle of the speaker who “proves” what she doesn’t quite believe.

It is not comedy alone that is often said to belong only to one discrete stage in Glück’s progress. With each of her recent books she has been congratulated for breaking an older style, or repudiating “her former sensibilities,” or writing more accessibly, or more personally or plainly. But in truth, Glück has long been casting off and putting on, restless refashioning herself, experimenting with her idiom, giving herself permission to say the unsayable or the unspeakable only to take it back, or laugh it off, or recoil with unconcealed revulsion from her own displays of pique or depressive fatalism. In the poem “Celestial Music” (1990), she can say that she is “always eager to oppose vitality” and that, however “at ease” she is “with death, with solitude,” she is drawn to “love the world” and to “hear celestial music.” No sense in this of contradiction or confusion. No sense for a reader of Glück’s work as a whole, that the instability of
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sentiment belongs to a single stage, any more than her obsession with death or her love of the world may legitimately be said to mark only a phase. Restlessness is inscribed in all of Glück’s work, even in poems whose closure seems definite, secure against any prospect of revision. Within any single volume there are erasures and reversals. Wariness yields to frank vulnerability, bare assertion to expressive color. Words swim, or run, then slow and walk. Fluency gives way to hesitancy. The poet who can seem at one moment to trust her own language to convey what is needed is suddenly mistrustful of the very words she employs. Such alternations are central to this poet’s intelligence and do not belong solely to any isolated phase of her development.

Glück can disparage empty beauty and yet write sentences ravishing in their music.

Of course, it’s fair to say that particular volumes contain more of one thing than another: more obvious recourse to metaphor, more mythology, more and bolder use of autobiography. But what ought to matter most—in the prov-

Glück’s impersonations do not always entail that we mean a willingness to draw unwelcome conclusions. “Epithalamium” does not bristle with the disgust sometimes present in Glück’s work (no tomatoes “misshapen, individual, like human brains covered in red oilcloth”), but it does pulse with the sense of the bad ending that awaits every fresh beginning. It is remorseless, iron in its resistance to complacency: characteristic in that sense and compelling in its stark negotiation of the stops and stations marking the path through a life.

In her book of essays, *Proofs and Theories* (1994), Glück contrasts poems that evoke “the presence of the abyss” and others that call to mind “the mattress under the window.” No question, is there, that Glück herself has done without the mattress? That she has moved not always cautiously on a ledge stationed over one abyss or another? That a Glück poem will associate with an internal dialogue, where a speaker at odds with herself and struggling to find an equilibrium cruelly denied throws her voice and conjures opposition.

In “April,” the decisive admonition comes from on high, from a god-figure whose voice conveys an uncommon authority. This is by no means an isolated instance, though Glück’s impersonations do not always entail speakers endowed with a comparably authoritative command of pitch or psychology. The miscellaneous voices she employs do, however, invariably compel our rapt attention and do bespeak a profound confusion of identity, itself a central feature of poems in which the internal dialogue, mounted to underlie conflict and rebuke, betrays the speaker’s unstable sense of self. The throwing of voices, then, in Glück’s poems is a transparent device, each persona embodying some essential or vagrant aspect of the divided self, the god in “April” more like an exasperated parent who speaks in an admonitory accent that Glück herself will often assume and elsewhere project onto a male speaker—a husband, say—also exasperated and spoiling for trouble.

In the poem called “Horse” (1985), for example, when the “husband” flings at the “wife” the accusation that she is barren change clothes or wash her hair.

Do you suppose I care if you speak to one another? But I mean you to know I expected better of two creatures who were given minds: if not that you would actually care for each other at least that you would understand grief is distributed between you, among all your kind, for me to know you, as deep blue marks the wild scilla, white the wood violet.

Notable here are the traces of what sounds almost like ordinary human utterance, but also the diagram of strenuous (if improbable) interactions, of voices not at rest but urgent with their respective burdens. Glück has long employed this form, congenial to her habit of disputation and experiment, her need to grab the other—any other—by the throat or collar and to insist, or provoke, or chasten. But what is most characteristic in “April” is not the direct address to an other (or an alter ego) but the charged air of confrontation and contention, the felt pressure to reprove and to force a response, the peculiar intensity we associate with an internal dialogue, where a speaker at odds with herself and struggling to find an equilibrium cruelly denied throws her voice and conjures opposition.

Prof"s and Theories...
Glück's poems can also be intimations to a story never to be told. Just so, it is no doubt helpful, in thinking of a writer who has given us dozens of works loved and admired by many readers, to focus on individual poems. And yet, as Linda Gregerson has rightly noted, the poems in The Wild Iris are finally “not separable: the book is a single meditation that far exceeds its individual parts.” Much the same might be said of the poems collected in other volumes by this poet. To speak of the god-voice in “April” obliges one to think of the way that voice is picked up and varied elsewhere in The Wild Iris, though one may also want to reflect upon the echoes or parallels that can be detected in poems conceived for other volumes. If each book is, as Gregerson contends, a “single meditation,” there is also reason to argue that no single volume, or single poem, can now seem to us set off from the others. The present volume of collected poems reminds us that in the case of a major poet, it is not possible to come to terms with any single work without reading and coming to terms with everything the poet has written.

Consider, in this regard, the by now commonplace observation that in the poems of A Village Life, Glück gave herself permission to “chatter” and tell stories, liberating the “inner short-story writer itching to break out” and demonstrating a long-suppressed “faith in speech.” But it is clear that Glück has long displayed her reliance upon speech, and voice, and story, albeit in narratives at most fragmentary, intermittent, implied, like the versions of “story” embedded in A Village Life. There is no way, really, to engage with the narrative deployments and challenges of the recent book without setting them alongside the related narratives and driven speech acts of earlier volumes. Why not? Because, for all of the radical departures that have marked her progress, Glück has been writing out of a sensibility complexly unified, her every poem in some way a correction of every other poem she has written. The storytelling in her most recent volume is, without question, a response to the barely implied narrative gestures discernible in early volumes that are distinguished in part by their resistance to narrative elaboration, by their minimalist allusions to a story never to be told. Just so, it is impossible to think “storytelling” in A Village Life without thinking of the related, though more pointed, stories half-told in a book like Meadowlands.

But then this emphasis upon the notion of “a single meditation that far exceeds its individual parts” also drives us to the more telling observation that underlying everything Glück has done, encompassing every singular volume and singular poem, is what might be called an embattled negotiation with reality and what Hegel called “the age of prose.” Consider the wayward accents that often punctuate or dominate a Glück poem, accents especially prominent in Meadowlands but by no means limited to that volume. Consider simply “I want to do two things/ I want to order meat from Lobel’s/ and I want to have a party.” Or consider what follows: “You hate parties. You hate/ any group bigger than four.” The age of prose, no? The poet has succumbed, so it would seem, to the least satisfactory of measures, to what Rilke once called “mischief and senseless caprice.” She has relaxed into the idiom of the mundane and prosaic. Made her peace with ordinary voices steeped in ordinary domestic and marital discord. Relinquished eloquence and exaltation. Settled for too little. “On market day, I go to the market with my lettuces”: so she concludes A Village Life. As though nothing more were to be said. As though she were tired of her turmoil and of the turmoil that marks a life consigned to thinking big thoughts too unwieldy and difficult and, in the end, irrelevant to be borne. Lettuces. Caprice.

Yet even to suggest the shadow of capitulation in the case of this poet seems somewhat ridiculous. Even the trivial in Glück conveys, or suggests, some possible meaning or mystery we would give our lives to uncover. The fall into the quotidian is no small matter. A boy, in Glück, sits at a window as the room darkens. Nothing. Except that outside “The grass shudders a little” and “The mountain stands like a beacon.” Everything is as it is, the sounds the familiar ones of the night. Only we know that there are “signs,” that “The night is an open book.” The age of prose, of the ordinary, the given and indisputable, has never looked as promising, or pregnant, or frightening as it looks in the lines of this poet, who knows how to make exaltation casual, palpable. Whatever her attraction to the near and the actual, Glück permits no sanctification of the world of getting and spending. Always in her work there is a sense of the yearning for something more than a good meal or a good lay or a perfect lettuce. Even in poems laced with hilarious or poisonous repartee, we never feel that the poet has settled for what T.S. Eliot once called a “few meager arbitrarily chosen sets of snapshots” or “the faded poor souvenirs of passionate moments.”

How not settled? Say that agitation is central to Glück’s work. Agitation, as in poems that often subvert their own motions, setting against one thought or accent another not quite easy to reconcile, the trip to Lobel’s to purchase meat yielding to the reflection that “for one night, affection/ will triumph over passion,” the “point” (“whether or not/ the guests are happy”) yielding to another “point” (“whether or not they’re dead”). There’s nothing programmatic in these juxtapositions. Nothing, really, but an expression of the poet’s gift for irony and her insistence that life not ever seem what Proust called “mediocre, accidental, mortal.” The agitation in Glück has often to do with her inconstancy. Her characteristic voice belongs to someone strangely old and yet still unborn, someone desperate to live in this world and yet not quite of it. The agitation unmistakable in the alternation between immediacy and detachment, the swerve from the quotidian (“the dog waits for me in the doorway”) to the elevated (“I move through the dark as though it were natural to me,/ as though I were already a factor in it”). Contrary to what some have said, Glück doesn’t rely on myth, Greek or otherwise, “to give the incidents in her life greater importance.” She uses myth not to “explain” her troubles (or ours) but to speak in a voice bequeathed to her by the tradition she has embraced and extended. “She writes,” as Charles Simic notes, “in an idiom that is as old as literature,” and yet she writes also as if the myths she employs, as if language itself, were hers to charge with fresh potency—as if no one had ever used words, or myths, so purposefully before.

Reading Glück, it is hard not to think that the poems come from what R.P. Blackmur once described as “the whole history of the common language of the mind, or as Yeats calls it of the soul.” And yet—one more time and yet—Glück’s poems can also be thought of as expressions of a very particular and troubled person, a poet determined to get to the bottom of her own experience without making an idol of “reality” or brute suffering. As with other great poets, Glück does not invite paraphrase. Her poems at their best—and they are very often at their best—embody not just the rage to order, but also the rage to identify a “truth” that no order can approximate or touch.
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Ragged, Unkempt, Strange
by JOANNA SCOTT

One morning in the late spring of 1962, William Faulkner rode his horse Stonewall across his property, following a bridle path through a forested area known as Bailey’s Woods. When he reached the clearing containing the ruins of the family’s abandoned ice plant, he turned back toward home. But according to the story Joseph Blotner recounts in his biography of Faulkner, Stonewall—known to be a skittish, intractable horse—was suddenly spooked by something and bucked, throwing his rider into the dirt.

As Blotner reports it, Stonewall returned to Faulkner and nuzzled him. It seems that the horse felt some remorse, albeit shallow. Faulkner tried to grab the reins, but Stonewall moved out of reach and disappeared down the bridle path, leaving the writer to limp toward home on his own.

He found Stonewall waiting for him back at Rowan Oak, his estate in Oxford, Mississippi. Though he was in severe pain, Faulkner climbed into the saddle for the second time that day and rode over a course of jumps. When a doctor later told him that he could have killed himself getting back on the horse, Faulkner replied, “You don’t think I’d let that damned horse conquer me, do you? I had to conquer him.”

Faulkner was no stranger to unruly horses, and he’d taken several dangerous falls in his life. But he was 64, and this fall from Stonewall left him with back pain that wouldn’t relent. By early July, the pain had become so severe that he checked into Wright’s Sanitarium, in Byhalia, Mississippi. Later that same night he awoke, sat up on the side of his bed, gave a groan and collapsed. It was shortly after midnight, July 6, 1962, and William Faulkner, one of the twentieth century’s most crucial authors, was dead.

In commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Faulkner’s death, the Modern Library has reissued six volumes of his fiction. The set, amounting to nearly 3,000 pages, includes a volume of short stories, along with the novels As I Lay Dying, Absalom, Absalom!, The Sound and the Fury, Light in August and the Snopes trilogy, comprising The Hamlet, The Town and The Mansion. The novels have been outfitted with new forewords written by E.L. Doctorow, Marilynne Robinson, John Jeremiah Sullivan and C.E. Morgan. An introduction to the Snopes trilogy by George Garrett is reprinted from the 1994 Modern Library edition.

These writers are in agreement that Faulkner is one of this country’s literary giants. He “uses language as brilliantly as anyone who has ever put pen to paper,” says Robinson in her foreword to The Sound and the Fury. In his foreword to As I Lay Dying, Doctorow pays tribute to Faulkner’s “supreme achievement.” Morgan argues that Light in August joins Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Moby-Dick as one of a handful of “Great American Novels.” Garrett lauds “the rich variety of Faulkner’s method, his endlessly inventive ways and means of telling stories.”

But amid all this praise for Faulkner, there are occasional hints of unease. Faulkner’s artistry is described with modifiers like “radical,” “demanding” and “overreaching.” Robinson notes that from the beginning of The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner “would seem to have deprived himself of elements of narrative that are most essential to it.” Morgan compares Light in August (along with its fellow Great American Novels) to a rich meal that “can overwhelm or even sicken the stomach.” Sullivan tells us that Faulkner breaks the rules that are taught in creative writing workshops by intervening with “descriptive terms between the reader’s imagination and the scene.”

There’s no doubt that these writers share a passionate admiration for Faulkner. When their observations about the challenges of his work are taken into account, however, some telling underlying differences become evident. Garrett, Robinson and Doctorow reflect on the ways Faulkner’s style expresses his thematic concerns. Doctorow sees Faulkner tapping “the human psyche to the depth of its raw existence.” Each of his books “is a new artistic adventure, making new and sometimes surprising demands on the reader,” writes Garrett. “His pleasure in the world…is always palpable,” says Robinson.

Implied in these three tributes is a belief that fiction is a grand medium with far-reaching potential; in the hands of a brilliant writer, its demands become satisfying pleasures. In contrast, both Sullivan and Morgan are more skeptical about the status of fiction among contemporary readers and, in varying degrees, even distrustful of literary achievement. Morgan wonders why “the very idea of the Great American Novel now seems hopelessly naive and unevolved and, like any fashion that’s become passé, a bit of an embarrassment.” Sullivan goes further, arguing that the whole notion of greatness “can leave a book isolated in much the way it can a human being.” In regard to Absalom, Absalom!, Faulkner’s own “self-consciously ambitious” novel, Sullivan states bluntly that its reputation “is safe from all reviewers and introducers.” Yet he also points out that “a subset of unsophisticated readers” find the book “unintelligible,” and he compares it to James Joyce’s Ulysses: like Ulysses, Absalom, Absalom! “lives as a book more praised than read, or more esteemed than enjoyed.” After admitting that there were times when he tossed it aside in frustration, “with a kind of defensive laughter,” Sullivan defends the novel not because of its artistic success, but because it “attempts something that had never been tried before in the art of fiction, and as far as I know has never been since.” Absalom, Absalom! may fall short, but “not to have failed completely at such a task is indistinguishable from triumph.”

Sullivan and Morgan are certainly not the first readers to voice frustration with Faulkner’s work. And their general concerns about fiction that is more “esteemed” than “enjoyed,” too rich to be stomached, are familiar. In terms of Ulysses—the very novel Sullivan invokes in comparison to Absalom, Absalom!—recent responses are emblematic. Within weeks of each other in The New York Times Book Review, prominent fiction writers...
Richard Ford and Elizabeth Gilbert called it an overrated novel. In a Paris Review interview, Jonathan Franzen says of Joyce that he was “chasing a certain kind of status,” and that he wrote Ulysses because he wanted to give readers something to admire.

Modernism has always had its opponents. Yet given that publication by definition constitutes an act of distribution, it’s hard to imagine why any writer, modernist or otherwise, would choose to publish multiple copies of a book that would be impossible for readers to comprehend. There are plenty of writers, past and present, from Shakespeare to Henry James to Lydia Davis, who test the limits of coherence and put pressure on current notions of accessible (and acceptable) narrative methods. To thrive and change and grow, any art needs this kind of pressure.

Writing that flirts with incoherence can just as readily flounder as writing characterized by simplicity and composure. There is no reliable formula for originality, and strategies that are distinguished as innovative in their first incarnation can quickly become stale in the hands of lesser artists. It’s all too easy to conflate dense prose or jumbled narrative structures with literary ambition. But in this age of blogging, with paragraphs growing shorter and the spaces between them growing larger, it’s also easy to dismiss the kind of fiction that might not yield readily, docilely, to our first attempt to comprehend it. This is the worry that Morgan and Sullivan express; they know how quickly readers—and writers—will turn away from fiction that dares to cast itself as difficult. Sullivan admits that he has done the same. And when, in The New York Times, a contemporary writer derides Ulysses as “a professor’s book,” he assumes that as readers, we have nothing new to learn.

If, however, we allow ourselves to think of reading as a capacity we keep cultivating, then we have reason to turn to books that have something to teach us about the medium they use to convey meaning. While it can be pleasurable to move speedily through a work of fiction, there’s a different sort of pleasure to be had in lingering, backtracking, rereading the same page. As children know, there’s lots of fun in nonsense. We never stop benefiting from staying flexible, open and responsive, even in the midst of confusion. Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to keep learning how to read.

I still have the copy of the first book by Faulkner I ever bought: a Modern Library edition containing two novels, The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying, with a publication date of 1946. I was in high school when I found the book at a yard sale in my hometown in Connecticut, and I remember how fascinated and disoriented I felt that summer day as I turned the pages, reading through the opening chapter of The Sound and the Fury in a sweat prompted less by the heat than by the weird, unsettling resonance of Faulkner’s language.

The Sound and the Fury, Faulkner’s fourth novel, is widely considered his first major novel and offers a gateway into all of his work. It tells the story of the dissolution of the Compson family, moving between different perspectives and back and forth in time. The first chapter, set on and around the Compson estate in the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha, Mississippi, is dated “April Seventh, 1928,” and narrated by Benjy, a 33-year-old “idiot.” The next chapter is narrated by Quentin, Benjy’s brother, on the day in 1910 when Quentin commits suicide by jumping from a bridge into the Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The third chapter returns to Mississippi in 1928 and is narrated by Jason, brother to Benjy and Quentin. The fourth chapter belongs primarily to Dilsey, the Compsons’ black servant.

Here’s Benjy, whose experience, in Marianne Robinson’s description, “is without syntax, without tense”:

“Is Mother very sick?” Caddy said.
“No.” Father said. “Are you going to take good care of Maury?”
“Yes,” Caddy said.

Father went to the door and looked at us again. Then the dark came back, and he stood black in the door, and then the door turned black again. Caddy held me and I could hear us all, and the darkness, and something I could smell.

Born Maury and renamed once his mother realized “what he was,” Benjy is the narrator who introduces us to the other characters, all of whom assume that he understands little about the world. Yet Benjy shows us otherwise. The “old looney” tells us exactly what he hears and sees and smells. He doesn’t bother providing context or explaining connections. He simply tells us what Jason said, what Dilsey said, what Caddy said. He tells us what T.P. said after drinking “sasprilluh”: “It make me feel just like a squinch owl inside.” Benjy doesn’t tell us what to think about his story. Unlike his more educated brothers, he uses language to tell us about the world rather than himself. He is a witness—nothing more, nothing less.

In important ways, the core of The Sound and the Fury belongs to Benjy, the one narrator in the group who doesn’t try to connect the dots of experience on the reader’s behalf. But there is more to this story—and to any story—that its core, and ultimately, Benjy has to be left behind, displaced by other narrators.

“I’d take what I could get, then. I can catch just as many fish with this pole as I could with a twenty-five dollar one.” Then they talked about what they would do with twenty-five dollars. They all talked at once, their voices insistent and contradictory and impatient, making of unreality a possibility, then a probability, then an incontrovertible fact, as people will when their desires becomes words.

This passage, an emblematic one for Faulkner, demonstrates how decisively its narrator, Quentin Compson, thinks, how nimbly he can distill the complex relationship between desire and language into a clear and convincing for-
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mula. Born and raised in the South and transplanted to cold, punitive New England to attend college, Quentin obviously knows about the productive power of language. From insistent, contradictory, impatient talk—the nonsensical noise of human speech—he identifies a trajectory that leads from private emotion to “incontrovertible fact.” Words don’t just convey meaning for Quentin; they make meaning, conjuring something from nothing.

But for Quentin, it’s not enough to know about words. This is the same young man who, a page earlier, looks down from a bridge over the Charles River, sees the mayflies skimming along the river and thinks, “If it could just be a hell beyond that: the clean flame the two of us more than dead. Then you will have only me then only me then the two of us amid the pointing and the horror beyond the clean flame.”

In The Sound and the Fury, and even more so when he reappears in Faulkner’s later novel, Absalom, Absalom!, Quentin doesn’t just interpret stories; he relives them through his intense imaginative engagement in the material. He doesn’t need correct grammar to find meaning in a sentence. He is so adept at comprehending language and imagining himself into the midst of a story that as he listens in Absalom, Absalom! to an old woman angrily ramble on about the ghosts of the past, he can picture those ghosts as if they were before him: “as though in inverse ratio to the vanishing voice, the invoked ghost of the man whom she could neither forgive nor revenge herself upon began to assume a quality almost of solidity, permanence.” Just as desires become facts in Quentin’s world, the history of the South becomes uncannily real.

Quentin shares with other key characters in Faulkner’s fiction a special knowledge of the way language gives substance to abstractions. He is a character who thinks hard about the nature of thinking, applying all his intellectual prowess to the effort of understanding how we define ourselves through words—yet it’s not enough to free him from his own obsession with death. On the contrary, his insights serve to reinforce his obsession, and the young man who is capable of blistering insight ends up throwing himself off the bridge and drowning in the Charles River.

As good as Quentin is at attending to the complex meanings of idiosyncratic speech, he makes a fatal mistake: he believes too readily, too completely. His very talent for imaginative engagement turns out to be a vexed thing; he is so haunted by the stories he’s heard that he can’t untangle them from his own life. He reminds us, through his own fierce belief in the power of language, that not every story can reveal a truth.

**Indian Song**

The stone is hard
The stamen & pistil of this flower
yet wild yet near

The city street is dark
This hand, these lips
The stone is hard
the city street dark

The wild woodlands break out
open upon the subterranean plains
yet wild yet near
The city is dark

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It’s telling that Sullivan equates Faulkner’s use of racist language with the “showiness” of his vocabulary and syntax. I bet Faulkner would approve of the equation. Racism is one kind of linguistic spectacle, and he stages it alongside other kinds of performances that include extravagant mixes of paradoxical language and unconventional syntax. This is theater at its most inclusive, created in recognition of the persuasive power of language. Words can give any abstraction—vile or attractive, productive or destructive—new influence. The danger arises when we begin to overestimate our ability to control language and make meanings stick.

