In a 1943 essay “We Refugees,” Hannah Arendt argued that Jews fleeing Nazi-dominated Europe had been afraid to admit what they really were. Rather than acknowledge themselves as refugees, exiles, and “pariahs,” they pretended to be immigrants whose departure was motivated “by purely economic reasons,” hoping to forget the past and become good, instantly assimilated citizens of wherever they had ended up. Arendt had Olympian contempt for such efforts. It was only those who accepted their status, the “conscious pariahs,” who could understand political reality and stay rooted in the “vaunted Jewish qualities … humanity, humor, disinterested intelligence,” which, she insisted, are “pariah qualities.” To be a proper thinker, a proper Jew, a proper human being, one had to join the “very few”—and it went without saying that Arendt herself was among them—who admitted to being one of “we refugees.”

While Arendt despised self-described “immigrants” who seemed to fold to the assimilating pressures of their new hosts and forget their past attachments, Bolouri observes that today, in the consciousness of the left-liberal establishment, the “good immigrant,” is rather one who “is tied to his past … is defined by his past … reproduces his past.” From the left-liberal perspective, a good immigrant is the bearer of a desirable quantum of diversity, a charming addition to a multicultural mosaic, offering...
us new recipes, new patterns and designs, and other such bits of harmless folklore. Above all, they bring us the stories of their victimhood. In some cases, as in Bolouri’s, they have literally had to rehearse such stories to official panels in order to be recognized as the right sort of refugees, people who have suffered in the approved sort of ways, to the proper degree, and learned how to organize the details of their misery into a coherent, cogent tale.

Arendt, writing amid the Second World War, imagined refugees as people who had lost all status and ties, who had become “nothing but human beings.” Such people held the potential to reveal radically human truths. She linked the self-conscious refugee’s lack of ties to particular identities to a supposed capacity to “represent the vanguard” of thought. Today, however, to be a refugee is a status in itself, with its own legal codes and cultural expectations. Rather than experiencing what Arendt considered the priceless advantage of a rootlessness that granted access to truth and universality, they find themselves cornered in a new form of specificity. “Am I oppressed enough to have a political value?” Bolouri asks in a list of questions addressed not only to the state, but to all readers. The questions conclude, “How would you read this if you did not know who I was?”

Arendt suggested that refugees—the ones lucid and brave enough to acknowledge themselves as such—embodied something essential about the human condition, stripped of traditional forms of belonging. In essence, she was offering a vision in which people like herself were enabled (or indeed, in which she specifically was enabled) to conceive and express thoughts inaccessible to others. For her, intellectual courage was a matter of speaking up and saying who one was. Today, in contrast, Bolouri’s questioning of how we, in the West, expect to “read” and find “political value” in refugees shows that this kind of self-disclosure is no longer a fearless act of resistance, but the very form of submission to contemporary power.

Seeking asylum in the West as a refugee means telling stories about oneself to holders of power, and those who request asylum on the grounds of homophobic oppression face a particular pressure to narrate themselves compellingly. As the anthropologist David A.B. Murray demonstrates in his investigation of the Canadian asylum system, applicants, many of them coming from the Middle East, are coached by lawyers and NGO workers to tell their life stories in ways that will satisfy the state’s criteria. Many of them, smoothing tangled lives into something that can be presented in an official dossier, “had the exact same story,” a stereotype based on what those helping them knew would work. Some applicants accused others of not even being sexual minorities, a claim that is difficult to disprove, since “sexual orientation claims depend mostly on the presentation of internal, often unspoken or unspeakable qualities.” The performance of queerness to satisfy the requirements of the state, is one that in principle anyone could learn, and anyone could fail. Like all tests of such unrepresentable internal characteristics, it measures not the quality in question, but the capacity to present a narrative about it.

Such high-stakes tests are reserved only for the most vulnerable outsiders in our societies, but iterations of these evaluations have become commonplace for us all. A demand for autobiography, for stories about who we are, organizes the most diverse domains of contemporary life. The college admissions process, notoriously, has become a kind of pageant in which applicants are asked, through their essays, to bare their souls to the admissions board, which evaluates them not so much on their record of achievement or cognitive capacity as on their ability to cast themselves in an ethically appealing light. For artists like Bolouri, there has been a growing demand over the last few decades for “artist statements” directed toward grant committees, curators, and collectors. Through these texts, artists try to convince the latter that their work possesses the qualities—as unmaterial as queer desire—of relevance and novelty, often by linking their creations to their autobiography, highlighting those aspects (being queer, a refugee, etc.) understood to be, for whatever reason, of political and aesthetic value in our current dispensation.

The history of “artist statements” has yet to be written. The work that exists tends to conflate them with the manifestos and essays through which self-consciously avant-garde artists of the early and mid 20th century declared what art was or should be. But such documents of artistic self-assertion, usually directed at—and meant to shock, baffle, or inspire—other artists or an anonymous public, have little to do with the compulsory, pseudo-autobiographical writing that comprises the genre of “artist statements” today. Art historian Lindsay J. Twa has identified one important reason for this shift in her research on the applications of Black visual artists to the Julius Rosenwald Fund, a charitable organization of the 1930s and ’40s created by the former head of the Sears department store chain. Applicants described...
The art as a means of “understanding and perhaps furthering racial relations,” and described themselves as “in relation to their subject matter in order to establish their authority.” Making art worthy of funding meant making art that contributed to a clear political project and presenting oneself as a proper member of one’s racial community.

