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Radical comedy: Stoppard's new *Utopia* trilogy

Tom Stoppard. *The Coast of Utopia: Voyage, Shipwreck, Salvage.* London: Faber and Faber, 2002. 114, 106, & 119 pages.

The Coast of Utopia is playing at the National's Olivier Theatre on the South Bank until 23 November.

Tom Stoppard writes in the least populous of dramatic genres, the comedy of ideas. In fact, his only rival for the title of master of the genre is the man who invented it, George Bernard Shaw. And though the ideas advanced in Shaw's plays were more revolutionary than those of his successor, Stoppard's are definitely funnier. The heart of Shaw's writing is in the introductions or epilogues that are inevitably appended to his scripts; one sometimes wonders why he bothered to write a play at all. Stoppard's plays, however, are brilliantly theatrical. They're full of vaudeville-style exchanges like the following from one of his most recent plays, *Voyage*. Nicholas Stankevich, an ardent student of German Romantic philosophy, is attempting to confess to his fiancée that when it comes to love he has not always succeeded in achieving the transcendence of spirit over matter:

Stankevich Liubov! I must speak! While you were away… I have been in...
Liubov *(helping)* The Caucasus.
Stankevich …torment! You are not the first. I come to you… soiled.
Liubov You mustn't speak of it.
Stankevich Yes, I must, I must—it lies so heavy on my breast that my lips have touched another's!
Liubov *(confused)* Breast?
Stankevich *(startled)* Lips, another's lips.

Stoppard gets laughs while also demonstrating his intellectual point—that a vision of the world predicated solely on abstract ideas is bound to be undermined by lived experience. Say that in an essay and it sounds dry, but structure it as a comic scene and it becomes entertainment. The structure of a joke—the setup followed by a reversal that overturns expectations—is at the heart of Stoppard's drama. Here's another example from *Voyage*. Michael Bakunin, also a recent convert to German Romanticism, is opposed to the marriage that has been arranged for his sister:

Michael To give oneself without love is a sin against the inner life. The outer world of material existence is mere illusion. I'll explain it all to Father…God I'm *starving*!
(Michael pauses to stuff his mouth with food from the table…)

['utopia' continued on page 4]

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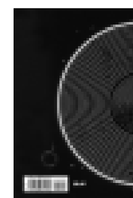
Psychoanalyzing September 11? Zizek on the fantasies and realities of the U.S.



Slavoj Zizek. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real.* London: Verso, 2002. 96 pages.

To mark the first anniversary of the September 11 tragedy, the global news media surveyed a multitude of opinions. Everyone from Boise, Idaho, to the fabled 'Arab Street' offered their views on how the terrorist attacks had changed the world.

However, despite the exhaustive coverage, a void remained: What were they thinking in Ljubljana? In particular, what did the Slovenian capital's

['real' continued on page 8]

Another side of the Confederacy: Two books on the West in the American Civil War

Cynthia DeHaven Pitcock and Bill J. Gurley, eds. *I Acted From Principle: The Civil War Diary of Dr. William M. McPheeters, Confederate Surgeon in the Trans-Mississippi.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002. 304 pages.

John N. Edwards. Conger Beasley Jr., ed. *Shelby's Expedition to Mexico: An Unwritten Leaf of the War.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002. 272 pages.

A native North Carolinian, Dr. William McPheeters had built a successful medical career in St. Louis, distinguishing himself in public health research and organizing the first professional associations in Missouri. When the American Civil War broke out in April 1861, Union authorities in the border states began to threaten and harass Confederate sympathizers. By swearing allegiance to the Union, McPheeters could have saved his career and property. Like many other Southern professionals, he deplored slavery. But with relatives and friends from his home state already fighting for the South, he knew a genuine transfer of loyalties would never be possible. The only choice his conscience left open to him was to reject the oath, a decision that ultimately forced him to flee his home and join the Confederate forces west of the Mississippi, where he served as an army surgeon under General Sterling Price.

McPheeters' diary is the first known account of the Civil War in the West by a Confederate medical officer. It tells the story of McPheeters' departure from St. Louis, his wartime experiences in Arkansas, and his daily duties treating battle wounds, malnutrition, and infectious diseases. It also relates the hardships of his wife and two children, who endured both imprisonment and banishment during his absence. This is a look at the personal journey of a principled Southerner, one of many who suffered the disastrous consequences of a difficult moral choice, but who ultimately returned home to rebuild their lives and communities.

