

White Space:
Essays on Books

James Snell

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First publication: 2021

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Acknowledgements

I must thank Iman Zayat of *The Arab Weekly*, John Ashmore of *CapX*, Claire Lehmann of *Quillette*, Karim Traboulsi of *The New Arab* and Sara Brzuszkiewicz of *European Eye on Radicalisation* for permission to reproduce here work which originally appeared in their publications. And I must thank them too for allowing me to write in the first place. Everything else was either first published on one of my websites or in my newsletter on Substack, or appears here publicly for the first time.

James Snell
Westcliff-on-Sea
November 2021

The Deep Past

Egypt in the Age of the Pyramids by Guillemette Andreu

Reading this book is a vertiginous experience. The distances in time and space are vast. One feels almost likely to fall.

Guillemette Andreu has written an approachable, and comprehensive, introduction to the deep history of Egypt — a history of the time the pyramids were built. It is necessary to explain how ancient these things are. Her book only covers the periods in which these great structures were created, before the pharaohs moved their burials into the Valley of the Kings, and dozens of centuries before the Romans came: entire millennia before many of the kings and queens whose names we know were conceived.

Rameses II, Tutankhamun, even the Bronze Age Collapse which capsized civilisation across the Mediterranean — these are all so distant from the periods under discussion that they could be as firmly separated as we are separated from the Norman Conquest. Caesar is as far from them as the writing of the Old Testament is from the modern state of Israel.

Andreu's book exclusively concerns the Old and Middle Kingdoms of Egypt, from around 2700 BC to 1600 BC. It is an unfathomably ancient business. Andreu first generates this vast gulf — she describes a society in which the writing system is pictorial not because of the benefits it confers, as in Mandarin, but because it is that close to the emergence of written communication in humans. When Egypt itself could be reasonably considered, not a unitary state of immense longevity dominated by the inevitable pharaoh, but the relatively recent unification of two distinct societies: Upper and Lower Egypt: the Two Lands.

She writes of a nation where domestic fowl were geese and ducks, because the chicken had not yet been introduced to the Nile Delta. Rats and mice ran wild, because this period predates the domestication of the cat. And hunting is that much harder, because horses had not yet been brought to Egypt from Asia.

And yet these people were so like us in their behaviour and their actions; their achievements both monumental and wholly explicable. My sympathy, already slender, for any claim that the Egyptians could not have done the things they did has evaporated entirely. Andreu makes brilliant use of astonishingly abundant documentation — papyrus texts, inscriptions and iconography — to recreate a social atmosphere in which grave markers tell entire life-stories; functionaries boast of the things they did — the building of pyramids, the tunnelling out of precious stones and pleasing rocks, the carving of statues; but treat it also as another day at the office.

In this telling the pyramids are no great achievement once the idea to build the first one was had (by a man called Imhotep — later, much later, revered as a god, and considered to be the author of an apocryphal collection of aphorisms). The pyramids were built, in ordinary fashion by massed groups of workers levied from their

ordinary work through the *corvée*, a kind of unpaid obligation to work. This is something which lasted in pockets of Egypt until the end of the nineteenth century — not BCE, I should stress, but 1900 years *after* the birth of Christ.

The pyramids are almost routine, in this telling. They were necessary for each pharaoh to have built, and they took a while, so the workers had better have set to it if they wanted the project to be ready in time.

This Egyptian civilisation had observed five planets of our solar system and had worked out that each year had 365 days. Their days had 24 hours.

No pyramid bears a signature of an architect. It exists solely as the permanent, indelible monument to the entombed; and even though its white limestone casing has not remained, polished and white, and its capstones have been looted and no longer shine — the Egyptian effort which aimed towards eternity has been achieved, at least until our own time, in these structures.

The statues the Egyptians created are a perfect distillation of their ethos — and all its sameness and difference. These statues are stylised in pursuit of a certain kind of life-like realism destined to last, in accordance with the dictates of the gods. Their realism is often almost unsettling. Yet nothing is ever signed, all was the interchangeable work of artisans trained to create alike and in concert. The craftsmen did not work for beauty or to distinguish themselves; but rather to participate in the perpetuation of their culture.

And yet the written record is pleasingly individual. The dual pictorial and linguistic nature of hieroglyphic script meant that texts could have two meanings — the sounds of the words mirroring or playing off the connotations of the images they are built upon. It is a parallelism which leaves literary works of extraordinary, incommunicable sophistication.

There are individual ‘wisdom texts’, collections of epigrams and examples of good behaviour, quite like the dicta made popular by later Roman and Greek schools — two or more thousand years later.

There are examples of allegorical fiction we might even call novels, like the ‘Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor’, with exotic foreign travel and the sort of perils one might associate with Odysseus or Aeneas, or Sinbad; and the fragmentary tale of ‘King Neferkare and General Sasenet’, in which a romantic relationship between the two men is implied — and implicitly condemned, for sneaking into the general’s bedroom is written up as an unduly frivolous thing for the almost-divine king to spend his days doing.

This is where the vertigo most rapidly descends.

Andreu describes both daily life and the nature of Egyptian art with a heart-wrenching present tense. The families love each other, as the wisdom books tell them they must. The men try to keep their wives in material comfort and to keep their children alive. The children who survive play in the streets; in art the little ones are depicted with distinctive hairstyles which by custom connote their age.

The yearly inundation of the Nile — now ended by a series of dams — keeps the delta fertile enough to grow the wheat for beer and bread. When the Nile does not

flood, there are lean times — but, a moving assertion, in the good times in this ancient land, no one had to go hungry.

They hunt and fish by the rivers, some of the fishermen boasting, others cursing the abrasion of their nets to their hands. They sit on their porches and sleep on their reed mats, and in the evenings they savour the cool night air.

The scribes, prideful and upright, tell their sons to follow in learned footsteps, and one scribe, Dua-Kheti, writes a book for his son Pepi called 'The Satire of the Trades' in which, a Juvenal before his time, he critiques with sardonic flourishes the manual work he wishes his boy to disdain.

The poor ones do not have much, but men and women of all classes wear cheap jewellery supposedly possessing charms and the blessings of the gods. They work in the fields, they gather reeds, they weave and butcher animals for meat. They play with their dogs. Their potentates lead expeditions into the desert to fight or pursue raw materials. They play music on their wooden instruments and pray to their gods, and offer up prayers to the cults of their dead. They worry, though they are told by their songs to live for today, about eternity.

If the sources Andreu cites are comprehensive, the people of Egypt of this period were uniquely interested in what relics of their civilisation would survive. Cosmic order, personified as Maat, had to be sustained — harmonious society and the creation of lasting monuments to the souls of the dead did that job. They are fortunate, though they cannot know it, that the conditions in which they laboured were so propitious — the sand so effectively preserving their temples, their papyri, their bodies.

We gaze at the immensity of the pyramids, and some of us foolishly wonder if human hands could have made them, while others wonder about the lives of the workers whose cottages and burial places lie there still, not too far from the great structures upon which they worked. Some wonder if they did so complainingly, or with a pride they kept to the end.

All of this is gone now — so distant it is difficult to believe it belongs to people of the same species as us. It is difficult — in a number of ways — to remember that they were us, and we are still like them.

Jamesnell.substack.com, August 16, 2021

True Romance

The Traveller's Tree by Patrick Leigh Fermor

It is remarkable that *The Traveller's Tree* was Paddy Leigh Fermor's first book, at least judging by its breadth and beauty.

This is an idiosyncratic and surprisingly comprehensive survey of the Caribbean written at the beginning of the 1950s, just before the islands transmuted into postcolonial independence. It is a record of a surprisingly transitory time.

The islands could not have commanded a better writer than Leigh Fermor in this moment of transition. Although he is perhaps best thought of as a man in love with old Europe — captivated by its intricacies and obscurities, a champion of its peasant cultures, adept with many of its languages — in this volume, he is as keen to discuss the finer points of Haitian art and Jamaican town planning as he is, in other books, to break into Greek verse or recall *en mémoire* a French song.

The book discusses in great and striking detail Leigh Fermor's travels across the island chain, accompanied by his partner, and later wife, Joan; and by Costa, a Greek photographer and illustrator (who also appears, unless I am mistaken, in a supporting role in books by other travel writers in the fifties and sixties).

They go everywhere, by aircraft and by boat, with Leigh Fermor remarking sadly upon little islands in the stream he has no time to visit. They stop in every major settlement that matters, and a number of out-of-the-way ones. They see as much as possible, even as they rush across the Atlantic towards the Main.

Some of the reviewers who saw this book first grasped the emergence of a fresh talent, and so on. But others of them, more perceptively, understood that this was also the creation of a great romantic sensibility. It's in evidence in Leigh Fermor's only novel, *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*, also set in the Caribbean, not his own age, but rather the recent, romantic past. A past of native Caribee aristocrats who spoke French with creole lisps, and great flowing ball gowns, love affairs carried out by letter, and fireworks. Including the tragic ending, it's a little like a more rhetorically elaborate song from *Fearless*-era Taylor Swift — heady stuff — and charming for it. (Not unlike a pop music video from the first decade of this century, in Leigh Fermor's telling, everyone he encounters in this book appears either to be strikingly pretty or to have an interesting face.)

Returning to travel, Leigh Fermor's romanticism goes further. He does the usual tricks of the romantic — summoning scenes of pageantry and peril from memory; resurrecting doomed settlements and deposed emperors in his mind's eye; imagining great colour and movement.

All of this could be cloying if not for two things.

First, the research Leigh Fermor delights in doing. He has read, it seems, virtually everything on each of the islands he encounters, in several languages, and makes pointed continual reference to the early European chroniclers of the Antilles.

For Leigh Fermor, Père Labat, a sixteenth century Jesuit who left voluminous ethnographic writing on the subject, is referred to throughout like a dear friend. Trips to new towns and cities are continually interrupted by Leigh Fermor's slinking off to libraries and antiquarian societies, where he tries happily to substantiate the colour of earlier historical writings. (One successful example is the remarkable charting of the journey that took a Palaeologus, the descendent of Constantine XI, the last emperor of the Romans at Constantinople, from Greece to England, to rest in a Caribbean churchyard.)

There is a lot of history, entertainingly told, in this book. It's often violent or tragic enough to allay charges of peddling cotton-candy nostalgia.

Second is the sheer unpatronising attentiveness with which the author addresses local customs. He is interested in everything and little avoids his attention. These customs are rarely quaint or amusing, or primitive. Instead, each presents a point of interest. 'Saga boy' dandyism, for example, or Voodoo ritual in Haiti, which is perhaps given a little more coverage than it necessarily merits. Leigh Fermor enjoys the art of the 'Haitian Renaissance' and the cooking of the Maroons in Jamaica's highlands. His most severe judgements are reserved for people who try to cheat him and his party — and for the new custom of consuming Coca-Cola, something he no doubt considers a harbinger of boring, American-flavoured homogenation.

Both the imported black population of the islands, and the native 'Caribs', now called Kalinago, are given a chance to talk. The author enjoys their customs, unspokenly envies their lifestyles, and wishes them the best. He dislikes — pointedly — tacit or illicit examples of the 'colour bar' still present in these dying colonial days; and he makes clear that the region's great stain is that of slavery.

But this book is never didactic. It is open-minded and jovial. Leigh Fermor plays along, and is eventually convinced, when a local man claims he can dowse with a pair of divining rods for buried Spanish gold.

Leigh Fermor is good at landscapes. Bays and glades, and mountains and cities, are rendered real in his description. Forest clearings are dappled with light. Storms rattle ships' ropes and sails, and fog imperils air travel.

And when he describes napping under a particular tree, as happens more than once, he does so each time with enough differences in detail and ambience to separate each instance.

That image might be appropriate — parts of the book feel a little dreamy, with each new sensation approaching the reader's eyes like a brightly-patterned dress blowing closer on a washing-line.

But enough remains of substance to give the ride some rigid, tensile strength. Good fun, and with enough excess fluff to flavour a novella.

Jamesnell.substack.com, August 23, 2021

The Memories the City Holds

A Line in the River: Khartoum, City of Memory by Jamal Mahjoub

Home does strange things to us. There's an entire sub-genre of autobiographical writing to attest to that. But for Jamal Mahjoub, a novelist whose life has been nothing if not international, home is less than fixed, and therefore difficult to pin down, let alone document.

Mahjoub writes of his intentions for *A Line in the River*, his book about Khartoum. It is an engaging mix of genres, taking in travelogue, memoir, literary non-fiction. He sees the book as culmination of previous work. It is not straight reportage, he is keen to stress – the emotive nature of his writing, tempered with the experiences of his youth, tinge all he sees in Khartoum, the city which was once his home.

It is a book dominated by civil war and the crises affecting Sudan today and yesterday. But they do not oppress. While Mahjoub does not give a recitation of the country's travails, he outlines them in journalistic passages of description which he sprinkles lightly across his narrative.

The novelist's manner is in evidence. Mahjoub sights Khartoum from the air and considers it 'a glittering tray of precious stones strewn across a sheet of obsidian'. This is just right – description that is metaphorical but real, unpretentious.

And since much of the book describes the reality of the city, with its gridlocked streets and crumbling facades, a little writing from above elevates in more ways than one.

When walking the streets, Mahjoub writes of experiencing the city and its memories, attached to a past life which 'seems now like a dream I had almost forgotten'.

But he has not forgotten much.

Midway through the book, Mahjoub looks at the development of modern cities – from cities consecrated as graveyards to our ancestors, to the globalised world's mass settlements and towering steel monuments to modernity.

Compared to these purposes, Khartoum is 'an invention, a convenience, an outpost at a bend in the river'. But this does not deny even an accidental city meaning. And the author returns, to realise how many memories – personal and impersonal, lived and historic – rush to greet the author when he walks the city's streets.

Mahjoub describes his parents with clear eyes but evident affection. This light touch is carried over into his investigation of the laments of his surviving relatives in Khartoum.

They lament that the proper arrangements were not made after the death of author's parents, that the old customs of the city are not being upheld. What could have been dull and pedantic complaints tell instead of the state of the city itself.

Mahjoub writes that he came back because of Darfur; but in experiencing Khartoum again, he found himself at least a little consumed by the city itself, turning to face it, absorbed by it – with the author ending up failing to focus on anything else.

Many narratives also run in parallel. Early on, the Khartoum of the modern day and the story of British involvement in Sudan in the nineteenth century contend with each other. Mahjoub centres this latter narrative, at least originally, on two generals: Gordon and Kitchener. He paints a portrait of the fanatical, enigmatic Gordon, whose ‘spirit lingered over the ruins like a hallowed memory’ after his death.

But Khartoum is not all imperial history. Mahjoub examines the combination of the brisk pace of commerce and the constructed modernity of the elites, which some see to be a product of the elites emulating the British, and now the dictates of globalised business culture. This contrasts with aspects of the country’s history which are forgotten or minimised out of embarrassment. He describes empty museums with gamely enthusiastic but ignorant guides.

An interview with an unwilling lawyer instead suffices to explain the country’s lawlessness, especially in Darfur. Murderers are freed in attacks on prisons; rapists are clearly identified but go unpunished; those who accuse others of thievery are simply killed by the accused to spare the trial.

Mahjoub gamely criticises the Darfur campaign in the West – he calls it a ‘civilizing mission’, casts gentle scorn at everything from sentimental YouTube montages of news coverage to the crisp white shirt of Bernard Henri-Levy, the French celebrity philosopher who made Darfur a focus of his global campaigning.

Amid all this violence, the author realises, after detailing the political and martial struggles of modern Sudan, that his peaceful Khartoum childhood was a ‘brief hiatus’, part of a series of conflicts over identity as much as anything else – identity asserted, fought for, and demanded.

This gives rise to a deep sense of history and time, with Sudan’s pre-colonial history itself understudied and unexamined, its component identities confected, its museums empty.

The author writes of encountering stopped clocks everywhere. Mahjoub makes valid points about the emotionalism inherent in history, and his emotions are oddly focused through the prism of a scattered and critical late-night viewing of the 2002 film *The Four Feathers*, which the author muses on while flipping channels.

Mahjoub’s interviews introduce vignettes not just of colour, but of essential experience.

He attends an illicit salsa class with others, who, under strict government rule, risk punishment in doing so. They do so simply to avoid boredom. Avoiding boredom is essential to life in Khartoum, it seems.

Mahjoub visits libraries where, in youth, he read pulp and cinemas where he watched trash – all to avoid the boredom of ‘dead afternoons’. The former, he concludes, did him more good.

This is a book about history and memory as much as it is about modern Sudan. But the modern state interjects itself into the narrative with insistence. Mahjoub is at

a newspaper office when the censor, not overly brutal but professional dominating, comes to call.

In that sense, this confirms some of what he writes about his childhood: that the peace and serenity he remembers was a brief island in time, if it existed at all as he remembers it.

But through the people he meets and the memories he uncovers, Mahjoub documents the value in those he encounters as well as the city he traverses, and that's enough to make the reader a more than a touch optimistic about the future.

The New Arab, May 18, 2018

A Madwoman in Iberia

Two Middle-Aged Ladies in Andalusia by Penelope Chetwode

I did not enjoy this book, and it took until I was more than half-way through it to find a definitive example of why.

Penelope Chetwode, Lady Betjeman, was apparently a great character in life. By all accounts she was a funny friend to have. She was the daughter of Field Marshal Philip Chetwode, Lord Chetwode, and grew up — at least a little — in the colourful India of colonial days. She refers to that time in this book fondly and, to my taste, a little grotesquely.

She married Sir John Betjeman and, after she had converted to Catholicism in the 1940s, the two separated. Past middle age, deep into the 1960s, Chetwode decided to travel around the rural Spain trod first by writers like George Borrow and Richard Ford whom she admired.

Having spent years in the saddle from childhood, she decided to take a horse — and the horse is the most fully-rounded character in this book. It's a sturdy old mare, from the Duke of Wellington's Spanish estate, darling; and something of a grouch.

Chetwode spends a lot of time feeding the horse in each place she stops and tending to its occasional maladies. The mare grazes freely in the countryside and aims specially well-directed kicks at the pigs with whom it is forced to share barns and outbuildings — and with whom, apparently in the spirit of many a horse, it has a collective problem.

Here we come to the root of my problem. It's exemplified by this, sadly quite lengthy, passage:

I wish I could convey something of the simplicity of these Andalusian village children: they possess no toys but those provided by a pig's inside; they eat the plainest of food and have no outings to the seaside in luxury motor-coaches; they have never been to the cinema nor watched television; they live in a non-atomic age knowing nothing of the world beyond the two pueblos on either side of them, Quesada and Pozo Alcón. And yet even the older ones appear to enjoy a sense of fun and wonder which is increasingly difficult to find in a land of plenty where God is the Internal Combustion Engine and children's teeth are ruined at an early age by surfeits of sweets. What is the answer? How can one preserve a balance between poverty and plenty so that true happiness is not corrupted ...

Much of the book is like this. Perfectly workable, even enjoyable, descriptions of scenery and people are undermined by dull, unimaginative writing about the grace attained in privation and the spiritual vacuum which follows on the heels of consumption.

Chetwode would not be the first travel writer to fall in love, a little too literally, with the people among whom she moves — admiring their bodies, their apparently fresh faces, their unaffected, uncorrupted, innocent smiles. But it begins to wear on the reader. The women in Spain are all pretty, she relates — even the fat ones; the children all-rosy cheeked, although a little boisterous — the scamps! The young men are commonly handsome, if a little shy. (These are decidedly not the observations of Norman Lewis in his *Spanish Adventure*, written just before the Civil War.)

Chetwode also continually makes towering moral judgements amid staggering naivete about poverty. One of the peasants who is so kind as to house Chetwode and give her abundant food delights in showing her English guest some wedding presents.

When we returned to the kitchen Felicidad showed me with pride, some ugly modern plates arranged for show along the mantelpiece, and a green plastic cruet: further wedding gifts. Blast and damn all plastic consumer goods seeping in to spoil the virgin beauty of Tiscar.

The Andalusian poor should not be allowed plastic, it seems, even if they might have need of it or take pride in its acquisition. Elsewhere, Chetwode is disgusted to see motorised combine harvesters working the fields rather than the oxen or mules of her imaginings. Whether the people are less hungry as a result is beyond her purview. She traffics in aesthetic impressions alone.

Forgive them O Lord; they know not what they do.

Sadly, and predictably, her naivete also extends to fascism. This is the Spain of Franco, we must remember — decades into Falangism's long and corrupt existence. The only mention of the government is positive — possibly because Chetwode considers rural destitution amid religious devotion to be charming. Chetwode attends a church school and is impressed by some minutia about its running. Under Franco (although he is not named), religious education — of which the author is *a priori* admiring — has come on leaps and bounds. That the country is still poor is not a problem.

Chetwode meets members of the Civil Guard more than once. They were Franco's paramilitaries, who operated largely in rural areas. You won't be surprised to hear that they were apparently heavy-handed in their duties, accused of all sorts of individual brutalities. Chetwode writes them up to be charming people.

The author claims to have read Brennan's *Spanish Labyrinth* and even Hugh Thomas' massive *Spanish Civil War*, so how she can let Franco's dictatorship off with such mild comment is unknown. She is sure to note the churches burnt down by the Reds, however — thirty-odd years later.

Perhaps, I fear, it all comes down to religion. Chetwode is very religious — and keen to say so. She sees god in the mountains and the valleys — and fair enough. But she also delights in every village priest who oversleeps, every rosary said, and how the charming peasants wish each other to 'go with god' when they say goodbye. This

from a woman who admits that, while sitting through Mass, she is often thinking about dinner.

Now, there is something to be said in the author's defence. She is adamant throughout this book that she kept to her 'homework', which includes the diary that — with very loose rewriting — became the present volume, as well as reading some *Don Quixote* for flavour and religious texts for devotional purposes.

In sum, however, Chetwode's religion is keenly felt and daily practiced, but hardly an intellectual endeavour, or even an ascetic one. Her Catholicism seems born less of a faith than a fetish.

So too does this journey to Spain.

She loves the peasants less because of who they are than the religion they profess and what they represent. When she calls the poor who live in caves 'troglodytes', it is unclear whether this is intended as a pejorative. The horse has more time dedicated to its character and moods than any Spaniard. Indeed, Chetwode writes more than once of deploying her rudimentary Spanish in long soliloquies so she does not in fact have to talk to the locals in dialogue.

She adopts some local customs, such as signalling farewell with 'vaya usted con Dios'. Chetwode renders this as 'vaya usted con Dio-o-o-o' and apparently so shed her English reserve that she rode around the countryside at speed, exclaiming this favourite phrase at everyone in sight — as though it was an affirmation.

This portion of the book seemed almost to approach the inhibition-free self-discovery advocated by modish spiritual bestsellers. I felt pages away from *Eat, Pray, Love*.

Elsewhere Chetwode disdains tourists, while herself wandering rural Spain in a fog of happy imagination, and being pleasantly surprised by the fact that in Spain, they eat *tortilla* — a word she always italicises, as though it was daringly foreign.

This portion of the book, and descriptions of every little community or house within which Chetwode found herself, combine snobbishness with callowness in a manner only mastered by those who sincerely hope that the poor aboard stay that way — because it makes them happy to know such people still exist.

There are moments of self-awareness. When Chetwode is asked by one peasant boy why she is there, she reminds him that English women, especially past-middle age, are not noble or brave. They are in fact mad.

It is true in her case.

Jamesnell.substack.com, August 2, 2021

A Lonely Impulse of Delight

Wings: Combat Aircraft of the Second World War in Paintings by Charles J. Thompson

As I do, of a Sunday, yesterday I sat in my grandparents' conservatory. We were talking about this and that. I'm not sure entirely how the subject of painting arose. I think through a discussion of furniture. Grandad had worked with a number of talented artists at his company — stylists and draughtsmen.

Many of them had side-lines in painting. One of them had contributed the painting of a forest green which hangs in the hall. Another entirely was an artist of aviation — later a stalwart of the Guild of Aviation Artists. His name is Charlie Thompson, and a book of his pictures, of Second World War machines, sat on the shelf of the coffee table, under the glass.

I had heard it existed, and been handed a copy, within moments of the man being mentioned.

As conversation continued, I leafed through the book, initially idly — afterwards, half-distracted, with admiring attention.

The pictures are various and quite telling. As befits an automotive stylist of long standing, Thompson's paintings have the ring of authenticity. Their technical details are unobtrusive but accurate.

But beyond this, there is artistry. The craft are depicted in a different locations, on runways or in shed hangers, although at cloud-level and above are the places most favoured. The poses are uniformly dynamic, with foreshortening having the craft appear to be rocketing through the air, or retreating at speed. They wheel and weave.

The sky is usually a sublime pure blue, and the clouds either wisp greyly by or stand out strong and white.