As Bolouri pointed out to me over email, no matter how “true” such stories may be, they become false once they are turned into “a selling point” that “the western art market chooses to promote.” Like the organizations that charge themselves with saving refugees, the latter seeks to imagine the minorities on whom it extends its favors as “as underprivileged and unsophisticated, which affirms in return the universal position of the benevolent saviors.” While Arndt argued that it was outsiders who had the “priceless advantage” of having no particular identity, Bolouri counters that it is the insiders, those benevolently dispensing favors, who have the “privilege of being a nobody, to blend in, not to have to reproduce my past and roots … identity IS for the marginalized.” Bolouri adds: “Zizek tells a brilliant joke on this: A rabbi and a wealthy merchant were praying in the synagogue, saying things like ‘oh God, forgive me for I am a nobody before you.’ A poor Jew passes through, kneels down next to them, and repeats the same thing. ’The rabbi and the wealthy merchant are like: Who the hell do you think you are calling yourself a nobody?’

To be a nobody—to be free of having to explain oneself, narrate one’s life according to the criteria set by power, to exploit one’s “identity” in order to access the resources one needs—is indeed a privilege in our society, one held by a shrinking number of people.

Refugees, queers, and artists, from various vantages, all might have imagined in the past—or had it imagined on their behalf by sympathetic observers—that their condition, somehow marginal to the mainstream of society, was being condemned to a silence that could be overcome through a great, courageous push. In such a vision, telling the truth about oneself would have seemed an act of liberation. Inside there is a secret—a desire, an insight, a wound—that parents, neighbors, friends, colleagues, all the regiments of the social order, seem to work together to keep hidden. Bringing it out of oneself and into speech, risking the consequences of its revelation, is an act that could transform both oneself and the world.

Now, nothing seems less liberatory, and more routine, than to avow oneself. At an interview for a job, or on the first day of orientation, someone in a position of authority asks us to say something “personal,” something from the darkness of our private life. We are invited to make ourselves visible, told we can and should admit our “whole selves” here, and we might imagine that we are being granted the satisfaction of our long-held wish to speak the risky truth—but under a compulsion that makes what we utter seem false and what we desired futile.

Once, one held within oneself a secret too dangerous to disclose; now, one must have on hand seemingly intimate revelations to feign a candid disclosure (one’s “greatest weakness,” a self-deprecating but ultimately self-affirming bit of nonsense). We must satisfy demands, not for our silent conformity to the norm, but for our garrulous submission to questioning about who we really are.

If it is true that power today demands that we speak up rather than be silent, it is, however, unclear what possibilities silence offers for resistance. Retreating into opacity and obscurity would hardly seem to serve us better than participating in the continual pageant of self-display. If we want to win back the privilege of being “nobody,” as Bolouri advocates, even for brief moments of evasion from the imperative to deliver canned autobiographies, we will need to rethink the intellectual heritage that leads us to conflate self-disclosure with autonomy, and to ask by what new practices of freedom we might regain the ability to speak, or be silent, in the name of common humanity.

Bolouri, for their part, lays claim to this universality in a new series, “Un-mothering.” Writing in Persian on early 20th-century French family photos, Bolouri captions these images with phrases ringing out from what they describe as “the unspoken” family ties: “I will never be ready for your death; I left you, so we stay together; I was yours from the very first day, but you’ve never been fully mine.” Speaking the unspoken once appeared to mean revealing one’s private truth in order to liberate oneself from the weight of stifling bonds. Perhaps now it means insisting instead that, like everyone else, one has the right to be no one in particular.

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Russia's New Assaults Put Ukraine Dangerously on the Defensive

To soldiers on the Donbas frontlines, U.S., European, and even Ukrainian officials still haven’t reckoned with the scale of the challenge

BY DANNY GOLD

The air raid sirens in the fiercely contested Donbas region of eastern Ukraine operate very differently than elsewhere in the country. In cities like Kyiv, in Kharkiv, in Lviv, the sirens ring out for 60 seconds or so, enough time to let people know to seek shelter if they are so inclined, though these days most aren’t. Then there will be another siren, maybe 10 minutes later, maybe 30, to let everyone know that the threat has passed. Here in the east, in cities like Slovyansk and Kramatorsk, the sirens are continuous. They go for hours sometimes, a constant loud whine that animates both day and night, replete with intermittent explosions.

War is not new to southeastern Ukraine. It began eight years ago, with the outbreak of Russia’s hybrid invasion. Some of the towns and cities were held by the Russian-backed separatists for months in 2014 before Ukrainian forces pushed them back to sections of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts that have since been occupied Russian territory. The frontlines between Ukrainian and Russian forces here were mostly static before Russia launched its new invasion in February. After repeated failures and strategic blunders in other parts of the country, Russian forces have been gaining ground—and are now concentrated for a new, terrifying phase of the war that could well prove catastrophic for Ukraine’s hopes of liberating the entire country.

President Volodymyr Zelensky has called the situation in the Donbas “extremely difficult”; his spokesman, Serhiy Nikiforov, has said that Ukrainian forces are outnumbered seven to one. Zelensky has also stated that Ukraine is losing 50 to 100 soldiers a day.

On a hill overlooking the contested city of Lyman, we stand with members of Ukraine’s territorial defense forces and watch large smoke plumes form. Down below us is the Siverskyi Donets river, one of the Ukrainians’ greatest allies at the moment. If the Russians hope to take Slovyansk, Kramatorsk, and the entirety of the Donbas, they’ll likely need to cross the river. Russians have had notable failures crossing rivers in recent weeks, and their incompetence has become something of a war meme.