Writing about race and speech in *Light in August*, Richard Godden has argued that the novel “can be read as a thriller whose villain is the word ‘nigger.’” This is an idea worth applying to much of Faulkner’s work. Forms of hatred—personal, societal, spiritual—are arranged in thrilling stories, with many villains. But the worst villain of all is the taboo word that racists try to claim as their own. It is not even at his most complex, ‘hard’ to read, but he insistently invites the reader to a deeper engagement in the experience of the story. To that extent he honors his readers, allowing them to bring as much as they can to the shared experience.”

It’s only Dilsey, the Compsons’ black servant and the steadfast presence of the final chapter, whose awareness doesn’t collapse in on itself. Like Benjy, she is witness to the world’s turmoil. She makes no secret of the fact that she hears everything going on around her: “I hears you,” Dilsey said. “All I been hearin, when you in de house. Ef hit aint Quentin er yu maw, hit’s Luster en Benjy.” Like Quentin, she turns the chaos of life into meaningful narratives: “I seed de beginnin, en now I sees de endin.” Like Jason, she is quick to respond and, despite her frailty, is willing to scold Jason, to order him out of the kitchen, even to fight him. She is the protector, the one who is as furious about injustice as she is sympathetic to the needs of others, who maintains a resistant sense of self amid all the confusion and violence around her and still manages to keep a fragile order. She is gaunt and still indomitable, impoverished but impervious. Her expression is “at once fatalistic and of a child’s astonished disappointment.” She is not allowed to enjoy any sentimentalized triumph over the culture’s sickening indignities, yet she retains a supple ability to dominate from within a position of oppression. As a figure of self-possessed endurance, she is our best guide into Faulkner’s fictional worlds. She sees what she sees, suffers, fights back, sings to herself when alone and keeps on telling others what to do.

When Dilsey first emerges from her cabin at the beginning of the final chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*, she is wearing a maroon velvet cape and a black straw hat over her turban. She takes a long look around, returns to her cabin, and comes out wearing a man’s felt hat and an army overcoat over a blue gingham dress. She is ready now. She should be indomitable. If only life weren’t so wild, so powerful, so damned difficult to control.

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**Untitled**

All winter the leaves stay on this ground

the sun

The rake, the hoe the furrows

the moon

All winter embodies

The ashes

Working insects beneath

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"Just as Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala forces open budget processes, these pages force open our eyes to the complexities of political life in Nigeria. Throughout her incarnations as the corruption cop, finance minister, tough decision maker, and managing director she has been and remains a great friend and an inspiring mentor. This is an essential guidebook for reformers everywhere." — Bono

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I can’t leave them alone.”

Every skillful equestrian never lets herself forget that the animal she is trying to control is bigger, stupider and much stronger than she will ever be. Like a writer working with the unwieldy material of language, like all of us struggling to make sense of unordered, unwieldy life, Faulkner, on horseback, had precariously control. And what an exhilarating feeling it is when things go right: your horse takes off at the perfect distance, carries you over the jump and canters away. I can say from experience that it’s worth being scared to death.

Motives and Apprehensions

by AARON THIER

In general, it’s good to ignore the elliptical testimonials that publishers print on the covers of books, but the condescending praise on the inside cover of Edward P. Jones’s *Lost in the City* is important because it reflects exactly the prejudices that Jones seeks to dispel. *Kirkus Reviews,* for example, writes, “This debut collection of stories pulses with the lifeblood of the forgotten neighborhoods of Washington, D.C... A skillful, elegiac collection, with remarkably little sociology.” *The Library Journal* writes, “Although these experiences will be unfamiliar to many readers, Jones instills humanity in his characters and stories.”

“Many readers”? “Forgotten neighborhoods”? In essence, Jones is to be praised because, even though these stories are about black people, they’re safe for white people too. The unhappy irony of his career is that he writes only about black Americans, but his readers—for reasons of “sociology,” of course—are mostly white. His task, practically speaking, is therefore to make the “unfamiliar” world of black America intelligible to white readers without transforming it into a cartoon. It’s discouraging to remember that Frederick Douglass faced the same problem.

But though it’s unfair to expect Jones or anyone else to speak for the multitude, he seems to take that role upon himself. His narrators are remote and authoritative. They see and know everything; they attempt to express themselves in grand terms; and they never make jokes. His story collections explore every aspect of black life in twentieth-century Washington, from gun violence to gospel music, and in these encyclopedic portraits of one urban community, they tell the story of a century of halting progress and intangible loss, a century during which “the cohesion born and nurtured in the South” has become a “memory.” With *The Known World,* a novel about a freed slave who comes to own slaves himself, Jones reaches deeper into the past to challenge one of the fundamental myths of American history: the myth that slavery was, first and foremost, an aspect of racism.

With every book, Jones casts his net wider; with every book, his ambition grows. And with every book, he seems to become stranger and more confused. In *All Aunt Hagar’s Children,* his most recent collection, the narrative voice is clumsy and anxious, constantly interrupting itself to clarify minute chronological details or insert irrelevant background information. Jones seems overwhelmed by a need to lay it all out, to make everything plain, and the result is a baffling welter of detail in which it’s often difficult to locate the story. But despite the artistic superiority of *Lost in the City* and *The Known World,* it is this third book that haunts me. What makes it a failure is not some loss of nerve or paucity of sentiment, but something more—and for all its miscues (or maybe because of them), it seems to speak more urgently than the other books to the real predicament of black America.

*Lost in the City* is Jones’s first book, was published to great acclaim in 1992 and has just been reissued in a twentieth-anniversary edition. It is an elegant collection set in Washington between the 1960s and the early ’90s. Like the stories in James Joyce’s *Dubliners,* to which it owes a great deal, these stories are limited in scope: none of those set in the ’60s are overtly concerned with the civil rights movement, for

Lost in the City

Stories.


The Known World.


All Aunt Hagar’s Children

Stories.


All by Edward P. Jones

instance. The narrator of “The Store” hires a woman named Gloria 5X, but he mentions it only in passing: “Before she lost her slave name, the world...had called her Pud-din. And that is what I learned to call her.” Likewise, “The First Day” is the story of an illiterate mother registering her daughter for school. There is no mention of Little Rock or *Brown v. Board of Education,* but her bewilderment and anxiety make it perfectly clear that she knows what’s at stake. She has brought not only her daughter’s birth certificate and immunization records, but “a doctor’s letter concerning [her daughter’s] bout with chicken pox, rent receipts...a letter about [their] public assistance payments, even her marriage license.”

It’s only in the interplay between these stories that the political and historical circumstances become unmistakable. “The First Day” ends with a child in school, but the next story begins with a teenager playing hooky. In the title story, Lydia, a corporate lawyer with a cocaine habit, has offered to buy her mother a house in a better neighborhood, but her mother refuses because she doesn’t feel she can live among so many white people. In the next story, Santiago Moses, himself a drug dealer, buys his own mother the house of her “poor women dreams.” She lives there with Rickey Madison, Santiago’s driver, who gets drunk in bed and tells her about the money that her son makes—so much money that it must be “some kinda sin just to have it at one time in a place that wasn’t a bank.” On their own, these stories seem to describe very different situations, but side by side they speak in chorus. Upward mobility is possible for these women only if they accept uncomfortable and sometimes dreadful moral concessions.

Like these two mothers, most of the characters in *Lost in the City* are troubled by a kind of uneasiness, but often this feeling has nothing to do with their present economic circumstances: it is an existential unease that derives ultimately from slavery. *Lost in the City* is reserved in its treatment of the subject, and slavery is present for these characters the same way it is for the reader—as an evil miasma. Only occasionally does Jones make it plain, as when the narrator of “The Store” casually says that his mother “would have sold [him] back into slavery for a good cup of coffee.” Or again, in the title story, the reader is told that Lydia will soon “pass a point in her life where she would have earned more than all her ancestors put together, all of them, all the way back to Eve.” Whatever the extent of their successes (or failures), these characters know that they are only a few

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generations removed from slavery. They live with the fear that everything they’ve worked for might suddenly be taken from them.

In *The Known World*, which is set in a fictional Virginia county in the 1840s, Jones makes this grim legacy his principal subject. The novel takes place on a slave plantation owned and operated by the widow of a black man named Henry Townsend, himself a former slave, and it describes not only the familiar horrors of plantation life, but the deeper contradictions and ambiguities of slave society.

In *The Known World*, free black children are taught to pronounce their “-ing” words in *The Known World*, free black children are taught to pronounce their g’s in order to distinguish themselves from slave children. The fear of white policemen that is so pervasive in Jones’s stories also has its roots here, a world in which free blacks are terrified of the patrollers responsible for catching runaways. If policemen, ostensibly neutral, are later perceived to represent white authority and white interests, their precursors in *The Known World* are quite literally paid to do violence to black slaves.

In case there’s any doubt about these connections, the narrator frequently jumps forward in time to offer some glimpse of the future. Sometimes that future falls within the novel’s compass, but often it’s a distant one: “When the War between the States came, the number of slave-owning blacks in Manchester would be down to five.” After several pages, time suddenly shifts: “Years later, after Rita disappeared...”; in “Philadelphia years later, as she paid for all those posters with Minerva’s picture on them...” In the first place, these flash-forwards reframe the story so that the emphasis is not on what will happen—in a general way, we already know that—but on how it will come to pass and what it will mean for these characters. Here, the Civil War is not an impermeable barrier or a grand theatrical melodrama; it is only one part of the backdrop against which the urgent drama of daily life is played out.

But even though *The Known World* addresses itself to the future, it has a great deal to say about the more distant past. At the heart of the story is Henry Townsend, who lives in slavery until his father—the upright and capable Augustus, who has already purchased his own freedom and the freedom of his wife—earns enough to buy him and set him free. Henry has social ambitions, and here, as in *Lost in the City*, upward mobility demands a moral sacrifice: to be a gentleman, he must buy slaves. His parents are outraged—“You could not have hurt me more if you had cut off my arms and my legs,” Augustus says—but the other characters accept Henry’s choice as a matter of course. White patrollers defend his interests, white slave owners tolerate him, and his own slaves are concerned only that he is the master. The remarkable thing about him is that he is unremarkable. To a reader who grows up with the standard elementary school narrative of American history—the story of an oppressed black minority struggling to gain its freedom in a society created by a slave-holding white majority—the fact of Henry Townsend is astonishing and troubling.

Why doesn’t Townsend constitute an unacceptable challenge to the foundational ideas of the slave society? It may be tempting to imagine that he is the beneficiary of some misbegotten political reform—an attempt to make slavery more modern, perhaps, by stripping it of its racial character—but in that case one would expect to hear some grumbling from the novel’s white characters. In fact, Henry is a relic of the deep past. He exists—that is to say, his existence is possible—because, though the American colonies were built by black slaves, they were not founded on the idea of a black underclass. That idea evolved gradually and spontaneously, for many reasons and over a period of many years, and it evolved in response to a need that was economic. The New World plantations needed workers, and because political turmoil in West Africa made black slaves more readily available, and because people from West and Central Africa were likely to have some
resistance to the tropical diseases that made plantation life so terrifying, landowners came to favor black slaves over indentured or kidnapped European laborers. Race and racism were therefore not the foundation of the New World plantation economy, but one of its first products. This is the reason that racial slavery could accommodate a contradiction as radical as Henry Townsend. The concept of race served the purposes of wealth; Henry’s money would always have been more important than his skin tone.