Some of these pictures are almost impressionist, with the aircraft occluded by climate or obscured in the vision of an imagined observer. Some of their sides are slick with rain, their metallic fuselages and polychromatic paint almost white where the sunlight lands upon them.

More than once, the artist includes reference to his home — my home, too. Southend-on-Sea has a long, old pier, which sometimes appears (not too prominently) beneath the squadrons.

Thompson's seas are either blue cloths, almost backing as in a panorama, or instead heaving rolls of wave, with light playing off them like the work of a more matter-of-fact Aivazovsky.

It's possible, in the hands of a technical specialist, as Thompson is, that these pictures might have turned out as little more than exercises in painterly skill. Pictures capturing the essential features of known airframes, placing them in brisk and bright scenarios of historical flight — giving the aviation artists and their fans more examples of the craft. A little excitement, a rush of memory. Ladybird books.

An early self-portrait of Thompson's, in uniform, offers another view.

Thompson was born in Poona, now Pune, in 1931, and growing up in British India, he saw a lot of aircraft. Arriving in Britain not long after the war, in 1949, Thompson found himself doing national service in the RAF from 1955 to 1957, while wartime aircraft — and the stories that surrounded them — still had currency. This book was published almost forty years later, and tells of an artistic interest, and emotional investment, which had lasted all that time.

The painter has something approaching Yeats' airman; and the solitary joy he is said to have felt on taking, uncertainly, to the air.

Jamesnell.substack.com, August 9, 2021

Beauty and Darkness

Lives of Caravaggio by Giorgio Mancini, Giovanni Baglioni and Giovanni Pietro Bellori

One night, at university, I had something approaching a transcendent experience. One of very few to date.

I was feeling a little rotten (not uncommonly) but had, this time, thought to remedy things by going along to the college library. It's a beautiful building and I thought it might lift my spirits. I found it happily empty. In the New Library of the Cockerell Building, which I had entered through a back gate, via an almost subterranean passage and a staircase, passing stone busts and the odd stained-glass window on my way, I was aware of being gratifyingly alone.

I found a table and a chair without difficulty. I clicked on a light. And so I stretched out and wondered what to read. Academic work was proving either intractable or impossible to begin. I wanted something entirely different.

I decided upon an art book, and wandered off to find one. There was no great catalogue of Rembrandt, which was my first choice, so instead I settled on something suitably rich in light and dark. Caravaggio was an obvious choice, Velázquez a less obvious companion.

Many claim to see the world in Caravaggio's pictures and I think I know why. They are melodramatic, because of their confected, perfect lighting. But they are real. He spends time on the telling details of faces and the effects of illumination of bones and skin.

His subjects are monumental but his models are ordinary. Often his pictures have a knowing, ironic quality, for example gypsy fortune tellers slipping purses from pockets in the act of divining the future, or cardsharps retrieving the necessary numbers from a conveniently discreet sash or pocket. St Matthew, elsewhere a sage, is an elderly man a little harassed by the Angel.

Unlike others, I dislike the scream of the Boy bitten by a Lizard, an unpleasant commemoration of a nasty thing, possibly due to nothing more than caprice. Not for any deficiency in its realism or style.

As I left the library, thrown out at 1 am, I did so in a contented daze. And then the clouds parted in the midnight blue sky, and the full moon was visible as I wandered back through the cobbled streets of the centre of town. At the edges of the moon the clouds were tinged with its light, producing rich brown and ochre hues. I knew I could not replicate those colours with a photograph or with paint, or describe them in language, and was briefly deliriously happy.

A few years later, in the same room at home for the sixteenth month, I felt need of some of the same.

The artists of the Italian Renaissance lived short and violent lives. I read Cellini's autobiography, of which more later. But I also wanted more from Michelangelo

Merisi. Present-day studies being dear, even on Amazon, I went instead for a small volume from Pallas Athene press, containing the Caravaggio his contemporaries saw.

These pen-portraits were culled from larger works and were themselves slight, but they had common themes.

Giulio Mancini was a doctor and an intellectual. He had many thoughts on painting. Giovanni Baglione was a fellow artist and bitch, as artists who are critics are wont to be. Giovanni Pietro Bellori was an art historian — a good one, as it happens.

They all agree that even by the standards of their violent age, Caravaggio was a destructive force. The sources do not agree on precisely how many men he killed in fights, but each that it was a fair number, that Caravaggio was a wild man, and that in consequence, people were afraid of him.

The artist would do his work and go outside and try to provoke a fight. Almost as if he was no artist at all. He would win approval with his mastery, and lose his patrons by offending their honour or outraging their laws. In a final confrontation, Caravaggio was wounded in the face, so viciously that it might have provided a model — ever the self-portraitist — for a similarly disfigured personage from history.

Each agree that for all of Caravaggio's technical achievements, he spawned weak imitators, lacking in *invenzione* — as imitators are likely to be. Bellori connects the darkness of Caravaggio's work not to his soul but to his physiology, and includes the following excellent phrase describing the artist's final flight from his numerous enemies: 'But misfortune did not abandon Michele, and *fear hunted him from place to place*'. Those are my italics.

Caravaggio died of a fever after losing all of his possessions upon landing in a new place after fleeing the old one. In a fruitless search for his boat, he became ill, and soon after died. He was not forty years old, and his critics suggest that at his death, he was abandoned by God and man. Quite absurd.

The religious subjects of his art were enlivened and made more truthful by the use of common folk as models. But all this profaned the sacred in the eyes of these writers. He took as a model for the virgin a prostitute with a pot belly. His idealised and beautiful Christ was not ideal or beauty enough. Imitators and those who came later fixated upon corruption, the gnarled hands and dirty white hair of old men.

This is all fallacious, of course. Something we can latterly see quite clearly.

The inherent accuracy of studies made with light is not diminished by Caravaggio's openness to physical flaw and fault in his subjects. Instead his pictures are wholly humane, even as they are stylised to a point of hyper-reality — a token of the failure of flesh, and perhaps the literally transcendent beauty occasionally attained by the spirit.

But it is hardly difficult to see why his contemporaries had such difficulty with Caravaggio. He was not a man of angelic talent to them. He was a brute, a thug, of whom it was easier to claim that he did not wash than to praise the beauty and truth of his pictures. He may well have subjected his biographers to violence had he lived.

But feverishly he had died, abandoned by men perhaps, unvisited by God, but remembered by history and revered no less in time.

Jamesnell.substack.com, July 29, 2021

The Ground Beneath Our Feet

Imaginary Cities by Darran Anderson

Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino is one of the most imaginative works of twentieth century fiction. The book is a dream, a vision, literally so. It depicts, as a framing narrative, a conversation between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, the great figure at the head of the Mongol Empire. The two of them exist in a dream state, caught in a suspended moment. They discuss wonders and marvels, the result of Polo's travelling. These are the cities of the title.

The cities are fantastical. Some are glorious, others meagre; some vast, others minor; some pristine, yet others squalid. They are each separate and distinct, perfectly formed and described. Cities for progress and regression, for the living and the dead. Cities of novelty and of decay.

Calvino's genius is manifested in the generation of these cities, orchestrated as they are within this arching narrative, within a dizzying encounter between the khan and his foreign visitor.

Invisible Cities is a brief book, but it is a beautiful one. Its images are deeply vivid. Once read, they cannot be forgotten.

The Irish writer Darran Anderson has written something of a continuation of and response to Calvino, a piece of creative, literary non-fiction called *Imaginary Cities*. As the title suggests, the things which link the two books are great, and the shade of Calvino is frequently present in Anderson's prose.

But the two books are different, and not just in intent.

Anderson's work has, if anything, a greater scope than Calvino's. Though his point of departure is the same – the tales of Marco Polo – his reach is greater than the Italian's. The scale of Anderson's book is remarkable.

It is not a straightforward history or a complete narrative, but rather, like Calvino's work, comprises a series of intricately drawn, interlinked vignettes, pithy essays arranged within loose books. These essays and the books which contain them have enigmatic titles; one fine book is "The Tower", which uses the idea and image of Babel to interpret human history and our desires and hopes for the future.

It is compelling reading.

As all this suggests, Anderson's range of reference is notably broad. His writing is never simply summative, but draws from a vast range of others' efforts to produce something reflective of thousands of years of human activity. His writing is strikingly visual. Anderson draws from an array of artworks spanning continents and centuries, from unpublished architects' plans to intricately produced medieval maps recently rediscovered.

This referential writing comes into its own discussing and dissecting books. Anderson is deeply well-read, from canonical literature to private correspondence to comic books and pulpy science fiction novelettes and airport thrillers. Particularly

interesting is an extended look at Victorian adventure literature, from tales of exploration to voyages over the sea and inside the planet, and into the future.

It is as interesting to chart the diffusion and spread of these ideas as it is to parse their contents. Anderson writes of the past sensitively. He knows that the future which has come to pass was once one of a series of possibilities. And he notes of some of the paths not taken, eventualities not realised.

Imaginary Cities is not like its predecessor in another respect. Where the former was compact, it sprawls. There is something monumental about it. A striking cover and crisp design from the independent, specialist publisher Influx Press give it real presence. It is weighty. This is more than a repository of writing; as important is the book as object.

That object is monumental and so is the nature of Anderson's inquiry, which takes in cities of the past and present, extending from the possible into the impossible. He includes the plans for a hundred unbuilt structures. His writing roams from the familiar to worlds undiscovered.

Anderson notes the pull of things outside the bounds of possibility. He records Leonardo Da Vinci's pious dictum that 'we ought not to desire the impossible', which sits in a notebook next to drawings of flying machines, blueprints for deeply advanced siege engines, and plans for Leonardo's own unrealised city, as much a fantasy as any other search for perfection on earth.

This hypocrisy is essential to human nature, Anderson suggests. We know our lives are short and our horizons narrow. We know there is no way to achieve true permanence. But still we attempt to shape the world around us; we are not all in pursuit of utopia, but all of us hope to improve, be it our lives, the lives of those we love, or the ground beneath our feet.

Anderson notes the arrogance of the architect. It is necessary, and a natural by-product of the ordering of things. Even the least prescriptive of them have plans for the world. They're as grandiloquent as any political radical or religious visionary. Their eyes burn with the same intensity.

This trait is not to be deplored. But it might be worth fearing. Everyone who wishes to reorder the world has within them a streak of madness, which can be coupled with ruthlessness – towards people or things which get in the way of design. Architects are little dictators. This is seen in their creations. Even the most perfect city has within it the possibility of a nightmare.

But this can be as much due to the nature of the people who occupy these spaces. Human nature is an implicit subject of Anderson's but despite some charming and occasionally impassioned digressions he never addresses it directly.

This unstructured view of humanity produces an uneven sense of history. Anderson's history lacks narrative and shape. The possibilities he surveys give a sense of what could have been otherwise; the book contains many counterfactuals. But at the same time, there is no sense of chronology. Scenes are stripped of context. This is a device to counter an overly Whiggish interpretation of the past, and perhaps a

necessary one; but it is a technique which makes Anderson's writing seem formless and his history deconstructed.

This is of less consequence than it sounds. Part of the joy of the book is found in its chaos. Words tumble off the page. Ideas arrive, are announced, and are briefly incandescent. This approach mimics the chaos of so many forms of creation.

Anderson's writing resembles his influences. It is mostly assured, sometimes sparkling with intensity. His writing is occasionally workmanlike; sometimes the joins show. Paragraphs occasionally comprise long quotations or strings of titles tied together by unremarkable linking passages.

But he has some excellent sub-clauses. François Villon, we are informed, is 'the finest poet ever to have killed a priest in a knife fight'. The construction here is exquisite. Entire pages of description can converge in these moments. Sometimes, like in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, the best lines are almost thrown away in footnotes. (Like Gibbon, too, Anderson has a dry, ironic sense of humour.)

Anderson's talent can be hidden away or taken for granted, but occasionally it is on ostentatious, vulgar display. He tends a little hard towards aphorism, with his sentences clipped and declarative. These declarations are sometimes wrong, no matter how fine the workmanship.

This is a deeply thoughtful book, the product of deep reading and real intellectual effort. The results of this thought are infrequently marred by obviousness: Anderson adopts a certain educated disdain for the pieties of progress, modernity, 'neoliberalism', which (as well as being far from unique or interesting) obscures more than it enlightens.

But in other respects the book is a real achievement. It is not directly comparable to Calvino's effort – not least because of the difference in genre and intent, and also because *Invisible Cities* is an imperishable classic of twentieth century literature. Anderson's book is scrappier, though no less coherent and intellectually certain. He deserves praise for writing it, for his ambition. It deserves a place on your bookshelf, though only next to Calvino's slender volume.

Jamespetersnell.wordpress.com, July 31, 2017

Missing Man

This is a story of one thing leading to another.

My parents set the foundations for everything I have read. From my mother, books about history and poetry; from my father, an introduction to contemporary novels. In the latter category, amid Amis, McEwan and Faulks, one cannot escape William Boyd.

Boyd's 2002 novel *Any Human Heart*, with its enveloping cradle-to-grave narrative, was one thing. But my interest was further piqued by ephemeral interviews he gave to promote the book. His hero, Logan Mountstuart, was appealing enough – a flawed man and failed writer, whose initially glittering career lapsed into unhappy but eventually comfortable silence. Boyd stated that two men particularly influenced the shape Mountstuart took: Cyril Connolly, author of *Enemies of Promise*, and an enigmatic figure called William Gerhardie.

Once a widely-read and respected writer, and a newspaper celebrity, Gerhardie's latter life sustained a period of extended silence. He lived into the 1970s, but published nothing after 1940.

This silence interested me more than his work, at first. Just the idea that one could abdicate the responsibility of putting words in order – or the slightly more worrying thought that one could have such a thing thrust upon them.

But this view of Gerhardie is myopic in an obvious way. Without recourse to his work, the silence is stripped of significance.

I knew Gerhardie was feted in youth. From the first, his was hailed as an important voice. I bought *Futility*, his first book, written while he was at Oxford, with limited expectations. But instead of maudlin, undergraduate prose, I found instead a mature and effective piece of writing, a book deserving all that praise.

It was set in Russia; there were references to Chekhov and unrequited love. But two things made *Futility* more than a well-executed exercise in sentimentality.

The first was Gerhardie's own experience. He was of Russian ancestry and had been in the country during the opening stages of the country's civil conflict. This gave his prose a remarkable immediacy, even when stating something as obvious as the fact that people killed in conflict do, indeed, die.

Perhaps there is nothing that brings home so clearly the conviction of the temporary nature of human things than the sight of a dead body. What a moment since had been a human being with a life and purpose of its own was now an object, like a stone or a stick.

This is well done and more. It's demonstrative of Gerhardie's trained eye, quite uncommon in a man his age. His war service gave him a sense of things beyond his years. He saw both horror and the almost comic chaos war brings:

"Is this sheet clean?" I asked.

"Yes," said the boy attendant.

"Quite clean?"

"Quite."

"Sure nobody slept on it?"

"Nobody. Only the boss."

Gerhardie, because of the interruption his Russian service brought, began at Oxford years later than his contemporaries, giving what could be jejune student fiction a lacquer of hard experience.

Futility is no trite war story. It is a story of inertia and the frustrations we endure in pursuit of love and money.

The protagonist, Andrei Andreiech, a proxy for Gerhardie, is a Briton in Russia. He's attached to the down-at-heel Bursanov family, entranced by the lovely Nina, daughter of the disreputable Nikolai Vasilievich. This family once had money, but now attracts only dependents, all of whom hang around, simply waiting.

Nobody moves; nobody does anything. They argue, bicker and scheme; they go to the theatre, to dances. But nothing comes to pass.

This paralysis provides scope for comedy. General Bologoevski, a caricature Russian White, admires Nina: "What eyes! What calves! What ankles!" he was saying [to Andrei Andreiech]. "Look here, why in heaven don't you marry her?" The question is never answered.

Here Gerhardie's prose is not the slightest self-indulgent. It's taut, tight, well-textured. I read the book extremely quickly and put it down with reverence for an author whose name I had never heard spoken.

Gerhardie seemed more experienced but less bitterly cynical than his contemporary, Evelyn Waugh. Unlike Waugh's in *Vile Bodies*, Gerhardie's characters seemed to talk both to and past each other. By contrast, Waugh's characters simply hit the right notes so his jokes can land. There's no shame in that; it certainly achieved the desired effect. Still, Waugh is said to have esteemed Gerhardie as a master practitioner.

Fans and admirers often advance *Doom* as Gerhardie's best work. It tells of the destruction of the world by a scientist intent on kicking off the planet's disintegration. It has many merits – not least in containing an apparently accurate, if slightly fawning, portrayal of Lord Beaverbrook, who courted Gerhardie assiduously. But in its madness, and it is mad, there is indulgence.

Better is *The Polyglots*. It is an emotional, affecting novel, which contains natural tragedy that feels perfectly, respectfully done. It is, unlike the work of so many, not the slightest overwrought.

Gerhardie's work was lavishly praised and he was, briefly, a man of society. He had the attention and financial backing of a powerful newspaper owner. The writing he produced was good, solid stuff with surprising depth. Knowing this, it's difficult to escape the sense that his latter silence is rendered all the less explicable. But while he wrote, he wrote better than well. Gerhardie's work drips with promise and

demands examination, more than seventy years since he prematurely laid down his pen. Seek it out.

Formative Reads, November 1, 2017

Ironic Tragedy

Donna Quixote, or Perfectly Scandalous by William Gerhardie

William Gerhardie is an enigma. I've read most of his works and his only published biography, and have studied his life and his papers, kept in the depths of the University Library at Cambridge.

I have picked up his faint trail in the biographies of his better-remembered friends. He is the subject of my undergraduate dissertation in history.

I can't claim to understand him, nor can anyone — even Michael Holroyd, one of England's greatest biographers, a friend of Gerhardie's in later life, someone who has possibly filled in more than any other the details of the circle which stood out in literary London between the wars, but never found permanent footing.

Readers of William Boyd will know Gerhardie as a spectre — rattling his chains and remonstrating about the transience of a reputation in literature. A man who demonstrably failed, who is forgotten, a minor character fitting as a model for a downwardly mobile, although charming, protagonist.

Not a fair portrait by any means, but one that millions have seen.

Gerhardie was caught between Russian and English — he had a cosmopolitan and slightly mysterious background, and late in life changed the spelling of his last name.

Holroyd considers Gerhardie a 'tragic ironist'. My supervisor at university wondered, on the basis of a long catalogue of social disasters attributed to his nature, if he might have been autistic.

His works offer little to go on aside from the room to make aesthetic judgements.

Like Gerhardie's best known novels, *Futility* and *Doom*, the play *Donna Quixote*, first published as *Perfectly Scandalous*, is set abroad, in a Tyrolean *pension*. It features, like those books, an international ensemble cast.

Critics of Gerhardie's wondered whether his polyglot internationalism was all put on, whether he was in fact a dull Englishman at heart larding up his observations about life with foreign furniture. Some of the clichés present in this play suggest they may have been onto something. National stereotypes abound, and the only youngish male character not to be an obvious cartoon foreign is clearly in the mould of the author.

And yet. there is something else, too.

Gerhardie is often very funny. In *Futility*, there is a scene in which the luckless protagonist attempts to rent a bed for the night in some filthy hostel.

"Is this sheet clean?" I asked.

"Yes," said the boy attendant.

"Quite clean?"

"Quite."

"Sure nobody slept on it?"

"Nobody. Only the boss."

The same exchange, more or less, occurs in *Donna Quixote* — except that it's about fresh towels, and has ultimately fatal consequences.

The author understands comedy, and how people can be almost reasonably made out to talk.

A Russian grand duke begins the play out of his mind, taking pot shots at everything that moves. ('A stray bullet in your vitals from a Russian Grand Duke cracked in the head. The indignity of it!') Before the end of the first act, he has topped himself, and left his pretty and avaricious wife, who doesn't spend all that long in mourning, to begin brief and apparently unconsummated affairs with every man on- and off-stage.

Gerhardie is quite an effective satirist of not only the absurdity of hereditary power and dignity, but also the lengths people will go to accommodate flattery of their betters.

Otto the groom remembers the duke now dead: 'He used to beat us every day when he came into the stable, with his riding crop. He had three horses, and at Easter he gave us each one English pound. He was a fine gentleman, a fine gentleman.'

But for all this fun — and there is fun: the grand duchess travels across Europe off-stage, leaving a trail of discarded lovers, all of it commented upon with supreme judgement by the middle-aged shrew Mrs Brandon, who invited herself along as an unmasked-for chaperone ('Perfectly scandalous!') — there is misery too.

Some of the misery is comic. Simleton-Tomson, the most Gerhardie-like of all these characters, is a literary critic. People assert he is clever and important but have read nothing of his. He sleeps in late and accomplishes little. He pretends to know Bernard Shaw. When Mrs Brandon attempts to conscript him into her campaign against the immoralities of everyone else, she appeals to his stoic reason and judiciousness.

Yet he falls for the grand duchess, and when she makes it plain she is not interested, his ironic façade collapses, and he spends a few scenes interjecting into others' conversations ('Why am I punished so?', and 'addressing the universe', 'Shall I jump from the hill into the river? or from the river on to the hill? or hang myself from the balcony? or wait until I perish of sunstroke?'). During these breaches of stoicism, no one takes any notice.

More absurd developments follow. Simleton-Tomson is later revealed to be the bastard son of Mrs Brandon herself, who comes into more and more criticism as time passes.

Even the grand duchess is able to attack her menopausal priggish judgmentalism: 'And her high seriousness! Her moral indignation! An untiring worker for the Cause of Righteousness! ... And somehow, all as though she were conducting a jazz band.'

With Gerhardie, humour is never an end. It exists to leaven tragedy. We have seen some of that tragedy up to now, with the grand duke's suicide, but there are more deaths to come. First the *pension-owner's* charming son Fritz, who is thrown from a horse whom the Mrs Brandon insists his colleague Otto was mistreating. And second, latterly, Mrs Brandon herself.

Her death is protracted and miserable, and something of a misstep. If performed as written, the play would not only be a downer, it would drag on interminably. She does at least remember the horse that killed Fritz in her bequests.

Gerhardie is almost parodic in his continual return, in the end, to the morbid. And trying to reach the end of his work without some death played less for laughs than for tears is like trying to read a Christina Rossetti with the same intention — the reader is doomed to failure, and to annoyance.

Given that Mrs Brandon is entirely a foil character — a campaigner for righteousness who trades on her baronet father's name, the mother of a bastard carping at the promiscuous grand duchess — the pain and misery her death is not just no fun; it's tonally misplaced.

Which makes one wonder about the point of the play as printed. Because in the version I have, Gerhardie saw fit to append a better ending, for lowerbrow theatres and impresarios less interested in art than leaving the audience laughing.

'The state of the theatre is low, as we all know, is low', he writes. '[N]ot as low as before the war; yet low. Ever anxious to oblige the managers, I have prepared an alternative, low-brow and perhaps more pleasing, ending.'

'As we know, the lady in the play is dying. There is a long, anxious pause.'

'Suddenly:

Mrs Brandon jumps out of bed and, to the quick, whirling strains of Chopin's Waltz (Op. 64 No. 2. Più Mosso), executes a dance solo. They stand aback — not unnaturally — while she whirls on to a standstill.

A pause.

The orchestra on the premises now sets in with the mighty rhythms of the famous "Danube Waltz". Grand finale and apotheosis. All join and spin around to the large, deliberate strains ...

The curtain falls.

The music completes itself with a flourish.

'Not unnaturally' assures me that this is a joke, and a rather funny one. The play possibly exists in sum just to set up that punchline in hardback.

Gerhardie's women may be 'pretty creatures', the title for a later novel which which appears also in this play. But his characters are silly creatures, and in this play they whirl and suffer wholly for our amusement.

Love's Dominion

Eugene Onegin by Alexander Pushkin, translated by Babette Deutsch

Recently I found myself wondering about the business of translation. I was reading Seamus Heaney's partial, and posthumous, translation of Virgil, *Aeneid* Book VI, which I found lyrical and moving and all the rest, entirely in keeping with the ethos of the translator. But Heaney also had to contend with his source material.

Although the heart of the piece was pure Heaney — the meeting of Aeneas' late father and the debt to memory and longing being honoured — there were aspects of Virgil's work he had to wrestle and pin down. Namely, this included the long litany of ancestors and successors at the close of the piece — Virgil's own debt to the propaganda of Augustus. In unskilled hands this could prove as metronomic, and unfeeling, as Biblical genealogy. Sonorous but without heart. Heaney solves the problem in his own way and the book works as intended. But its intentions are Heaney's, not Virgil's.

This came to mind when reading the Penguin edition of Pushkin's novel in verse. I enjoyed it very much. But whose work, really, comprised the majority of my pleasure? I read it in English, and it was often the brisk quality of that English, written by Babette Deutsch, which gave character to my enjoyment.