Rather than acknowledge the Confederacy's defeat in the Civil War, many diehard rebels fled the South forever, preferring exile to Yankee rule. Some made their way to Mexico, where they joined forces with warring monarchist and Juarista factions. First published in 1872, *Shelby's Expedition to Mexico* is the tale of Confederate general Joseph O. Shelby and his Fourth Missouri Cavalry Brigade. Better known as the 'Iron Brigade', the unit saw extensive action in the Trans-Mississippi theater, notably in the battles of Camden and Jenkins' Ferry in Arkansas. Refusing to accept Lee's surrender, Shelby and his men fought their way across fifteen hundred miles of hostile territory, eventually reaching Mexico City. During their picaresque journey, they encountered an astonishing variety of colorful and dangerous characters—outlaws, Native Americans, and Mexican partisans.

Conger Beasley's introduction includes a biographical sketch of the elusive author, the newspaperman John Edwards. Echoing the epic romances of Sir Walter Scott and Victor Hugo, Edwards spins a tale of high adventure and desperately courageous men sustained only by their heroism and chivalry and ultimately left with nothing but their honor. A fine example of 'Lost Cause literature', this account provides another contemporary perspective on the Civil War in the West. O

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On the street where you live

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FROM THE EDITOR: New books and old books

Nothing is older than yesterday's newspaper.
—Mark Twain

One of our constraints at *The Oxonian Review of Books* is that everything we review is new—recent productions, current exhibits, forthcoming or recently released books. And we focus, of course, on the books. New books—books on which the verdict is still out, books that have not yet been buried and forgotten, enshrined as modern classics, or recorded as noteworthy failures. Older works are mentioned, of course, but they are sideshows, never the main attraction. They provide 'context': they form an established, already-judged past, useful above all for providing convenient terms with which to talk about the present.

By limiting itself to the here and now, a review can give a distorted impression of the nature of artistic and intellectual pursuits. This single-minded focus on the present may seem especially strange to those of us studying at Oxford. A huge majority of the books we read are much older than those discussed in these pages. For me, a medievalist, the books are more than half a millennium old, and although more recent scholarly works employ every modern resource of analysis, they do so above all to make better sense of the older texts (and through them, the peoples and worlds) that are our objects of study. On its own, this doesn't seem completely healthy either.

But it does give a fuller sense of the past. And if there's any doubt about the value of understanding the past, a glance at popular culture should dispel it. Just about all the names on the Top 40 music charts right now are new, but there is little that is truly original about the music itself. The problem with much of pop culture is not too much novelty, but too little.

Genuine originality rarely emerges without a solid understanding of what has come before. It is often the cultural practitioners with the strongest grasp of their historical context who prove to be the real innovators, who have the musical, visual, or literary ideas that change the course of their fields. In the intellectual world, similar principles apply: the stronger our sense of history, the better we are at encouraging the talented, looking out for the suspect, and recognizing the original.

The writer of Ecclesiastes correctly notes that 'of the making of books, there is no end'; but this isn't to say that new books and old are indistinguishable, nor that the project of being attentive to the continuities and differences between them is a futile one. It is, on the contrary, utterly necessary. Interacting with contemporary ideas and creations is an exciting and challenging task because our perspectives, our judgments, our comments, our preferences become themselves a part of the history of these works and even help to determine whether the works play a significant role in the history of our culture as a whole. This task, not some myopic fixation on the present, is what motivates us at *The Oxonian Review*—which is why I hope Twain's words will *not* apply to our work here. O

Editor in Chief

Utopia *[continued from page I]*

In Stoppard's drama, every intellectual position is both a serious contention and a potential butt for humor. His characters talk at length about very serious things—the ideal structure of society, the proper function of art, and so on—but their pretension is more often than not immediately deflated. The structure of comic dialogue allows the author to stand playfully aloof, and he relishes that position of ideological objectivity. In *Salvage*, he gives the following words to the novelist Ivan Turgenev but might just as easily have spoken them himself:

Perotkin And what was your attitude really?
Turgenev My attitude?
Perotkin Yes, your purpose?
Turgenev My purpose? My purpose was to write a novel.
Perotkin So you don't take sides between the fathers and the children?
Turgenev On the contrary, I take every possible side.

If you were to define 'Stoppardism' it would not be an ideology but a structure of thinking. His best plays tend not to advance his own ideas so much as to serve as vehicles for the discussion of other people's. If that makes his work sound like a university seminar, the comparison is entirely appropriate. Audiences tend to approach his work as if it came complete with a required reading list; we remember the plays by subject headings. There's one about Classical poetry (*The Invention of Love*); quantum mechanics (*Hapgood*); Dadaism (*Travesties*); even one about thermodynamics, Byron, and landscape gardening (*Arcadia*).

In fact, however, Stoppard is less like the learned professor than he is like the clever student who's read ahead. He openly admits that he's no expert in the subjects he writes about and freely acknowledges the sources from which he's cribbed his information. These are generally the very books from which theater dramaturgs cull their explanatory program notes, thus creating a vast reading circle, a more erudite version of Oprah's Book Club. Most of Stoppard's plays, then, are actually elaborate book reports. 'Here's what I've been reading,' he tells us, 'and look what I came up with!'