Does it bother them that the Russians are just on the other side of the river? “It’s hard to get here,” one soldier answers, noting that a few days ago they actually tried to cross the river but the open fields on the eastern side allow for easy targets for Ukrainian artillery. “Our army, the artillery, didn’t allow them to come closer, so they went to Lyman,” he adds.

Still, the Russians have had a string of successes here in the east as they have battered the cities of Lyman, Severodonetsk, and Lysychansk. After attempts at rapid advances in other parts of the country failed miserably, the Russian military seems to have settled on a new strategy of bombarding cities with heavy amounts of artillery before slowly moving forward, little by little.

The soldiers with us in the hills operate carefully, telling us to move quickly and in pairs, while staying low and stopping only under the cover of sparse trees, for fear of being spotted by drones. Outgoing artillery booms from somewhere behind us, as they communicate with targeting teams over walkie talkies. The Russian military has been using helicopters and jets to hit positions all around Lyman. “Our main problem is the sky, open sky. They have big advantages of the sky, and this sometimes spoils everything,” says a soldier named Hussein.

He adds, “We should go, they’re going to answer [our artillery] soon.”

Hussein had introduced himself earlier in perfect English. Originally from the nearby city of Konstantinovka, Hussein is the son of a Lebanese father and Ukrainian mother who met studying dentistry in Donetsk in 1978. They had him a few years later. An engineer, he spent 12 years working in Texas for a thermal manufacturing company. He also worked in Moscow for a time. “This is what is actually surprising,” he says of the Russian invasion. “I know those people, I know the culture, but I don’t understand what they’re doing now. This is something unbelievable, man.”

Hussein was living in Lebanon when the war started, and he immediately came to Ukraine to volunteer for the military. “I came here to fight because this is my homeland, and I refuse the Russian ‘peace’ and Russian ‘democracy,’” he says. “I’m fighting for my freedom, and for those old people who left their homes, everything they accumulated during their life was left and lost, children that were killed, women that were raped and killed, Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol, this is what I’m fighting for. I will never forgive them.”

The war has entered a grueling phase of attrition, and Hussein says there’s active combat every day on the other side of the river, but despite reports of territorial
losses and Russian advancement, he’s not entirely dismayed. “We feel comfortable. But of course we are worried,” he says. “Everyone who does think and has his brain there is worried, he’s afraid, we are human beings. But we believe in our mission, we believe in our victory.”

As talk turns to memories of his life in the United States, Hussein’s mind is temporarily occupied with thoughts of a different river: the Guadalupe, near his former hometown of San Marcos, Texas. Asked what he misses most about it, he doesn’t hesitate to answer: “Hamburger and beer and tubing and Texas steak and country music and happy hour,” he says. His answer to what he doesn’t miss about the States is more succinct: “New York.”

Hussein offers to lead us around the small village of Pryshyb, located beneath the hills on the river bank, made up of dozens of brick and stone houses spread across dirt roads. It’s incredibly idyllic in the warm spring weather of mid-May, picturesque, and there’s even a national park right nearby. “If I stay alive and the war is over, maybe I’ll buy a little house in a village, with a small piece of land I’ll take care of,” Hussein says. “I’ll buy some ducks, go fishing. Of course, I hope to meet my father again, and bring him here.”

The villages here do not yet share the same scars of those near Kharkiv. The Russian military has yet to concentrate its weapons on them, and have not occupied the area. Still, most of the residents have left. Hussein takes us to meet a middle-aged woman and her mother, who have stayed despite their neighbor’s house being hit by a shell.

Lena and her mother are in the backyard, cooking a stew over a fire. Lena tells us there are about 15 families left in the village despite there being no water, gas, or electricity. She guides me through her neighbor’s backyard to show the damage done by a Russian shell. The house is smashed up, the windows shattered, just a pile of rubble. “We hope it will be better soon, there were already two hits and it wasn’t us so hopefully we’ll be lucky again,” she says.

The shelling is constant and loud at night, but she’s already adapted to it. “Of course I understand it’s not normal, but there’s no way around it, so we make do,” she adds.

She, too, wants to leave, like many of her neighbors, but she won’t abandon her mother. “My mom didn’t want to leave, and I didn’t want to leave her. The older generation, you can’t make them do anything,” she says, slightly exasperated.

A group of British volunteers show up to drop off food. Days earlier they had offered to take Lena and her 69-year-old mother, Nina, to evacuate, but they refused. “This is my home, this is my hometown. If I leave I’ll stay in some hostel full of people, some crowded place,” says Nina. “This is the place where I can keep my thoughts, there’s flowers, I can cook. I prefer my comfort more than my safety. I’m an old woman.”

Before we leave, I tell Hussein that we’re lucky we ran into him, that he has an amazing story, but he doesn’t see it that way. “It’s not an amazing story, but he doesn’t see it that way. ‘It’s not an amazing story. It’s war, and it’s always sad. It’s always a nightmare,’” he replies. “If I have kids I would never allow them to speak or to think about war. The word ‘war’ would be prohibited,” he says as we bid him goodbye.

When I arrive a few days earlier in Kramatorsk, the city just south of Slovyansk, it feels quite empty. The only people walking around are older women, most carrying plastic bags of groceries. I’ve seen reporters estimate that 70-80% of civilians have evacuated from the region. Still, the shared van-taxi I take from the hub of Dnipro, four hours away, is packed with people returning.

Over the next few days, though, the streets in both Kramatorsk and Slovyansk at times seem somewhat busy. Soldiers are everywhere, packing the supermarkets. At the only café open in Slovyansk, the Golden Cup, reporters with “press” patches on their flak jackets mix with soldiers in camouflage fatigues.