Pushkin's poem, though short, is quite notoriously complex — not syntactically, but in the way each word (the Russian and those imported from other languages) is laden with meaning. Nabokov's translation of this slender poem is in several volumes.

One quickly risks disappearing into ontological absurdity here, so I will resign myself to this: Deutsch's work is excellent, her translation is unpretentious. She writes to be read easily, and favours close rhymes. She keeps the 'Pushkin stanza' rather than going for prose, and this gives the poem a the momentum and slight corniness of something by Congreve. Her form is worn lightly and is flexible. It's good fun when necessary, tragic when required.

'He's done with women, and it looks / As though he's surely done with books', versus the tragic: 'There is the spot if you would know it: / Left of the village where the poet / Once dwelt, two pines are intertwined — / Below you see the river wind / That waters well the nearby valley. / The women mowing oft repair / To plunge their tinkling pitchers there. / And there the weary ploughmen dally. / Beside that stream with shadows laced / A simple monument is placed.'

I will not spell out the tragedy of the book, but it is a futile waste in much the same way that Pushkin's own life was curtailed.

The books is also strikingly romantic, and it could not have been a tragedy without romance.

The changing nature of Onegin's relationship with young Tatyana are perhaps best caught in two long verse letters written by the two of them. Tatyana first:

*Not knowing you, I would not thus
Have learned how hearts can be tormented.
I might (who knows?) have grown contented.
My girlish dreams forever stilled.
And found a partner in another,
And been a faithful wife and mother,
And loved the duties well fulfilled.*

*Another I ... No, my heart is given
To one forever, one alone!
It was decreed ... the will of Heaven
Ordained it so: I am your own.
All my past life has had one meaning—
That I should meet you. God on High
Has sent you, and I shall be leaning
On your protection till I die. ...
I saw you in my dreams; I'd waken
To know I loved you; long ago
I languished in your glance, and oh!
My soul, hearing your voice, was shaken.
Only a dream? It could not be!
The moment that I saw you coming,
I thrilled, my pulses started drumming.
And my heart whispered: it is he!*

And later:

*My mind's aw whirl;
Perhaps mere folly has created
These fancies of a simple girl
And quite another end is fated. ...
So be it! Now my destiny
Lies in your hands, for you to fashion;
Forgive the tears you wring from me,
I throw myself on your compassion. ...
Imagine: here I am alone,
With none to understand or cherish
My restless thoughts, and I must perish,
Stifled, in solitude, unknown.*

I could have chosen to quote the letter entire.

Her love goes unanswered, and later, Onegin writes to her. He expresses the same thoughts, the same desperate love; but in a more formal, educated manner than the country girl overcome by rash emotion. It has the same effect.

*Indeed what can I hope for, after
You know the truth? What is the use
Of speech? For what malicious laughter
Do I thus give you an excuse?*

*We met by chance; I, though perceiving
Affection's spark in you, believing
Myself mistaken, did not dare
To let the tender habit seize me;
Although my freedom did not please me.
The loss of it I could not bear.
And one thing more put us asunder —*

Continuing:

*No, to be with you constantly;
To follow you with deep devotion;
And with enamored eyes to see
Each smile of yours, each glance, each motion;
To listen to you, late and soon;
To know you: spirit tuned to spirit;
In torment at your feet to swoon —
Were bliss; and death? I should not fear it!*

*It may not be: without relief,
I drag myself about; time's hasting,
And it is precious, being brief:
Yet in vain boredom I am wasting
The hours allotted me by Fate,
And oh, they are a weary weight!
My days are counted: I've had warning;
But to endure I need one boon —
I must be certain in the morning
Of seeing you by afternoon, ...*

The English reader does not know who to thank for such beauty, the translator or the poet. But each deserve gratitude for their parts in its creation.

My Own Self-Song's Truth

ABC of Reading by Ezra Pound

As might be expected from Pound, especially in a later edition, written after the war, this is a complex and hectoring work. It is designed as a textbook of sorts, an introduction to the art of reading and writing poetry, but even that modest premise conceals a little hidden density.

Pound wrote this book to put into practice a theory he developed and advocated in a pamphlet called *How to Read*, which I have not read and which I cannot afford. Early in this book, he refers to the unerring critical sensibility of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, an artist who died very young and of whom Pound wrote a short biography, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*, in 1916. I had not heard of the artist; I have not read the book.

This was not an auspicious start. And in some sense it's par for the course. Any reader of this book will face a blizzard of references they will not know. In the midst of a treatise on reading poetry, we have close to the full gamut of Pound's obsessions: from the inadequacy of modern translations, the necessity of learning languages, the particular (assumed) character of Chinese pictographic script, the survival and peculiarities of classical Japanese Noh theatre, the failure of much modern poetry in terms of musicality and 'singibility', and so on. Everything that vexed Pound save fascism, although this book was written in 1931 — not early enough, perhaps, for his admiration for Mussolini to take full charge.

A few interesting and idiosyncratic ideas emerge from the first chapters. Of great interest to Pound is the discussion of where ideas originate. He does not begrudge imitation per se; instead, what frustrates him is bad imitation: the degradation of perfectly good conventions and forms in the hands of the unskilled. Homer is a genius and Sappho as true as any who came after her. Virgil is, by contrast, a bit of a phony. The imitators of Petrarch were inferior copyists.

Continuity is just fine, says Pound: he claims that Chaucer is a great European poet, not the 'father of English poetry' at all, and that Chaucer and Dante and Villon and more are united in a continent-spanning 'Provençal' poetic tradition that later English writers cannibalised and hived off from. Shakespeare, according to Pound, was possibly a dramatist because he could not be a poet outright, and in any case, what Shakespeare did in the sixteenth century was done better by Italians a hundred years before. Fair Verona, indeed. (Milton, corrupted by Latin, was inferior to Shakespeare, Pound claims. Meanwhile, Arthur Golding's *Metamorphosis*, a vernacular English reworking of Ovid, is the most beautiful book in the language.)

Pound stresses that critics must understand poetry in a variety of ways -- only some of which relating to enjoyment and the extent to which its lines are memorable. The critics who focus on the poet rather than the poem attract his particular ire.

Quite correctly, Pound sneers at the critics who labelled Robert Browning 'difficult' — Browning is of course fondly beheld, as much for the depth of his description and capacity for conjuring a scene as for his approachability. Pound defends even *Sordello*, a poem of Browning's which is reputed to have foxed Tennyson save for two lines, but which is seen — at least in the extract Pound prints — to be entirely intelligible with little extra effort.

Amusingly and truly enough, Pound notes that much of Pope's most biting satires are robbed of their potency by the sheer obscurity of his targets, whom history has comprehensively forgotten. (There's some irony there; even my copy of the *Dunciad*, which Pound thinks holds up rather well without drowning in editorial explanation, is at least 90 per cent footnotes by volume, and 99 per cent by density of text.)

Pound wants poets to have a musical sensibility, like those jongleurs of old, but he also hopes that they waste as few words as possible, and avoid contorting lines to fit the requirements of rhyme and scansion. In short, Pound's ideal poet writes because he has something to say; something that is true; something that can be said well and without waste or pretension.

That is not a new observation; and indeed contemporaries of Pound were saying so with even more force and even less tolerance. Hemingway, in France between the wars (as relayed in *A Moveable Feast*, posthumously published 30 years later): 'I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, "Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know." So daily I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there.' Hardly a new idea.

Nonetheless, if one separates out these quite stark and sweeping judgements, Pound's view is worthwhile. Maintaining the schoolbook conceit, for example, leads to a few charming summaries in simpleish language of why poetry which stands the test of years lives on, and a few exercises — to be done at home or in the schoolroom — either to improve the student's capacity for true description of physical things (trees, leaves, other people), or ultimately poems themselves.

All this is charming and useful, even if the ultimate conclusion reached is little more than poetry is written by poets because they understand prosody and have something to say. The best of them are musical and memorable. The survival and fashion of poems is a mystery. But the best of them live long, and possibly for ever.

Finally, the chief joy of Pound's book is one of the latter sections, in which he prints, with minimal notation, a selection of verse of note. His tastes are catholic and a little out of the way. (Who reads Walter Savage Landor, the author of a moddish series of *Imaginary Conversations*, today? Not I.) Pound laments that he must provide commentary for these works rather than let them stand alone. 'I am afraid that would be too revolutionary'. But I am under no such pressure, from a publisher or a public, and so, for the latter half of this review, I will include poems entirely alone, without comment. They were selected by Pound, and approved of by me.

Geoffrey Chaucer:

*O prince desire for to be honourable,
Cherish thy folk and hate extorcioun!
Suffre no thing, that may be reprevable
To thyn estat, don in thy regioun.
Shew forth thy swerd of castigacioun,
Dred God, do law, love trouth and worthynesse
And dryve they folk ageyen to stedfastnesse.*

Gavin Douglas:

*The byisning heist the serpent Lema
Horribill quhissilland, and queynt Chimera,
With fire enarmyt on hir toppis hie,
The laithlye Harpies, and the Gorgonis thre
Of thrinfald bodyis, gaistly formes did grone
Baith of Erylus and of Gerione.*

Arthur Golding:

*While Cadmus wondered at the hugeness of the vanquisht foe,
Upon the sodaine came a voyee : from whence he could not know.
But sure he was he heard the voyee, which said : Agenor's sonne,
What gazest thus upon this Snake? The time will one day come
That thou thy selfe shalt ba a Snake. He pale and wan for feare
Had lost his speech : and ruffed up stiffe staring stood his heare.
Behold (mans helper at his neede) Dame Pallas gliding through
The vacant Ayre was straight at hand and bade him take a plough
And east the Serpents teeth in ground as of the which should spring
Another people out of hand.*

Golding again:

*Now while I underneath the Earth the Lake of Styx did passe
I saw your daughter Proserpine with these same eyes. She was
Not merie, neyther rid of feare as seemed by hir cheere
But yet a Queene, but yet of great God Dis the stately Feere :
But yet of thai same droupie Realme the chiefe and soveraigne Peere.*

Mark Alexander Boyd:

*Fra hank to hank, fra wood to wood I rin
Ourhailit with my feeble fantasie
Like til a leaf that fallis from a tree
Or til a reed ourblawin with the wind,*

*Two gods guides me, the ane of them is blin,
Yea, and a bairn hrocht up in vanitie,
The next a wife ingenrit of the sea
And lichter nor a dauphin with her fin.*

*Unhappy is the man for evermair
That tills the sand and sawis in the air,
But twice unhappier is he, I lairn,
That feidis in his heart a mad desire
And follows on a woman throw the fire
Led by a blind and teachit by a bairn.*

George Crabbe:

*No haughty virtues stirr'd his peaceful mind,
Nor urged the priest to leave the flock behind;
He was his Master's soldier, but not one
To lead an army of his martyrs on:
Feu was his ruling passion: yet was love,
Of timid kind, once known his heart to move ;
It led his patient spirit where it paid
Its languid offerings to a listening maid;
She, with her widow'd mother, heard him speak,
And sought a while to find what he would seek:
Smiling he came, he smiled when he withdrew,
And paid the same attention to the two;
Meeting and parting without joy or pain,
He seem' d to come that he might go again.*

W. S. Landor:

*'Twas far beyond the midnight hour
And more than half the stars were falling,
And jovial friends, who'd lost the power
Of sitting, under chairs lay sprawling;*

Robert Browning:

*In Mantua territory half is slough,
Half pine-tree forest, maples, scarlet oaks
Breed o'er the river-beds, even Mincio chokes
With sand the summer through, but 'til morass
In winter up to Mantua walls. There was,
Some thirty years before this evening's coil,
One spot reclaimed from the surrounding spoil ;
Goito, just a castle built amid
A few low mountains ; firs and larches hid
Their main defiles and rings of vineyard bound
The rest ...*

And finally Pound himself, not included in the book:

*But age fares against him, his face paleth,
Grey-haired he groaneth, knows gone companions,
Lordly men are to earth o'ergiven,
Nor may he then the flesh-cover, whose life ceaseth,
Nor eat the sweet nor feel the sorry,
Nor stir hand nor think in mid heart,
And though he strew the grave with gold,
His born brothers, their buried bodies
Be an unlikely treasure hoard.*

Jamesnell.substack.com, August 25, 2021

Mind's Eye

Collected Poems by Lawrence Durrell

It would perhaps be a little too much to presume that a collected edition of a poet's work have some overarching, undergirding principles of style or tone. Writers age, they read, they think. In Lawrence Durrell's case especially, they travel. What a young man in love with his own cleverness thinks is profound and perfectly put, an older man admits to be overwritten. Some of the least readable in this volume are the early efforts, a lot of them written very young. They resemble the worst of Rupert Brooke in a way: stilted, overwrought, and cloying, and relentlessly morbid.

What is amusing about Durrell, in a sense, is that although he conceded, in an interview with the BBC's *Arena* programme, that he had a tendency to overwrite, he never seems to have lost the urge.

Some of his poems are brief and almost concise, but all of them are ripe. Sometimes in language; often in the objects and metaphors they use. His work heaves with the weight of the branches of produce, the olives, and plums, the peaches, and all the softening, juice-bearing fruits which stand in for foreign destinations, or for life's pleasures and its pains.

In other writers this is often too much — Cyril Connolly, another overweight English literary type, submerged his own musings upon eternity with continual talk of ripe plums and spreading plane trees. Connolly's parsing of texts and general urbane demeanour saved him from being boring and moody.

But in Durrell, these descriptions are some of his best — not only because they are truthful to a point which the rest of his more speculative writing on the nature of living cannot reach; but also because they are real and largely grounded in the business of conveying something definite, rather than languishing in life's terminal uncertainty and irresolution. Otherwise, with nothing to describe or typify, Durrell is wont to languish.

Some of his descriptions of place, too, are enjoyable and concrete, while others are poems named for some portentous location which in truth convey little more than the ordinary thoughts about other things which the author had while visiting. The more grounded of these geography poems are both illustrative and insightful, without being rose-coloured. The least grounded are pure fluff, and could have been composed anywhere the author found himself sitting.

In one of the later poems, Durrell refers to himself as a 'Irish poet' — the result of a citizenship snarl up which left Durrell, who was born in British India and lived most of his life in the Mediterranean, without a United Kingdom nationality. At a pinch, an Irish passport had to do. It's almost telling to hear him use this identity. His poems are too Latinate, too self-consciously clever, to be mistaken for anything Irish. Nor are they the work of a multi-lingual perpetual expatriate. Instead, they exude a certain kind of twentieth century, and very literary, worldliness which is

unmistakably English, no matter how much vernacular Greek the author claims to have, or how happy he seems in Provence.

Durrell laments the passing of the gaudy Paris of Toulouse-Lautrec (without mentioning an artist his readers might have found obvious) and fills his work with French tags and Greek titles. But he is English all the same. It is good fun.

When Durrell attempts dramatic monologue, which he does too infrequently, he is successful and transporting. His speculation on the daily life of an exiled Roman poet is witty and sad. It approaches the best of Robert Browning. Durrell tends to imagine the transport of a vanished age upon touching wind-eroded columns in a deserted ancient town. Although the reader would possibly rather hear about the vanished age than Durrell's thoughts on the feeling of stone on his hand and what it makes him reflect about mortality.

This is a very morbid collection, and although arranged chronologically, the same is true of both the beginning and the end.

Durrell's obsession has flaws. First is the perhaps intended effect of referring to death continually: it makes for grim and jarring reading, but also reading which quite quickly turns to tedium in so large a collection as this. Over and over again Durrell turns to the mortal, in both reference and contrast to the more sensual pleasures he spends the rest of his time describing.

While this creates some dichotomy and tension, it is not tension which is usefully sustained. The same points are made, the same ironies explored, the same basic point reiterated. It's possible to commend Durrell for his refuse to rely on euphemism: 'death' is 'Death' is death, and the word is possibly one of the most-used in this volume. No retreating, as I have done for the purposes of this review, into the variety of synonyms the language provides for that bitter thing. (I do it because repetition is often dull, but others do so — intentionally or not — in a way which veils sad truths behind acceptably various language.)

That is not something one could accuse this poet of attempting. But for all the dwelling Durrell does on death, he does not appear to advance in his thinking, nor to produce, over several decades of iterative work, anything new or interesting. The young man speculates on the end while still whole of limb and heart; later he writes about the decease of friends and the ending of acquaintance; and he tries endless analogy to romantic love and all those things which cannot last forever — but not profitably, so far as literary art goes.

This is something of a pity. It seems spoilt and self-absorbed; and is something of a waste of time. A writer of such gifts as Durrell had could possibly have spent his finite time describing more of the world he inhabited, rather than dwelling on the fact that his time, like his collected works, would at some point have to end.

Jamesnell.substack.com, September 1, 2021

Dead Certain

A Game for the Living by Patricia Highsmith

This is a very effective book — murder story, crime thriller, mystery novel: whatever you want to call it. It is put together with unpretentious efficiency. The whole thing moves at pace. And everything in it seems to matter and to have weight as the characters move inexorably, and not always knowingly, toward its ultimate object.

First, a little digression. Patricia Highsmith is certainly best known, and justly most acclaimed, for her series of novels about Tom Ripley, a charming sociopath whose violence is entirely self-interested, but whom readers cannot bring themselves to hate. He is a liar and schemer, a forger and a killer, and by and large these things are perversely justified. The readership's normal sympathies are so subverted by Highsmith's skill that they excuse, even cheer on, the inexcusable.

This is what all the critics say, and there's no reason to declare them wrong.

But I also found a secondary source of pleasure in the things that drive Ripley. In the first novel he is scrappy and poor, aspiring to, and killing for, the ease and money enjoyed by another.

In the later books, on the back of this usurpation, he has a house in the country, a beautiful wife, an elegant garden, a dutiful housekeeper, elegant pictures on the walls. Life is good, and in normal times, his struggles consist of battling against the carpenter ants, working in the garden, and keeping up with his harpsichord lessons. That is until someone needs deceiving or defrauding or killing, lest they ruin the whole thing.

Ripley's taste for the finer things, and the comfortable luxury of his country living, are endearing enough to justify his trail of murder. They are the home and lifestyle he must protect.

This is a touch different from other Highsmith protagonists, who often are moderately successful suburbanites, largely thrown into something awful which is initially over their heads: *Strangers on a Train* had just enough slack to allow for a major rewrite in favour of a Hitchcockian 'Wrong Man' story in film. Or where bitter men whom life has disappointed enter into devils' bargains, or begin down grim paths none in their right mind would wish to follow — for example, *Deep Water*, *The Blunderer*.

Many of these characters either will on their own destruction or pursue some other objective, beyond reason, in the vain hope of saving face. It is the fiction of a self-conscious, unsure age.

What is most engaging about *A Game for the Living* is that it is a fusion of the two types, wrapped in mystery and with a touch of police procedural. To say too much is to ruin hours of pleasure, but a little set-up might be permitted.

The story begins in Mexico City. Theodore is an artist, an undistinguished one, but a man accepting of his circumstances, and only occasionally given to depression. He has private means, but unlike Ripley, he did not fight and kill to acquire them. He wears his money easily because its arrival in his pockets is regular, and really no business of his.

His house, with a charming live-in maid, is at the service of anyone who wants to stay; Theodore just lives there. He is tolerant of others to a fault, possibly too trusting, and willing to give cash away in a personal effort at social justice and redistribution.

Theodore loves Leila; and so does a friend of his, a poor carpenter called Ramon. But this is fine — the two are content to share her affections. They are even capable, in Theodore's mind, of being friends.

But when Theodore arrives back from a trip in which he has been painting, he finds Leila dead — murdered, and nastily cut up. His first thought is to suspect Ramon.

To say any more about the plot would be, for want of a phrase, criminal, but allow me to praise it in general terms. The settings are economical without being caricatures. One feels as if one is in a Mexico recognisable from books and television, but not Sunday morning cartoons.

Highsmith can describe Mexico City and coastal towns, ossuaries and cathedrals, in a few words which read quickly and resonate. Her dialogue is functional and realistic. Her characters, even the most inclined to generic convention and stereotype, are real people. Her depiction of Catholicism — largely self-administered agony and guilt — never disappears down Graham Greene's navel.

This may not be her greatest novel, but it is an achievement in its own way. Rarely showy or sparkling, but robust of structure, machine-tooled for readability, and possessing enough moments of suspense, of genuine horror, and of infuriation to ensure the reader never grows complacent.

Compared to other efforts of hers, there is little of high anxiety or the grotesque which twenty-first century critics adore — but so carefully is this book written and plotted, that the reader suspects and fears more than is made clear. It is an achievement worthy of a genre writer so lauded.

Jamesnell.substack.com, September 7, 2021

Pulp Fiction

Once Upon a Time in Hollywood by Quentin Tarantino

In keeping with the book under review, this is going to be rushed and energetic, under-edited, and too long. It will be a didactic ramble, with the hope that the thrill of the ride justifies readers' attention.

I've not seen the film this is based on but since it departs from the source material anyway, I don't see that as a flaw. The setting is the story anyway — Hollywood, 1969. People have time to kill in their cars and on movie sets. Everything is colourful and exciting. Eisenhower is long gone. The girls are wearing miniskirts and some of them don't wash. What a time to be alive.

Now the central point of both the film and the book is the Manson murders — although in this telling, although there are murders, they're the murders of Manson and his bunch of creeps, not poor Sharon Tate, Jay Sebring, Abigail Folger, Wojciech Frykowski, and Steven Parent — and the other tragic souls Manson later killed for fun. In the film one of the 'Family' gets fried with a flamethrower, which is alluded to (out of sequence) in the book. It's cathartic and feels strangely earned. Manson is a repulsive weirdo; his 'Family' are strange in themselves; they do terrible things; and they're in his sad-act thrall.

Manson is a true loser in this telling. He traipses around trying to get people in music to give him the time of day. He wants their attention and he wants their applause, all the better so that he can spread his message, as the anointed of Jesus Christ, to a waiting and grateful world. In that, he doesn't get very far.

His disciples include some unwashed women. They hitchhike and enter the lives of other characters. They go on 'Kreepy-Krawls' and break into people's homes. Some of the descriptions of these characters are uncomfortably sexual, given they're meant to be children. Perhaps that's historically accurate, but either way, it sits unhappily.

One of the girls in the book, 'Pussycat', who is based on a real woman whose association with Manson began distressingly young, is in the book a 'fifteen-year-old dark-haired angel' — the 'beauty of the bunch'. She's a real object in the book, in a way which seems ugly and gratuitous. Accurate to the period under discussion or not, it's grotesque. Perhaps this is an instance in which Hollywood censorship and the limitations provided by having to choose actors are to the benefit of all. In the film, 'Pussycat' is played by Margaret Qualley — by any standard an acceptable dark-haired beauty. And thank goodness, at the time of the film's release, she was 24.

Manson's posse has taken over the ranch owned by an elderly, blind George Spahn, whose environs were used for shooting Westerns — don't you know. George Spahn gets a nurse and mistress in redhead 'Squeaky', one of Manson's girls, and the group gets a place to live and some money. It's an uncomfortable arrangement for the reader, and for the primary agent of the book, Cliff Booth.

Booth's a stuntman and a war hero — prime Tarantino stuff. He's blond and he's handsome. He got the 'most confirmed kills' — a grotesque and probably anachronistic phrase — of anyone in the whole damned Second World War. He won *two* Medals of Valor (which doesn't exist), and keeps them in his pocket. Women find Cliff irresistibly attractive. He flirts with them with all the overconfidence of Roger Moore as James Bond. Cliff's a film buff, and has long sections of the book dedicated to his idiosyncratic tastes — almost identical to the author's, one can only imagine. He wears yellow Hawaiian shirts and recently murdered his wife. His dog is a tough bulldog bitch called Brandy, and at once stage she fought other dogs, and killed them, to win her owners money. It's an odd life.

Cliff is the driver and handyman, and stunt double, for Rick Dalton, a neurotic drunk of an actor who never quite managed to make it. Sure, he had some big parts — war dramas, Westerns. But he's a failure and on TV in guest spots, and wakes up hungover, and can't remember his lines. At least he bought his swish house, next door to Roman Polanski's, when he had some money. His neighbour has just moved in, with his pretty blonde wife, Sharon Tate. They're about to have a party.

Rick's problem is that he doesn't know if he can make it any more. It's a difficult life. The Italians are coming in and trying to make Westerns. The streets are full of hippies, infested with them. He still wears a pompadour. Early in the book Rick gets a talking to from an agent. He's told that his time is up, unless he sells out precisely and quickly to the right people. He'll never be Steve McQueen, but he could still make a good living. The future has almost arrived. It is a great and terrible thing.