In Gainesville, Florida, where I live, one often sees Confederate flag tattoos that bear the legend “Heritage Not Hate.” The idea, at least on the face of it, is ludicrous. There is no South, no sweet tea or pecan pie, without slavery. But that isn’t what the tattoo is about. It means, approximately, “Just because I’m proud of where I come from doesn’t mean I’m a racist.” And the sentiment may even be sincere, but The Known World makes it very clear that racism is only one feature of a larger and more enduring evil. In Jones’s vision, the antebellum South is not some distant and vanished agrarian society but a part of the modern world, a place where capitalism was allowed to reach its most complete and most brutal expression. Many of the cultural, political and economic institutions that we claim to value, that we may celebrate as part of our “heritage,” are themselves founded on the ethos of exploitation that made slavery possible. One of the dreadful ironies of Reconstruction is that the Fourteenth Amendment, which was intended to give full legal rights to freed slaves, later became one of the legal justifications for the doctrine of corporate personhood. Even though the Reconstruction amendments were in one sense a form of economic regulation—they made it illegal to buy and sell people, a transaction that should be perfectly legal in a truly “free” market—the Fourteenth Amendment also inaugurated an era in which multinational corporations exercise unimaginable power. Emancipation therefore did nothing to change the underlying reality. If many of the old plantations fell apart in the United States, it’s hardly a secret that sweatshops and big plantations still flourish abroad under the banner of neoliberal economics.

This is a problem for Jones the fiction writer, because if it’s true—if race and racism were creations of the plantation economy, and if that economy has persisted in various forms and in various places—then the correspondence between Lost in the City and The Known World may not be as straightforward as it appears. It’s one thing to illustrate the connection between the patrollers in the novel and the policemen in the stories, but what is the causal relationship? We have our gut reaction: all of this seems very bad! There’s more to a tattoo than meets the eye! And that’s important—but what else is there to say?

Fiction can illustrate such a connection without having to articulate its deeper meaning, which is important because it’s not always possible to articulate the deeper meaning. For me, Lost in the City is complete and persuasive and powerful. But Jones himself seems to have been transformed by the experience of writing The Known World, and though he returns, in All Aunt Hagar’s Children, to contemporary Washington, he is no longer able to approach that material in the same way. These stories are wider in scope, messier, with more characters, more subplots, more backstory. He seems intent on something new, and the results are mixed at best. The title story is a lamentable stab at hard-boiled detective fiction. “The Devil Swims Across the Anastasia River” and “A Poor Guatemalan Dreams of a Downtown Ocean in Peru” look like magical realism. “Bad Neighbors” is an imitation of John Cheever (it begins: “Even before the fracas with Terence Stagg, people all along both sides of the 1400 block of 8th Street, N.W., could see the Benningtons for what they really were”); Jones must intend some kind of irony—Cheever is the great poet of the complacent white middle class, and Jones is often writing about black people who struggle all their lives to become middle class—but it doesn’t come off.

This formal uncertainty is mirrored in the prose, which at times seems maddened by the need to explain itself. Here is the beginning of a paragraph from the second page of “Root Worker”:

“Mr. Morton,” Maddie said not a month after becoming companion to Alberta, “can I speak some words to you?” The murder of her best friend by Maddie’s brother had awakened Maddie to the fact that she had been rather blind to the pain of others, even those close to her. “Just a few words, Mr. Morton,” Maddie said. She spoke not long after lunch one day in late May, a rare mild day in a month that had seen more violently hot weather than even Washington was used to.

What’s happening here? This scene-setting, this fumbling with time, threatens constantly to give way to brisker and brighter prose, but it never does. An inconsequential four-line exchange takes several pages. The story is derailed by digression and qualification.

It seems clear that Jones intends some kind of synthesis of The Known World and Lost in the City, but it’s not clear how the novel’s wider historical perspective ought to inflect these stories about contemporary life. “Root Worker” does seem to grope toward some kind of balance between past and present: a doctor accompanies her parents on a visit to a traditional healer in North Carolina, where her mother is cured of a psychological ailment that modern medicine has been powerless to address. The past is still alive, maybe, and still potent? A similar impulse is at work in “The Devil Swims Across the Anastasia River,” which begins: “Some fourteen years after her grandmother walked out into the Atlantic Ocean on her way to heaven, Laverne Shepherd went into the Safeway on Good Hope Road, S.E., and for the first time came face-to-face with the Devil.” The traditions of an older world share space with the Safeway—and not just any Safeway, but the one on Good Hope Road. The Devil is real and alive and present, but at the same time he’s an ancestral memory. Laverne’s grandmother has spent some time with him on “a red country road in Georgia.”

This collection abounds with grandmothers who have seen “only the morning, afternoon, and evening of a cotton field” and men who struggle to make “enough of a living raising crops so that they could put more and more distance between themselves and the legacy of slavery”—but the more explicit these links to the past become, the more difficult it is to say what they’re supposed to mean. “Root Worker” is confusing not because it’s too elliptical, but because it’s too specific with respect to time and place, too hopeful that truth lies in the obsessive retailing of facts. That specificity does not illuminate any intangible truths, whatever those truths might be; it only highlights their intangibility.

In a certain way, Jones is defeated by the quality that is also most admirable in his work: his belief that it’s possible to talk about the presence of the past in a straightforward way, without humor or irony or paradox. His overbearing narrators express themselves with a certainty that suggests the language is fully under their control, but American Eng-
lish is haunted by the memory of what it once had to describe. The importance of Barack Obama’s election can never be overstated, for instance, but its importance is partly rhetorical: Obama’s mother was white, so when we say that Obama himself is black, we articulate a cultural rather than a physical reality. Even in celebrating the election of a black president, we affirm the old distinctions, the one-drop rule, the foundation of the slave system.

This is the kind of problem Jones has to deal with in All Aunt Hagar’s Children, and that’s also why the collection is important: it is a manifestation of the confusion we all feel when we try to talk about these things. It is not true that Caesar Matthews, in “Old Boys, Old Girls,” turns to crime because American society has given him no other option. And yet it’s also true that he turns to crime because American society has given him no other option. Jones cannot make sense of this paradox. His stately prose doesn’t allow him the flexibility to grapple with something that obviously is and obviously isn’t what it seems to be.

In the end, he needs a voice, not an omniscient narrator—a voice that never pretends to anything but deep subjectivity; a voice that speaks in a comfortable vernacular, leaves everything out and never worries about its own hypocrisy. Flannery O’Connor’s characters don’t know anything, and they don’t care; James Baldwin is the angriest writer in American literature. Both of these writers get to the heart of things: race in America is not a matter of cool third-person narration but of tormented individual experience. If it’s an experience we all have in common, it’s still one that we experience differently and to which we react differently. We get our tattoos, we write our essays, we tear our hair out, we buy a gun. That is the truth of it, and it’s awful, and a responsible narrator—a truly omniscient narrator—ought to say so.

But I think Jones knows that. In his minute attention to his own characters, in the complexity of their motives and apprehensions, he judges correctly that no political or cultural institution is as complex as the human heart. The best thing about All Aunt Hagar’s Children are the unaccountable characters who will not conform to type, people like the “aging Jesuit” who discovers “too late in his life that while God walked with him, he did not enjoy walking with God.” Jones’s obvious love for these people is worth every- thing. That’s the hard part, after all. That’s where we can find hope. So in the end, he’s already saying the thing he needs to say—the grim, honest, equivocal, impossible truth. Now all he needs to do is step aside and let his characters say it for themselves.
of 2008, China has become more assertive. Luttwak catalogs how it has staked expansive claims to the South China Sea, reopened disputes over maritime territories and sharpened the language of its diplomacy. Country by country, he reviews the reactions prompted by China’s shift. His analysis is informative, but it also manages to be at once alarmist and humdrum. Luttwak hypes both Chinese grandeur and its neighbors’ resistance, imagining them as portents while conceding how minor they’ve been so far. Twice we hear that “Chinese warships saluted on the high conception of strategy depends on politics in order to mean anything in any particular time and place.

Because pure strategy’s yield is meager, Luttwak ends up becoming the Sinologist he initially forswore. His prose comes alive as he diagnoses China with a “virulent” strain of strategic “autism.” China’s inward-looking leaders, he argues, can scarcely comprehend the outside world and show scant regard for foreign sensitivities. Though such autism afflicts every great nation, including the United States, China’s case is worse thanks to its deep past. Its tributary system cast all others as barbarians; ancient texts like The Art of War emphasized the use of clever stratagems against culturally dissimilar states. These legacies pose a “specifically Chinese and most peculiar” obstacle in a world of sovereign equality and cultural difference.

Luttwak writes as though Chinese leaders have stepped straight from the first millennium, or earlier, into the third. He says next to nothing about the twentieth century, when China not only learned to live among legal equals but also became a paramount defender of the doctrine of state sovereignty against Western interventionism. Nor does he burden us with evidence that Chinese leaders think as reductively about their past as he does. Vociferating in a vacuum, Luttwak goes right ahead and contradicts his whole thesis by declaring himself “confident that China will not ultimately disrupt the equilibrium of world politics, because the Chinese themselves will moderate their conduct as they advance culturally as well as economically (two different translations of The Iliad are now on sale).” Where this interjection leaves the chapter titled “Why Current Policies Will Persist” is no clearer than the reason translations of The Iliad—not exactly a pacifistic text—should herald geopolitical moderation.

What is to be taken seriously about The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy is the credibility its kind of reasoning may command in the United States. If US policymakers buy Luttwak’s line and China’s military keeps growing, it would be a small step to conclude that the country is hopelessly autistic and must be contained. Economic interests should counteract the coming of a new cold war, and that alone may make the difference. But if we achieve peace and cooperation with China, it will be not because of strategists like Luttwak, but despite them.

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Robert Caro has been tracking his great white whale for thirty years now. As with any undertaking of this scale, an aura of legend attaches to the labor. First there is the Ahab-like devotion with which he has pursued the life of Lyndon Baines Johnson. In 1977, not long after publishing his epic biography of Robert Moses, New York City’s master builder, Caro decamped to Texas Hill Country for three years to take in the air of LBJ’s childhood. He spent a night outdoors in a sleeping bag to better fathom the desolation of the territory. Along with his wife, Ina, he has combed through every possible archive and ballot box; his appetite for firsthand impressions from LBJ’s entourage is matched only by his allergy to post-1960 scholarship. All of this fact-hunting and what you might call Method research has made Caro—who started his career as a reporter for *Newsday*—something of a hero for American journalists: he is the guildsman who made good and raised their craft to a level that academics can only envy.

But he is far from universally admired by his contemporaries. Garry Wills and Sean Wilentz have dismissed him as a myth maker who rhapsodizes the life of Johnson into a morality play. In their view, Caro is hopelessly committed to seeing the thirty-sixth president through the prism of good and evil: LBJ the civil rights crusader versus LBJ the scourge of Vietnam. Caro’s anatomy of political power is too crude, they argue; he thinks LBJ’s secret was simply to be always the greediest, most ambitious and ruthless man in the room.

This is a serious criticism, but like the journalistic halo over Caro, it confuses the trappings of his achievement for its core. Caro has always been more valuable as a guide to how power works in postwar America in particular than how it works in some general abstract sense. Biography would not initially seem to be the form best suited to his purpose. The locus of power in this country is never fixed; it doesn’t reside in one person or single power elite, or in one institution, agency, economic interest, media outlet or popular movement, but in the shifting imbalances among them. Caro’s fortune in choosing LBJ as an entry for understanding the elements of American power is that Johnson moved through so many of them—and responded to and manipulated so many more—throughout

*Chicken Wire and Telephone Calls*

by THOMAS MEANEY

President Lyndon B. Johnson, October 22, 1968

*The Years of Lyndon Johnson*

The Passage of Power.
By Robert A. Caro.
Knopf. 712 pp. $35.