Ivan, the owner, is from Donetsk, the capital of the Donbas that has been occupied since 2014. “I lived and worked with war in Donetsk, now I live and work with war here. That’s life,” he tells me. Young, with a fade haircut and baggy T-shirt, he could pass for a Brooklyn hipster. He originally went to Odessa to escape the outbreak of the war in 2014, but came to Slovyansk and opened the café in November, for the simple reason that he thought this city of 100,000 people needed good coffee. His brother partnered with him.

After only four months of operating, war came to his new city. “After the invasion it was a shock, the first days we were thinking about our future, stay here or leave for another city,” Ivan says. “The first few weeks in March when we understood that the war would be long, we decided to stay here.”

It could not have been an easy decision. Shells fall on the city now, and the Russians are clearly aiming to encircle Slovyansk at some point in the possibly near future. I ask him why he has decided to stay. “People need good coffee,” he says with a laugh. “It’s my mission here, to do something that will be remembered for the war.”

Outside of the cafe, we strike up a conversation with Dima, a police officer from Lyman who has been fighting in the city. Dima paints a picture of a dedicated fighting force that is being outgunned and bombarded by the Russian military, of frequent air raids and a lack of capability to defend against them. “The fact that they’ve [the Americans] given us Howitzers—it’s all good and dandy but how many of them did they give us? For our little region, Slovyansk...
We head in the direction of Bakhmut one morning, a city extremely close to the converging Russian axes of attack coming from Popasna and Severodonetsk. The road is mostly empty except for various soldiers speeding back and forth in civilian trucks and vans. At a crossroads a few miles north, we come upon a few dozen soldiers seeking shelter under the trees lining the sides of the road. They crouch and smoke cigarettes as a tank hidden in the trees revs up and rumbles off in the distance.

A grizzled, middle-aged soldier named Yuri tells us that the men have just rotated out of the frontline after six weeks of fighting and are now getting some much needed rest. “We didn’t see water for 40 days, even to wash our faces,” says Yuri. “The water is only for drinking.”

Conditions for Ukrainian soldiers all along this eastern front have been tough as the Russians continuously pound the area with heavy artillery and air strikes, constantly using drones to assess strike locations. He tells us the Russians are advancing from all directions, trying to find a weak spot to push forward. Explosions in the distance are constant.

“We need heavy weapons: howitzers, tanks. Javelins are not enough,” Yuri says. “They’ve got howitzers, tanks, planes, helicopters. This war and the next are going to be wars of equipment,” he adds, noting that this battle is nothing like the one fought here in 2014. Instead, he says, it’s more comparable to 1941, a battle of vehicles and equipment.

“You see, it’s hard to fight people who have no conscience,” he says. “They settle in for the long haul, and it will likely be months before they can be won not only in the declarations of powerful politicians, but here in the trenches by men and women like Yuri, Hussein, and Dima, who fight only to be able to once again lead normal lives in their homeland.

I think back to something Dima, the frustrated soldier, told me outside the coffeeshop before we parted ways.

“I lost my home in Lyman. I just want to liberate my town and come back and live there… If we had an opportunity, if we had equipment and artillery to recapture our town. We don’t want [the Russian city of] Rostov or something, we just want to live in our town, in our country, you know? That’s what we’re fighting for. We’re simply fighting for our freedom, for the freedom to live freely in our town, in our country.”

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THE REST

➡ The Chinese government has officially lifted its lockdown on Shanghai, bringing to an end one of the largest prison experiments in human history, in which some 25 million people were forcibly confined to their homes. The strict lockdown crippled the economy in the financial and commercial hub: total retail sales in Shanghai were down 48.3% in April from the same period last year, the equivalent of more than $10 billion in lost revenue, according to statistics released last month by Shanghai’s government. The full human toll of the policy in Shanghai, including the number of people who may have died during or due to the lockdown, is not yet clear. With residents free to move again, the government of Shanghai has banned use of the word lockdown in the media.

➡ A real, working ear formed from human cells was made in what appears to be the first successful use of living tissue as the raw material for 3D printing. Do you hear me? They made an ear! The ear, manufactured by a Queens, New York-based company called 3DBio Therapeutics, was successfully transplanted onto a human patient in March. “Further down the road,” according to scientists who spoke to The New York Times, “3D printing could even produce far more complex vital organs, like livers, kidneys, and pancreases.”

➡ Tesla CEO Elon Musk has a “super bad feeling” about the economy, adding his name to the growing chorus of financial elites who say the United States is on the brink of a severe economic downturn. Goldman Sachs President John Waldron told investors that the confluence of inflation hitting a 40-year high, Russia’s war on Ukraine, and monetary policy from the Federal Reserve has created “among—if not the most—complex, dynamic environments I’ve ever seen in my career.” Last Wednesday, JPMorgan CEO Jamie Dimon’s warned that the U.S. economy is headed for “a hurricane” and that the only question was whether “it’s a minor one or Superstorm Sandy.”

➡ After more than three months of virtually unquestioned support for Ukraine, the blank check from Congress may be coming to an end. “The U.S. government is sending billions in humanitarian, economic, and military assistance to help the Ukrainian people overcome Putin’s brutal war, and the American people expect strong oversight by Congress and full accounting from the Department of Defense,” Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) said in a statement. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have grown concerned about the lack of transparency into how the money is being spent. Some senators, including Rand Paul (R-KY) and Josh Hawley (R-MO), voted against the $40 billion aid bill that Biden approved in May, arguing that it included “no meaningful oversight,” as Hawley said.