Rick is the best character in the book for the simple reason that his flaws are real and obvious, and he can almost grasp them in his hands. They elude his comprehension just yet. But he is starting to understand. He sits on sets reading potboiler junk, and talks to agents and finds himself in tears. He speaks vulgarly to other actors — about homo directors, and films they didn't 'get', and their short-lived marriages, and women they desire — in superficial, atmospheric ways. Everyone talks about sex in this book but no one ever seems to have any. The men never speak truthfully — it's bluster and posture throughout. Reality only strikes when drunken chatter becomes an outburst, when banks are burst and dams break. Then cold truth rains down.

The moments where Rick really shines are those he shares with a precocious young co-star, who wants to be called Mirabella, even though she's actually called Trudi, so she can stay in character. She needles him and presses him, and forces him to be a professional. In a surprisingly moving moment left out of the film, she asks him during a running of their lines whether he agrees that they're actually really lucky, aren't they?

I spent this time describing the characters because their interactions are the heart of the piece, and without them this book would fall to pieces.

Tarantino probably hates the way people compliment him for his dialogue above all things. He probably thinks that comment is cheap — that it reduces him as an artist. But it's true in film and it's true here. The dialogue of this book is whip-

sharp, clever, surprisingly revealing, witty, laden on occasion with pathos. It makes the book immensely enjoyable, and gripping. By comparison, everything else is leaden and dull.

The descriptions are often appalling. Things are said that do not need to be referred to in passing, let alone written down at length. The book is full of awful clichés and howling, cringe-worthy adjectives. Cliff is played by Brad Pitt, wears a yellow Hawaiian and is blond, so when he's referred to, it's 'the stuntman', the 'Hawaiian intruder', the 'Hawaiian guy', the 'blond smart aleck' — every single time. Rick's co-star is an eight-year-old girl, so Tarantino calls her 'the little eight-year-old' (how many big eight-year-olds are there?), 'this midget' and so on.

Your ability to read this novel to the end, and to enjoy it, will be determined by whether you can get through passages like this ('While the blond-haired man was storybook dashing and incredibly dignified, this new man was a devilishly handsome roguish-looking south-of-the-border-styled cowboy with a thick snatch of fudge-colored hair that framed his face in a way that Mirabella could only describe as dreamy') without screaming and throwing the book out of a window.

('Pulled by six horses, the Butterfield Wells Fargo passenger stagecoach rounded the corner where the adobe-walled mission stood and thundered down the dusty dirt main drag of the Spanish-style town of Royo del Oro, sixty miles on the north side of the Mexican border in California. The hard hooves of the sweaty beasts tore at the dirt main street, creating a cloud of brown powder in their wake.' This is the stuff Dan Brown is pilloried and parodied for doing, but worse, and more pretentious.)

Part of this could be waved away as the price of homage. Tarantino wanted to write in the style of the cheap novelisations he read as boy. He wanted to produce his own version of the same trash. It's like using grainy, jumping filmstock to produce *Grindhouse*. The most obvious marker of atmosphere, period scenery.

But other things are even less forgivable. Tarantino cannot stop himself from redundant description. He describes the character of several different radio programmes on several different stations. He quotes song lyrics at length. He lists bands, directors, actors and the rest, often including little tags so we know what he thinks of them. He quotes period appropriate adverts verbatim. He criticises films and actors continually, both through the character of Cliff and just for the hell of it in the narrative proper. He justifies at length Cliff beating the shit out of Bruce Lee.

It's the narrative equivalent of a rambling podcast interview with the author, of which we have a number for the sake of comparison — even some produced to promote this book. The interviews and the book have the same hobbyhorses, the same rush to judgement.

Some of this is funny and apt; much of it is not.

(On Kurosawa: 'Cliff felt where the American critics got it wrong was referring to the director as a "fine artist." Kurosawa didn't start out as a fine artist. Originally, he worked for a living. He was a working man, who made movies for other working men. He wasn't a fine artist, but he had a sensational talent for staging drama and

pulp artistically. But even the Old Man was susceptible to falling for his own notices. By the mid-sixties, with *Red Beard*, the Old Man would change from Kurosawa the movie director to Kurosawa the Russian novelist. Cliff didn't walk out of *Red Beard*, out of respect for his once-favorite movie director. But later, when he learned that it was how darn ponderous the Old Man became on *Red Beard* that prompted Toshiro Mifune to vow to stop working with Kurosawa, Cliff took Mifune's side.' This digression at least has a punchline.)

The reason Tarantino does this, it seems, is because he wanted to write a novel rather than a screenplay. He can write screenplays; his screenplays are good. But he wanted to write a *novel*. From reading this one, it does not seem that he has read many novels — not many good ones, anyway. Tarantino has seen many films and much TV. But he doesn't want to write film scripts or TV. Novels are descriptive and so this one must be.

Tarantino has suggested en passant that he writes far too much because the stuff just pours out of him, and that his already-long films are whittled down to the bare essentials by endless gruelling rewrites. Even so, his scripts, his says, are filled with asides, the equivalent of stage directions, which he uses to build his actors into the characters who have inhabited his thoughts for years. All this description helps to create stuff — in the frame, on the soundtrack — that can be conveyed instantly on film. It does not require any wind-up, or rhetorical justification.

The book allows him to change the story, to supplement it, to make additional comments. For example, the author appears to have increased the size of Sharon Tate's bust in moving from the screen into print. That seems an odd emendation to stress.

Tarantino's style suits film well. It does not suit a descriptive, long novel in the slightest. Fun as this all is, it's something he should have realised.

Jamesnell.substack.com, September 20, 2021

Caught

Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger

This book is one which many read in school, and until I had read it, I wondered whether that was caused by anything beyond the relative simplicity of its language and its brief length — the easier to teach, the better to cram before assessment.

That view was born of incurious ignorance, and it was incorrect. From the first page, it's clear this book is stamped indelibly with the mark of a 'twentieth century classic', however defined. It has all the visible signs. A terseness of language; a distinctive, demotic lexicon which looks increasingly dated as its slang slides further away in time; a certain jaundiced perspective; and above all, the seeming use of a small, even insignificant story to illuminate what teachers call 'universal themes' — experienced either personally or socially.

Now, that's a relatively bland introduction, but I can only work with what I'm given. The book's self-consciously a classic, and could have been nothing else. There would have been no reason to print it otherwise. It is a classic also for the same reason *Lord of the Flies* is a classic, and *Of Mice and Men* is a classic — each have a pocket-sized narrative, strong emotions, and rattling good story-telling.

Salinger mentions other writers so I might as well do, too. *Gatsby* is a classic because of its extraordinary beauty, and a *Farewell to Arms* because of the totality and earth-shaping power of Hemingway's iron-hard worldview, to which one can either be seduced or which one is compelled to reject, and the blunt novelty of his description ('Nick watched his father's hands scrubbing each other with the soap' — in 'Indian Camp'; and 'As I ate the oysters with their strong taste of the sea and their faint metallic taste that the cold white wine washed away' — *A Moveable Feast*: both of which I will never forget).

In those other novels, things actually happened, and there was more than one notable character. In Salinger's case, he was able to mint a classic in which almost nothing happens, and there is only one character. One character, indeed, who is a terrible bore.

No doubt any review of *The Catcher in the Rye* (at least one which is not some metacommentary or exposition of a pet theory) is in effect a review of the protagonist, Holden Caulfield. He tells the reader the story; it's exclusively his story, told in his own voice, and inflected entirely with his view of the world.

It's all a bit of a drag — being Caulfield, at least. He is kicked out of his snobby private school (not for the first time, nor the first school). His fellow students treat him shabbily and one of them bloodies his nose. The cabbies whose cars he occupies think he's nuts. Waiters refuse to serve him booze and to pass his notes to musicians. He is shaken down for money by a fat pimp and punched hard in the chest for his trouble. One of his brothers is dead. His parents *despair*.

Caulfield lies to everyone, all the time. He does this in part for expediency, partly because he is temperamentally young for his years, and partly because he views the world with such misery. It is populated by phonies and freaks. Entertainment is no balm. The movies, for example. Caulfield despises the movies. His big-shot writer brother — not the dead one — lives in Hollywood now and produces film scripts. This tears him up inside.

It is no bad thing that Caulfield is so hateful, of course. Nor that he would be, if you met him, profoundly dull to speak to, tedious to be with. He admits some of his flaws — directionlessness, a certain mawkishness, cowardice — but not the others which the reader can plainly see: that he is spoilt by his upbringing; that he is faker in his own way than the phonies he sees all around him; and that even if he believes in nothing and is therefore free from hypocrisy, he still manages to be destructive and spiteful when even the path of least resistance would take him sailing beyond such pettiness — and even stupider than he himself admits.

What matters more than this is the character of the novel itself. Is it accurate?

Is it written like a young-for-his-years cynic, a prudish pervert, a jaded sentimentalist — and so on? It clearly is, to Salinger's credit. Every word seems effective in furthering Caulfield's character. All the repetition and vituperation of his description, the naturalisms imported from talk ('old Phoebe', 'boy was I', 'I almost puked, to tell you the truth'), all the shambling weakness of his actual speech when written down.

Part of the effectiveness of the book is in its evocation of a mood — a mood so teenage it might be easy to bury all recognition beneath retrospective shame and weight the years that followed. It's captured so truly that it's hard to examine — so horrifying it prompts embarrassed self-reflection.

Perhaps the point of the book is not so much the creation and sustaining of this mood than the melancholy and anomie it leaves the reader with — not the sense, in one who is no longer a child, that he has been understood; but rather the sadness in perceiving that this kind of undirected nihilism seems a close to a universal experience. It is maybe meant to be heart-breaking, and in that possible aim it almost succeeds.

Caulfield's foolishness aside, however, there is no deep tragic note upon which the story ends. The boy is simply condemned to more of the same. How unlike, in one essential way, a fine Salinger short story, 'A Perfect Day for Bananafish' — a little better, and briefer, than this short classic of a novel.

Jamesnell.substack.com, August 31, 2021

Double or Nothing

Casino Royale, Live and Let Die, Moonraker, Diamonds Are Forever, From Russia with Love, The Diamond Smugglers, Dr. No, Goldfinger, For Your Eyes Only, Thunderball, The Spy Who Loved Me, On Her Majesty's Secret Service, Thrilling Cities, You Only Live Twice, The Man with the Golden Gun, and Octopussy and The Living Daylights by Ian Fleming

After spending a month reading everything of his save *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang*, I must conclude that many who criticised Ian Fleming's works during his lifetime were quite pointedly incorrect in their attacks. This is not a new observation. Jeremy Duns has spent years saying so, as has more than one generation of Bond fans. Just as the *TLS* reviewer and the *Telegraph* snob were wrong in their day, so too have Kingsley Amis and Raymond Chandler — early advocates of Fleming's work — been subsequently lauded as far-sighted.

More controversially, perhaps, I have also come to disagree with the apparent consensus of the fans. The best Bond books are often those the fans dislike. And two of Fleming's most interesting books — *Thrilling Cities* and *The Diamond Smugglers* — have nothing to do with Bond at all.

First, let's briefly attempt to understand the premise. The Bond books are unpretentious thrillers. They have an espionage focus. Fleming wrote them in the two months' holiday he had each year from his post-war job at the *Sunday Times*. He averaged 2,000 words of each of them per day.

In keeping with these origins, the books are appealing in their bold straightforwardness. James Bond is an archetype — the 'secret agent' manifest. He is, to borrow a phrase direct from archetype, a 'competent man'. He drives well and fast. He shoots to kill and rarely misses — only for plot points, or for effect. And much is made of his trusty muscles, his flat stomach, his solid six feet of height. Everyone thinks he is handsome, if a little cruel-looking. No one seems to mind his scars. All this is the canvas for the action.

Bond is in general tasked to interrupt some criminal scheme or to monitor something which swiftly embroils him in more than he has asked for. He must investigate and reach conclusions. He must often fight, for self-protection and for an objective. Generally, someone needs to die.

On the other side, to leaven the bread, there is also what a comedy prude might call A Lady. Ally or initial foe, she's usually attractive — Fleming has a few specific descriptions down pat — and although she may initially resist Bond's advances, she will eventually relent.

The above description might seem a little disappointing — even mechanical. That is how the old critics described the books. It misses what they missed — which is the technical proficiency of the books, and their sparks of magic.

I probably don't need to say it, but I may as well: that by the conclusions of each of the major novels, I could hardly turn the pages fast enough. The books tear along at a pace readers of mainly literary fiction would almost likely scoff at. There are few false steps, no missed handholds. Off we go, each time, and are glad that we have gone.

These are also books of surprising, if incidental, details. Fleming is often very funny. Not the cheap wisecracking of the sort of penny novelettes written by Holly Martins, protagonist of *The Third Man*, but amusing little touches which seem funny because they are true or are otherwise zany implausible. The most groaningly sardonic of these are still funny: Bond's friend Leiter is bitten up by a shark in *Live and Let Die*. Bond receives a note reading 'He disagreed with something that ate him'. Jokes like that don't need Sir Roger Moore's raised eyebrow.

The books are full of travel, too — little hints picked up from Fleming's own lifetime of world-spanning movement and from other books. Bond consults Paddy Leigh Fermor on the Caribbean. Fleming uses his own observations from the articles which made up *Thrilling Cities* liberally to spice up Bond's adventures.

Spice is appropriate. Especially in the early books, food is one subject Fleming never fails to exploit. Rarely has a book been written for hungrier readers. Lobsters drip with cream and cigars and brandies are ever close at hand. Bond at one stage attempts a 'raw diet' before being told by May, his tearful housekeeper, that in his line of work, a man needs some crispy bacon and some well buttered eggs. In one short story, "007 in New York", Fleming even offers a footnote on how to cook 'scrambled eggs James Bond': they are identical to how I cook them, save for Bond's stipulation that they must be accompanied by pink champagne.

All this colour saves the books not just from boredom, but from the howls of the critics. It is the living rebuke to the idea that the books are clanking and mechanical, that they have no heart and no sense of humour about themselves.

The critics also accused Bond and Fleming of sadism, something I can heartily rebut. Bond kills a lot of people, but he does not do so wantonly. They ordinarily attack him first. When cold-blooded killing is called for, Bond not only quails internally, he also finds a way to avoid carrying out the order.

There are torture scenes — granted. The visceral pulping of part of Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale* is verbatim taken from the book; except that Le Chiffre, in the book a big Frenchman, not debonair Mads Mikkelsen, does not first say 'Wow — you've taken good care of your body'. (It might have been in Craig's contract.)

But the charge of sadism collapses because the torture in the books is usually a contrivance to justify later liquidating the villain. And any enjoyment the reader or author may have got from these horrors is a little undercut by how studiously, if ineffectually, Bond attempts to die in the process of these sufferings instead of prolonging his pain or giving up some vital information.

One thing Fleming might perhaps be guilty of is having Bond threaten to spank this or that disobedient lady a few too many times, in various individual fits of pique.

But this amuses rather than annoys after the first couple of instances. Flavour for the pot, one might say.

After all this defence, I may say something against the fans. They are decidedly wrong when they say that the Bond books which most depart from the formula are the least enjoyable. *The Spy Who Loved Me* is not written from Bond's perspective, and in any case, like with *From Russia with Love*, he turns up for the first time a hundred pages in. Both books are better for it, and *The Spy Who Loved Me* is surprisingly good in describing the dull humiliations wrought on otherwise decent girls by the hypocrisies of 1950s sexual politics. And after all that, some gangsters still get shot up in the end.

The best books of Flemings are each not Bond novels. Two collections of short stories — *For Your Eyes Only* and the posthumous *Octopussy and the Living Daylights* — contain brilliant work: Fleming's best of Bond. "Quantum of Solace" takes the form of a long conversation between Bond and an elderly colonial administrator. As a piece of Somerset Maugham-adjacent social drama it is both true to life and riveting. "Risco" is a good old fashioned adventure story amid gangsters in Venice. "The Hildebrand Rarity" and "Octopussy" are nautical-themed attacks on the abuses of arrogant tough-guy men. (The 'Octopussy' of the short story is not a lewdly-named woman. It refers, in actual fact, to an octopus.)

Fleming's other best work — or at least most emblematic work — comes in books of travel and non-fiction. *The Diamond Smugglers* is not in practice very exciting. Fleming himself was apparently unsatisfied with it, and wrote it in a haze in Tangier in two weeks, with a man from the diamond companies standing over his shoulder as he did so, adamantly taking out all the good bits. But as a failed experiment it is a revelation. *Thrilling Cities* is not an especially accomplished travel book, but it contains excellent stories of the Big Men at work in Macao, some of the Japanese customs which mystify Bond in *You Only Live Twice*, and a denunciation of New York so great that it apparently elicited outcry among the reading public of America.

I will conclude with this. Although Bond's missions all end the same way, and this or that girl is discarded in favour of a new one, I found by the end that I was beginning to grow sentimental. Perhaps this was because, in closing the series, I came closer each volume to Fleming's own untimely death. Perhaps it was because reading nothing but thrillers for a month short-circuited my brain.

But when I read of Bond at the conclusion *You Only Live Twice* — being pulled, amnesiac, out of the sea by the fisherwoman Kissy Suzuki, who tries to revive him and keep him as her husband on her little island of Kuro, despite knowing that something will draw him away from her and back into the world in the end — I must say the unexpected tragic beauty of the situation proved surprisingly moving. For those with the text to hand, 'Surely they would do no harm to a fisherman from Kuro?' is the point at which I had to fight back tears. (I read subsequently that the fans did not get it.)

In the course of the last month I came to understand the formula Fleming uses rather well. I saw every example he put through its gears. It made me want to try

something similar myself, at a suitable distance. In the partially completed thriller which resulted, no matter the tricks I used, no matter the personal and private knowledge I brought in to aid it, I could not approach the magic of Fleming and Bond. There's something to be said for that.

Jamesnell.substack.com, November 11, 2021

Misreading Houellebecq

In France, the release of *Serotonin*, the latest novel by Michel Houellebecq, attracted the sales and comment his work usually receives. Around the same time, France's former *enfant terrible* was awarded the *légion d'honneur*. The author, popularly held to be brutal, unromantic, also married Qianyum Lysis Li late last year. In the pictures, Houellebecq was dressed strangely, but looked happy. His new book is, so far, unavailable in English.

An essay in *The Times* by James Marriott, the paper's books editor, laments the lack of a British Houellebecq. Instead of serious novels by people who take themselves seriously, Marriott notes, British culture is dominated by light entertainers who aspire to be politicians, and politicians who either impersonate light entertainers or end up pursuing the job full time.

Now, France's intellectual culture is hardly a *sine qua non*. In circles marginally different to Marriott's, it's the done thing to scoff at France's celebrity thinkers. When not deprecating Britain's intellectual heritage by comparison, no doubt more than a few sophisticates would, when told their interlocutor liked Houellebecq or Bernard-Henri Lévy or Pascal Bruckner, declare them to be the intellectual version of what Guy Fieri is to cooking – flashy, loud, and funny looking rather than revelatory.

Houellebecq's is infrequently invoked in the internationally English language press – used mainly, as is only natural, as an interpreter of his native land, but sometimes as a prophet (see the uncanny publication date of *Submission*, which coincided with an event eerily similar in tone, if not in intent, to its horror-show premise).

Recently, a contrarian *Harper's* essay by Houellebecq had limited circulation, in which the author painted Donald Trump a good president because, a cynical interpretation of Houellebecq's essay might hold, the president made America less prominent and less effective on the world stage.

Houellebecq is a funnier Spengler, to some, with occasionally useable thoughts on countries other than his own.

In Douglas Murray's *The Strange Death of Europe*, a Mediterranean migration-crisis era look at 'identity, immigration, Islam', Houellebecq is used in precisely this way. Murray sees Houellebecq as a chronicler of the vapidness of modern life. His books contain empty sex, rampant consumerism, meaningless activity. Relief from the hell of it all is found in infrequently going on holiday.

This is all true, both in that it is present in Houellebecq's work and that it is present in life itself – and Houellebecq catches it well. But that's not all he does. (Christopher Hitchens, writing many years ago about *Platform* in *The Atlantic*, noted this. At the time, Houellebecq's perceived pessimism seemed more out of step with the early years of the last decade. His apparent roughness, especially in describing love and its lack was considered cruelly lascivious, if not actively aimed at perverse

gratification. As Hitchens notes, though, beyond all this noise, there is something else going on.)

The first defence one can offer for Houellebecq concerns this aspect of his work, and the charge of being one-note, or – worse – of producing mere pornography, for sexual titillation of those with decline fetishes. That can be rebutted, at a stroke, by any examination of the sheer beauty of his work.

His prose, in French and in capable translation, glows. It has more than economy and deftness. And despite his callous reputation, Houellebecq's writing also leaves room for real love.

Jed Martin, protagonist of *The Map and the Territory*, was seen by many readers and critics as a typical caricature of a pop artist. His initial works are entirely abstract. And his later paintings, which sell for millions, are of his artistic contemporaries, including artists-as-capitalists like Koons and Hurst. A painting depicting both of them is latterly ripped to pieces by its painter – and apparently improved in the process.

But another painting, this one of Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, is described in a way which has resonance beyond satire. Its description includes a phrasing of the logic and even the beauties of capitalism which brings tears to the eyes. It takes more than mere satire to make one wish for an ideology to be true simply from hearing a statement of the faith its adherents place in the world.

This episode is more than a touch ironic; but it still elicits emotion. It demonstrates the author not only as a craftsman of barbs, but as a humane observer.

Murray, in his reconstitution of the same novel, refers to Houellebecq's protagonist as an occasional artist who strikes it rich. This ignores so much of the detached and elevated, almost transcendent nature of how Houellebecq writes about Martin's photographing of household objects and, latterly, road maps. It is profound in its lack of profundity; literary art filling the void in meaning left by the photographic art described.

Whatever, a first novel of surprising and sparse bitterness, we can perhaps dismiss as a morose statement: it's pared down to the point of brutality. It spawned a movement of depressives, which soon went so far as to disown Houellebecq himself.

But *Atomised*, a later effort, is beautiful. Even *Platform*, with its grotesque description of a tourist utopia forged by little more than sanitising the image of a foreign sex industry, has moments of beauty.

What saves all these works from being dull procedurals is not just prose and emotion, but hints of sentimentality.

Houellebecq's heroes love transiently but in real terms. Things never quite work out, but they try their best and are crushed when things do not end as happily as sentiment suggests they might. Houellebecq's characters believe also in the possibility of that love surviving, beyond the frailties of their bodies.

And so, it seems, does the author. And despite the death of god, which Houellebecq acknowledges in *Submission* most notably, there are consolations. Consolations of the flesh, certainly. But also of philosophy.

In *The Possibility of an Island*, Daniel (a comedian who grows rich and successful until he tires of other people's laughter) and a beautiful girl – who delights and then ditches him – separately join a cult. This is sinister and drenched in irony; but it represents something else: the attempt to make life mean something, not just to extend individual existence.

A later, augmented version of Daniel (operating in the far future) even escapes the confines of his life-sustaining barbed-wire-covered compound to venture across the torn remnants of Europe to find an Eden in which he can die.

In *Atomised*, another character Michel (a scientist and one of a pair of tragic brothers) succeeds in advancing the nature of humanity itself. Reminiscent of Ian McEwan's writing about the ethereal elegance of complex neural surgery in *Saturday*, Houellebecq's description of the beauty of Michel's breakthrough inspires awe.

Houellebecq has been misunderstood and has cultivated that misunderstanding through provocation and self-satire (most notably, and successfully, and amusingly in *The Map and the Territory*, where he introduces a pitiable version of himself as an incidental character, and then has him brutally murdered).

But to write him off as a bitter reactionary or mere functional chronicler of French and European decline misses the beauty of his work, and the core of romanticism which allows even the darkest of visions – of past and present and future – to have the most slender lustre of foolish hope.

Perhaps there is some value, then, in this writing beyond its skill – and some value in the intellectual culture Houellebecq both repudiates and, to an audience foreign and domestic, seems increasingly to define.

Jamespetersnell.wordpress.com, March 8, 2019

The Radicalisation of Remain

Three years on from the Brexit referendum, there's little sign of the passions stirred up by a fiery campaign being put to rest. Many participants in the Brexit debate have found their politics more entrenched and more extreme, and their private and public thoughts more prone to conspiracy theory and bile.

One striking example was an article written last week by Phillip Hammond for *The Times*. Hammond was once a Conservative chancellor, and is now neither the chancellor, nor a Conservative.

Offhand, Hammond referred to support for the prime minister among 'speculators who have bet billions on a hard Brexit'. In doing so, he both echoed and anticipated conspiracy theories common among the most emphatic opponents of leaving the EU.