> Hegel's theory of the dialectical movement of history… is one of the dominant ideas of the trilogy, providing Stoppard with both an intellectual thesis to refute and a structural principle to guide the drama.

Stoppard's latest work, which premiered this August at the Royal National Theatre in London and from which I've been quoting, is a trilogy called *The Coast of Utopia*. It consists of three plays—*Voyage*, *Shipwreck*, and *Salvage*—and its subject, broadly speaking, is a particular circle of nineteenth century Russian revolutionaries in exile. The National's dramaturgs (or perhaps their merchandising directors?) have helpfully compiled a standard syllabus. They've stocked the shelves of the NT bookshop with books about Alexander Herzen (the Russian socialist and central figure of the trilogy), Isaiah Berlin's essays on *Russian Thinkers* (which Stoppard has cited as a major influence), and a few copies of Pushkin thrown in for good measure. Having seen the plays, I must warn you that you'll probably want to brush up on your Hegel, as well.

> Most of Stoppard's plays are actually elaborate book reports. 'Here's what I've been reading,' he tells us, 'and look what I came up with!'

Hegel's theory of the dialectical movement of history (so influential to Marxist thought) is one of the dominant ideas of the trilogy, providing Stoppard with both an intellectual thesis to refute and a structural principle to guide the drama. The Hegelian opposition of thesis and antithesis is such a close cousin to the principles behind Stoppard's dialectic comedy that one can see why he was drawn to it. The overriding issue in this trilogy full of issues is whether we ought to focus on history's ultimate destination, the utopian ideal toward which 'the zig and the zag' is taking us, or whether present happiness ought to be our primary concern.

Voyage, the most self-contained of the three plays, serves as a kind of prelude. The only play of the trilogy set entirely in Russia, it introduces us to many of the main characters, but especially to Michael Bakunin, who when we first meet him espouses a credo of abstracted, idealized intellectualism. By the end of the play, though, having been turned on to Hegel and having provoked a lot of family discord, Michael sets sail (hence the title) for the West and a life of more concrete, worldly goals as a political revolutionary.

The action of the other two plays, *Shipwreck* and *Salvage*, is basically continuous; although Bakunin reappears in them, his story becomes increasingly subordinate to Alexander Herzen's. In *Shipwreck*, we see how the dreams of all the revolutionaries are shattered by the failure of the 1848 Revolution, but Stoppard yokes this to an extended depiction of marital strife and, ultimately, tragedy in

Herzen's family. In *Salvage*, Stoppard picks up the story of the broken, disillusioned Herzen, exiled in London, and shows how he started publishing a radical newspaper from abroad that eventually spurred the Tsar's emancipation of the serfs. Stoppard leaves us with the image of the elderly Herzen and the rest of his 'generation of repentant gentry' rejected by the younger, more militant Marxists who seized control of the Russian revolutionary movement. In its broad outline, the trilogy takes us through the archetypal stages in the development of the intellectual life: from youthful enthusiasm, through discouraging setbacks, to the eventual yielding and compromise that come with old age.

The structure of *The Coast of Utopia* feels less like a play than a sprawling nineteenth century Russian novel. Stoppard, famous for constructing intricate theatrical games, here uses a looser and more episodic method, letting the sweep of history wash across the stage.

Among the issues considered in *The Coast of Utopia* are such perennial Stoppardian concerns as the political utility of art, the opposition between rationality and desire, and the predicament of exile. What distinguishes these plays is their form, and not just their sheer length (each runs about three hours, with an interval). The structure of *The Coast of Utopia* feels less like a play than a sprawling nineteenth century Russian novel. Stoppard, famous for constructing intricate theatrical games, here uses a looser and more episodic method, letting the sweep of history wash across the stage.

Perhaps because it is being performed in the National's Olivier Theatre, the vastness of which tends to dwarf any playwright's work, director Trevor Nunn has chosen to emphasize the trilogy's epic scope in a somewhat rudimentary way, using a rotating stage and parades of supernumeraries. He wants to give the play a 'cinematic' feel, despite the fact that most of the action consists of little more than lengthy, dense debate. The 1848 Paris revolution, which is in theatrical terms the nadir of Nunn's uneven staging, should be the pivot point of the action, the decisive setback that causes the characters to rethink their dream of creating a new society.