QUOTE OF THE DAY: “In brief, non-lethal drones can be installed in schools and other venues and play the same role that sprinklers and other fire-suppression tools do for firefighters: preventing a catastrophic event, or at least mitigating its worst effects.” — From Axon’s press release announcing its pilot program to bring together the righteous power of Tasers, which the company created, and drones.

➡ The public faith in government is hitting record lows, according to a new PEW study. Just 29% of Democrats surveyed said they trust the government most of the time, while only 9% of Republicans felt the same way—the lowest level of faith in the federal government for Republicans in six decades.

FROM THE BACK PAGES

The internet may seem to offer a refuge to the shy and weird kids who are often singled out and picked on in their peer groups, but catering to young people’s feelings of marginalization doesn’t ultimately do them, or the communities they live in, any good. In general, socially awkward kids would be far better off being placed in situations in which they are forced to interact with their more socially adept peers rather than languish in a simulation of life on their digital devices.

Several years ago, few of us had heard of neopronouns, sapiosexuality, or neurodivergence, but now these concepts are commonplace. These ideas proliferate in online spaces where shy and introverted children congregate. In these social media niches, self-diagnosis with various mental illnesses is typical, and identification with various disorders serves as a source of pride and community.

TikTok hosts people boasting about having dissociative identity disorder, popularly called multiple personality disorder, a rare diagnosis. These kids slip into their various personalities at will and affect different voices and mannerisms. TikTok has also apparently inspired a wave of Tourette’s syndrome-like diagnoses in young people, primarily girls, who began exhibiting vocal and physical tics after being exposed to influencers on the app who displayed similar symptoms.

—‘The Faceless Rando’
The Sunny Side of American Life

Why our greatest writers found their inspiration in misery and failure

BY DAVID MIKICS

Americans love to look on the bright side. We process our traumas and congratulate ourselves on our resilience. We like to crown ourselves winners, avoiding the stigma of the L-word deployed by a certain ex-president. The triumph of the therapeutic, as Philip Rieff called it, even applies to our anti-free-speech college students, who gain vituperative it, even applies to our anti-free-speech the therapeutic, as Philip Rieff called a certain ex-president. The triumph of

But there’s a dark flipside to the story. Americans can’t turn their eyes away from failure. No one is so interesting to us as the person, preferably a celebrity, who has sunk to the most degraded, soul-crushing Marianas Trench of existence, capsized, busted, shellacked, KO’d, and wiped out. Some truer sense of things seems to come with loss. The person wholly crushed by life is the one who knows the score. In failure, reality does not evade us.

American authors of the early 20th century speculated in failure the way the tycoons of their day bet on stocks. Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Wallace Stevens, Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Robert Frost—these writers find illumination within pessimism, and so they are permanent members of the American canon.

Twentieth-century American literature got off the starting block with the naturalist trio of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser, who aimed a primitive sledgehammer at the notions of the progressive era. Progressives insisted that all human problems could be alleviated via social tinkering. Solidarity and peace would blossom, if reformers could only come up with the right formula for a just society.

But Dreiser and his contemporaries had a disillusioned sobriety that looked straight at the hard contours of reality: poverty, death, disease, sexual frustration, loss of love.

When Dreiser first came to New York in 1894, in the midst of an economic crash, he was struck by the “hugeness and force and heartlessness of the great city.” New York was “gross and cruel,” he noted. Dreiser slept in flophouses, a wretched loser like Hurstwood in Sister Carrie, the scandalous first novel he published a few years later. Like Crane and Norris, Dreiser never lost the sense that life is ruthless.

Dreiser was a Midwestern oaf, big and awkward, a man of blunt sexual craving. His crowning work was the mammoth An American Tragedy, published in 1925, which remains the most riveting 900-page book I’ve ever read. An American Tragedy is about Clyde Griffiths, a colorless young man who kills his girlfriend and eventually goes to the electric chair. Clyde wants to be part of the glittering society of Lycurgus, a town in upstate New York—would-be flappers and their beaus having what they describe as fun. Clyde’s pregnant, working-class girlfriend, Roberta, gets in the way—Clyde has his eye on a glamorous young socialite named Sondra—and so, with perfect plausibility, the thought of murdering her steals on him. This section of Dreiser’s narrative crawls forward as suspensefully as Crime and Punishment, as Clyde becomes more and more used to the prospect of Roberta’s death. While they are boating in a desolate upstate lake, Clyde strikes her, half by accident; she falls out of the boat, and he lets her drown. The scene is an agonizing tour de force. David Denby writes that “Clyde’s consciousness, never very full to begin with, and now divided between murder and guilt, is deranged further by the dark beauty of the lake, the cry of unfamiliar birds, the empty woods.”

Clyde Griffiths is like all of us, Dreiser is saying. What sums him up is not the clumsy act of murder but his long slide toward moral numbness, which is a sin, yes, but also a recognition of the facts of existence.

When Dreiser pictures the death house, the final station of Clyde’s tormented existence, he is one with Clyde every harrowing step of the way:

The glooms—the strains—the indefinable terrors and despairs that blew like winds or breaths about this place and depressed or terrorized all by turns! They were manifest at the most unexpected moments, by curses, sighs, tears even, calls for a song—for God’s sake!—or the most unintended and unexpected yells or groans.

For Dreiser prison is simply a more intense version of anywhere else. Dreiser, Alfred Kazin remarked, always had “the sense that injustice makes society possible. It was another form of the carnage that sustains nature.” Every love affair requires that someone has been jilted. A wealthy, well-dressed man has just one function, to remind a hapless, starving bum like Hurstwood of the bitterness of his social humiliation.