A post at the website *Byline Times* suggested that Brexit itself was an exercise in 'disaster capitalism' which either by design or happenstance – design most heavily implied – made undesirable capitalists a lot of money. Citing Hammond's piece, the shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, tweeted that he would write to the head of the civil service to ask him a few questions.

A post on the *Financial Times*' Alphaville blog explained why the *Byline Times* allegation did not hold water. Various, its numbers did not make sense, and it assumed a unity of purpose and intention among hedge funds which would be strange and unlikely. Journalists and researchers condemned the original report as unsubstantiated demagoguery. *The Byline Times* piece and its central point saw massive, largely uncritical circulation nonetheless.

It is now common to hear Brexit itself referred to not only as a vote won by dishonest politics, but as an out-and-out 'scam', a tool for the financial elite to make even more money at the expense of everyone else.

A long *Guardian* essay by Daniel Cohen offers a partial explanation for the popularity of these theories and the appeal of airing them in such a histrionic manner. In 2016, a section of people who were strangers to political organisation, who thought of themselves as sensible and their politics as 'nice' and normal, now saw their world destroyed in the blink of an eye when they lost a totemic vote.

The distressed Remainers' world was no longer nice; instead, it was frightening. Their certainties and even their conception of the country were under threat. They took to social media with anger, and to the streets with new passion, as a result.

This interpretation smooths over part of the attraction for some of taking to politics so seriously: the novel social world of fellow feeling that politics can provide, coupled with the delight of a new rogues' gallery to revile.

But for some Remainers, politics and activism appear to compensate for a sense of loss: a loss of innocence, perhaps. This is seen as strongly in literary types as it is in

pro-EU politicians and those who simply never believed the country could vote to leave.

When the novelist Jeanette Winterson appeared on *Newsnight* the day the Supreme Court declared the government's prorogation of parliament unlawful, she rattled off a series of arguments which would not have been unfamiliar to anyone who recognises the acronym 'FBPE' (follow back, pro-Europe) from Twitter.

Winterson even plaintively told her fellow guests that 'the result [of the referendum] was advisory' – a common FBPE line. The actions of the past three years can be forgotten, Winterson seemed to say, as though highlighting a paragraph of text and pressing backspace.

Perhaps even more emblematic of the literary classes' difficulty in comprehending Brexit is Ian McEwan's newly-published novella, *The Cockroach*.

It's an entertaining homage to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Rather than man metamorphosing into an insect, McEwan's protagonist, a cockroach, transforms into a man. That man happens to be prime minister. The cockroach is soon running the country on a newly determined course in its own interest and in the interest, communicated through pheromones, of its species.

The cockroach pursues 'Reversalism', a crude Brexit analogue. 'Reversal' holds that people must pay to be able to work, but will receive money when they spend and purchase. In the novel, the cockroach attempts to crush the opposition of conventional politicians and sundry experts, in the process manipulating the press with sham patriotism and allying with an unscrupulous president of the United States.

That politicians, the newspapers and the people seem to fall in behind this scheme is written, by McEwan, to be greatly to their discredit. Those who favour Reversal are painted as having brought the human species closer to the chaos and anarchy the cockroaches desire. Supporters of the policy are effectively complicit in their own destruction.

As abstract as Reversalism is, what it stands in for is obvious. McEwan's novella demonstrates the same educated incomprehension common among lesser novelists who lament the result of our own 2016 referendum a little more overtly.

But as the cockroach employs devious schemes to secure power and push through its insane policy, McEwan's skilful and amusing touches make the reader want him to succeed.

The irony is that rather than this story of Reversalism being a blistering take-down of Brexit, McEwan's cockroach is actually an appealingly wilful creature – and makes an unintended virtue of doing anything to honour the result of a referendum which was meant to go the other way.

CapX, October 2, 2019

A New Right Reading List

When Osama bin Laden was found by the special forces of the United States and met his end, there was surprising attention paid to this bookshelf. First, and understandably, the volumes present were the subject of understandable interest. That bin Laden appeared to like the books of Noam Chomsky, at least enough to include them in his collection, elicited a little amusement.

More widely, bin Laden's bookshelf contained more specifically extreme material, including the products of the media arms of his and linked terrorist organisations. More broadly, the same intellectual ecosystem includes texts like *The Management of Savagery* by Abu Bakr Naji, a handbook which is said to have been influential in the leadership circles of what later became ISIS.

When considering the far-right, discerning elements of the reading list likely to be followed by those approaching radicalisation ought to be simple. Among the distant fringe of declared Nazis and their approximates, *Mein Kampf* still enjoys brisk trade.

But an entire world exists beyond these unquestionable radicals, and discerning exactly what is being read and discussed proves difficult.

The emergence of a pumped-up, excitable strain which is populist but not extreme presents further complication. That the radicals also don MAGA hats on occasion makes differentiation a harder job.

Online, these two trends coexist on anarchic websites such as 4chan, whose significance – especially relating to recent elections – is greatly talked-up, and where surface-level assessments of 'alt-right culture', such as it exists, often begin.

Some of the phrases and preoccupations popularised by the site seep into wider internet culture. The YouTuber E;R, to take one example, marks a digression from his discussion of a recent Star Wars prequel to tabulate roughly how many Jews were involved in its making, and what effect they may have collectively intended. It's an odd thing to be so explicitly interested in, but fits into a popular theme of overt Jewish influence in the media which is commonly referenced on the 4chan boards related to popular culture.

But simply scrutinising 4chan in the hope of finding the intellectual roots of the alt-right is a fool's errand, however. /lit/, the 4chan board dedicated to books, is filled mainly with anxious would-be writers and idiosyncratic literary snobs. Its inhabitants are as likely to recommend the scandalous 19th century poet Algernon Swinburne to female bloggers on whom the board has developed a collective crush as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The website and the communities on other social media which gravitate around similar aspects are often entirely unserious; and even when the material in question is meant seriously, it is deployed in a throwaway manner, part of a culture of constant superficial reference rather than depth.

Comic reference made on 4chan to the conservative writer Ben Shapiro, and his purported habit of 'owning' or 'destroying' liberals and college students, cannot be taken to indicate sincere affection from the real far-right. Ditto Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychology professor, self-help author and burgeoning public intellectual.

4chan, amid the contrived gloom and misery of boards like /r9k/, has an interest in the fundamentals of self-help. Peterson's ethos might seem to fit with this philosophy. But, as I have argued elsewhere, Peterson's intellectual antecedents are far more the evangelical Tories of the early 19th century, some of whom later became liberals in the mould of Gladstone, than anything recognisably far-right.

Returning to self-help, however, there is a point to make. Boards like /fit/ and other websites in its ecosystem aspire, however jokily, to improve their visitors' physiques; meanwhile, /fa/ deals, at least nominally, with upgrading users' dress sense. And it is here, alongside other attempts at self-edification, that a reading list begins to take shape. It is not intrinsically ideological, but is instead packaged in the terms of self-improvement. Reading books is an end in itself.

Take one step away from the websites I have mentioned. They are only so useful in defining a broader culture. In that culture's reading list, the Western canon naturally features heavily. Its intrinsic value, literary and cultural, is supplemented by subtle mythmaking, the very edges of which arrive at radicalism. Certain historical figures are elevated beyond their normal status. Huey Long, a radical populist governor of Louisiana and later senator who was assassinated in office, is one.

This is myth-history, but it is not harmful. Nor is most of the above. This internet ecosystem only when these innocuous ambitions become extreme. It is a long way from Ryan Gosling to Julius Evola. And it is worth separating the one from the other, lest we end up confusing edgy enthusiasts for radicals, or taking Chomsky for Naji.

Quilliam Foundation, December 2018

Radicalisation and Self-Education

In Sebastian Faulks' novel *Engleby*, a significant scene occurs early on, during a university interview. Faulks' protagonist, the titular character, is the interview candidate. Engleby is a prospective student of literature; a discerning one, to his own mind. And in the course of things, he is asked to make a comparison between the writing of T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence. Engleby, an abrasive, arrogant young man, does not believe there is much to compare.

'I thought he must be joking', Engleby declares of his interviewer's question. 'An American banker interested in the rhythms of the Anglican liturgy and a pitman's son who wanted to escape from Nottingham, maybe via sex, or by his crude paintings. Compare them?'

Engleby continues: 'I looked at him carefully, but he showed no sign of humour so I gave an answer about their use of verse forms, *trying to make it sound as though it had been a reasonable question.*' My italics.

Though his description of Lawrence seems to contain a little of the easy contempt Engleby feels for his interviewers and those around him, Engleby himself resembles the writer. And he does so in more than way. Both the writer and the character could be considered clever. But both are determined by brutality, and in each can be found the desire to escape the material circumstances, and class background, of their birth.

Escaping straightened circumstances is not all. Of a piece with that desire comes the pursuit of a kind of flinty worldliness.

'I can deal with reality as it is', Engleby later declares, contrasting that to Lawrence's comparator. 'Poor old Eliot thought humans couldn't stand too much of it. But I can stand as much of it as you care to throw at me.

'As much as D. H. Lawrence anyway,' he concludes.

In Faulks' novel, Engleby's desire to confront reality leads him to treat his contemporaries and those he considers beneath him with bitterness and derision, and later the same impulses give rise to an act of shocking violence.

Lawrence, in a way, felt the same disdain as Engleby expresses for the people who did not think as he did. Among them were those with whom he grew up. And this attitude brought Lawrence's intimate thoughts, expressed in private language, close to fascism.

'I don't believe either in liberty or democracy. I believe in actual, sacred, inspired authority', Lawrence wrote to one correspondent. To another, he declared 'Let us have done with this foolish form of government, and this idea of democratic control. Let us submit to the knowledge that there are aristocrats and plebians born, not made. Some amongst us are born fit to govern, and some are born only fit to be governed.' Note the position of the word 'us' in this phrasing.

Both Engleby and Lawrence are prickly characters whose intelligence leads them to dislike, then to despise, those they live among. In society as well as in

literature, feelings of this sort can provide a potent resource for radicalisation. It is something those intent on propagating far-right perspectives know well. The attitude is so common that extremists seek to ape appeal to those who espouse such views. They attempt to make their ideology, with all its cruelty, seem the path to toughness, to improvement, and to truth.

One part of the picture is how extremists cloak their beliefs in unearned grandeur. A style guide produced for the benefit of contributors to the *Daily Stormer*, a notorious neo-Nazi publication, suggested that there was 'no such thing as too much hyperbole'.

'Even when a person can say to themselves "this is ridiculous," they are still affected by it on an emotional level,' the guide's author suggests. It directs that writers must 'Refer to teenagers who get arrested for racist Twitter posts as "eternally noble warriors bravely fighting for divine war to protect the blood heritage of our sacred ancestors"'. Even the self-evident absurdity of this phrasing attaches lustre to extreme activity which, when repeated sufficiently often, is intended to draw in those eager for a noble cause and a heroic mantle.

Correspondingly, far-right rhetoric and ideas can propagate while attached to less directly contemptuous feelings. Disaffected youths can find themselves among extremist cultures which appear to reflect pure self-improvement and self-education.

Young Muslims who seek to learn more about their religion can be attracted by the intellectual exercises associated with some Islamist groups. Learning to take the real world as it is can mean, in effect, pursuing religion which promises absolute, world-defining theology. Peter Pomerantsev's new book *This Is Not Propaganda* includes an illuminating description of the practicalities of this approach.

Rashad Ali, now a researcher and counter-terrorism practitioner at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a think tank, was involved in his youth with the revolutionary Islamist organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir.

It began with the promise of erudition. Hizb ut-Tahrir recruiters went into schools, where little wrong was thought to come from 'well-dressed, erudite young college lecturers in engineering and science speaking so engagingly about big ideas: about whether you could prove God exists, evolution, identity', as Pomerantsev writes.

Ali was interested by the prospect of totality and true knowledge. 'Can you be a complete Muslim?' one of the recruiters asked, in implied contrast to other 'part-time' or 'Friday' Muslims. That distinction between part-timers who couldn't take Islam at its true extent and the possibility of completion was enough to pique the young man's interest.

Significantly, Ali began his involvement with Hizb ut-Tahrir not at a mosque, but in a school, and latterly through a succession of 'study groups'.

What was on offer reads like hidden knowledge: novel ideas, and the possibility of hearing more than others in their quiet lives seek to understand.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is a non-violent Islamist organisation which prioritises the propagation of its political ideas. That is what Ali, as he rose in the organisation, was

trained and expected to do. Other groups have more violent ambitions for their recruits. But the same impulses appear in those they seek to co-opt, and are used by recruiters.

A recent *New Yorker* investigation of the British far-right group National Action evidenced the organisation's pseudointellectual culture and its – perhaps perverse – appeal to someone seeking more learning than life had hitherto provided.

Robbie Mullen, the piece's subject, a man who joined National Action before informing authorities about its members' violent intentions, is described as a 'bright' boy whose 'education was truncated'. '[I]n our conversations', journalist Ed Caesar writes, 'he sometimes lacked the vocabulary to express complicated thoughts or feelings'. Mullen's formal education was inconsistent, and he fell in with a crowd his mother considered unsuitable. Less than well educated and lacking training, he took unskilled work upon finishing school.

Mullen's lack of formal education provided an opening for the radical group he eventually joined.

Amid uninteresting surroundings and unchallenging relationships, the racist worldview of National Action can be seen, or skilfully presented, as a perverse education in itself. New ideas, and more strident belief, overtook a life of not thinking about very much at all. As Caesar puts it, 'More established N.A. members educated Mullen in what seemed to him a sophisticated world view'; the cornerstones of that worldview were racial resentment and political radicalism.

National Action's methods of propagation included the mock-intellectual magazine *Attack*, which served as justification for some of its pretences. Elsewhere, National Action's leaders described the core of their organisation not only residing in its membership, but also in what they termed 'our ideas'. This elevation of vulgar prejudice to intellectual effort not only justified the group's worldview; it also seemed to meet standards for education and improvement, even self-betterment, which are attractive to those in less than perfect lives.

In 'teaching' socially awkward and under-educated people such as Mullen, radical groups can indoctrinate under the guise of educating. While their overt worldview provides a direct cause for which adherents can advocate, and their commitment to action provides political motivation, other, more subtle factors can attract those who are bored or drawn to aggressive pseudointellectual politics.

National Action's purported 'ideas' were intended to give cover and justification to its planned violence. Mullen only began informing on the group after its members did not stop or even try to dissuade another member, Jack Renshaw, from openly contemplating the murder a Member of Parliament, Rosie Cooper. Mullen could stand no more. It proved too real.

Matthew Collins, who is now a figure in the anti-extremism organisation Hope not Hate, began his political involvement as a young man drawn to the far-right. 'In high school, Collins became, in the words of his teachers, a "racist" and a "bully."' At a library, he began to research the National Front and other fascist groups', Caesar notes.

These researches led to the boy, someone later described in Collins' memoir as 'leaderless' and 'bored', to overt radicalism.

Boredom and the desire for challenge combine with another common theme: the desire for self-improvement in its most general sense.

On forums and message boards, such as 4chan, which provide partial meeting places for opinions far from the mainstream, those who post are as likely to discuss improving one's own or others' tastes in books and film, and improving the physique, than overtly radical material. The vast majority of the material shared on these websites is almost innocuous, if often strangely specific and generally odd – deliberately at odds with the opinion of others and disdainful of other views, but carried out with diversion as the aim. All, in other words, designed to escape boredom as much as any other objective.

But things can, and likely will, carry a strange undertone in these communities, which define as much by their edginess and vulgarity as anything else.

On forums such as these, discussions of fitness, for example, will not be entirely free of strange subtexts. Not only will some posters talk, as anyone discussing the subject might, about wanting to improve their attractiveness; others, either ironically or sincerely, will talk about wanting to get into shape for the race war which they say is coming. Even these boards contain aspects of the spirit of the more politically extreme parts of the site, and serve as something of an annex to wider pursuit of extreme politics.

Entertainment and diversion still predominates. On boards dedicated to literature, the Western canon is more likely to be recommended than the writings of the fascist intellectual Julius Evola. But nonetheless, in the pursuit of reading books, visitors are likely to be induced to read biographies of the British fascist Oswald Mosley, or Louisiana's populist governor Huey Long, works which complement or supplement more radical talk about race and nation. On anonymous (and since deleted) Twitter accounts, some of the people who frequent these online destinations spoke to those who agree about how fulfilling the experience of reading this niche material can be, and how others – the people they encounter in daily life – were unenlightened for not having trodden similar paths.

The desire for self-improvement and self-education can lead the untested down strange and uncommon routes, all born from a desire, as Engleby evidences, to see life as it really is and to face it. This desire has unpleasant corollaries. It can lead some to seek perverse education in things far from the accepted tenets of plural and peaceful society – in radical politics or hatreds. These pursuits can cause others to hold their contemporaries in contempt as Lawrence did, and to decide, after years of intellectual effort, that most people deserve to be ruled rather than to hold power themselves.

In many ways, given his desire to escape his provincial background amid knowledge of all kinds – intellectual and sensual – it is not surprising that Lawrence's politics developed as they did. For him, an awkward and intelligent provincial working-class boy, it was easy to become contemptuous as Lawrence, in his own eyes, made himself better, but saw his contemporaries remaining much the same as he had

left them. The violence of Engleby and National Action, seen in this context, is an outgrowth of wider desires and drives, all of them with deep roots.

European Eye on Radicalisation, August 12, 2019

An Embarrassment of Riches

This Is Not Propaganda by Peter Pomerantsev

We live in a golden age not of fact, but of fiction. The possibilities of new media have led to an embarrassment of riches. Where once there was a lack of information, there is now overabundance, with half of the world's population possessing access to the internet, and the sum of human knowledge accessible from a device most in the rich world carry in their pockets, and replace for an almost trivial sum when its screen gets scratched.

Overabundance presents a new problem. Rather than lacking information, its oversupply leads to a corresponding fall in value. Confirmation bias benefits, but so too do those with more direct ambitions: to undermine conventional interpretations of events, to sow discord and disagreement, or to depreciate trust in institutions, people and ideas of truth itself.

As chemical weapons attacks in Syria are not only denied but the subject of successful propaganda campaigns; as 'state-sponsored' trolling unmask protesters in Bahrain; as Turkish columnists, 'who are members of the ruling party[,] incite mob attacks on anyone who dares criticise President Erdoğan' – the variety and efficacy of authoritarian efforts in information becomes clear.

The intellectual disorder and chaos of modern information has meant a boon for some. But for others, it has shaken their faith. Peter Pomerantsev, working in the London School of Economics on the state of the digital society and the future of mass information, found himself – and those in receipt of his advice – lost and adrift.

'The neat little bullet points of my reports assume that there really is a coherent system that can be amended, that a few technical recommendations applied to new information technologies can fix everything', he writes. 'Yet the problems go far deeper.'

Pomerantsev's narrative begins and is woven together with the story of his parents in the old Soviet Union. He writes about the intimidation they suffered by authority for desiring freedom of thought and of action, and the mind-games played by the authorities under whose power so many helplessly lived.

The KGB would, when taking people in at the break of day, call them to the door with the cry of 'telegram!' And worse than apprehension was the hot shame of falling for the ploy.

Similar games are still played by authoritarian states, though the playground is larger and harder to discern.

Pomerantsev's parents eventually left the Soviet Union, but their son spent a decade as a television producer in Russia at the start of this century, and saw and participated in the whirling change which enveloped that country.

Pomerantsev's first book, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, published in 2014, provided an entertaining and prophetic assessment of the chaotic shifting of

identity in Russia that supported the country's consolidating authoritarianism. His assessment of Russia's almost theatrically orchestrated domestic politics gave way to convincing analysis of the effect this had on Russia's neighbours and the world of information at large.

Now, Pomerantsev's focus is global, including disinformation in the Philippines, the rise of populism in the United States, Great Britain and across Europe, and the ways terror groups bend their old aims to new methods.

Much has been written on each of these subjects. On Russia's information warfare, many have taken up Pomerantsev's thread, so successful was his work – long before the words 'meddling' and 'Russian' became virtual twins after all that happened in 2016.

But little has been written with the same weary despair he now advances, and evinces. Others have diagnosed similar problems, and bemoaned them with the evident assumption that any shift from what is considered normality can be mitigated, or that navigation away from dangerous waters is possible.

Pomerantsev writes more effectively than any other about the hopelessness this new state of affairs inspires.

He sees it not only among those whose business it is to study these things, or those who, by dint of their occupation and status, desire privileged access to the shaping of information and resent its slipping from their grasp.

Instead, Pomerantsev notes the despair of those whose voices ought to be magnified by the democratisation of information, but who instead are buried under its deluge, set upon by more canny forces, and left wondering whether the things they were promised about the hopefulness of the modern world were ever true.

Pomerantsev lands on the story of Khaled Khatib, a Syrian activist who sought to document the destruction of Aleppo as it was attacked, besieged and finally conquered by forces fighting on behalf of the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

When Khatib first began documenting the bomb blasts, people in the throes of agony and grief would cry out to him 'Aren't you ashamed to film us? Do you like to see our tears?'

Khatib would reassure them of his intentions, and say that what he did – no matter how painful – he did to help.

After Aleppo fell in spite of muted global outcry – and as Syria's opposition has been slowly defeated, and abandoned by its allies, its fighters and supporters traduced as jihadists worthy of slaughter – Khatib's mission seemed less certain, its ambition less sure.

'Increasingly people just sighed when they saw Khaled's camera', Pomerantsev writes. 'What was the point of filming?'

The Arab Weekly, July 27, 2019

Absolutism

The Emperor and Shah of Shahs by Ryszard Kapuściński

These two books could have been identical. Kapuściński intended them, apparently, as the first parts in a projected trilogy on absolute power. The Emperor in question is Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, king of kings, the Shah is Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran, shah of shahs. Kapuściński did not live to write the third — although how could he have done? Who could he have written about?

In practice the books are quite different. Most obviously on the question of style. *The Emperor* is a furtive book built on the decaying oral culture of a banished empire. After the emperor's overthrow, Kapuściński travelled to Addis and skulked around, avoiding the forces of the Derg who ruled Ethiopia after its revolution and seeking out courtiers and retainers, burning a small candle for the old order of things.

He found them in squalor and bitterness, their clothes moth-eaten and their bodies worn. Through whatever magic of reconstruction Kapuściński saw fit to employ, the book largely consists of their monologues — anguished, hidebound — about the order which existed under the emperor, and could never come again.

The empire was an oral culture and a Potemkin one. Its ruler would wake every morning to be briefed by his spies on the plots which the night contained. He would never read a word, nor write anything down. He preferred to transact business entirely orally, with his advisors and ministers whispering separately into his ears. In the course of his morning walk around the palace in Addis, Haile Selassie would feed raw meat to his panthers, who were caged.

The court Kapuściński describes is one where extreme dysfunction is coupled with fanatical devotion, pretend or otherwise.

On dysfunction: the government would hold 'hours' of each day where issues were brought to the emperor and some action was generated by his mind, and written down by the Minister of the Pen — a glorified scribe who was, in this time, effectively head of the government. Few actions resulted from these daily rituals. And if things went wrong, they were blamed on the minister; for how else could an incorrect edict have come about, but from an incorrect or malicious transcription of the emperor's will as the words flowed from his mouth onto paper through an intermediary?

Because the patronage of the emperor was all that counted, the crowds of officials and servants would crush and press in order that the emperor might see their faces. One glance, and they would be recognisable. One moment of recognition at a later date could mean advancement.

For a man to be deprived of office, or to go unseen by the emperor — each was death, socially, politically, emotionally. When a man became a minister he grew, physically. When he was relieved of office he shrank until he seemed either a husk or a shadow.

When the emperor is, later in the narrative, finally overthrown, the edges of the revolution itself are blurred. As the generals arrive to take over the government, the emperor congratulates them on their loyalty. He continues to do so until the book's end, even though all the courtiers have left and he has been moved out of the palace. Each act, he maintains, is done in his name.

Kapuściński does not write, because it was not then confirmed, that the emperor was strangled in his bed by his overthrowers.

Shah of Shahs, meanwhile, is cobbled together from appearances. Kapuściński spends much of the book analysing photographs of Iran in ancient days and modern, which he either kept in a scrapbook or generated himself.

Unlike the other book, this is the tale of the shah's overthrow rather than his reign. Shahs were frequently overthrown. This is one more story of how a society which hated its ruler was finally capable of deposing him — not to be replaced by another in his mould, but someone else anew.

Like the emperor, the shah talked of development. But unlike the emperor, the shah had the means to develop. When famine struck Ethiopia, the outside world was horrified, but the Ethiopians did not overthrow their ruler. Their society was not rich; there was only so much to go around; and in their extreme backwardness the emperor had a profound ally of centuries' standing. The book, therefore, is about the corrupt emptiness of absolute power, which is terminated — almost off-stage — by revolution.