But Stoppard hasn't chosen to show us much of what Herzen and the others actually *did* in 1848, so all they can do is stand around and react to what's going on around them. The problem with the section is emblematic of the bind Stoppard has gotten himself into more generally. He's chosen as his central figure Herzen, an admirable and reasonable man whose most effective revolutionary activity seems to have consisted of writing dissident essays while in exile and sending them back home. Licking envelopes is about as far as the revolutionary agitation gets.

Should this massive project, then, be considered a monumental summation of Stoppard's career or an overlong rehashing of themes he's dealt with before? Even the tightest play of the three, *Voyage*, with its double time scheme, often feels like a mechanical reworking of Stoppard's masterpiece, *Arcadia*. By contrast, *Shipwreck* is far more daring but also more diffuse. The disparate political and personal threads concerning Herzen's marriage and his revolutionary career never quite hold together, though at times Stoppard's writing gestures toward an unrealized unity:

> I'm beginning to understand the trick of freedom. Freedom can't be the residue of what's unfreely given up, divided up like a fought-over loaf. Every giving-up has to be self-willed, freely chosen, unenforceable. Each of us must forgo only what we choose to forgo, balancing our personal freedom of action against our need for the cooperation of other people–who are each making the same balance for themselves. What is the largest number of individuals who can pull this trick off? I would say it's smaller than a nation, smaller than the ideal communities of Cabet and Fourier. I would say the largest number is smaller than three. Two is possible, if there is love, but two is not a guarantee.

Such sparks of beautifully articulated elegy compensate for the dearth of Stoppard's trademark comedy in a play whose movement—towards disillusionment—is hardly comical. The unevenness of *Shipwreck* is problematic, but it also demonstrates an instinct toward risk-taking rarely exhibited by an eminent writer well into his sixties.

Salvage, sadly, brings the trilogy to a rather conventional conclusion. Lacking the structure and wit of *Voyage* and the raw emotion of *Shipwreck*, it feels as if it could have been written by anyone.

Salvage, sadly, brings the trilogy to a rather conventional conclusion. Lacking the structure and wit of *Voyage* and the raw emotion of *Shipwreck*, it feels as if it could have been written by any-

['utopia' continued on page 6]

['utopia' continued from page 5]

one. It has a generic 'historical drama' structure: Herzen gets the idea to write a newspaper. He prints up some copies. He sends them out. The Tsar emancipates the serfs. And so on.

The Coast of Utopia is a particularly rich mess of writing—Stoppard's most impressive book report yet—but, despite all the revolutionary notions it entertains, it ends on an essentially conservative note.

The first and most crucial task of the historical dramatist is choosing which events to depict and which to leave out. Stoppard seems too often to be merely reporting the events of Herzen's biography rather than artistically crafting them. At its worst, *Salvage* feels like an exercise in undisciplined hagiography, a PR campaign for Herzen's advocacy of non-violent reform from above as opposed to the Marxist-Leninist preference for violent overthrow from below.

The trilogy ends with the heavy-handed juxtaposition of Marx, ranting about historical determinism and his violent vision of 'the Neva lit by flames and running red,' and Herzen asserting that 'We have to open men's eyes and not tear them out.' 'A distant end is not an end but a trap,' Stoppard has Herzen say. 'The end we work for must be closer, the labourer's wage, the pleasure in the work done, the summer lightning of personal happiness…'

It's no wonder that Stoppard wants to call attention to this forgotten figure in Russian history. Herzen's is the moderate voice that, had it prevailed, might have prevented a century of bloodshed across Europe and around the world. Perhaps after the almost bloodless overthrow of Communism, the European world order at the end of the twentieth century has finally come around to 'Herzenism.'

Precisely for that reason, Stoppard's glorification of Herzen often seems too comfortable. There's such a glow around him that the audience longs for a Stoppardian deflation, a punch line that never comes. *The Coast of Utopia* is a particularly rich mess of writing—Stoppard's most impressive book report yet—but, despite all the revolutionary notions it entertains, it ends on an essentially conservative note. Most of us don't need to spend nine hours in a theatre to be convinced of the value of liberal humanism. In the twilight of his career, it seems that Stoppard has compromised a bit on his objective stance, that he could not stop himself from positing an answer to the question, 'How, then, should we live?' And, even if his answer may be the right one for society, great drama thrives on the tension of the unresolved. O

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Still Chinatown

Grace Yu

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Let your mind wander: David Lodge *Thinks…*

David Lodge. *Thinks…* London: Penguin Books, 2002. 352 pages.

Thinks… covers familiar ground for David Lodge: academics struggling in marriages, indulging in love affairs, facing their own long-repressed desires and fears, and finally discovering there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in their philosophy. The trick this time is that the 'philosophy' at stake isn't merely a set of personal moral quibbles, but the possibility of the Human.