Thomas Meaney is a doctoral candidate in history at Columbia University. He last wrote for these pages on Charles de Gaulle.
his long career. Indeed, the great drama of reading The Years of Lyndon Johnson comes in watching LBJ master the machinery of American politics like one of those security contractors hired by companies to test the strengths and weaknesses of their systems.

The Passage of Power, the fourth installment of Caro’s LBJ saga, takes us from Johnson’s last two years in the Senate to his unsatisfactory days as vice president—the one office whose riddle he was never able to crack—to the summit of his political might in the year following President Kennedy’s assassination. With unshakable faith in the value of repetition, Caro shows, again and again, how LBJ was not only an expert counter of votes and “reader of men” but also a sensitive monitor of the national pulse. In The Passage of Power, that pulse is determined by the civil rights struggle, and LBJ rallies his matchless skills to the cause. But however sincere his convictions were—and Caro convinces us that they were sincere—it’s nevertheless clear that LBJ seized on civil rights because it was politically sensible to do so. His brilliance as a politician lay not in his idealism but his opportunism. His career also manifested a corollary dynamic: the more adept a democratic politician is, the more perfect a demagogue he or she will be. LBJ’s calculated populism identified tidal shifts in public opinion and then sought to assure them with just the right degree of reform that would ensure his continued rise within the power structure. As president, Johnson could rise no further, and so Caro claims that his true nature can be discovered by chronicling his exercise of executive power. “Power always reveals,” he insists. But in fact something like the opposite happens: we witness how LBJ’s lifelong lust for power could not be entirely Caro-ized, with each detail revealing a corollary dynamic: the more efficient he must succor with the right sort of material.
with his, LBJ’s ambition has Johnson rushing to the Senate like a saloon in his own private John Ford production:

Shortly before noon, the tall double doors at the rear of the Chamber’s center aisle would swing open—wide open, so hard had they been pushed—and Lyndon Johnson would be coming through them. As they swung, he would, without pausing, snatch the brown file folder Gerry Siegel was holding out to him, and toss an order to George Reedy out of the side of his mouth. And then he would be coming down the aisle’s four broad steps with a long, fast stride. Seeing the journalists’ heads turn, [Republican minority leader William] Knowland, realizing Johnson was approaching, would stop talking. He would sit down at his desk, waiting to hear what the Majority Leader had to say.

This passage can be faulted for its mythologizing flair, but it conveys Johnson’s sense of political theater. Caro has always been committed to isolating his subjects’ animating essence, and in Johnson it’s his will to become president. (Caro’s conviction about his subjects having some locatable essence began at the beginning—not in his biography of Moses, but in his 1957 undergraduate thesis on Hemingway: “Is there, somewhere, a facet of Hemingway that has remained untouched in all the talk about him?… Is there in the complete picture of Hemingway, besides the two familiar props of gin-and-bananas on the one hand and a typewriter on the other, a force looming up over both of them, motivating the one and shaping what comes out of the other? Is there a continuing theme running through all of his work? There is.”)

In *Master of the Senate*, LBJ’s ambition to occupy the Oval Office takes two forms: first, in his becoming an expert technician on legislative procedure, to the point that Johnson knew exactly when to drive a piece of legislation forward and when to stall, making him the gatekeeper through which every bill had to pass; and second, in his commanding such precise intelligence about the proclivities and whereabouts of every other senator that he rarely misfired. One of the more memorable moments in *Master* has Johnson rushing to the Senate cloakroom to call air traffic control at National Airport in order to get the plane carrying a crucial vote—Hubert Humphrey—on the ground. But the greater accomplishment that LBJ managed in the Senate was in distancing himself from his reputation as a tactician for the Southern bloc and making himself palatable to the liberal North (he had been instrumental in halting anti-lynching legislation in the Senate in 1951, so this was not easy). We watch as Johnson strokes and comforts bleeding hearts like Humphrey and reactionary shellbacks like Richard Russell—not out of any holy notion of “bipartisanship,” but because he knows it’s his only way to the top. The vital center was not a position of principle for Johnson, but a launching pad for the presidency.

LBJ had one of the most spectacular careers in the history of the Senate, yet Caro opens *The Passage of Power* with his protagonist making a series of uncharacteristic political blunders. He enters the 1960 race for the presidency too late; he fails to register how urban the American electorate has become; and he fatally underestimates the appeal of Kennedy, whom he had previously known only as “a young whipper-snapper, malaria-ridden and yellow, sickly, sickly,” who “didn’t know how to address” the Senate chair. But these miscalculations were followed by one strikingly deft wager: asked whether he wanted to join the Kennedy ticket, LBJ had his staff run the numbers to see what the odds were, historically, of vice presidents taking over from dead presidents. Just over one out of five, came the answer. With LBJ’s special knowledge of Kennedy’s health problems, he decided to take those odds.

After showing Johnson floundering in the vice presidency—an office that an earlier occupant from Texas had said wasn’t worth “a bucket of warm piss”—Caro makes it clear how decisively he sprang into action after Kennedy’s assassination. We are treated to another piece of political theater as Johnson choreographs his own inauguration in Dallas aboard Air Force One, not only arranging the famous photo with a blood-spattered Jackie front and center, but also insisting that Judge Sarah Hughes of Texas swear him in. Locating Hughes added considerable delay to the transition, but Johnson had a reason for making everybody wait: two years earlier, he had tried getting Hughes an appointment to the federal bench but had been blocked by Robert Kennedy and the president’s aide, Kenneth O’Donnell. That they agreed to appoint her after House Speaker Sam Rayburn intervened only highlighted the vice president’s impotence. Now he wanted to send a pointed message to these men that he was not to be messed with again.
n his first two years in office, LBJ led one of the most impressive cattle drives of legislation in American history. “Lyndon Johnson is getting everything through Congress except the abolition of the Republican Party—and he hasn’t tried that yet,” wrote James Reston in The New York Times. It was largely a matter of timing, according to Caro. The Kennedy administration had failed to grasp that by attempting to push through a tax cut and civil rights legislation at the same time, it had enabled the Southern bloc to hold up legislative traffic indefinitely. But Johnson knew too well how the Southerners operated—he was one of them, after all—and he brought bills forth in an order that would make it impossible for the Dixiecrats to avoid civil rights by ducking for cover behind another bill. He slashed the government budget to placate the debt fanatic Harry Byrd, who then cleared the way for LBJ to cut taxes. By speeding through the morass of the budget, LBJ was able to concentrate everything on bringing a full vote on civil rights to the floor. “You know,” said Richard Russell, chief member of the Southern bloc and a former LBJ mentor, “we could have beaten John Kennedy on civil rights, but not Lyndon Johnson.” It is perhaps one of the more severe failings of the Kennedy administration that it didn’t mobilize LBJ’s legislative skills when it had them at hand, but the overriding imperative—especially for Robert Kennedy—was that the vice president and his talents be contained.

It’s hard not to share Johnson’s joy for a few chapters in this book, as when he echoes the call of the civil rights movement—“We shall overcome”—in a joint session of Congress, or personally desegregates a club popular with faculty at the University of Texas with a black secretary on his arm. When told by an adviser that he can’t move too quickly on civil rights, he erupts with a winning line: “Well, what the hell’s the Presidency for?” Caro gives ample evidence to show that a genuine passion for equal rights swelled in LBJ. “We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights,” he said to the joint session. “We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law.” But all the while, an important point about democratic politics comes into focus, which is that Johnson’s political gift was not in carrying the banner for the cause of civil rights in the corridors of power, but in knowing the right time to do so. The civil rights cause was good for America, but one gets the unmistakable impression reading Caro that it was prosecuted with such vigor only because it also happened to be good for Lyndon Johnson.

At dozens of junctures in The Years of Lyndon Johnson, LBJ switches his political allegiance at the most opportune moment possible. He was a Roosevelt New Dealer when it was popular to be one in Texas and not a minute longer. He was anti-McCarthy by inclination, but only moved against McCarthy well after it was politically safe to do so. As LBJ put it to an intractable Texas congressman in 1957, “The problem with you is that you don’t understand that the world is trying to turn to the left. You can either get out in front and try to give some guidance, or you can continue to fight upstream, and be overwhelmed or be miserable.” Yet it was less the giving of guidance than the getting out in front that defined LBJ. One could argue that Lincoln, too, was endowed with a gift for timing when it came to something like the Emancipation Proclamation, which solved a host of strategic and political problems for him in one stroke. But in the case of Johnson, one can’t escape the sense that, had the growing public support for the civil rights movement suffered a reversal—in response to, say, an upswing of violence in the South—he would have made a hasty retreat and put civil rights back on the shelf.
Hidden Bird

Song birds enter the morning
the pre-dawn before the fires,
you know, when the night floats away
like vapor on a lake,
or like kisses in the woods.
Songs that even creation
might not remember.

Continuous, threaded, as if
a cherry pit were stuck
in the throat
to produce the trumpet of the branches.
So varies, yet never, changing
through all the days, since
reptiles fell to earth.

I give up the reason for the sound
I give up the creature of sound
and the creator of the creatures
and of us and of dawn and
air and of vacuum
and human inhumanity.
I give up the song.
I give up the place

JOSEPH CERAVOLO

December 10, 2012

indefinitely. It’s for this reason that the
movement itself was always much more of a
prime mover than any president.

Caro seems only to half acknowledge
this. *Master of the Senate* included some vivid
chapters on the civil rights movement, but
their perfunctory, montagelike feel left the
sense that it took place apart from the main
action, which was always on Capitol Hill.
Yet without a movement to bring about a
major shift in public consciousness, LBJ
would have had nothing to respond to—and
nothing on whose behalf to exercise his
legislative talents. As with the reforms that
followed the Great Depression, the Civil
Rights Act of 1964 was not triggered by sta-
tistical indices on inequality, or a president’s
visionary leadership, but by rampant strikes,
looting, rent boycotts and riots of varying
degrees of violence. Even the most power-
ful leaders within the civil rights movement
recognized that they were partaking in an
antiphonal-style power arrangement with
black congregations, as Taylor Branch has
so deftly described in his three-volume his-
tory of the movement (an ideal, even neces-
sary complement to Caro’s work).

All of this should put to rest any sense,
still held by some, that American politicians
are agenda-setters, and that in elections we
the people choose among competing “nar-
ratives.” Effective politicians like Johnson
are ideologically empty vessels, professional
litmus-test takers and inveterate oppor-
tunists. There is a critical difference here
between opportunists and pragmatists that
Caro helps us see. The pragmatist (Truman,
George H.W. Bush, Obama) harbors a set
of convictions, however vaguely felt, that
he cautiously guards and tries to further.
The opportunist (LBJ, Nixon, Clinton)
is willing to trade those values in and out
according to day-to-day shifts in the demo-
cratic weather. For all those Democrats who
claim to be suffering a deep nostalgia for
forceful presidents like Johnson—it is hard
to imagine LBJ getting bogged down in the
debt-ceiling crisis the way Obama did—it is
worth considering that, though they may
be less inspiring, pragmatists are less of a
gamble than opportunists.

This is because the kind of political
maneuvering, and requisite sense of the do-
nostic political terrain, that spurred John-
son to press his full weight behind civil
rights legislation also made quitting Viet-
nam seem impossible to him. In both cases,
LBJ strove to accommodate the popular
mood and dominant institutional logic he
found in place. He could push a civil rights
bill through Congress because it was an
institution whose mechanics he understood
better than anyone in Washington; but
he was not as practiced at outfoxing the
implacable agenda of the national security
bureaucracy. And this despite some effort:
LBJ rebuffed twelve separate attempts by
his advisers to authorize the bombing of
North Vietnam, and relented only when
Robert McNamara withheld critical infor-
mation about the Tonkin Gulf incident.