The shah meanwhile was spectacularly rich, and he was spectacular. He threw a great party on the anniversary of the founding of the empire of Cyrus. He imported military equipment in dollars measured by the billion. His country was drowning in oil, so he imported American oil engineers and French chefs to feed them. The shah claimed to want to build a 'Great Civilisation' — the capitalisations very much Kapuściński's. His book is almost wholly about the revolution.

The shah's reign is something Kapuściński likens to theatrical performance — a great confection, given by a theatre manager who does not know how to stage a play. At some point the men in the stalls grew bored of applauding, although the rich in the galleries continued their ovation.

The poor wanted political rights (although, ironically, those political inclinations if expressed were Islamist and likely to result in the religious totalitarianism of Khomeini and his successors). And the poor wanted money. Neither of which the shah could offer them. He promised 'development', like the emperor (who had implemented a daily 'Development Hour'), but like the emperor development came insufficiently.

Later in *Shah of Shahs* the medium shifts again — to videotape, the footage of growing protests against the shah, followed by gunfire, followed by ritual funerals at which protests emerged. Kapuściński puts down his photographs and criticises the camerawork, and writes beautifully and deftly about the psychology of the crowd.

Revolutions only happen, he says, when the normal interaction between individual and the authority of an absolutist state does not contain a third figure: that of fear. If the third man is lessened, the normal meeting of the first two does not go as

it should. Upon being challenged in tyranny, the citizen ordinarily flees from the policeman. His fear freezes him with unspoken reference to torture and oblivion, and he leaves the scene.

But if he does not, the policeman walks back to his sentry box or his emplacement and begins to aim his rifle. The calculus has changed. Violence is inevitable, on a mass scale, and so too in reaction is revolutionary protest.

The past eleven years have shown elegantly enough how inevitable this cycle can prove.

Questions have increasingly been asked about the 'reporting' claimed by these books. They are such literary documents, it is alleged, that they resemble novels in the form of non-fiction. The emperor's courtiers are all referred to by their initials. They probably couldn't have been contacted by any eager fact-checkers, even while they still were alive.

One defence of Kapuściński is that he wrote the truth even if he had to reconstruct it in his mind. No matter if the photographs didn't actually exist. His observations accord so closely with reality that we the reader should elide the two.

There is some reasonableness to all this. The books, beautifully translated by Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand and William R. Brand, are so full of style and artifice that they generate period sound stages. They evoke an atmosphere — the cloying absurdity of absolute power — defying the laws of man, defying age, defying logic.

Perhaps this is right. But it would be ironic that one book made up of testimony that condemns the emperor's courtiers out of their own mouths, where they do not utter a word to damn him, yet he is damned all the same, is in fact a construct; or if the pictures of the shah's collapsing society — so true, so lifelike — were created in the mind of a Polish journalist in 1979, the veteran of twenty-seven previous revolutions, without leaving his hotel room in Tehran.

Jamesnell.substack.com, August 1, 2021

Jordan Peterson's Mechanistic Universe

In a very brief time, Jordan Peterson has become almost ubiquitous. The professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, now on leave in order to tour the world, has been cultivating a growing following on social media and YouTube for years. But 2018 is his moment.

Peterson's until recently modest fame has been increased by recent high-profile appearances on international television and the release of his best-selling book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, which combines self-help and stories of suffering.

Peterson sells out auditoriums. His book has sold over a million copies. He receives \$80,000 per month in donations from fans alone, solicited via the website Patreon, where admirers subscribe and offer their cash to those who entertain or edify them, and which combines the essence of capitalist audience-pleasing with the overtness of the virtual begging bowl.

His fans paint Peterson as a new and revelatory thinker. Opponents call him a huckster, trading on academic credentials which he stretches to capacity.

His books are saturated with mythic and historical references, from the Eden of the Bible and Milton's *Paradise Lost* to the terrors of totalitarian states in the twentieth century.

His history is also tempered with myth. Peterson writes about primordial fears and conflicts. He identifies and defends hierarchies which he claims are natural – and essential to the nature of life on earth. This is not so much historical as prehistorical. But examples from history, particularly the bloodiest episodes perpetrated by modern totalitarianism, serve to illustrate Peterson's claims about the abhorrent nature of tyranny and the incredible damage done by chaos, in its elemental and embodied forms.

Peterson's admiration of Dostoevsky, Jung and Solzhenitsyn situates him in history. His horror at the totalitarian state is, like that state itself, a uniquely modern phenomenon. But his essential beliefs can be traced back further. Peterson is of a conservative temperament. He dances around the subject of religion, never quite endorsing its supernatural claims, but asserting that its value – both as an attempted answer to the questions posed by existence and a propagator of morality – is undeniable and obvious.

The world Peterson envisions is truly brutal and harsh. Its terrors are inherent, but made worse by failing to succeed within acceptable patterns of behaviour. We must be our best or face social and sexual rejection, moral degradation, abjection and even early death. There is beauty in the world, but it is transient and self-created. Myths and stories, as detailed in his earlier book *Maps of Meaning*, are our way – as mortal creatures prone to error – of reconciling ourselves to failure and oblivion. We cling to sanity if we serve society; otherwise, everything goes to hell.

Peterson's credo is bizarre and, to some, intoxicating; the latter effect is generated and maintained by his uncommon prose style – a mixture of demotic rural

slang and even occasional emoticons followed by page after page of harsh, interrogative rhetorical questions, excoriating the reader, attempting to force the author's point again and again.

One historical current seems to echo much of Peterson's thought – in both rhetoric and worldview. This is the Tory evangelical strain visible in early 19th century Britain. Its logic is caught well in the conclusion to *Corn, Cash, Commerce* by Professor Boyd Hilton of Trinity College, Cambridge.

In Hilton's second book, *The Age of Atonement*, the subject receives its definitive treatment. Hilton defines an evangelical school of thought popular among some Tories in the early 19th century, some of whom later became Gladstonian liberals.

In *Corn, Cash, Commerce*, Hilton notes the formative effect of Thomas Chalmers, who was an inspiration to George Canning and William Huskisson. 'His preaching moved [them] to rapture, sometimes even to tears', Hilton writes. Politically, Chalmers supported Catholic emancipation, a property tax, and free trade in corn.

Thomas Malthus's gloomy predictions about overpopulation presented a challenge to utopianism and even optimism. Chalmers successfully fused Malthus and morality. He argued that the checks of hunger on population growth was an opportunity to exercise moral freedom to do good. The prospect of hunger could force a population to be restrained, abstemious, efficient.

Tory evangelicals saw the world as a largely self-acting, morally self-regulating mechanism, a mechanistic universe 'illuminating the wisdom and glory and goodness of its Creator'.

This belief in the goodness of God led to an absolute faith in the value of struggle. The universe was seen as mechanistic and unyielding, requiring both moral goodness and hardness of character to survive and reap rewards. The evangelical injunction to moral goodness was backed by an implied threat: one must be good or suffer the consequences – in the afterlife and, if necessary, on earth as well.

Tory evangelicals glorified the struggle of being. Peterson, in *12 Rules for Life*, suggestively capitalises the first letter to elevate existence to 'Being'. He suggests that only by taking responsibility for oneself and attempting to embrace the vicissitudes of 'Being' can one pursue true meaning. Evangelicals believed that the harshness of the world was justified by the promise of divine compensation.

They were conflicted about the uses of charity, with some arguing that it distorted the nature of the way God had created the world and provided incentives for people to demand help. Evangelicals disdained people who made rather than earned money. They decried 'speculators' who were considered both dishonest and immoral. Speculators were believed to shirk hard work and the rewards it can bring, and thus to deny themselves the possibility of doing good.

Peterson, likewise, is adamant that living life without struggle is no way to get to the heart of 'Being'. There are consolations to both ways of conceptualising the world. Early evangelicals were sure of God's truth. For Peterson, coming closer to understanding 'Being' justifies all immediate suffering and strife.

The Tory evangelical movement did not solely manifest itself in moral hardness and cold, flinty brutality. As time passed, it mellowed. Hilton observes that by the 1840s and 50s, kind treatment was advocated for 'animals, children, lunatics, and paupers'. Duelling was banned, as it was 'more chic to apologise than to fight'. At the same time, limited liability shareholding, which once would have been decried as immoral speculation, became commonplace.

This was accompanied by a move in theology away from fear, towards love. The love of God was less to do with the death of Christ and his atonement, and more to do with the love God feels for everyone. This suggested that evangelical religion was being socialised, secularised, and softened. The influence of early nineteenth century evangelicalism persisted. It can be found in the politics of Gladstone, once an evangelical Tory, but latterly a Liberal. His belief in the mechanistic universe justified economic liberalisation.

Evangelicalism also seeped into the modern self-help industry, notably in Samuel Smiles's book *Self-Help*, which first appeared in 1859. Smiles argues that betterment and salvation are possible, just difficult to attain. His book irreducibly links morality and conduct with prosperity and success. It serves as a *de facto* justification of liberal economics built on the evangelical model.

In so many ways, these are Peterson's antecedents. He too finds meaning in suffering and links morality to success; he too criticises those who live life without struggle. At times, Peterson's rhetoric approaches the evangelical. So, too, does his view of the world we inhabit.

CapX, May 21, 2018

School Ties

Keir Starmer: A Life of Contrasts by Nigel Cawthorne

This is a short review because the book in question does not merit a longer one.

The title says it all, in a way. For just as children reporting on foreign parts for primary school geography might declare Mexico, Russia or Mozambique ‘lands of contrasts’, so too can lazy, inept biographers refer to others’ lives. And after all, whose life in the history of humanity, except those who never reached adulthood, did not include at least one breach in continuity or reversal of expectation?

This book is badly written in the extreme and interminably boring. The former comes from the innumerable little tortures Cawthorne’s sentences are made to suffer. Some of the latter is due to the greyish nature of its subject. But much of it must be blamed on the inability of the author to assemble, from all his accumulated trivia, anything approaching an interesting story.

As it is, the story is filled with non sequitur statements and strangely overextended lists. For example, Karl Marx is redundantly included among a list of famous Marxists from whom the Labour left draws inspiration. That famous but perhaps forgotten Marxist, Karl Marx.

The first parts of the book are dominated by two things: an oddly inhuman attempt to conscript the many sufferings of Starmer’s parents — his overworked and distant father, and crippling ill mother — into middlebrow heart-warming fare, and a strange and pronounced educational snobbery. Cawthorne makes much of the mundane fact that he and Starmer, at different times, attended the same school. He labours this point continually. It’s pointless in itself, of course, and reveals little about biographer and his subject.

But even if the connection was meaningful, it does not justify an extended introduction focused largely on the price of Reigate Grammar School these days, and how obsessed the book otherwise is with which public schools dead politicians attended, and bizarrely enough, how much these schools charge per student in 2021.

This is a short book, but still feels too long. Containing as it does very little real insight. It is larded with useless information culled from interviews with unnamed nobodies who speak in tabloid clichés; broad and unenlightening historical background; and extracts from church bulletins, typo-ridden local newspapers, fee-paying schools’ websites and, one can only assume, Wikipedia.

Not only is the book bereft of insight into its subject: everyone else gets the same treatment — with adjectives crammed into descriptions which do not describe anything of note. Because Anthony Crosland kept up a calendar of publication, he was ‘an avid book writer’. Was he really *avid* in the business of writing books, or did he simply write quite a lot? I suppose there’s no point pausing to disentangle this adjective; the author almost certainly gave it less thought.

The above is also an example of a typically hideous phrase, one of many in this book, and it's possibly how Cawthorne, who churns out pap like this yearly, imagines himself. An 'avid', as opposed to a good, writer. In reality, of course, he should be embarrassed to put his name to this junk.

I pity the publisher, who in these pestilential years was delivered at short notice, not a manuscript, but a bill of goods.

Jamesnell.substack.com, September 30, 2021

In Parts True and Original

The Death of Truth by Michiko Kakutani

Amid many recent books purporting to explain our present age's apparent problems with the truth, Michiko Kakutani's stands out.

It stands out because of its author's reputation as a judicious writer; she was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for literary criticism. But more than that, it stands out because of the specificity of its central claim – which holds not, as other books have argued, that there is more falsehood in the world now than ever, or it is easier to be duplicitous, and on a grander scale, than at any time in recent history; but rather that the very idea of verity is under attack, and that it has been in retreat for some time.

The boldness of that fundamental claim might mark it down for originality. But that is not in great supply. Early on, the reader begins to suspect exactly what Kakutani will say, and exactly how she will get there. Arendt, Orwell, troll factories, filter bubbles – all make their awaited appearance within pages.

This is no great problem. The book is a political and social polemic, not a cheap thriller. There is no need to be kept guessing until the final page. But the above, combined with a mass of complementary references, weighs down what might be a light essay. The work is more referential than it is declarative, and this gives its arguments a tired, second-hand quality.

The American president comes in for criticism – of a fairly perfunctory sort. For Kakutani, Trump is not just a cartoon villain but an enemy of the truth: he has waged a 'war on language and [made] efforts to normalize the abnormal'. This is, one ought to grant, a pleasing reformulation of the anti-Trump mantra 'this isn't normal'. But as a comment on the present moment, such thoughts are more normal than revelatory.

More references arrive. Kakutani traces the political paranoia diagnosed by Richard Hofstadter, and what Philip Roth saw as berserker impulses in the American psyche – all this running parallel to the what Kakutani sees as a more noble history of the United States.

That narrative – representing the 'normal' – is itself idealised. It is not quite an America of mothers and apple pie, but Kakutani renders a vision of a nation revering its constitution, ruled by its laws, a country for which the authors of America, those Kakutani paints as good, enlightened men, placed barriers in the way of poor governance which are now under attack.

Kakutani is correct when she notes the importance of setting narratives, coupled with what she terms the 'instability of language' in modern society. Much of this is blamed on trends in postmodernism – with Mike Cernovich, an ardent Trump supporter and propagator of the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, revealed as an unlikely but faithful reader of Lacan. This does not hold entirely.

But Kakutani is on solid ground when discussing trends in literature and how these portend narcissism. Gonzo and 'new' journalism, which centre even stories of real importance on the person of the reporter, did not help.

Ditto the decadent unstraightforwardness of modern fiction, suggesting a constellation of crack-brained writers and a public eager for unreliable narrators and novelists. This is a literary landscape where 'subjectivity rules'; the 'memoir boom' which followed saw 'self-indulgent, self-dramatizing' works find and shape a receptive audience.

The above references are useful and well deployed. But Kakutani is the prisoner of this tactic. Extending one's frame of reference to draw uncritically on the writing of Seymour Hersh and the documentaries of Adam Curtis – both rather keen on conspiracy theories – does not allow one to claim a monopoly on recognising and speaking the truth.

Parts of the book are disappointingly obvious, with Kakutani propounding a list of grievances so commonly held across international liberalism that the author loses all claim to originality.

On other criteria, Kakutani falls short. There is no definitiveness in a book weighed down by reference and quotation. Occasional fine phrases of the author's own emerge, but the whole is surprisingly inelegant, given Kakutani's years of stellar press clippings.

A career at the culture desk has its uses, and Kakutani is good at characterising culture and diagnosing sickness therein. Her ability to subject books to critique remains undiminished. It has bite and value. It is only when they are grafted to the whole that they lose impact. The political ends of such analyses, when they take their regimented place in Kakutani's argument, are either pointed but creakingly partisan or banal.

How Kakutani's book will be judged depends on how several pertinent questions will, in time, be answered. Is her diagnosis of the situation correct? Is there a problem as great as she describes? And how, in the future, will such cautions be viewed – as necessary early warning system, or as alarmist rhetoric conveyed in the measured phrases of a *New York Times* book critic? And one must remember that if these warnings are taken and acted upon and the worst does not occur, a crisis averted looks like no crisis at all.

There is something to be said about the fundamental divergence of modern media from all that has come before, which Kakutani explicates. Other writers' cute parallels to the advent of the printing press aside, it is not the availability of media that worries, but rather the feeling that one is, at all times, assailed by its speed and oppressed by its scale. Kakutani understands this and makes much of it.

It is also reasonable to separate the way Trump speaks from other American presidents – though not necessarily other politicians. It is difficult to suggest Trump is more calculatedly mendacious than other participants in politics.

He simply runs his mouth without thought; Trump is, it seems, rarely open to persuasion by evidence – only sudden realisation, rather than any process of

reasoning, can change his mind. Impulsiveness and stubbornness dictate his thoughts and his speech.

These are not good things. But they are also not Machiavellian hallmarks. Trump's policy is not a war on truth, as Kakutani claims; he's characterised instead by his indolent indifference to it. If such a complaint begins to affect society at large, we may have a problem on the scale Kakutani predicts. Otherwise, at least for the immediate term, we can avoid the gravest predictions of our still undecided future.

The New Arab, August 3, 2018

Fire and Fury, but Little Else

Fire and Fury by Michael Wolff

The biggest of the stories swirling about Donald Trump this week concerns, not a tweet (as is ordinary), but a book.

The president is famously unlettered, professing little time for reading; and others attest that Trump has little interest in any printed matter that does not contain his photograph.

But the interest which many readers, not just the president, have in this book, *Fire and Fury*, by the scurrilous journalist Michael Wolff, is not surprising. It purports to be an account of the Trump administration written by someone who roamed the White House without supervision and oversight, but with some official co-operation. Wolff wants kudos for seeing the chaos first-hand.

He must take some credit. He has baited the president and his spokespeople into talking continually about the book, and even into trying, and failing to prevent its publication.

This, alongside the release of some scandalous excerpts in major American and world publications, has guaranteed not only hefty sales, but an excessive reaction beyond the media. The book has become a strange cultural touchstone.

Inconsistently evidenced and gossipy in tone, the book makes specific claims about Trump's handling of the Middle East. None of these claims are ludicrous or entirely unreal. Indeed, almost every detail is predictable. But this does not make Wolff's every supposition correct.

His overreliance on Steve Bannon, the former CEO of Trump's presidential campaign and White House chief strategist, now in disgrace and disagreement with the president, means that Wolff's foreign policy narrative is incomplete.

It is inflected with a nationalist tone provided by Bannon and reflects some of the bitterness of the man who lost his fight against other factions within the administration, factions whose foreign positions could be summarised as 'business as usual'.

This approach is associated with Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter, and Jared Kushner, his son-in-law. For Wolff (and Bannon), 'Jarvanka' represents moderation; the two are centrist 'New York Democrats'.

They brought in Dina Powell, formerly of Goldman Sachs, who specialised in corporate philanthropy. Powell and Ivanka, in Wolff's telling, were essential in prompting the president to react as he did to the sarin attack carried out by the Assad regime on Khan Sheikhun last April.

Trump is callous in the way businessmen liked to see themselves in the 1980s. During the campaign, candidate Trump referred almost positively to Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons, including poison gas. But this facade crumbled

when he was confronted not with a rally but with a crisis awaiting his response; and also when he was faced with the results of such an outrage in person.

Powell and Ivanka presented Trump with a presentation about the attack, which included photographs from the scene. Pictures Bannon, ever the cold-heart, dismissed as 'kids foaming at the mouth'.

Trump 'went through [the presentation] several times. He seemed mesmerised', Wolff writes. This is not a new revelation. Trump's emotion was visible when he spoke about the 'beautiful babies' who had been murdered when justifying his response.

Trump ordered a Tomahawk strike on the airfield from which the chemical attack had been launched, a move which was met, largely, with domestic US and global support.

A critical chorus soon emerged.

Some of it was sparked by Bannontite frustration at Trump appearing to care enough about the lives of non-Americans to act, to risk entanglement in what nationalists think of as other people's battles. More critics suggested that Trump's stance was prompted by a reflexive desire to repudiate the failure of his predecessor, Barack Obama, to deal with the chemical war crimes of Bashar al-Assad.

Yet others took issue with Trump's expressed emotion. They argued that it was an unconsidered basis upon which to base decisions of gravity.

But this is far from the point. Even in Wolff's critical telling, Trump's emotional engagement prompted, not a knee-jerk reaction, but 'wide-eyed interest in all kinds of other military options'.

But Trump is not all emotion. He has a transactional approach, which is applied to most issues, domestic and international.

Trump believes that his son-in-law is the perfect man to solve the intractable Israel—Palestine conflict because he is a man of business and, like Trump, can make 'great deals'. This sunny prediction is very unlikely to come true and may make undermine traditional diplomatic efforts.

Trump has taken this transactional approach across the Middle East, notably in assessing the internal politics of Saudi Arabia. He and Kushner are close to the kingdom's crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman.

This has been extensively documented. Trump applauded new arms deals and appreciated being given a lavish reception at a summit in Riyadh. He also endorsed the Saudi attempt to, in Wolff's words, 'bully Qatar'.

Wolff adds little to this picture of Trump, which is widely known and anticipated, except some detail about just how much Trump and Kushner celebrated bin Salman's rise to the office of crown prince, to the detriment of the previous occupant of that office, Muhammad bin Nayef. 'We've put our man on top!' Trump is said to have crowed.

Aside from such stand out moments, which one should probably treat with a lot of caution, the book has little new in it. Instead, it further furnishes a view of Trump

as unpredictable, led by his immediate appetites and aversions, and hemmed in by a White House in perpetual chaos.

None of this is news. Wolff's book says the expected; anyone could have come to the same conclusions about Trump's Middle East policy merely by observing events. The president has few hidden depths, after all – something which needs no chronicler to confirm.

The New Arab, January 9, 2018

Covering the Ground

Days of the Fall: A Reporter's Journey in the Syria and Iraq Wars by Jonathan Spyer

As the violence of the Syrian civil war increased, and as the Islamic State group (IS) crossed the Iraqi border, it was clear that the wars in these two countries would become the essential conflict of our times.

Very quickly, the military campaign against IS became the focus of world attention. And as that campaign reached its final stages in Iraq, many of the world's finest conflict journalists – complete with a fair few chancers and opportunists – hurried to Mesopotamia to witness the end of something.

This collective witnessed the grinding Mosul campaign which took back IS' self-declared Iraqi capital. The city was, for a short time, the centre of the world for news media. When the battle was won, and eventually, when Iraq's prime minister Haider al-Abadi declared IS defeated, many of those who had observed that campaign left the country.

Iraq's moment in the spotlight did not eclipse the war in Syria. It rumbled on in the background, with IS fought and pushed out of major urban centres, and civilian casualties growing in number as the civil war continued.

But the fact that Iraq's government never attempted to keep reporters out nor kill journalists (neither of which can be said about the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad) meant that the conflict in Syria was less covered by western press.

The journalists who ventured into Syria did so at real risk.

Some of their colleagues were killed – by the regime, by IS, by myriad groups. Jonathan Spyer, a British-Israeli journalist and analyst, begins his book, *Days of the Fall*, with the deaths of two such men.

One of them, Abdullah al-Yassin, a Syrian rebel activist, was killed not by a particular armed faction but in 'some dispute with semi-criminal elements in the city' of Aleppo. It is an ignominious end for a man portrayed as a 'sort of poet-warrior'.

Another journalist, Steven Sotloff, the man who maintained that description of Yassin, had been known to Spyer for longer. They had met in Herzliya, in Israel, years before. The acquaintance between Spyer and Sotloff was not deep and Spyer does not make it more than it was. But he notes Sotloff's captivity at the hands of IS and marks Sotloff's death.

When Sotloff was rumoured to have been killed, shortly after the world was made aware of his being held by IS, Spyer was in a bar in Jerusalem with a friend. The friend broke the news. "Sotloff's dead", he mouthed to me after taking a call while we were having dinner. We stayed and smoked and drank arak until late in the night.'

Spyer chronicles the brute reality of violence.

Aleppo in later 2012 'was a close approximation of hell'. During the battle for Kobani, fought by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and IS, Spyer reported from Tell Abyad. Because of the ferocity of the battle, the corpses of IS fighters were

not collected, and lay, in 'strange dark-coloured piles', where they had fallen between the two frontlines.

Years later, driving down a highway between al-Hawl and Qamishli, Spyer and his companions came across a group of corpses. They belonged to IS fighters, 'strewn in various parts across the flat, sandy ground'. Spyer notes 'one livid remaining face', belonging to a young man.

Of the rest of his body, half was in evidence. 'The rest had been vaporised or was to be found among the black, roasted clumps spread around' – the men were 'blown apart by the shocking and astonishing destructive power of a charge fired from a fighter aircraft'.

This is not an attempt to convey colour through the inclusion of grotesque detail. Instead, it affords insight not only into the way wars like this are fought – from the air, with immense, overwhelming force – but also into how those covering these conflicts feel.

'We joked a little about the dead jihadi.' But humour could not hide the unease of those present. 'What we really felt', Spyer writes, 'was a sense of dread, even of wonder'.