Lodge sets his Fall of Man at the fictional University of Gloucester, where novelist Helen Reed has moved from London to take a temporary position as a writing instructor. There's our Eve. Playing the parts of both the serpent and the apple is the self-assured cognitive scientist and skeptic Ralph Messenger, who gets all the best lines in *Thinks…*

Ralph deftly juggles his various love affairs, shrewdly conducts his academic business, maintains order in his family life, and even faces death with aplomb: with a possible diagnosis of cancer looming, he resolves in his journal that 'The thing to do is to take defensive action where one can, and stoically await the outcome where one can't.' In the face of our hero Ralph's commitments to agnosticism and philandering, Helen stands little chance of maintaining her eternally faithful love for her recently deceased husband, or, for that matter, her belief in 'human selfhood.'

> … wouldn't it be nice if the person you were dreaming about on a rainy Sunday was at that very moment wishing for someone just like you?

Much of the novel consists of excerpts from the two protagonist's diaries, which interlock so perfectly as to emphasize, with a wink, just how constructed the whole situation is. Lodge underlines the contrived fatedness of their affair, and, by extension, so many other just-so love stories—wouldn't it be nice if the person you were dreaming about on a rainy Sunday was at that very moment wishing for someone just like you? This recognition of reading-as-fantasy becomes an integral part of Lodge's treatment of reading-as-voyeurism.

His real insight is that in order to preserve our most deeply held personal myths, we often restrict our voyeuristic (and, equally, exhibitionist) impulses from the people closest to us. He offers this comment both implicitly (there is a surprising, painful, and intimate betrayal at the heart of the novel) and explicitly: when Ralph offers to exchange diaries with her, Helen protests, 'Why is torture so horrible, so morally repugnant? Not just because of the pain it inflicts, but because it uses bodily pain to prise secrets from the mind, which should be inviolable.' Sure enough, Ralph soon hacks into her e-diary.

Lodge writes courageously; he is confident in anyone's head, narrating thoughts or speeches or lectures or notes with equal dexterity. He doesn't write with a great deal of sensitivity for the subtlety of social interaction. But if on the one hand you could complain that his characters are too often reduced to ideas, you could just as easily point out that his ideas are convincingly alive. His versatility in handling different narrative forms gives his work a rich texture, and he doesn't shy away from sheer entertainment: *Thinks…* titillates, and its sex appeal also keeps the interwoven intellectual discussion interesting. The ending is too complete a vindication of Ralph's smug, didactic intellectualism, but it is perhaps fitting for this all too tightly constructed plot to end with the scholar of artificial intelligence on top. There is, after all, a bittersweetness to every Death of the Human, no matter how predictable. ◼

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a passage from Thinks… :

'Since the enlightenment,' [Ralph] said, slipping into lecture mode, 'science has established itself as the only true form of knowledge. This has created a problem for rival forms—they've had to either take it on board, try to make themselves scientific, and run the risk of discovering that there's no foundation to their conceptual world—like serious theology, for instance—or put their heads in the sand and pretend science never happened—like fundamentalist religion. These postmodernists are mounting a last-ditch defence of their disciplines by saying that everybody is in the same boat, including scientists—that there are no foundations, and no sand. But it's not true. Science is for real. It has made more changes to the conditions of human life than all the preceding millennia of our history put together. Just think of medicine. Two hundred years ago doctors were still bleeding people for every ailment under the sun. If you had cancer, would you consult a postmodern oncologist who thought reflexology and aromatherapy were on a par with surgery and chemotherapy?'

Real *[continued from page 1]*

best-known public intellectual, the oddball Lacanian pscyhoanalytic theorist Slavoj Zizek, have to say? Luckily London's Verso Books has come to the rescue, releasing Zizek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* as part of a triumvirate of works by European intellectuals addressing the first anniversary of the attacks.

Zizek is far more famous than might ordinarily be expected of a Central European disciple of Lacan, primarily because he sprinkles his theoretical analyses with examples drawn from both high and low culture. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* shows him just as at home with the obscure Yugoslav Serb movie *Pretty Village, Pretty Flame* as he is with *The Bridges of Madison County*. Indeed, the book's title is drawn from a quote by 'Morpheus', Laurence Fishburne's character in *The Matrix*.

Pop culture not only functions as a tool for explaining theory, it also serves as an object of the theoretical gaze. Thus he seeks to show that abstract theory has direct relevance to everyday life.

Although the subject matter of Zizek's work is accessible, the same cannot be said of his stream-of-consciousness writing style. To say that he goes off on tangents would be inaccurate, for the word 'tangent' implies at least a small connection between successive arguments. Lacking any structure, Zizek deliberately jumps from metaphor to film clip to quotation, disorienting the reader: you have no idea where he is going with his thoughts.