Vietnam will dominate the next
installment of *The Years of Lyndon
Johnson*. Still, LBJ’s intuitions when it
comes to foreign policy are tellingly
foreshadowed in *The Passage of Power*.
For this subject, Caro shifts into his critical
register, which he uses when he wants to cut
Johnson down to size. When it came to his
dealings with the world beyond congres-
sional districts and the Senate chambers,
the full extent of Johnson’s provincialism
and ham-fistedness was apparent early on.
The most revealing instance is the Cuban
missile crisis of 1962. When the situation
was explained to him, he recommended
“an unannounced strike”—bombing Cuba
from the air without warning—which very
well could have set off a catastrophic So-
viet response. A naval blockade, Johnson
said, would be “locking the barn after the
horse was gone,” and any gradual pressure
on the Soviets would be “telegraphing our
punch.” In this case, it was Bobby Kennedy
whose more nuanced and cautious plan
prevailed—and who, in one of the rare
moments in this biography, comes off as the
cool-headed figure.

It would be one thing if Johnson’s judg-
ment on Cuba was an isolated incident—
Caro is careful to remind us how removed
LBJ was from the daily deliberations and
intelligence reports—but an even more
damning instance of LBJ’s foreign policy
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instinct has already been featured in Master of the Senate. In that volume, Caro documented how Johnson became a national figure and first got his face on the cover of Newsweek: by steering a Defense Preparedness Subcommittee that claimed the military wasn’t stockpiling enough weapons and materiel at its bases across the country, with the unmistakable suggestion that the Truman administration was soft on communism. The reports were heavily doctored, but Caro’s point—though never explicitly formulated—is that foreign policy was always subordinate to political infighting for LBJ, as it often is for able politicians.

However much Caro may appear to lurch between Manichean extremes in his assessment of LBJ’s exercise of presidential power, he ultimately suggests that the same impulses that led Johnson to be taken as the savior of civil rights are the ones that left him with the badge of shame for Vietnam. But while this is true, it is not the entire explanation. Yes, Johnson did not grasp the dynamics of power in the international sphere—but who in the government did? After all, it was the least powerful faction in the Vietnam War—the antagonists of Ngô Đình Diệm’s repressive regime in the South—that forced the North to intervene on its behalf, an escalation as much against the will of Ho Chi Minh as LBJ.

Three thousand pages into The Years of Lyndon Johnson, our hero has been president for less than a year. Among the most impressive accomplishments of that period is his historic pace in the first hundred days—one that seems particularly hard to imagine from our present vantage point. Johnson was both the embodiment and the upholder of a powerful liberal consensus that has all but vanished from this country. The cracks began to appear in his administration and proliferated soon after it, when the epigones of Goldwater dominated. The reports were heavily doctored, and the credibility gap became the antagonists of Johnson—Lyndon Johnson—it’s a sign of its success that, like any person one knows well, he remains a bit opaque—but to make us recognize that the greatest promulgators of our ideals are at the same time uniquely suited to be their most corrosive agents.

I’m Nobody, Who Are You?

by ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

But can’t a rapper insist, like other artists, on a fictional reality, in which he is somehow still on the corner, despite occupying the penthouse suite?… Can’t he still rep his block?” So Zadie Smith wondered of Jay-Z on an afternoon not long ago. The two were lunching for a profile by Smith published in The New York Times Magazine in September, a few weeks before the opening of the Barclays Center, the new entertainment and sports mecca in downtown Brooklyn for which Jay has served as the homegrown poster boy.

The premise of the novelist’s questions was the criticism that the rapper-mogul might be “too distant now from what once made him real”—the poverty, the drugs, the hustle, the street, all the themes he’s kept riffing on well past his first million and 100 million. It’s a charge familiar to Jay-Z’s fans, and Smith’s response in the article to her own line of questioning will be equally familiar to hers: “Who cares if they’re keeping it real?” she retorted on behalf of Jay-Z and his recent collaborator, Kanye West. The question neatly summarizes the climax of the second section of “Speaking in Tongues,” her wonderful 2008 essay on Barack Obama, in which she demolished the accusation that any success blacks achieve in wider Anglo society amounts to a betrayal of their roots.

To me, the instruction “keep it real” is a sort of prison cell, two feet by five. The fact is, it’s too narrow. I just can’t live comfortably in there. “Keep it real” replaced the blessed and solid genetic fact of Blackness with a flimsy imperative. It made Blackness a quality each individual black person was constantly in danger of losing.

“How absurd that all seems now,” Smith concluded, and the fact, put so simply, seemed indisputable.

“Speaking in Tongues” appears in the collection Changing My Mind (2009). The title is a disclaimer for whatever contradictions and inconsistencies might arise between the autobiographical reflections, reportage, film criticism and book reviews gathered in its pages, but it’s a credo as well, both literary and personal. Smith may be contemporary English fiction’s most ardent champion of the right to change one’s mind and, above all, one’s self, an idea that’s been at the center of her work since the publication of her first novel, White Teeth, in 2000, when she was 24. There is a moment in that book when the young Londoner Magid Mahfooz Mushred Mtbasmin Iqbal is discovered by his Bangladeshi parents to be going by the name Mark Smith at school. Uproar ensues, but still the question hovers: Well, why not? Magid, longing to be part of a different, more middle-class, more British family, unintentionally grasps what his parents, clutching their old-world ways, don’t: that he can be—and on some level already is—a Smith who covets holidays in France as well as an Iqbal who never gets farther than “day-trips to Blackpool to visit aunties.” He’s only 9, and could already plot a small map from the blocks he has to rep.

White Teeth is a comic novel brimming with a rare fondness for the foibles of the human condition, and where a different writer might have insisted on casting Magid’s split state as a grim symbol of alienation—generational, racial, postcolonial, that Triple Crown of modern angst—Smith observes it with a wink. She sees humor in all this identity confusion, and hope, too. “You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,” Walt Whitman warns readers liable to be baffled by his giddy mutations in Song of Myself, then alchemizes the threat of his strangeness into a communal blessing: “But I shall be good health to you nevertheless.” Along with the rest of White Teeth’s motley crew, Magid Iqbal hails from Willesden, the multicultural London neighborhood

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where Smith herself grew up, the daughter of a white father and a Jamaican mother many years his junior. But Magid would be an ideal resident of “Dream City,” the Whitmanesque utopia she conjures in “Speaking in Tongues,” where “the unified singular self is an illusion…. It’s the kind of town where the wise man says ‘I’ cautiously, because I feels like too straight and singular a phoneme to represent the true multiplicity of his experience.” Dream City is a place, in other words, where a rapper could choose to travel from his old corner to the penthouse suite and back with no more effort than it takes to step into the elevator, and Smith ended her Times Magazine profile by suggesting just how close to reality this vision might come. After Jay compared his early years in Brooklyn’s notorious Marcy Houses, now the stuff of myth, to the unfathomably different circumstances that his baby daughter has been born into, Smith condensed the distance into four syllables: “It’s a new day.”

That sentiment of progress and possibility is good. It’s better than good. It’s necessary and urgent, never more so. Then why, after reading the profile and feeling stirred by Smith’s conviction, did I sense her conviction waver when I read it again, like a smile stretched too thin? Beware of novelists bearing the cheery sound-bite slogans of politicians, particularly when the novelist in question is as skilled as Smith at parsing the tortuous nuances of personhood. Beneath her optimism and certainty, there seemed to run a fissure of doubt. Something wasn’t being said; some question wasn’t being asked. After all, we may each be entitled to a “fictional reality” in which the past doesn’t have to be shed to make room for the present, and the fact of the present doesn’t discount the truth of the past—but how to pull off that balancing act? It takes a superstar to transform the housing
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"God shouldn’t be put in charge of everything until we get to know Him a little better."
—Kurt Vonnegut

“We have to have fun while trying to stave off the forces of darkness because we hardly ever win, so it’s the only fun we get to have.”
—Molly Ivins
The Nation. November 17, 2003

projects of his childhood into the gleaming victory of a Barclays Center, but what about everyone else? And if you do get to the top, only to find that the voice hounding you with charges of inauthenticity is your own, what then?

N

W, Smith’s new novel, is named after the postal code for the North West of London, which counts Willesden as part of its domain. There we find Leah Hanwell and Natalie Blake, two women in their 30s who grew up as best friends in the Caldwell housing project (or “council estate,” in British English). Leah, an only child, is white. Natalie, the second of three, is black, although these distinctions mean relatively little when the girls are young and getting to know each other in that stretch of childhood before all differences come outfitted with a strict set of social mores. There is a basic equivalency, a symmetry, between the two. The girls do everything together. Their mothers are both nurses, neither “in any sense a member of the bourgeoisie but neither did they consider themselves solidly of the working class either.” The middle Natalie, it’s true, is fascinated by the middle-class accoutrements of Leah’s family life—tea trays for tea and trolleys for snacks; a hushed apartment in place of the cramped chaos of her own flat; talk-radio rather than a DJ blaring all the time—but Leah is equally thrilled when the Blakes include her on a Saturday outing to McDonald’s.

Yet by the time we come across this background in “Host,” a lengthy section that tracks the story of Natalie’s life as it unfolds from childhood through marriage, we are halfway through the novel and long disabused of any suspicion that the two women may have remained in perfect sync. NW begins in the thick of adulthood with “Visitation,” an extended chapter narrated from Leah’s perspective in the third person. Unsurprisingly, things are no longer quite so balanced. When we first encounter the friends together, Leah and her husband, Michel, a handsome French hairdresser of West African extraction, are visiting the much larger, much more luxurious home of Natalie and her husband, Frank De Angelis, a handsome banker conceived from a hasty coupling between his extravagant Italian principessa of a mother and a Trinidadian train guard she met in a park. Location-wise, the De Angelis residence isn’t far removed from Leah and Michel’s own pleasant council-subsidized apartment, but what distance there is makes all the difference, as the narrator, filling in Leah’s thoughts, observes: “Leah passes the old estate every day on the walk to the corner shop. She can see it from her back yard. Nat lives just far enough to avoid it.”

Leah, who studied philosophy in college, works at a shabby nonprofit where her colleagues playfully chide her for being the only woman without a kid. Natalie has become a high-powered barrister, juggling the demands of her smart phone with those of her two toddlers. As the group sips wine in the garden and the children play too close to the barbecue, she projects a powerful detachment from her old friend. Her attitude is “serene, a little imperious. Insincere.” Even a straightforward chat about long-lost acquaintances from their high school, Brayton, grinds to a halt as Natalie fluctuates between distraction and indifference. Leah, slighted, grows resentful:

Perhaps Brayton, too, no longer exists for her. It’s gone, cast off. She is probably as surprised to have come out of Brayton as it is surprised to have spawned her. Nat is the girl done good from their thousand-kid madhouse; done too good, maybe, to recall where she came from. To live like this you would have to forget everything that came before. How else could you manage?

We know what she’s getting at: Natalie sold out! She stopped keeping it real! To twist the knife, Leah brings up a boy who “sat next to Keisha. Back when she was Keisha.” This is a pointed revelation. Like Magid Iqbal, like Jay-Z (a k a Shawn Carter), like Smith herself (who started life as Sadie Smith), Natalie, the reader discovers, decided to change her name on her way up. “I forget that you did this,” Michel says before she can switch the subject. “It’s like: ‘Dress for the job you want not the one you have.’”