Dreiser’s style sometimes feels flat-footed, even cloddish, but this is not the reason that he became a target for critics like Lionel Trilling, who wanted novelists to enact the free play of the mind. For Dreiser society was as definitive as a jail cell—there is nothing free about it.

Willa Cather was Dreiser’s opposite number in terms of style. The inevitability of Dreiser’s prose lies in his agitated power to see inside his faulty, stumbling protagonists, and to mirror their flaws. Cather’s style is utterly distinct—everything she wrote seems perfectly done.
She too sounds inevitable. No American writer has a better sense of the land itself, forbidding and enormous as it is. Cather never forgot her first sight of Nebraska when she first arrived at 9 years old, “jerked away,” as she put it, from the hills of her native Virginia and “thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron.”

This inhuman land, with its emptiness, was made to thwart the poor immigrants who tried to farm it. Sometimes they succeed, like Alexandra in O Pioneers, but often they are defeated.

Cather was a “strong, bossy woman,” Joan Acocella noted, and she wrote, not “fables of prairie virtue,” but “some sort of strange poetry, about the terror of life.” The terror shows up in the tragic fates of Cather’s characters: the father who blows his brains out with a shotgun, or the drifter who throws himself into a threshing machine.

A quieter brand of failure exists too in Cather. Godfrey St. Peter in The Professor’s House sits alone and recalls his meditation in his old house, now that his wife, daughters, and sons-in-law have gone to Europe for the summer, strikes a shadowy key:

He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom’s old cliff-dwellers must have been—and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth. When white clouds blew over the lake like bellying sails, when the seven pine trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely: “That is right.”

Like Cather, Wallace Stevens was a high priest of clarity, despite the cryptic involution of his poetry. Those who met the poet for the first time expected to see a dandy, an ornate connoisseur. The physical Stevens stood 6-foot-2 and weighed 240 pounds. The disparity between his hulking body and his slender acrobatic imagination was noticed by all.

Stevens could easily eat a pound of sausage at a sitting. When he asked for a martini, the waitress knew he meant a pitcher of martinis. Yet this gourmand was the subtlest poet America ever knew.

“‘It is often said of a man that his work is autobiographical in spite of every subterfuge. It cannot be otherwise.’”

Uniquely among poets, Stevens unites the sumptuous and the straight-arrow direct. He favors words like “poor” and “bare,” for these adjectives are emblems of necessity. Yet Stevens also has a fire-fangled vocabulary, ingenious and glistening. He tells us that Crispin, his “nincompept pedagogue” in “The Comedian as the Letter C,”“hung [his eye]... on silentious porpoises, whose snouts / Dibbled in waves that were mustachios.”

Stevens’ coruscating lines are not mere showmanship. Stevens’ arsenal, his word hoard, must be large and precise. He needs his stock of marvels to fend off the deprivations of reality.

“It is often said of a man that his work is autobiographical in spite of every subterfuge. It cannot be otherwise,” Stevens remarked. The disappointment of his loveless marriage haunts his poetry, and late in his life, so does the anticipation of death. In “Madame la Fleurie,” Stevens sings a somber dirge for himself:

Weight him down, O side-stars, with the great weightings of the end.
Seal him there. He looked in a glass of the earth and thought he lived in it.
Now, he brings all that he saw into the earth, to the waiting parent.
His crisp knowledge is devoured by her, beneath a dew.
... His grief is that his mother should feed on him, himself and what he saw,
In that distant chamber, a bearded queen, wicked in her dead light.

The “glass” where Stevens “thought he lived” is an image for his poetry, here consumed by the savage fact of mortality. Madame la Fleurie, the flowering earth, is the “bearded queen” wickedly chomping the poet (the beard is evidently grass,

FOOD
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a morbid riffing on Whitman’s favorite image).

Robert Frost, who survived the deaths of two children as well as his first wife, measured his poet’s imagination against harsh realities. He found resilience in practical actions like mowing, mending a wall, or picking apples. Frost’s speakers follow Emerson’s advice to “hold hard to this poverty, however scandalous.” In a barren field, they prosper.

But Frost also felt a more drastic destitution pressing against him. In “Once the Pacific” Frost depicts an obliterating storm, coming to spite any sense we might have that the world is built to human scale:

Great waves looked over others coming in,
And thought of doing something to the shore
That water never did to land before.

Frost’s words are made for efficiency, common, and simple. The more basic they are, the more cunning they seem, and the more they frighten us.

Frost ends “Once by the Pacific” with pitch-black humor. Frost’s destroyer God resembles Othello telling Desdemona to “put out the light” before he murders her:

It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God’s last Put out the light was spoken.

“The wear and tear on the self is Hemingway’s key theme.”

Someone had better be prepared for rage,” but preparation is useless against the dark design of a God bent on annulling “let there be light.”

The plainspoken Frost marks a contrast with T.S. Eliot. Frost, like Hart Crane and Stevens (who called Eliot his “dead opposite”), disliked Eliot’s Waste Land, since Eliot implied that one should be gloomy about the supposed twilight of high culture, the falling off from Cleopatra on her harge to the young man carbuncular. The tawdriness of the modern age had been a theme of European literature since Flaubert, who both abhorred and batten ed on the bourgeois cesspool. Yet Eliot amply survives his own snobbery, since his poetry sounds so perfect:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets...

The invitation you receive from Eliot’s voice is undeniable, as Louise Glück (who is, along with Jay Wright, our greatest living poet) argued in her Nobel lecture several years ago. He speaks to and for you, amid scenes of loss and dereliction. Even his lacerating neuroses are magical.