But this is not merely postmodern slight of hand. Zizek gets you lost in order to detach you from your intellectual prejudices. The flow of the argument loops around in a circle, causing you to realize that you hold a belief exactly opposing the one you thought you believed. In achieving this Lacanian inversion, he sheds light on the lies we tell ourselves, and this is the book's success.

The flow of the argument loops around in a circle, causing you to realize that you hold a belief exactly opposing the one you thought you believed. In achieving this Lacanian inversion, he sheds light on the lies we tell ourselves, and this is the book's success.

Welcome to the Desert of the Real opens with one such inversion. A cliché about September 11 is that it represented a 'real' outside world penetrating the prosperous fantasy world of the United States. However, Zizek inverts this by observing that prior to the attacks, there were countless films, such as *Independence Day,* that depicted the destruction of major American landmarks. Last fall, we were inundated with examples of the movies and album covers that had to be airbrushed or shelved because they depicted events too similar to the tragedy. Thus, Zizek argues,

Lacking any structure, Zizek deliberately jumps from metaphor to film clip to quotation, disorienting the reader: you have no idea where he is going with his thoughts.

> The question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again?* The fact that the September 11 attacks were the stuff of popular fantasies long before they actually took place provides yet another case of the twisted logic of dreams: it is easy to account for the fact that poor people around the world dream about becoming Americans—so what do the well-to-do Americans, immobilized in their well-being, dream about? About a global catastrophe that would shatter their lives—why? This is what psychoanalysis is about: to explain why, in the midst of well-being, we are haunted by visions of catastrophes.

So, rather than representing the real world invading our peaceful fantasy world, September 11 actually constituted the violent fantasy world of our imagination asserting itself on our reality. The distinction is not merely semantic, for Lacanians view these fantasies as symptoms of a mental malady.

The ultimate objective of Lacanian psychoanalytic treatment is to 'traverse the fantasy'—and this is not what it may first appear to be. The point is not to discard the fantasy so that the patient can exist peacefully in an unproblematic 'reality'. Rather, it is to recognize that there are components of the real that are so traumatic we cannot assimilate them fully into our picture of reality. Since we usually experience these components of the real as fantasy, the goal is to recognize their veracity.

The malady that Zizek wants to submit for psychoanalytic treatment is original and promising. Tragedies bear the capacity to shock either because we thought them to be the stuff of fiction, or because we never thought of them at all. Why was the World Trade Center attack the former rather than the latter? What component of the real does this symptom

reveal that we were trying to suppress? On the first anniversary of the attacks, what does this teach us about our attempts to remember, and then overcome, the trauma of the event?

These questions remain unanswered by Zizek's book. After establishing an ambitious project, Zizek retreats into platitudes; what follows is not applied psychoanalysis, but pedestrian critical observations repackaged in exotic theoretical wrapping paper.

Zizek observes that Osama bin Laden and the Taliban were previously supported by the United States, that the Oklahoma City bombing was perpetrated by a home-grown extremist, that Al Qaeda is an example of globalization's many discontents, and that in fighting the war on terrorism, America is trampling on many of the civil liberties essential to the American way of life. These are all valid points and have been made countless times before, accompanied by far deeper analysis.

Perhaps a greater failure than his lack of originality is his lack of a solid point. The main argument of *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* seems to be that we shouldn't choose from false dichotomies—something, I imagine, few would contest. He emphasizes that he feels sympathy not only for the victims of September 11, but all victims of injustice, including victims of American injustices.

That is hardly earth-shattering, given that the two are not mutually exclusive. Sympathy doesn't run out because you have used it once. He also says the forced choice between unquestioning support of all U.S. policy or of fundamentalism amounts to a false dichotomy. Well, that much is obvious. The clear middle ground is to reject some, many, or all of the Bush administration's policies without at the same time supporting Al Qaeda. His final major argument is that:

> The democratic political order is of its very nature susceptible to corruption. The ultimate choice is: do we accept and endorse this corruption in a spirit of resigned wisdom, or can we summon up the courage to formulate a leftist alternative to democracy in order to break the vicious cycle of democratic corruption and the rightist campaign to get rid of it?

Here he actually reinforces a false dichotomy rather than arguing that we

What could a Lacanian psychoanalyst say about a current event that hasn't already been said by the thousands of journalist and political analysts around the world?

shouldn't have to choose from one. Why must we replace democracy rather than reform it? Thus, his first two major arguments are obvious, while the final one is obviously wrong.

The failure of *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* raises the issue of why one might have expected something significant in the first place. What could

He emphasizes that he feels sympathy not only for the victims of September 11, but all victims of injustice, including victims of American injustices... hardly earth-shattering, given that the two are not mutually exclusive.

a Lacanian psychoanalyst say about a current event that hasn't already been said by the thousands of journalists and political analysts around the world? This question speaks directly to the debate spurred by Judge Richard Posner's recent work, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*. Posner is aware of the irony that he, a conservative public intellectual *par excellence* in the United States, is launching such an argument, but he nonetheless goes on to pillory those specialists in narrow fields who nonetheless address issues of 'broad public concern.'