T

he comparison is embarrassingly frank, but Michel means it as a compliment. He, too, wants to see himself as on the way to somewhere else. If he feels any homesickness for the life he left behind, it doesn’t show. (Who is his family? Why do Leah and Michel never visit France? Why isn’t he given a surname? The novel doesn’t say.) Michel is a speechifier, a self-starter, the kind of person who would shine on his own daytime TV talk-show. “From the first day I was stepping into this country I have my head on correctly; I was very clear: I am going
up the ladder, one rung at least,” he tells his silent, skeptical wife as they lie in bed together, surely just the latest in a string of similar soliloquies. A different, “illegal” conceit occurs to Leah in the garden: Natalie, she thinks, is a “coconut”—brown skin, white within.

The spite in that insult masks a subtle, and corrosive, brand of shame. Though Leah doesn’t label it outright, Natalie’s carefully curated domesticity of “cake ingredients and fancy rugs and throw cushions and upholstered chairs in chosen fabrics” is as white in its litany of signifiers as a Martha Stewart catalog spread. Running a home that seems, in every particular, to fulfill the promise of those tea trays she first encountered at the Hanwell house, Natalie inhabits the destiny that somehow passed Leah by.

“What was the purpose of preparing for a life never intended for her?” Leah wonders bitterly while slogging through another meeting at work, thinking of the “fancy degree” that has turned out to be all but pointless in her social services job. Her slip into the passive voice hints at what will become relentlessly clear over the course of the novel: Leah cannot figure out how to see herself as the agent of her own experience, or to use a phrase she overhears on the radio, “the sole author of the dictionary that defines me.” “A good line—write it out on the back of a magazine,” she instructs herself, self-help style, an intention whose immediate defeat Smith slyly chalks up to a technicality: “Pencil leaves no mark on magazine pages.”

Reflecting on their childhoods, Natalie remembers Leah as a shape-shifter, the kid who could hang with anybody from the estate and, in college, mixed among all types, from philosophers to ravers to environmental activists. Natalie is jealous of Leah’s ease, a quality that she—focused, serious, solitary—never had herself. As an adult, Leah’s talent for moving among worlds has stranded her somewhere permanently in between. She’s the odd one out in any crowd, they too must find themselves called upon to play the part of tokens. Smith is writing in the great tradition of English novelists who home in on meals, with their ready markers of class and culture (“The spinach is farm to table”), as preset stages for this kind of conflict. Think of the unctuous Mr. Collins preparing Lizzy Bennet, in Pride and Prejudice, for dinner at Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s with a classic bit of advice: “Lady Catherine will not think the worse of you for being simply dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved.” At a brunch in the gentrifying Willesden with Frank and another couple, Imran and Amee, Natalie—a veteran of the absurd de Bourgh—like formal dinners required as part of law school and barristers’ training—casts herself in much the same terms:

They were all four of them providing

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Like Leah, Natalie is adept at parodying the way she knows she is seen by others. It’s a basic technique of survival and, when useful, manipulation. “Look, we’re both educated brothers,” Frank tells the waiter at the upscale café to get some eggs taken off the bill, though coming from her boarding-school-bred husband, that note of shared struggle rings false. “She dislikes being reminded of her own inconsistencies,” Leah coolly observes in the De Angeli garden.

In her wariness and vulnerability, Natalie is like Rodney Banks, her high school boyfriend, Brayton’s other “miracle of self-invention.” Religious, studious, relentlessly disciplined, young Rodney carried a copy of the King James Bible and The Prince wherever he went. Smith doesn’t mention what Rodney’s preferred Bible reading was (something Old Testament and unforgiving would be apt), but she does tell us which passages he highlighted in Machiavelli: “The difficult situation and the newness of my kingdom force me to do these things, and guard my borders everywhere.” Machiavelli, too, is quoting, in his case from the doomed Dido in The Aeneid. Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee: Natalie can’t risk letting her defenses down, and Carthage is a long way from Dream City.

Since she began publishing essays, Smith has been remarkably candid about her concerns as a novelist. In the six-year hiatus between On Beauty, her last novel, and NW, she has scattered a trail of crumbs the size of cupcakes to lead us through her evolving thoughts on how she wants to be making novels, creating characters, staging scenes and situations.

Her watchword is influence. In a talk she gave at Columbia University, collected in Changing My Mind as “That Crafty Feeling,” Smith spoke of writers who assiduously avoid the taint of all other novels while trying to produce their own. She does things differently—not by choice, I’d hazard, but by nature and inner compulsion: “My writing desk is covered in open novels. I read lines to swim in a certain sensibility, to strike a particular note, to encourage rigour when I’m too sentimental, to bring verbal ease when I’m syntactically uptight.” For unassailable backup, she brought John Keats into her corner. Since discovering the poet at 14, Smith has felt “a bond with him, a bond based on class.” Like Smith, Keats “made his own scene out of the books of his library. He never feared influence—he devoured it. My writing desk is covered in open novels. I read lines to swim in a certain sensibility, to strike a particular note, to encourage rigour when I’m too sentimental, to bring verbal ease when I’m syntactically uptight.” For unassailable backup, she brought John Keats into her corner. Since discovering the poet at 14, Smith has felt “a bond with him, a bond based on class.” Like Smith, Keats “made his own scene out of the books of his library. He never feared influence—he devoured influences. He wanted to learn from them, even at the risk of their voices swamping his own.”

Voice is different from its cousin, style. Critics have made much of the fact that Smith’s three previous novels are written in markedly distinct modes, her themes and points of reference refracted, like the beads of a kaleidoscope, into new patterns each time around. The ribaldry and humor of White Teeth, with its panoply of characters stuffed into a series of plots and settings, from a World War II battlefield to a farcically inept Islamic fundamentalist youth group, gave way to the colder, stiffer tricks of The Autograph Man (2002), which in turn morphed into the lush realism of On Beauty. With that novel, it seemed that Smith had finally found her mark, not because she had abandoned an experimental sensibility for a more traditional vein, but because the form, which
In style, voice and the interplay of influences, PW is a perplexing creation. Long before the book’s larger structure becomes apparent, the story has an ominous tone. The texture of the prose is still distinctly Smith’s, but its color has changed, a familiar, bright picture seen through smudged and darkened glass. Sentences are curt and clipped, meted out in stingy servings of nouns and verbs denied the luxury of richer grammar. The effect is jumpy, jittery, the early scenes infused with the same kind of foreboding that causes the guard at the start of Hamlet to call out, “Who’s there?” It’s a reasonable question.

Who is there in a passage like this one, which opens the book:

The fat sun stalls by the phone masts. Anti-climb paint turns sulphurous on school gates and lampposts. In Willesden people go barefoot, the streets turn European, there is a mania for eating outside. She keeps to the shade. Redheaded. On the radio: I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me. A good line—write it out on the back of a magazine. In a hammock, in the garden of a basement flat. Fenced in, on all sides.

No matter where Leah attempts to begin, Pauline returns to this point. The whole story gets run through: from Dublin to Kilburn, a rare Prod on the wing, back when most were of the other persuasion. Heading for the wards, though, like the rest of the girls. Flirted with the O’Rourke boys, the brickies, but wanted better, being so auburn and fine-featured and already a midwife. Waited too long. Nested at twilight with a quiet widower, an Englishman who didn’t drink. The O’Rourke’s ended up builder’s merchants with half of Kilburn High Road in their pockets. For which she would have put up with a bit of drink. Thank God she retrained. (Radiography.) Where would she be otherwise? This story, once rationed, offered a few times a year, now bursts through every phone call, including this one, which has nothing at all to do with Pauline. Time is compressing for the mother, she has a short distance left to go. She means to squeeze the past into a thing small enough to take with her. It’s the daughter’s job to listen. She’s no good at it.

The portrait, expertly dispatched in the space of a paragraph, is actually a triptych. There is Pauline fully formed, seen through Leah’s lens, conveyed to us through Smith’s diction and cadences. The vocabulary (“Prod” for Protestant, “brickies” for bricklayers) is Pauline’s; the restless tone, the boredom and irritation that bookend the story, are Leah’s. The authorial touch that seeps through in words like “compressing” to describe aging, and “rationed” to capture Pauline’s onetime attitude to her past, belongs entirely to Smith, subtly shaping the information for the reader to receive.

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Four gardens along, in the estate, a grim girl on the third floor screams Anglo-Saxon at nobody. Juliet balcony, projecting for miles. It ain’t like that. Nah it ain’t like that. Don’t you start. Fag in hand. Fleshy, lobster-red.

The language moves so quickly that it took me a number of readings to understand, in a flash, that this was not a description of a walk. I had been imagining Leah strolling through Willesden, a homage to Leopold Bloom wandering through Dublin, or to Clarissa Dalloway plunging into the throng of the Strand on the morning of her party. The passage reaches for the quicksilver rhythm invented by Joyce and Woolf, attempting, through words, to press as close as possible to all forms of sensory and cerebral experience. But Leah is in her garden, in a hammock, listening to the radio compete with her neighbor’s half of a phone conversation. Is she the one who thinks of herself as “Fenced in, on all sides”? Or is it Smith, alerting us to the greater problem of Leah’s condition?

Before Ezra Pound edited it into The Waste Land, T.S. Eliot had called his poem He Do the Police in Different Voices, and here, as in both versions of the poem, there is something ominous in the cacophonous jumble of character, voice and thought that builds as the sentences accrete. “At least with eyes closed there is something else to see. Viscous black specks. Darting water boatmen, zig-zagging. Zig. Zag. Red river? Molten lake in hell? The hammock tips. The papers flop to the ground. World events and property and film and music lie in the grass. Also sport and the short descriptions of the dead.” On that doleful beat, the passage ends with a chapter break, leaving us to scramble to make sense of what just happened. The sight behind the closed eyelids like a lake in hell? It sounds impressive, but on closer inspection, that schmear of foreboding diction starts to seem a bit silly. The implication, of course, is that the world the newspaper describes in composite is just as close to coming undone.

“Forms, styles, structures—whatever word you prefer—should change like skirt lengths,” Smith prescribed in an essay on Middle-march, cautioning novelists not to default to the nineteenth century for want of a different idea. NW is a whole, messy wardrobe. A hundred pages in, the section devoted to Leah gives way to what amounts to a small, distinct novella, told in a calmer style of complete sentences and dialogue cradled between normal-looking quotation marks. It’s downright retro. “Visitation” covers a period of weeks; the novella, “Guest,” is restricted to a single day in the life of Felix Cooper, a 32-year-old who spent his adolescence in Caldwell and is unknown to Leah and Natalie, though by the time we reach him, Leah has already heard his death reported on the TV news. Felix, shiftless in the past, has kicked drugs and is now trying to make good. He wakes up with his girlfriend, visits his dope-smoking Rasta dad, buys a car from a young, white Londoner, calls on a melodramatic, upper-class ex-lover who seems to be wasting away in the equivalent of a private opium den in a posh part of town, and meets his end in a random and maddening act of violence at the hands of a couple of guys he came across on a train.

And then it’s on to “Host” and Natalie, the span of her life communicated according to yet another set of stylistic terms. Just as the fragmented prose of Leah’s tale is meant to reflect her depressive, unmoored state of mind, Smith has broken Natalie’s story into a series of short sections, many no more than a paragraph long, each tidily labeled with a number and a title as if for reference. As a kind of cataloging system, the numbers make sense—Natalie is a person so methodical in thought and action that, when Leah leaves a wrapped vibrator on her doorstep as a sixteenth birthday present, she handles it “in this business-like way, as if delegating a task to somebody.
else”—but the titles are filled with references for the savvy reader (the beginning of the vibrator saga, for instance, is broken into two parts: “Rabbit” and “Rabbit, run,” with the result that a reader of John Updike fiction smirks at a joke that Natalie herself likely wouldn’t get). They’re stylish, often funny and ultimately superfluous. What are they meant to do? Show off, flaunt, like farm-to-table spinach.