Ernest Hemingway, who was perhaps the best-known American writer of the 20th century, was also notably obsessed with failure. In “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” the dying writer Harry confesses, “He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in, by drinking so much that he blunted the edge of his perceptions, by laziness, by sloth, and by snobbery, by pride and by prejudice, by hook and by crook.” His cruel to himself and says, “Between grief and nothing I will take grief”—Faulkner’s truest statement of his faith.

America’s culture, like its authors, knows that failure is a condition, not a momentary event. The taint of loss soaks the blues and country music, genres to which all Americans pledge allegiance at least some of the time. “I tried and I failed, and I feel like going home,” sang Charlie Rich. Rock ‘n roll loves to rebel, but in blues and country, which speak the downhearted truth, rebellion is useless.

Despite their reputation, the American modernist writers are not rebels. They are reconcilers. When we fall short, and find both ourselves and the universe wanting, there is nothing left but to examine what remains, and make terms with it.

*This article was originally published on June 8, 2022.*
High and Low Israel Criticism

Two recent books on the Israeli national project reflect the differing cultural sensibilities of their U.S. publishers

BY ARI HOFFMAN

When it comes to Israel, it’s always the best of times and the worst of times. For the Jewish state, the sky’s the limit—or else it’s falling. According to its critics, Israel is on the verge of moral immobilation, an apartheid regime living on borrowed time. Its boosters counter that Israel has never been stronger: The more the haters hate, the more peace agreements it signs with its Arab neighbors, and the more sophisticated the technology it develops and exports. It’s as if the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea can only be viewed through a fun-house mirror.

This schizophrenia finds expression in two recent books that read like they were written on different planets. Omri Boehm’s Haifa Republic: A Democratic Future for Israel approaches Israel as a failed state and Jewish sovereignty as a moral obscenity. As Boehm, an Israeli associate professor of philosophy at The New School in New York, puts it, “True Israeli patriots must now challenge Zionist taboos as we have come to know them, must dare to imagine the country’s transformation, from a Jewish state into a federal, binational republic.” If Thomas Jefferson believed that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” then Boehm believes that sometimes you need to cut the tree down altogether.

Yossi Shain’s The Israeli Century: How the Zionist Revolution Changed History and Reinvented Judaism argues that Israel’s success is so total that it has remade the Jewish people, reversed the misfortunes of their past, and secured their future. For Boehm, Israel is so compromised as to be ripe for demolition; for Shain, a Knesset member for Yisrael Beiteinu and professor of political science at Tel Aviv University, it is one of the greatest miracles in human history and the lodestar of the Jewish present. “Israel has consolidated its hold as the most dominant entity in the Jewish experience,” he writes. “The Jewish center of gravity—cultural, religious, political, demographic, and even economic—has decamped from New York, and is now to be found in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv for the foreseeable future.” In the Israeli century, “the majority of Jews will come to live in the historic Land of Israel and enjoy the protection of the State of Israel.” Zion is where it will be at.

Like his one-state fellow traveler Peter Beinart, Boehm knows his audience: He couches his advocacy for the dissolution of the Jewish state in language intended to convince Jewish readers and non-Jewish critics of Israel that it is perfectly acceptable and desirable to overturn the country’s national identity. Even as he seeks to detonate the Israeli national project, he insists that he is more Zionist than the Zionists, selectively citing clippings by Menachem Begin, Ze’ev Jabotinsky, and David Ben-Gurion to argue that sovereignty as such was never really necessary. A Jewish state—as opposed to a binational state with a Jewish minority—was a mistake, a wrong turn that has led to a dead end.

According to Boehm, Israelis have become more hardline and closed-minded than their founding fathers, who were open to a broader range of political possibilities. The book’s title refers to Boehm’s personal promised land: not contested Jerusalem or vibrant Tel Aviv, but Haifa, a city unshackled from Jewish history or yearning that in Boehm’s telling can be the model for the successor state to the Zionist entity.

Boehm’s indictment of the Jewish state cites testimony from its architects. He has an extensive archive to work with, due in large part to the astonishing richness of the Zionist historical library. The difficulty of addressing the Jewish Question in Europe led to a kaleidoscope of proposals in one of the biggest Jewish brainstorming exercises of all time, from Herzl’s diplomatic approach to Ahad Ha’am’s focus on culture to the anarcho-socialism of A.D. Gordon. With Jews 2,000 years out of the habit of self-rule and desperate for a solution to their European predicament, it was only natural that they would entertain and debate a million and one ways of hypothetically governing themselves.

Early Jewish Zionist thinkers were also working and imagining the future in a very different context: the decaying Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires and the bloody urgency of the continental Jewish Question. Even those fervent believers in Zionism were required to be strategically cautious, alert to the yawning gap between their dreams for a national home and the very limited means at their disposal. For Boehm to cite a Jabotinsky endorsement of a binational state free of relevant context and use it to condemn the contemporary Israeli national project is clever but not convincing.

Boehm eagerly calls on many other such out-of-context and since-discarded ideas from the Zionist archives in
support of his cause. The only way he can conceive of a Jewish state is as a misguided outgrowth of the Holocaust, and thus he calls for “forgetting” rather than “remembering” as a form of justice and as a prerequisite for embracing binationalism. Boehm does make an attempt at symmetry: Jewish Israelis need to remember the Nakba and forget the Holocaust, and Palestinians need to remember the Holocaust and forget the Nakba, he says. Easy enough, except that Zionism predates both events, and many Palestinian Arabs understand themselves as downstream victims of the Holocaust.