On the other side of the debate stands what Diego Gambetta of All Souls College calls 'Claro' cultures, where public intellectuals are objects of out-and-out reverence. In these cultures, a holistic model of knowledge prevails. This means that people are afraid to admit ignorance on any particular subject because that would imply ignorance across the board.

Further, an intellectual's proven expertise in a particular discipline is seen as an indicator of much wider knowledge; hence the Italian term *tuttologi*—people ready to give their views on just about anything to just about anyone.

There is a middle ground between the Claro and Posner extremes, where intellectuals apply their methodological approaches to subject matters from outside of their discipline—for example, Gary Becker employing the principles of economics to explain marriage patterns, and Stanley Fish using literary theory to deconstruct the critique of affirmative action.

What makes these interventions bear fruit is *not* the fact that we assume, following the Claro cultures, that knowledge in a narrow field is proof of general expertise. Rather, we recognize expertise in a particular form of analysis, which when applied to a new subject matter, has the potential to bring latent dimensions of the issue to the sur-

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['real' continued from page 9]

face. Continuing with our examples, history and literature have always drawn attention to the underlying material elements of marriage, and yet the disciplines which usually analyze the institution have tended to emphasize its psychological and moral elements at the expense of all other considerations. In the case of affirmative action, the dominant legal approach focuses on a conflict between rights, while Fish's analysis shows how the critique of affirmative action actually depends on a peculiar narrative of personal achievement.

It is their expertise in a particular methodology, rather than a particular subject matter, that grants public intellectuals the potential to comment effectively on matters of 'broad public concern'.

Only when intellectuals disregard this link between methodology and authority do their efforts ring hollow. At that point, the putative public intellectual really is no different from the proverbial 'man on the street' interviewed on the evening news for a five-second blurb. Such is the fate of Slavoj Zizek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*; he fails to connect his substantive arguments to his ambitious psychoanalytic project.

Such is the fate of Slavoj Zizek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*; he fails to connect his substantive arguments to his ambitious psychoanalytic project.

In the course of the work, he attacks the American refrain that 'nothing will be the same after September 11'. 'Significantly,' he says, 'this phrase is never really elaborated—it is just an empty gesture of saying something "deep" without really knowing what to say.' Unfortunately for Zizek, that criticism applies all too well to his own book. ■

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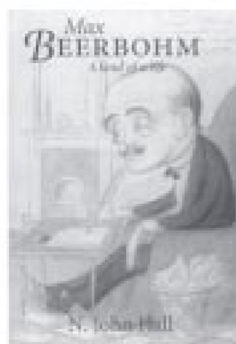
Max Beerbohm
A Kind of a Life
N. John Hall



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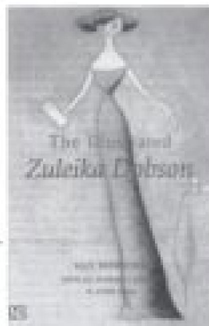

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For you

I saw you and I spared nothing.
I turned twenty dancing in
Your blue shorts at the beach in Saugatauck.

We wrote vows one sleepless night
And you stole me away in a carriage of roses
After our wedding in two languages.

My head slept on the right side of your chest
And dreamed the purpose of love into your heart
While you, afraid that I'd stop breathing,
 watched me.

Carmen Bugan *is a third year D. Phil. student at Balliol writing on the poetry of Seamus Heaney. Her poems have appeared in* Cyphers, PN Review *and* 2001 Oxford Poets: An Anthology *among other places.*

['confused' continued from page 12]

absent from *Platform*, the author's latest work. Its world of sex and racism is one-dimensional, insistently focused on the sordid and the inhuman. The genius of *Atomised* lay in its complexity, its intertwining of scenes and speculations. *Platform* offers less variety. The S & M clubs of petit bourgeois France and the Thai sex industry blend together into a grey fog that not even the novel's terrorist attack can colour. Perhaps Houellebecq deserves credit for this mundane tone; having previously outlined a fantastical blueprint for humankind, he wants to impress upon his readership the drab squalidness of its present plight. However, he achieves this by lazily cherry-picking from the earlier work, fusing the brothers from *Atomised* into one dull civil servant/peepshow aficionado (also) named Michel, and leaving us only a diluted version of the boredom and grubby decadence he's already outlined.

Maybe the severity of his polemic is a last-ditch attempt to inject a bit of interest into the flabby prose and soft porn into which his novel sinks.