While reporting on this conflict, Spyer was not, as he notes in his introduction, new to war. He had fought, in 2006, in Lebanon with the Israeli army. He reported on or otherwise observed wars in 'Iraq, Turkey, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and Ukraine'. With that history, Spyer might be expected to shrug violence off, but he is open about his emotions.

Spyer is also open about his partiality.

As a reporter he is free to look more fondly on some groups than others. But he must be careful when doing so.

And, as a reader, one must note the tone of voice in which this is communicated. Spyer admires the Kurdish achievement. For him, Rojava, despite its 'democratic confederalism', with which he does not agree, is 'an island of sanity'.

In his estimation, it is 'the most peaceful and least oppressive area of poor, blighted Syria'. The pitying tone the end of that sentence takes is perhaps warranted, given the horrors much of the book describes. But it grates, just a little.

Spyer notes that in the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), nominally a multi-ethnic coalition of partner militias, the United States entered into de facto alliance with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

He records that the PKK is an internationally-designated terrorist group, and that this alliance of convenience caused the Americans trouble. But he maintains, against sizable evidence, that this trouble is 'related less to the PKK's actual activities and more to the sensitivities of Turkey'.

This partiality colours most assessments of the YPG, SDF and related organisations. It can be detected in the portrayal of the smaller SDF militias. 'Sanadid fighters [from the Shammar tribe] had a certain dash about them which the Kurds lacked', Spyer writes.

'They struck dramatic poses ... wielding their strap-less Kalashnikovs like movie props'. Kurdish fighters, Spyer notes, 'were privately critical and also amused by the antics of the Sanadid, who they regarded as lacking in discipline and seriousness'.

Spyer's book is a useful immediate assessment of the two-headed conflict in Iraq and Syria, but his writing on the Syrian war does not match the prose of others.

Janine di Giovanni's book, *The Morning They Came for Us*, for example, is more impressionistic and self-consciously literary. But Spyer's work is a necessary assessment of a brutal conflict, and a testament to the author's willingness to risk capture or worse in the course of covering the ground.

The New Arab, March 2, 2018

Life under the Islamic State

The Raqqa Diaries: Escape from 'Islamic State' by Samer

The Syrian war has produced a great deal of writing, but little of real permanence. Most of its derivative works are journalistic accounts and dry geopolitical analyses. It has yet to produce a new novelist, poet, or memoirist of note, rather than simply providing new material for old hands. Some day, a great book about the Syrian civil war will be written – something that draws deeply from the conflict and sets the tone for a changed nation, region, and world. Such an era-defining conflict will have that effect.

The Raqqa Diaries by 'Samer', a pseudonymous media activist who documented the daily reality of the occupation of his city by the Islamic State (ISIS), is not that book. Its brief length and episodic narrative do not allow it to reach great literary heights. It is presented too generally, in a way that will render it accessible to Western audiences. Arabic terms, even basic ones, are explained in footnotes. The book reads like an introduction to the Syrian conflict as well as a vignette of the wider war. Constrained by these limitations, it doesn't rise to the level of a truly piercing, vital account.

Nevertheless, although Samer's literary ambition is not grand, nor is it insignificant. The task of producing the book was fraught with danger. Prompted by BBC journalist Mike Thomson, Samer wrote a diary in instalments, attempting to record the bare facts of how life was lived in Raqqa during its time as the *de facto* Syrian capital of the Islamic State. As is suggested by the identity of its editor, the upshot is something of a BBC production. It is even constructed according to the corporation's style guide, including denying 'Islamic State' a definite article, and placing the term in meaningful inverted commas so as to indicate disapproval of its claim to religious authenticity.

Samer's prose is plain and unadorned, and brings clarity to bear on the quotidian episodes that characterise unfree life in an occupied city – a routine of pervasive boredom interrupted by rare outbreaks of horror. Samer's friends are executed by ISIS and their bodies are left in the streets. Executions are held in public and these displays of extravagant cruelty are supplemented with floggings. At the same time, ISIS's rule is marked by smaller, less violent means of coercion and control. Women are hassled by the 'modesty police', and told to put on gloves to conceal their hands. Shopkeepers are harassed with arbitrary taxes.

In these moments ISIS rule looks less like a death cult than a religious mafia. It seems, perhaps counter-intuitively, to be emulating organised crime. But in truth, this should not be surprising. Tyrannical entities tend to breed this kind of low level bullying – the exertion of control over the petty and the personal. But in the Caliphate, the peculiar mix of casual ultraviolence and the pettiness of ossified and capricious officialdom are pitched at a level of contradictory intensity.

Samer's anecdotes benefit from his episodic structure, which organises the indignities and horrors experienced by Raqqa's citizens into a vivid picture of tyranny. Most of the story is devoted to ISIS rule in the city, but through a neatly constructed framing device, the reader is offered a glimpse of what happened when the revolution first came to Raqqa. 'I could not believe what I was hearing', Samer writes:

I ran outside and saw cars flying the flag of the Free Syrian Army. One of the cars stopped right in front of me. A man leaned out of the window and told me not to be afraid. He said he and his fellow soldiers had come to liberate us all from tyranny and corruption. "We are your brothers," he added.

Such moments provide an agonising sense of Raqqa's brief free interlude of promise between Assad and IS rule when, for some, the future seemed to expand perceptibly. The Assad regime shared many of the features that would subsequently characterise ISIS's totalitarianism, not least the mixture of real violence and the threat of violence with local problems. Its officials were corrupt, its jails full. When Samer's friends spoke about the revolution's arrival in Raqqa, they agreed to give it their support. The mood was hopeful and positive and so, for a time, were they. But this was not to last. The revolution, spread thinly as it tried to fight the regime across the country, could not protect urban environments its leaders thought were secure.

Islamist groups infiltrated Raqqa and wormed their way into its local communities. After that, all it took was a *fait accompli* gesture, in this case the breaking of a Free Syrian Army (FSA) line, to deliver the city into their hands. Samer hints at the moral complexity of this situation. For a while, ISIS was able to hide itself among various non-regime forces and keep its agenda from becoming known. This only became apparent when ISIS fighters began to tyrannise the local population in small ways, and was reinforced by a spate of high profile acts of brutality.

After ISIS's assumption of control, Samer documents how Raqqa's citizenry were failed by all parties to the conflict, and he draws particular attention to the terrible civilian death toll inflicted on the city by Russian airstrikes. The Russians and Iranians have demonstrated scant interest in Raqqa's civilian population as they have waged a brutal and indiscriminate war on behalf of the regime. The US-led coalition, meanwhile, has hardly helped by encouraging sectarian elements within the Syrian Democratic Forces, a confected Kurdish-led constellation fighting to take Raqqa from ISIS. Amid the mayhem, Samer effectively documents the fears and anxieties of a city already imprisoned, but fearful of an alternative future which could be even worse.

He also writes movingly about lives interrupted, and possibilities closed off. Of the girl he fell in love with at university and hoped to marry, he writes: 'Everyone dreams that things will get better, a future full of the beauty of life and all it has to offer'. But for these two, and for numberless other Syrians, this has not come to pass. So many of their hopes, thwarted by circumstance, exist in the past tense. The brother of Samer's wife-to-be was arrested, accused of working with the FSA, and threatened with execution. His sister was presented with a stark choice – her brother's life would

be spared but, in return, she would have to marry an ISIS fighter. She agreed. Samer was informed by a phone call. 'I was in pieces', he writes. 'But I knew her brother's life was more important than our feelings and the dreams we shared. A life is worth much more than those things, or so I told myself repeatedly. I still try to convince myself of this.'

From this point forward, Samer and a group of colleagues dedicated themselves to the task of documenting ISIS's crimes in Raqqa. This development parallels the emergence of astonishingly brave groups of media activists such as Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, who pay the price of bearing witness with their lives. They are hunted within the city of Raqqa and, when captured, they are brutally murdered in public. Courageous people continue to engage in this dangerous and vital work, contrary to every instinct of self-preservation. Eventually, convinced he is about to be arrested, Samer flees Raqqa for rebel-held territory, and from there to a refugee camp on the Turkish border. Current information suggests he is still there.

Samer's book is a story of ordinary life interrupted, and of bravery and endurance in the face of abject terror. But it ends on a note of optimism, which is more than might be reasonably expected of its author. The world now knows about the crimes of ISIS and Assad, he says. And from this, something good, if not help for Syria's suffering, may yet emerge. Above all, there is still hope: 'Hope that our country will rebuild itself. Hope that the sacrifices made by our people will finally banish the cruelty and evil that has long stalked our land.'

A popular adage states that it's the hope that kills you. Maybe so, but in Samer's case, and in the cases of many other Syrians like him, hope has yet to be extinguished, and it is that hope which sustains them through the destruction of their old lives and country. It's hope for a future beyond tyranny and theocratic barbarism. It's hope for a future not impoverished and interrupted by evil men. That hope is a powerful thing. That it still survives, after all that has befallen Syria and its people, is more powerful still.

Quillette, September 1, 2017

A Memoir from Mesopotamia

The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq by Emma Sky

The *Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* is a captivating book. The memoir of Emma Sky, a one-time opponent of the war to topple Saddam Hussein, deals with how she administered an Iraqi province in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Baath regime. Moreover, she spent much of the following years in the country, working closely with the American military – the same organisation she and many likeminded individuals opposed so vigorously in the run up to the war.

In the latter role, Sky became associated with what she calls the ‘American tribe’ (despite being a British citizen with little formal guidance from her own government), serving as a political advisor to American officials including Raymond Odierno (‘General O’) and David Petraeus.

A great deal of the book consists of the realities of administering a newly-liberated nation, with dramatic descriptions of the work the military undertook, the realities of working in a warzone, and interesting dissections – complete with reproduced emails and recalled conversations with key participants – of rebuilding a state and attempting to create the underpinnings of a functioning democracy in the most trying of circumstances.

Sky’s assessment of divisions and rivalries within the Coalition is built upon her close knowledge of the personalities involved. She was insulted by colleagues on her birthday, witnessed at first hand the conflicts between civilian and military operations within the Coalition, and recounts vital details about how things were really decided. The latter minutiae can be (perhaps unexpectedly) fascinating, as who was sitting in which meeting, and what exactly was said, became a vital element of how the country of Iraq was rebuilt.

But Sky’s assessment is not a mere recollection of administrative life within the Coalition. The book is also an extended assessment of the merits and failures of the reconstruction of Iraq, as well as a wider look at the other factors – namely Iranian involvement and domestic politics in the United States – which contributed to the titular collapse of what had been, for a short time, a hopeful situation. (On Iran, Petraeus was declarative: ‘They’ll pocket what we give them, bide their time and come back more lethal.’) Certain aspects of Sky’s writing – particularly about the Sahwa (‘Awakening’), which helped to unite Iraqi Sunnis against al-Qaeda in Iraq – are thoroughly affecting. As are some of Sky’s other assessments of the situation: the Surge of 2007, which dramatically increased the number of American troops in the country, also helped, in her view, to stabilise some of the more volatile aspects of the post-Saddam state of affairs.

Sky's perspective is an acute and idiosyncratic one – and her atypical background (being both British and female, as well as having opposed the war) create some tensions within the text. Luckily for the reader, however, these also allow for an especially acute analysis, one which is detached from vested interests and storied regimental histories. Her personal perspective brings to life much of what other writers might have missed (or mistakenly deemed unimportant). Yet it is preserved: showers which are minutely scheduled, absurd acronyms which became commonplace, and the increasingly strange spectacle of what US troops are compelled to watch on television. Sky builds up a truly comprehensive picture of the Coalition, which was more than the sum of its military victories and defeats, and more than a collection of half-forgotten diplomatic initiatives.

Sky's book contains, more than anything else, a genuine appreciation of Iraq. This is seen in the affectionate way she describes the personalities of the country's various political and religious leaders, and in the impressive, empathetic way she details her experience with many Iraqis. It is apparent to see how much she valued and continues to value contact with Iraqis – both ordinary citizens and government figures – and not difficult to see why. Stories of her travels around the country, often without a military escort, radiate humanity and serve to bear witness to her personal investigations regarding Iraqi society itself.

Sky never sits by idly; she is an active presence. And she allows both Iraqi and American personages to speak for themselves – something which is sorely lacking in some more academic and analytical efforts. The resultant work is an effective, enthralling memoir which doubles as a panoramic and ultimately unresolved portrayal of a country – and a region – which struggles fitfully towards the prospect of democracy. Much is made – by both Western journalists and Iraqi politicians – about the apparent resemblance between Sky and Gertrude Bell, whose influence on the foundation of Iraq cannot be overstated. Reading the former's accounts of her time in the country, this comparison seems even more apt – with one alteration: unlike the Bell of reference, but not unlike Bell as she truly was, Emma Sky is not only a governor but a writer, and a thoroughly compelling one at that.

Quillette, February 5, 2016

Prey

Prey: Islam, Immigration and the Erosion of Women's Rights by Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Ayaan Hirsi Ali argues that Muslim immigration is diminishing women's rights in Europe in a way that is measurable and sustained. She makes an empirical case for asylum seekers and recent immigrants perpetrating an out-of-proportion number of sexual crimes, and contributing to a de facto culture of seclusion in which – at least in some parts of the European continent – women venture outside less than their male peers and partake less in society.

These are dramatic and stark accusations, and have largely been rejected out of hand. Hirsi Ali's book *Prey: Islam, Immigration and the Erosion of Women's Rights* has been only sporadically reviewed. It has been praised by a variety of conservative outlets, and either ignored or dismissed as hypocritical and wrongheaded by Left-wing ones. These responses were essentially guaranteed. They were made inevitable not only by the contents of Hirsi Ali's previous five books and the love she attracts from friends and the dislike in which she is held by her critics, but also by the nature of the argument she proposes. It is visceral and sharp. Those looking to accuse her of stirring up this and that need not look far.

Examining which demographic groups commit which crimes, Hirsi Ali is clear that she is on uneven footing because of the state of the evidence available. The reporting and conviction rates for sexual offenses are notoriously low, and the definitions of sexual crimes vary by country, making accurate statistics very difficult to come by – difficult to find in the first place, difficult to evaluate thereafter, and more difficult still to compare. To take just one example: the last time Sweden released data publicly on the immigration status of criminals was 1996. It has been left to enterprising sociologists and newspapers to commission their own surveys ever since, with predictably polarised results.

In evidence, I will reproduce some figures collected in Hirsi Ali's tables: for Denmark, according to the country's statistics bureau, between 2014 and 2018, the number of rape convictions handed down to 'non-Western immigrants and their descendants' never fell below 39 percent, and was in 2014 as high as 47 per cent of the total. The proportion of groping convictions given to the same group in the same period was 21 percent of the total in 2014, 26 percent the year after, 28 percent in 2016, 35 percent in 2017, and in 2018 it was at 18 percent. Meanwhile, the proportion of all sexual offenses committed by the same group is notably lower, fluctuating between 11 and 21 percent.

Hirsi Ali is more subtle than her critics may allow by drawing few didactic conclusions from such opaque data; it is not only the tendentious who might suspect that the absence of clear statistics is purposeful. She accepts the variance by country, by region, and often by methods of recording. She does, however, allow, as many interior ministries do, that foreigners of all kinds are in general overrepresented in crime figures, including sexual offenses. In France, foreigners are 7 percent of the

population, but 14 percent of sexual crime suspects. Between 2014 and 2018, the proportion of non-Germans who were suspected of sexual violence in that country rose from 18 to 29 percent. Asylum seekers in Germany are more likely to be suspected of each category of crime than their proportion of the population (the aggregate figure is 8.3 per cent); and they are slightly more likely again (9 per cent) to be suspected of sexual crimes.

Hirsi Ali attributes most of this rise in sexual crimes to the Mediterranean refugee crisis after the Arab Spring began ten years ago, notably increasing in 2015 with the German acceptance of one million asylum seekers and the aggregate rise in migration across the continent. This precipitated a rise in the general population, and especially – because young men were more likely to make such a difficult journey – in the male population aged between 15 and 40, the very demographic most likely, by a distressing margin, to commit sexual crimes. In individual jurisdictions, the evidence is indeed of a proportionate increase in crime, including sexual crimes, from 2014-5, and especially after 2017.

Yet, as Hirsi Ali herself notes, for all of the above numbers, there is still little to go on. Firm conclusions about sexual violence run into endless institutional roadblocks.

Whether one agrees with Hirsi Ali or not that the culture of recent arrivals is behind this rise in sex crimes – we're coming to that – there is the question of whether it could be tackled by purely technical measures. The unfortunate truth is that the broad measures popular with the publics in Europe and Britain to deter and punish sexual violence – including longer prison sentences and more aggressive policing – are rather limited in what they can do, at least in the present circumstances where threats of deportation for violent immigrants, say, are not credible; it is understood by all sides that such things are rarely carried out.

If administrative action alone cannot work, then the discussion of culture has to be had. Hirsi Ali points to a number of upsetting examples: young men from places like Tunisia, Afghanistan, and Syria groping girls in swimming pools and raping women who were out walking. More instructively, she points to specific behaviours that are clearly alien to the host countries. In particular, she dedicates no small space to *taharrush gamea*, literally translated as 'collective harassment,' but which has become more freely translated as 'the rape game': mass, public sex attacks. This phenomenon is best-known from Egypt; several female Western journalists suffered such an ordeal covering the protests in 2011, including one who was gang raped actually during a broadcast. In Germany, New Years' Eve 2015/2016 has become an infamous case study. These sort of attacks, which do not make for a high proportion of the total instances of sexual violence, are particularly frightening and leave an outsize imprint on public consciousness; the fact that the police seem unable to halt them only makes this worse.

In covering the mass assaults on women in Cologne in December 2015 or the 'grooming gangs' in British towns, Hirsi Ali points to their common features: groups of men from Muslim-majority societies attacking one or more women together. She

could have added that in both instances the police inaction – and refusal to accept that these things were happening after they were informed – meant that crimes not only went unpunished; criminals were not even identified. Hirsi Ali describes these events as fitting essentially no pattern, except an assumed motivation: contempt for the female victims that meant perpetrators felt justified.

This is worth discussing in terms of causes and consequences. Young men and boys from patriarchal cultures are more likely to do these things, Hirsi Ali argues. But all is not lost – they can be taught mandatory sex education in countries with secular systems of education. And, so long as they are subject to the same laws as the rest, those laws can be enforced and strengthened. More significant than this, perhaps, are the consequences for authority. For a time, police forces did not uncover ‘grooming gangs’ or try to address their members’ connections, and did not deal with events like the Cologne mass assault with the determined seriousness they demand. There is reason to believe that the right lessons can still be learned from these sad instances, and there is some indication of this beginning among the MPs and police officials interviewed in the book.

Hirsi Ali associates this also with a broader trend of women being slowly driven from public life. In some parts of some European cities, she writes, women are not to be seen on the seats outside restaurants; to walk into certain cafes as a woman is to be stared at and verbally accosted. And by some measures, harassment on the street has also increased. This is the product, she writes, of unintegrated areas, where the habits of the old country reassert themselves unchallenged, and a kind of de facto male guardianship keeps the women indoors. It is an eye-catching threat, but not an irresolvable problem.

Such is the great majority of *Prey*. Many of its worst incidents could be solved or mitigated by the police and border authorities better doing their jobs. Most of the cultural problems it describes could be drawn down by integration models which work and are not built upon rent-seeking consultancy. A tougher system of criminal justice would punish sexual criminals of all backgrounds. Hirsi Ali does advocate for all of these things. But because of her back-catalogue, and because of the asides the book sometimes almost disappears into, it was never likely those aspects of her argument would emerge into the light of day and the heat of discussion.

European Eye on Radicalisation, July 9, 2021

From Good Crown Prince to the Mad King

MBS: The Rise of Mohammed bin Salman by Ben Hubbard

Ben Hubbard, the *New York Times*' man in Beirut, has written a biography of Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's young crown prince and uncrowned king, which will surely be widely read.

MBS, as he is known, portrays himself as a great reformer, and his kingdom's new modern architect. But his actions and his opponents paint a picture of an impulsive prince driven by wild desires as well as rational ones, and willing to surveil, imprison, torture and murder his opponents. A prince who would be a mad king.

But before all this came the rise to power, which began inauspiciously. Bin Salman was born into royalty but not into power. His father, Salman, later king, was a long-term governor of Riyadh – an important but unflashy post, unpromising of future advancement.

Unlike many of his cousins and brothers, many of whom were educated abroad and some of whom became international businessmen, scientists and astronauts, MBS had an explicitly Saudi upbringing with little direct outside influence.

In contrast to many near relations, who wore English suits, holidayed in France, and worked in America, bin Salman spent his youth working for his father. As a young man he was often seen sitting in on Salman's meetings, and, as Hubbard writes, he played the stock market and invested in property a little to make up for his relative princely poverty.

The book functions partially as a record of its author's time in the kingdom, and this requires some setting of scene.

The Arabia Hubbard first visited was dull, with life dominated by religious conservatism. There was little for the young – who make up the significant majority of Saudis – to do in the way of entertainment, and Saudi natives worked mainly in the oil industries, with expatriates staffing the professions and engaging in much of the country's manual labour.

Hubbard makes much of the kingdom's youth, as does MBS. The young people, to the correspondent's eye, blurred lines between conservative and liberal politics, engaging with aspects of foreign culture but ultimately hewing towards the kingdom's religious conservatism.

There were some reforms before 2015, and these were not unpopular. But everything was done slowly and without impetus. A journalist called Jamal Khashoggi wrote at that time that there would soon arise a new king, from the new generation coming of age in the kingdom.

A falling oil price, combined by the high expectations of the young and the fear that America was no longer an ally to trust, formed the background to MBS' rise to power.

After the death of the old king, Abdullah, in 2015, MBS' father ascended to the throne. His young son gained in rank, but between him and the succession were two princely obstacles: Muqrin bin Abdulaziz and Mohammed bin Nayef.

Bin Salman began, in his own way, to accrue power. He was made minister of defence and head of the royal court. He restructured Riyadh by combing various authorities into two supreme councils, with him at the head of at first one, and then the other. They gave MBS control of the security of the kingdom and, latterly, economic development.

An early act from his time as minister of defence still resonates. Saudi Arabia had fought few wars, but on March 26, 2015, bin Salman had the air force begin to bomb Houthi rebels, whom bin Salman saw as pawns of Iran, in Yemen.

Muqrin was soon replaced as crown prince by bin Nayef, with MBS deputy crown prince.

In a trip to America, Bin Salman met Barack Obama, nervously, before revealing some of his future style: speaking with enthusiasm to Susan Rice about women's rights in the kingdom. Yet at the same time, Hubbard writes, American intelligence services had decided that bin Salman had virtually imprisoned his own mother, the king's wife.

Over time, bin Salman began to undermine his superior, bin Nayef, finally forcing to him resign in disputed but undoubtedly unpleasant circumstances. Bin Salman, soon to be 32, was now crown prince.

Before and after his appointment as crown prince, bin Salman began to develop his plans for the country. He spoke of economic and social reform, outlined his technofuturist Vision 2030, and drew focus to corruption in interviews with journalists and foreign analysts.

He began to court the press and the Trump administration. Foreign consultants flooded into the kingdom. Bin Salman undertook a visit to Great Britain and a tour of the United States, heralded by propaganda as he went.

At the beginning of his arrival at real power, Hubbard notes, bin Salman sought the opinion of two groups: clerics, some of whom had large social media followings, and journalists. He would undermine the former and begin to tighten his grip on the latter soon enough.

Another man now enters the frame. Hubbard devotes so much time to Jamal Khashoggi, the journalist turned critic of the crown prince who would be murdered and dismembered in the Saudi embassy in Istanbul, that the book comes to resemble an exercise in parallel lives.

Khashoggi's exile, his fears, his search for love, and his eventual fate – these can only induce pathos. His murder is emblematic of the point at which many in domestic American politics and business decided bin Salman was not the good crown prince but the mad king.

Hubbard makes the case, and describes the brutal circus Saudi diplomacy has at times resembled before and since – the blockade of Qatar, the spat with Canada, the brief detention of Lebanon's prime minister.

But amid all this, and some effective reporting getting behind the lifting of the kingdom's ban on women driving, the book is strangely bereft of insight.

It is a good distillation of the life to date of the power behind the throne, a man who may rule for decades after the death of his father. But it falls sadly short of any revelation which could indicate how those years might unfold.

The New Arab, March 25, 2020

We Are Bellingcat

We are Bellingcat: Global Crime, Online Sleuths, and the Bold Future of News by Eliot Higgins

W*e are Bellingcat*, by Eliot Higgins, describes the past decade in open-source intelligence. It charts the creation of Bellingcat, an “intelligence agency for the people”, which compiles open-source evidence to analyze war and government malfeasance, notably as perpetrated in Arab countries after the revolutions in 2011 and by the Russian state across the world.