Natalie’s section of NW is knotted with detail, and Natalie is the clear heroine of the book, the vessel Smith has chosen to transmit a series of acute observations about life, love, class, race, purpose, confusion, family, isolation. “They were going to be lawyers, the first people in either of their families to become professionals. They thought life was a problem that could be solved by means of professionalization.” This comment on Keisha and Rodney Banks is the entirety of section 57, labeled “Ambition.” It’s clever and curt, a bit like a Lydia Davis story. But what, or who, lies beneath these pronouncements? We see Natalie as an agglomeration of attributes, actions and thoughts, the majority highly rational, some not. Together, these things indicate a character who certainly resembles a person in every particular, and yet the person herself fails to emerge.

“Natalie had not really known Colin (it was not possible to have really known Colin) but she had known what it was to know of Colin. To have Colin be an object presented to her consciousness.” Colin is Leah’s father; Natalie comes up with this logical Gordian knot at his funeral. What we’re hearing is Smith ventriloquizing through her, airing her own misgivings. Is it possible to know anyone at all? Can a believable character—that is, a character who matters to us as a person would—really appear “out of grammatical clauses,” as Smith wondered in “That Crafty Feeling”? “You’re the only person I can be all of myself with,” Leah tells Natalie in college. We learn that the comment “made Natalie begin to cry, not really at the sentiment but rather out of a fearful knowledge that if reversed the statement would be rendered practically meaningless, Ms. Blake having no self to be, not with Leah, or anyone.” And years later, a livid Frank De Angelis, who has discovered the Internet profile that his wife devised to have casual encounters with an array of unsavory and improbable types, demands: “Who are you?”


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“Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic.” As a pastiche of identity politics and theoretical notions of the self-as-construct, this is shrewd. As an observation about a personal predicament, it’s terribly sad. As a way of creating a character, it establishes little more than a series of propositions. The questions are asked, but the answer is never greater than the sum of their parts.

There is a scene in Anna Karenina that I think about often. Anna is at an afternoon party hosted by the Princess Tverskoy, who knows about her affair with Vronsky. Sitting together, the women begin to speak about another guest, a married woman whose lover is a prince. Anna tries to inquire discreetly into the relationship between the two; she doesn’t understand how the affair can be open enough to be talked about and accepted by everyone involved, the cuckolded husband as well as the couple. The Princess Tverskoy knows that she is really seeking insight into her own situation and answers with a comparison:

“You see, one and the same thing can be looked at tragically and be made into a torment, or can be looked at simply and even gaily. Perhaps you’re inclined to look at things too tragically.”

“How I wish I knew others as I know myself,” Anna said seriously and pensively. “Am I worse than others or better? Worse, I think.”

There are two points here. The first is the idea of a destiny that can be shaped by the way a person sees herself, and the way she chooses to view the world. On the surface, there is little difference between Anna and the other woman having an affair, but that woman’s story, we imagine, will end well because she sees herself as the heroine of a comedy, while Anna’s, we know, will end in disaster. The second point, of course, is that despite what she says to the Princess Tverskoy, Anna doesn’t know herself at all. If she did, she would be able to take some action against the tragedy she already imagines herself to be setting in motion.

Toward the end of NW, when Natalie’s infidelity is discovered by Frank, she leaves their house in her slippers and goes wandering in the direction of Caldwell. It’s nighttime. She encounters Nathan Bogle, the boy from Brayton whom Leah had mentioned in the garden. Time has not treated him kindly. A heartthrob back in the day, he now shambles aimlessly around NW, smoking various substances. As Natalie discovers, he also makes money as a small-time pimp. “Even relative weakness in Caldwell translated to impressive strength in the world,” Natalie at one point observes while in law school. “The world asked so much less of a person, and was of simpler construction.” But that’s not true at all, as the broken Nathan Bogle proves. While the two walk, Nathan does most of the talking, addressing himself to “Keisha.” He is by turns wistful, charming, sometimes frightening, given to harsh, half-philosophical monologues driven by the need to be heard. He brags, in the sad way of people who have only despair to brag about: “Different life. No use to me. I don’t live in them tow...
turns on Natalie when she tries to introduce her own version of the past: “What do you know about it? What do you know about me? Nothing. Who are you, to chat to me? Nobody. No-one.”

This is hardly the first case of a character in NW being haunted by an inverse figure, a double with a fate that, had things played out differently, could have been hers. Leah, in “Visitation,” is haunted by the thought of Shar, a local woman who scams some money from her and then seems to continuously pop up around the neighborhood looking aggrieved, a ghostly emblem of Leah’s guilt. The death of Felix Cooper, too, enters Natalie’s life as well as Leah’s, his freak fatal mugging a possible fate shared by all three but finally experienced by only one. At the end of the novel, the women team up to turn on Nathan—preposterously and without a shred of cause—as a suspect in Felix’s murder. Smith may be trying to bind the four figures together once and for all, but her control over the proceedings has slipped. Her hasty solution is worse than hollow; it’s without sense, a sacrifice of character to some principle of structure whose purpose remains obscure.

Unknown to Natalie or Leah, Felix does come to consider himself the sole author of the dictionary that defines him. “I’ve completed the level, and it’s time to move to the next level,” he says to Annie, his added ex. Annie, whose fatalist glamour wears pitifully thin by the end of their confrontation, belittles Felix for refusing to self-destruct with her in her squalid flat. She nearly succeeds, but as he leaves her poisoned apartment we feel, even though we know what’s in store, that he somehow has a fighting chance. Parts of Felix’s story veer into melodrama or sheer clunkiness (Annie’s cat, nudge-nudge, is called Karenin), but there’s a soul to it, too. Felix knows where he comes from, and knows where he has to go. There’s truth to that.

When Leah hears of his murder, she’s at a raucous celebration for Willesden’s carnival. “Why that poor bastard on Albert Road,” she asks Natalie of Felix’s death. “It doesn’t make sense to me.” To which her friend replies: “We wanted to get out. People like Bogle—they didn’t want it enough.... This is one of the things you learn in a courtroom: people generally get what they deserve.” Natalie sounds tough, decisive, lucid. If only we believed her bluff.

Letters

(continued from page 2)

rehabilitate the world that US welfare and prosperity depended on.

That remark, highlighting the connection between the economy and world order, offers insight into the treaty debate on the league by bringing into sharper focus the position of the Republican isolationists, not mentioned by Lears. This influential group, which included former Secretary of State Elihu Root and virtually every major US foreign policy figure of the 1920s, shared Wilson’s view of the need for international stability.

Believing the league had serious but correctable flaws, this group advocated US membership with reservations. Rebuffed by Wilson in their efforts to forge a compromise, they abandoned the league and sought international stability by other means. By 1931, it was clear that the means available were not up to the task. However, not until 1941, the eve of the American entry into World War II, was the public prepared to place more robust instruments in the hands of US foreign-policy-makers.

This occasioned a momentous and irreversible shift, the results of which are everywhere visible today, and prompts two final comments. First, the record is crystal clear that economic considerations were a fundamental cause of this shift. Second, those who now argue against intervention and empire must examine the economic forces driving US foreign policy if they hope to be taken seriously. It is this dimension that seems to have escaped Jackson Lears.

Robert H. Van Meter

Lears Replies

Furman’s Corner, N.J.

I’m a bit puzzled by Mr. Van Meter’s letter. He seems to think I was pretending to provide a detailed account of the rise of an imperialist foreign policy in the United States without paying any attention to economics. That would indeed have been a major blunder. But I was not writing a history of American empire; I was reviewing an intellectual history of the isolationist tradition in early twentieth-century American thought. Some isolationists, notably Eugene Debs, were acutely aware of the importance of the capitalist drive for overseas markets and investment opportunities. But nearly all, including Debs, focused their arguments on a more encompassing question: What happens to republican ideals and practices when a republic becomes an empire? Their arguments were moral and political, and only occasionally economic.

This was how they engaged the two most prominent advocates of foreign military intervention, Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, who also focused on political and moral ideals rather than economic interests. (Whatever his role in bringing about the Spanish-American War, McKinley was never a significant voice in public debate about empire—the subject of Nichols’s book and my review.) The idealist idiom was of course the characteristic rhetorical gambit of American imperialists (then as now), who wrapped the aims of capital in robes of righteousness.

Isolationists were forced to challenge that righteous stance with whatever weapons were available. They could attack the scramble for empire as piracy and plunder, but they were unable to broaden the terrain of debate to include systemic accounts of overseas economic interests. Roosevelt and other imperial ideologues had raised the stakes in the rhetorical battle by identifying empire as the fulfillment of American ideals, and the isolationists could stay in the game only by replying in kind, with the argument that imperialism was in fact a betrayal of those ideals. Still, they managed to pose unanswerable questions and to demonstrate time and again that an empire was something very different from a republic. That, as Nichols makes clear, is why isolationism is such a valuable American tradition—too valuable to be left to the likes of Pat Buchanan.

Jackson Lears

Gray Grizzlies Join the Fights Ahead!

Lopez Island, Wash.

I am not sure where “Methuselah,” aka Del Roy, intended to go if the right had won the election (“Letters,” Nov. 12). But he should remember (he was 19 at the time) what Churchill said to Parliament on a possible Nazi invasion: “We shall fight on the beaches...we shall fight in the fields and in the streets.... We shall never surrender.” I was 17 and living in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands. It stiffened our resolve, and that of the British. So Del, let’s start the Gray Grizzlies and fight any way we can.

Oscar Smaalders
Puzzle No. 3262
JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO

ACROSS
1 Soufflé is ruined by a bit of lemon oil, perhaps (6,4)
6 Small hack wound’s effect (4)
10 Sports official interrupting rest, unfortunately—it’s hard to know how to solve that (7)
11 For example, Mohawk’s humble dwelling concealing air conditioner’s front (7)
12 Grant entry to maid in distress, ahead of time (5)
13 Conductor’s actions in medley (9)
14 Got ri of (9)
17 Recited opening of Whitman poem: “Put this on a cake” (5)
19 Confronted government agent circumscribing type of power (5)
20 Arcane matters—i.e., a corset untied (9)
22 Strange rite: rewriting clues for “purses” (9)
25 Crack cocaine of the sea (7)
27 Rear of DeSoto automobile encased by a little instrument (7)

DOWN
1 and 19 Breathless note: “Bear pelt will cover debts” (4,3,7)
2 Genre that Aretha Franklin helped popularize in order that Albert Einstein’s hometown is supported by uranium (really—that’s not a typo) (4,5)
3 “Enter the thing” involves dreadful pun (5)
4 Anticipation of loud, playful sea otter (9)
5 Get hostages to adopt beliefs and customs (5)
7 Plants tragic ending at start of play (5)
8 and 21 Vampire can—endowed with anger—deliver a record of achievement (7,7)
9 It is good for you to compete after swallowing a mint, well-chewed (7,1)
15 Obscene shift to the right around Christian Era (8)
16 Scotch pancake made from stewed scrod? Nope (4,5)
18 Bogus restriction excluding left (9)
19 See 1
21 See 8
23 Walk rated “no good” (5)
24 Allowed within Somali city (5)
25 Burn contents of fiscal dossier (5)

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3261

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