Michel uses his sizeable inheritance to take a tour to Thailand, where he meets Valerie, a beautiful bisexual nymphomaniac. On their return to Paris, the pair work together on creating a Club Med-style sex resort, a swinger's Far Eastern 'Pussy Paradise'. It is difficult to judge whether or not the author is in favour of such promiscuity, a query also raised by *Atomised*, in which he asked if this kind of selfish exploitation is too high a price to pay for personal autonomy.

From this perspective, we could view the justification of both sexual capitalism and jihad as symptomatic of the selfishness of the twenty-first century: the individual is elevated to the extent that we cease to comprehend truly the suffering of the other.

In *Platform*, the antithesis of hedonistic sex tourism is the Thai-Islamic fundamentalist group that brings carnage to the middle-aged European pleasure-seekers. Houellebecq is not known for his patience with Islam; in an interview with *Lire* magazine he declared it to be 'the dumbest religion'. Muslim-bashing seems an urgent project of the novel from the start, with Michel's father being murdered by an unstable Muslim on a point of honour.

However, the fact that Houellebecq offers Islam as an opposition to the sexual hedonism he seems to find so distasteful muddies the waters. Does he consider Islam an evil creed seeking to wreak havoc on 'innocent' white middle-class Europeans? Or does he believe that his countrymen's unthinking quest for self-gratification encourages terrorism? Perhaps it is irrelevant. Maybe the severity of his polemic is a last-ditch attempt to inject a bit of interest into the flabby prose and soft porn into which his novel sinks.

A generous critic might conclude that *Platform*, as an extension of its predecessor, does not have to explicate the same philosophy a second time around. From this perspective, we could view the justification of both sexual capitalism and jihad as symptomatic of the selfishness of the twenty-first century: the individual is elevated to the extent that we cease to comprehend truly the suffering of the other.

Other critics would—perhaps rightly—see this as pseudo-academic posturing, searching to give a rational meaning to a work that spits with hatred. Writing in *The Guardian*, Salman Rushdie declares *Platform* to be the novel to go to 'if you want to understand the France beyond the liberal intelligentsia, the France that gave the Left such a bloody nose in the last presidential election'.

Certainly, it must be dealt with on its own terms, as a book bred in a confused climate of bitterness and introspection. *Platform* veers away from the enticing Calvino-esque theoretics of *Atomised* to act as a counterbalance to both the ineluctable Derrida and the slick French scene responsible for the soft-focus whimsy of *Amelie*. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether Houellebecq's work is in fact anything but despairing pornography, destined to rail impotently against the society he so unsparingly portrays. O

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Confused extremes: *Platform*, Michel Houellebecq's follow-up to *Atomised*

Michel Houellebecq. Frank Wynne, trans. *Platform [Platforme]*. London: Heinemann, 2002. 362 pages.

Michel Houellebecq. Frank Wynne, trans. *Atomised [Les Particules Elementaires]*. London: Vintage, 2001. 384 pages.

In 1998 *The New York Times* wrote off Michel Houellebecq's controversial novel *Atomised* as 'a bad, self-conscious pastiche of Camus, Foucault and Bret Easton Ellis'. While this is overly damning, the author's pretensions to philosophy, social analysis, and cultish subversion in *Atomised* do ring a little false. For instance, his attempts to forge a humanism grounded in atomic genetics are half-baked: he writes that one of the protagonists, Michel, 'was able, through somewhat risky interpretations of the postulates of quantum mechanics, to restore the possibility of love'. But even such drivel cannot drown out the novel's ambition and originality.

In *Atomised*, Houellebecq speculates on the 'last metaphysical mutation' of the human race not because the genetically manipulated future he carves out will become a reality but to force us, by delegitimising 'revolutionary' or 'alternative' ideas, to question the very notion that ours is an enlightened and progressive age. According to the author, we merely perpetuate the same cutthroat individualism that dates back to medieval Christianity.

Houellebecq is particularly scathing in his dismissal of post-structuralist thought: he looks forward to the 'global ridicule' awaiting such academics as 'Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze', and he sees deconstruction not as a recognition of our meaninglessness, but as the acme of self-deceiving individualism. The 'decentred self' remains a selfish unit; the death of hierarchy merely nurtures the cult of the individual and an incoherent, deviant society. Houellebecq's own post-post-modernist vision looks towards the obliteration of the self by a biogenetic clamping down on diversity. This is a questionable, but nonetheless fascinating premise.

> Sadly, such conceptual flights of fancy are noticeably absent from *Platform*, the author's latest novel. Its world of sex and racism is one-dimensional, insistently focused on the sordid and the inhuman.

Sadly, such conceptual flights of fancy are noticeably

['confused' continued on page 11]

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