Having begun his work as a blogger attempting to verify facts in the wars which followed the Arab Spring, Higgins now runs an operation in Bellingcat that has many members and moving parts. His book is remarkable and this is, at least in part, because of its resolutely ordinary tone. It describes extraordinary things in ways which are largely practical, lofty ambitions as though they are obvious and possible, and results that few could have imagined as though they were arrived at through processes of extreme simplicity.

Higgins is the founder and chief spokesman of the Bellingcat group — a collection of formerly amateur digital detectives who seek to use almost exclusively open-source information to pin war crimes and acts of violent espionage on powerful perpetrators. In practice, this means using sources opportunistically — from satellite imagery to leaked phone records — in order to pin down the dates, locations and times of significant events whose causes and perpetrators are not only often unknown, but actively disputed by nation states, as well as observers.

Many of Bellingcat’s recent investigations have either focussed on stories which are of major international importance or given rise to the reporting of those stories themselves. Higgins gives a background assessment of how his team was able to:

1. Locate the Buk missile launcher that downed flight MH17 over Ukraine in 2014;
2. Unmask a cell of chemical assassins run by Russia’s GRU military intelligence service;
3. Geo-locate chancers who posted photographs of pieces of paper pledging their allegiance to the Islamic State from locations across the world; and
4. track smaller-scale war criminals in Syria and Libya’s civil conflicts.

Because of his ability to uncover these crimes, Higgins is often deprecated by the state media of dictatorships, who use their resources to commit crimes that they believe will either go unnoticed or unpunished.

Scrupulous Methods

Each investigation builds small pieces of evidence — individually flimsy or trivial — into irrefutable tapestries. Bellingcat’s methods are scrupulous, and it only publishes things its people can see from every angle. The rigor of the Bellingcat approach belies its scrappy origins.

Higgins started his work as a blogger obsessed with the wars in the wake of the Arab revolutions at the beginning of the last decade. He was a creature of forums and newspaper website comment sections, who realized that concrete truths could be extrapolated from the mountains of video, photography and audio produced by participants in these conflicts.

He ran a small but influential blog, Brown Moses, which pioneered a transferable approach to conflict analysis, rather than one built upon deep knowledge of a given society’s deep history and traditions, or an individual conflict’s peculiarities. He would trace shipments of guns despite having no curator’s knowledge of firearms. He dipped his toe into the process of geolocation — something many in public policy were either new to entirely or conceived of as something almost magical in its abstraction.

Truth Can Be Ascertained

Higgins says that he was prompted to professionalize this approach when he witnessed the incompetence of intelligence agencies and the ignorance of politicians in responding to these conflicts. They spoke nonsense when the truth could be ascertained. They produced thin reports based on confidential sources when better evidence could be extracted from mountains of online information.

This much is true: there is great potential in open-source investigation — even when pursued by amateurs. Although, as Higgins hints, these avenues are only useful if they are explored by people determined to establish facts and not to substantiate agendas, and only when followed by groups with a strong system of ethics — something so many online interlocutors discussing war and peace clearly lack. Much of the book focuses on the practicalities of open-source investigation, and by relaying stories which feature these tools in use, individuals can learn for themselves how to use open sources.

Collecting Verifiable Facts

Higgins is adamant, there is little point in this work if it is not particular and intricate. The aim ought to be adding individual, verifiable facts to the collective store rather than favoring a tribal side or supplementing an argument already complete. Higgins explains how to “reverse search” an image offered by a number of search engines and how to uncover clumsy forgeries and misappropriated photographs with ease — regularly holing a number of state media operations below the water line.

When attempting to geolocate an event, or identify a person, it is crucial to find precise matches. The topography of a landscape or the topography of a face each have

distinctive features. They cannot be approximated or estimated to be the same. However if — with appropriate sources and careful attention to perspective and shadow — these features all match, an investigator can feel satisfied.

Mapping software is remarkably effective — even in its lowest resolution versions — and can be useful, not only in matching shots taken from omniscient satellite-view, but also in more subjective questions of topography with various tools which allow for a 3D view. Photographers' tools, including SunCalc — an online service which computes the angles of shadow and heights of the sun, can be helpful in establishing the time of day. More importantly, it is vital to survey and compile primary sources put out by local media, terrorist groups, protestors and campaigners.

Purging of History

With so much primary video from the Syrian revolution and civil war vanishing from both YouTube and other video sharing sites — in what resembles a years' long rolling purge — much history has seemingly been lost. As social media firms prioritize their own clean hands over their duty to recent history, archiving material personally is often the only way to ensure that it survives.

Conclusion

The Bellingcat method is allied to the Bellingcat philosophy: facts are demonstrably true and matter, truth can win the day and truth and justice may not go hand in hand, but correspond frequently and that, in an age of impunity, all of this is not a waste of time.

Bellingcat's methods have significantly affected the way many newsrooms operate, and they have led to some prosecutions for grave crimes. However, as Higgins writes, his aim is not to continue to work as a team, with increasing notice and fame. Instead, it is to propagate a method for sceptical and truthful investigation of murky data — the stuff thrown out by social media that defines modern life. These methods are so far removed from the worst habits of social media use, that they may seem difficult to emulate. But there is little harm in picking up the toolbox and attempting, carefully, to use it to do good.

European Eye on Radicalisation, July 16, 2021

Amid a Swirling Sea

Roman Britain by R. G. Collingwood

R. G. Collingwood is perhaps best known, these days, as a philosopher, of both art and history. This is partially on the strength of posthumous publication, and partly because he was the first source, it seems, of inherently philosophic terms like *historicism*. In his own time, however, Collingwood spent a good portion of his life on archaeology; and helped to define the discipline; and was a practical worker on Hadrian's wall and Roman sites in England's north.

This was when clever academics were allowed by time to have more than one discipline.

All this is to say that, bar none, Collingwood is the ideal writer to discuss Britain under the Romans. This slim and elegant book attests to that. It is broad without being general.

Collingwood writes with dispassionate authority of the political organisation of the British provinces; the topography of Roman settlements (of which there were garrison towns, explicit Roman cities like London, mixed Romano-British settlements complete with villas and straight roads, and hundreds of villages where no Roman hand stretched out, across all of three and a half centuries, to interject and affect the archaeological record); and the extent to which there was a British Celtic population living under imported Roman masters (something he does not see in evidence), the use of Hadrian's wall (less a fortification than a long watchtower, a place useless for mounting a martial defence) — before becoming significantly less descriptive and more artistic.

How might it have felt to live in the Roman world — even if one could not take the rambler's chances and travel across swathes of imperial territory, confined as one may have been to the remote island of Britain on the empire's edge?

Is it not possible that ethnic Celts may have taken Roman names, adopted Roman customs and Roman pagan religion, and intermarried with the various ethnicities newly arriving in Britain as part of the Roman tide? We have some archaeological evidence they did.

Within a generation of Claudius' conquest of much of Britannia, might many of the locals have developed the beginnings of Latin-Celtic bilingualism? From the grandest grave-markers, erected by Celtic kings under Roman protection, to vulgar graffiti unexpectedly surviving the millennia, it seems that they may.

Collingwood only hints at the psychological ramifications of all of this, but even in hinted form, they are head-spinning. A native population detached from the Roman pomerium by a thousand miles, yet believing to a great extent that they are swimming within the essence the Roman world. A place where several generals declared themselves emperor — not of Britain, for there was no such nation to command — but of Rome itself. With Roman Christianity separating the empire from

its barbarian neighbours, the Romano-British must have felt even more isolated at the edge of the world, their ties to the Roman world tenuous but embracing.

One can only imagine what it must have felt when the Romans left — first in 410 (although Collingwood does not approve of the undue finality of that date), when the island was formally abandoned by its Roman garrison; and previously, in the Great Conspiracy of 367, when the invaders from the north ravaged the villa-strewn country; and later, with the Saxon Shore no longer defended by its Roman count, when it seemed reasonable to invite in Saxon warlords to defend the rich southern countryside from Pictish interlopers. The undefended rural villas were abandoned while the population retreated into fortified towns, long before the people stopped calling themselves Roman. No wonder the people needed a hero of myth, whom we now call King Arthur.

But we must not get ahead of ourselves. Collingwood rarely does. He even reins in some of his more prejudicial artistic judgements, which in other quarters were considered too subjective to count as objective history. He describes both the nature of Celtic and Roman decoration in amusing terms: how homes were intended to be comfortable rather than beautiful, and the collection of third-rate art was more a statement of having the means to spend rather than an expression of connoisseurship or taste.

Collingwood writes perceptively of the influence of Roman and Celtic forms on each other: on pottery, like the example of a vase above, which is a fusion of Roman 'Samian' styles and Celtic iconography, notably the figure of dog, which is attempted rather than a man, who would have been more Roman — and possibly harder to get right.

The Celts, Collingwood writes, were draughtsmen rather than sculptors, which is where the Romans were without equal. The emergence of a Gorgon at Bath, which I also include above, shows a remarkable fusion of the two styles. The Gorgon is a classical image; but traditionally female, rather than male. The fierceness of the eyes, Collingwood says, is almost Celtic. But the coolness required to make a study of them is purely classical. The beard is wild but well-formed — Roman sculptural knowledge writ large — but the face is surrounded and defined by the Celtic draughtsman's conception of arcing, curving parabola which Collingwood, quoting Hogarth, calls 'the line of beauty'.

This book is not contentious nor is it speculative. It was regularly updated and aimed to be something of a general purpose, objective introduction to the study of the period. My copy is the last edition issued in Collingwood's lifetime before his unexpected death in 1943, before the publication of *The Idea of History* a few years later. Collingwood wrote, with subtle enthusiasm, of the hope that sonar-type scanning of the ground and aerial photography would show up yet more of the invisible traces of Roman settlements than the RAF had seen during his own lifetime.

This he did not live to see. But in this work he was able to give a summary of the interleaving of Roman and Celtic which gave aesthetic, religious and political

reason for a culture both foreign and indigenous to exist in Britain, even after the legions left the periphery to defend the decaying metropole.

Indeed, there is much in the art and religion and civilization of Anglo-Saxon England which is due to a recombining of the two parts into which, as we have said, the heritage of Roman Britain had been divided. On the one hand, there was a revival of Celtic elements, Celtic habits of thought, and mental characteristics, leaving the Germanic character of the Anglo-Saxons and making them into a people very different from the Low Germans of their old countries. On the other hand, the Christianity which Rome had given to Britain was a light kept burning in the west until England was ready to receive it; and the saints and scholars of Ireland and Iona, who lit the lamps of religion and learning in so many places during the Dark Ages, gave back to the world the heritage, not squandered or lost, but enriched in the keeping, that Rome had bestowed on Britain.

Jamesnell.substack.com, September 4, 2021

Reaction

Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman; The War Lords; How Wars Begin; Revolutions and Revolutionaries; and How Wars End by A. J. P. Taylor

Of this handful of books, A. J. P. Taylor's biography of Otto, Prince of Bismarck, Count of Bismarck-Schönhausen, Duke of Lauenburg, is the work of true scholarship; the rest are collections of lectures, lightly edited, which the historian had entrancingly delivered on television. They read rather well, despite having been extemporised, and contain many interesting asides and well-chosen pictures. And they serve to elaborate rather well on some of his themes.

How Wars Begin and *How Wars End* note that there is little consistent in history — all is a desperate bid to keep heads above water. *Revolutions and Revolutionaries* shows that a revolutionary tide can terrify as easily as it can splutter to a halt. These books are better because of their informality; they contain fun little asides and jokes — the kind a favourite teacher might delight in.

Taylor's biography of Bismarck, meanwhile, is a beautifully written book — short, but full of insight and clarity. The first chapter alone, which describes Bismarck's uneasy and bipolar upbringing, is a great introduction to the man. Bismarck wanted others to see him as a Junker, a particular type of landed Prussian aristocrat, ignorant and militarist. Yet his mother was an intellectual, and wanted her children to be thinkers.

Bismarck played at farmer and industrialist in his later years, and pretended to have great Lutheran religious faith; he claimed to have his happiest moments in seclusion in the country, and spent much of his final years in government cloistered in one of two great rural estates. But he was a radical in his youth, was bored without politics to distract him, and charged god less with universal magisterium than the job of keeping Bismarck's worst impulses — romantic and even perhaps political — unacted upon.

A man who sent his country into three wars, Bismarck claimed to dislike conflict as an instrument of policy: because he was told by the old field marshal von Moltke that its outcome could never be certain. (But 'Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided — that was the great mistake of 1848 and 1849 — but by iron and blood', he said.)

He saw the bodies of men whose lives he had spent, and worried about his son ending up among them in a future conflict. Yet Bismarck was given honorary promotion to the rank of general after 1866, and often wore a general's uniform in public for the rest of his life.

Bismarck was a big man who overate, and spent some of his youth desperate to get into fights in order to prove his cojones. But he cried easily, and often; and this supposed master of calculation — domestic and foreign — had screaming rows with his opponents in which he not infrequently threw crockery.

He bestrode the national political scene as prime minister, foreign minister, and chancellor of Prussia, the North German Confederation, and the German Empire, but claimed to know no economics and have no time for politics. He was a radical in youth, then a reactionary champion of absolute monarchy, then a unificationist liberal, then an ally of the newly-formed National Liberals, before falling into a deep institutional conservatism which still allowed Bismarck to pass universal suffrage and one of the first national insurance programmes, including health insurance, ever to be instituted — all to defeat the socialists (whom he also repressed directly by law).

He persecuted Germany's Catholics in a *Kulturkampf* but counted Pope Leo XIII as an ally.

He was a man who claimed to have no economic sense, yet became rich through monopolies and avoiding tax, and served as his country's trade minister concurrently with other posts. (Taylor thinks that, rather than a rural Junker, Bismarck might most have resembled in temperament a Hamburg merchant.)

The champion of the king's and emperor's will, holding office not through parliamentary majorities, but rather at the kings' and emperors' pleasure, Bismarck considered his first, beloved emperor a man to be boxed in and managed, and the emperor's two successors to be enemies. Each threatens to Bismarck's capacity to run the country as it must be run.

Much can be made of this life of contradiction, and indeed Taylor does exactly that. But he does not miss the subtle point: that for Bismarck, contradicting oneself was no barrier, nor something to worry about. Expediency was all — remaining in power by any means was the sole objective. One must be in power to govern, and one must govern to govern correctly.

Bismarck first came to power in September 1862 after a Prussian political crisis, barely fifteen years on from the Europe-shaking year of revolutions in 1848. He had previously spent some time as a diplomat in St Petersburg and Paris, unhappily carrying out others' instructions.

He arrived at the head of a Prussia which was still second fiddle in Germany to the Austrian Empire of the Habsburg dynasty. Within ten years, Bismarck engineered three wars, all of which Prussia, and then the German Confederation, won. He gave Germany its greatest extent and much of its present state.

First, in 1863, one year after taking office, Bismarck oversaw the defeat of Denmark and the seizure of the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, with Austrian help. Three years later, working in concert with smaller German states, he saw Prussia defeat Austria in the lightning Seven Weeks' War, forming the North German Confederation (of which Bismarck became Federal Chancellor) in the process. Finally, in 1870, Bismarck led Germany into the Franco-Prussian War against Napoleon III, a war which began with the rapid defeat and capture of the French emperor, but dragged on for months afterwards, including a protracted siege of Paris, before the civilian government could agree terms.

The empire, as the confederation became, gained Alsace and Lorraine, and more than one generation of problems. Wilhelm I was crowned German Emperor at

Versailles at war's end. (Bismarck had insisted, to the emperor's chagrin, that he not bear the title Emperor of Germany).

Later Germany, and Bismarck, organised congress after congress and conference after conference, which hammered the world into a kind of shape for European eyes. The powers scrambled for Africa and prevented war between Turkey and the Slavic states. Germany even acquired some colonies, although Bismarck had little use for them.

Taylor admires Bismarck, and it is not difficult to see why. On their face, these are impressive achievements. But what they do not convey is the constant scramble which Bismarck's policy entailed. There was no plan, no final form — at least not before the battle of Sedan deposed the third Napoleon.

It was little short of brilliantly adaptable opportunism on a European scale.

The number of alliances Bismarck both planned and signed is difficult to keep up with. When he wanted to redraw the European map, with Prussia at its centre, he attempted to ally with the revisionist powers of Napoleon's France and the Russia of Alexander II. Later, when Austria became a target in the path of Prussian growth in Germany, Bismarck allied with the new state of Italy, hoping that it (and France) would keep Austria's Venetian flank busy. Not far later, Bismarck considered a 'Crimean coalition' against a Russia gone amok — and sought any combination to stop war between Russia and Turkey, and the new nations in the Balkans. He talked of an old coalition called the Holy Alliance, established by Napoleon I's enemies, although he did not resurrect it. Later, in his old age, he spoke of a conservative bulwark in the form of the League of the Three Emperors — including the sovereigns of Austria, Russia and Germany — all to stop any of the other two allying with France. The only power Bismarck never courted was England — despite significant domestic German support — and possibly only because he thought Gladstone's interventionist liberalism laughable, not least for its moral pretensions. Finally, he tied Germany to Austria with a thread that would prove too tight, and would in less than forty years destroy the empire Bismarck had built.

At first, Bismarck concluded alliances a short time in advance, solely in order to go to war. He ended his term signing the Dual Alliance with Austria that would, decades later, drag the German Empire into its fatal conflict.

As one might imagine, this was a tangle, and required constant management. First Bismarck wanted to remake Europe, assuming the pieces would fall where he left them — later he sought, the reactionary at heart, to sustain his own conception of the Balance of Power: an equilibrium futilely moulded by many would-be great statesmen over the centuries. Not only did Bismarck become a titan reactionary; he built a system dependent on reaction — namely, his own capacity to react to events.

But after his fall from power became inevitable, the man's legacy could be fully seen.

The results of a man of ice and steel who was subject to floods of tears and shattering anger; a paramount leader largely uninterested in national politics, with few legislative triumphs, unmatched by any in the art of political hypocrisy; and a

diplomat of utmost brilliance, whose conception flexed and bent to achieve remarkable goals, who ended his days creating a rigid system of international affairs which soon became a prison for Germany, and which fell entirely to pieces after entering the care of lesser men. Bismarck created and shaped the German Empire. But in doing so, and in ruling it for decades, he ensured its final destruction.

Later on, after his first emperor died and Bismarck was forced to confront two hated successors, 'He would talk in his soft melodious voice — always recollections of the past, never a reference to the present; and these recollections improved in the telling.'

Bismarck in old age is a pitiable thing. 'He no longer wanted to create; he wanted to preserve, and this soon turns into negation. ... He had once condemned those who put the clock forward. Now he tried to make it stop.'

At the end of his term in office, after Bismarck was thrown from power in 1890 by Wilhelm II, the man who would provoke the First World War: 'No human beings existed for him except his wife and children; there was no thought of his great achievements, no hint of policy for the future; the German *Reich*, it seems, had been brought into existence solely to save Bismarck from boredom — and now it could fall to pieces.'

Taylor makes a mistake in considering the tragedy of Bismarck's life to be his failure at the hands of age and weakness. It is a universal tragedy, and not Bismarck's alone. But instead, the failure of Bismarck's life is not the toll time took, but the knowledge that for all his brilliance, and with all the time in the world, Bismarck would not have succeeded in sum. His system would have failed. New events would have shaken his balance, new men would have arisen. One of them eventually did in the shape of Wilhelm II.

Even if he were young and strong, Bismarck could not have saved his country. He had created it, built it, made it an empire. But his policies, whether continued or abandoned, ensured the destruction of the Reich he had served.

Jamesnell.substack.com, August 11, 2021

On Being Left a Library

Of all the features of bereavement, cardboard boxes are the most incongruous and the most inevitable. They help, and sometimes obstruct, the packing up and dispersing of a life. They carry possessions which have become things, in the hope that they may yet be possessions again.

My late friend Ken, a lifelong pal of my grandfather, left me his book collection, the fruits of almost a hundred years of reading. Included were the choices of his late wife, Doreen, whom I never met. Ken died in March, after a pandemic year in which we could not meet.

Thus I travelled with my grandparents in April to a funeral whose attendance was kept to a statutory limit. The deceased, we were told, was the epitome of an English gentleman -- not a cliché of one. The reading was from Philippians. 'Finally, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest', something the reverend, a friend of decades standing, said had summed him up.

And thus I went with my father to the comfortable house in quiet Southgate in mid-May, in order to sort and pack up the remains of a life.

We were determined to be brisk and businesslike, but inevitably the mind wanders. The books were not so numerous as to be absurd; they were solid in their numbers and secure in their niches. A great mass soon broke down into well-ordered sections, and patterns began to emerge.

When we last spoke, before circumstance kept us apart, Ken had talked a little about books he especially wanted to keep close until the end. He was a great reader of George Orwell, with whose short life his long one significantly overlapped. He had every novel and every book of essays published during Orwell's time, some of them in duplicate or triplicate. He had diaries and letters.

A few biographies of the writer, some of them recent, completed the collection. Ken had bought them and looked into them long after his eyes had begun to fail.

As young middle class during the war, I knew he liked Churchill as well, and there was a biographical study or two (including admiring wartime efforts) inside a glass-fronted cabinet otherwise filled with colourful Reprint Society novels.

We had also discussed more esoteric writers -- Mill and Burke, Hayek and Popper -- the latter of whom were among the great intellectuals of sixty years ago. I knew them less well than him. He had wanted to keep them, too -- perhaps in an effort to remain anchored to the coming men and intellectual life of his early adulthood, when ideas were novel and exciting, and there was much to discuss.

He kept them and a volume called *Lessons from My Life* by Lord Vansittart, a memoir on cheap wartime paper which was largely an anti-German tract. Vansittart was 'one of the first to go against Hitler', I was proudly told when I had asked about the book.

Childhood was represented by Saki's short stories, Captain Marryat, and editions of Lewis Carroll.

I was pleased to see among the shelves a work or two by C.E.M. Joad, the old rascal intellectual whose fall from grace (dodging rail fares) their purchase might have preceded.

Ken had a habit of buying more than one copy, decades apart, of books he really liked. Many of these were poetic. He had more anthologies than I was able to count. Four editions of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and several *Rubaiyats*.

Doreen was religious and from her there were more lives of Christ than one might have anticipated, and sufficient Books of Common Prayer, Bibles and hymnals to furnish a small chapel.

I had the sense that poetry was present in their lives in a way it rarely is now. I cannot know, but I can imagine that they had each committed -- either wilfully or through the pressure of an education -- rather a lot of verse to memory.

Doreen was also, I have since been told, a lover of the theatre, and kept theatrical annuals old enough to have Olivier on the cover. Memoirs of theatrical types like James Agate and W. Graham Robertson. A great stack of works by Shaw.

I wondered, as I packed things hastily into repurposed bags for life, which plays of a vanished London stage the two of them may have seen.

There was also a small shelf of books written by friends, a self-published novel and monographs on arcane academic subjects. All were warmly inscribed and carefully read.

When Ken and my grandparents and I were eating lunch once over a year ago and the subject of bequests came up, he wondered whether I really would take and read everything I said I would. Did I really want quite so many books on cricket? Was I that interested in mathematics?

I said yes, not quite explaining my reason. The two of us were friends because we had some interests as well as relatives in common. The first books Ken had given me were intended to help piecemeal with my studies in history and art. But a life is never made up just of those things we can relate most closely to.

My interest in books I would never have bought was exact that: the connection to the private solaces of a full life which I could only partially understand.

On that day in May, movement between house and car was cut off by torrential rain. It left a little time, sweating and dusty, to think. I considered what it meant to be left a library, and to become the uncertain custodian of a lifetime's reverence for books.

Growing tired now, the pace of our work quickened. We searched cupboards and shelves for titles missed, shaking out dust in cobweb clouds. We stood on chairs and moved furniture with an exhausted lack of dexterity.

Shunting things from front door to boot, and flattened back seats, and footwells, we became quite rushed and untalkative, until interrupted by a brief and sadly-tinged conversation with a longstanding neighbour.

He missed the man from next door. His boy, now a successful young man cutting a dash through the world, had been given many encouraging books as he grew up.

The carrying continued. Later, tired but pleased, we drove away out of the spotty rain and into the sun. I can't remember what we spoke about.

Looking through one of the books brought home, Dad found the following ode by Pope in an edition of *The Golden Treasury* which, having now so many, I had handed to him.

*Blest, who can unconcern'dly find
Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind,*

*Quiet by day,
Sound sleep by night; study and ease,
Together mixed; sweet recreation;
And innocence, which most does please,*

*With meditation.
Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
Thus unlamented let me die;
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell where I lie.*

It seems appropriate.

2021