History is of prime importance for Shain. The Israeli Century spends hundreds of pages retracing Jewish history from biblical times to the present, focusing on how Jews adapted to wherever they were but always pined for an eventual return. Most of this won’t be news to readers familiar with Jewish history or tradition, and the abundance of secondary source citations could likely have been trimmed. But Shain’s journey through the past is a welcome antidote to Boehm’s attempt to twist that past to fit his expectations of the Middle East.

For American bar mitzvah boys of the mid-20th century, the fountain pen was the gift to be had—a gesture that, for many, perfectly symbolized the gravitas of the moment. The ink that issues from a fountain pen is permanent, lasting, August—not unlike the strokes of the Torah scribe’s quill. Its 13-year-old recipient, it declared, is through with pencils, mature enough to work with something that demanded focus. (According to the old joke, the prospect could make a bar mitzvah boy so nervous that when he stood up to give his speech, instead of declaring “Today, I am a man,” the poor flustered kid would bleat, “Today, I am a fountain pen.”)

We launched Tablet on June 9, 2009, which means we enter into our bar mitzvah year. Although the internet can feel like writing in some eternal pencil—forever fleeting, forever being erased and rewritten—we’d like to think that we’ve achieved something lasting, something permanent, and that our place, both in the world of ideas and in the lives of our readers, has grown secure.

And so, our request: We aren’t amassing a college fund, but the idea is more or less the same. We’re relying on you, our friends and family, our readers, to invest in us and in our future.

Please support Tablet today.

—Alana Newhouse
COMMUNITY

Uprooting the Wandering Jew

The grassroots movement to rename a plant

BY RACHEL ROMÁN

In the last few years, there have been outcries over racist or otherwise offensive names on schools, buildings, mountains, and rivers. Now, a grassroots movement by botanists, arboretums, and garden shops seeks to rename the wandering Jew plant (Tradescantia zebrina) due to the belief that its moniker is antisemitic.

Liz Hughes, the co-owner of Groovy Plants Ranch in Marengo, Ohio, switched T. zebrina’s name from wandering Jew to wandering dude around 2019 after hearing about the renaming movement. “Culturally, a lot of people are trying to move away from any name that could be offensive to any person,” she said. “In general, it’s really important to be politically correct.”

“It’s clearly an antisemitic name,” said Jon Greenberg, a Jewish botanist who runs the website Torah Flora. “For the wandering Jew plant, the name reflects the fact that it’s invasive. The perception is that Jews come into an area, they take over, and transform the area in a way that people living there are not happy with.”

The name implies that Jews are “outsiders and invaders,” Greenberg noted. “This plant has several other common names—like spiderwort and silver inch,” he said. “You could use those positive, neutral names.”

John Tradescant the Younger first brought the plant—native to Mexico—to England in the 17th century while documenting plants from the New World. It was called Tradescantia after Tradescant, and zebrina from the striped zebra, due to its striped leaves—which trail, or “wander,” from the main plant. The origins of the plant’s wandering Jew nickname is thought to have been derived in the 19th century, although the exact date and the intent behind the nickname are unclear. The expression “Wandering Jew” comes from a mythical Jewish figure who was cursed to roam the earth until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In more modern eras the term has also been used in less derogatory ways—by Jews and non-Jews alike—as a metaphor for the wandering of Jews in the desert and the perseverance and persistence of the diasporic culture.

Greenberg believes this kind of positive spin on the name is “wishful thinking,” and Yair Mintzker, a professor of history at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey, who is writing a book about the Wandering Jew, believes the original myth is “definitely negative.”

“The idea is that the Jews are a cursed people who somehow never died. In English, he’s known as the Wandering Jew, but, in Germany, for example, he’s known as the Eternal Jew,” Mintzker said. “There’s a series of parallels between his personal history and the history of the Jewish people as a whole: They are cursed, they turned away from Christ, they originate in Jerusalem, and no one can quite explain why they’re still roaming the earth.”

The figure of the Wandering Jew first appeared in a 13th-century text, the Chronica Majora by Matthew Paris, a monk at the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St. Alban in St. Albans, England. In this account, the mythical figure is condemned Ahasverus to roam the earth until his return. This story of Christ’s condemnation has been used over the centuries to persecute Jews. “There was propaganda all throughout history using him as an example to eradicate Jews, including during the Nazi era,” Mintzker said. “In 1940, the Nazis made a film called The Eternal Jew. It’s not really about the legend, but the title itself kind of evokes this old legend. This is the most heinous Nazi propaganda movie of all time. It really is repellent.”

Now the botanical movement is citing the story to prevent possible offense to the Jewish community. A blog from Bloombox Club—a plant shop in the United Kingdom—states, “We’ve decided to use the name ‘Wandering Dude,’ in favor of the (anti-Semitic) name ‘Wandering Jew.’ We assumed the name referred to the Israelites, sentenced to ‘wander’ through the desert in search of the promised land until the last member of the original generation (Moses) dies. But further research revealed ‘Wandering Jew’ to be connected to an apocryphal myth, one that has been used to justify anti-Semitism since at least the 13th century.”

A blog post from the Hoyt Arboretum in Portland, Oregon, points out the “offensive origins” of the plant’s nickname:
“Inequities run deep in the natural sciences, and it’s apparent in the racist and xenophobic nomenclature of some trees and plants.”

Likewise, plant shops, houseplant groups and blog writers, like Garden-
stead and Houseplant Hobbyist, have decided to relabel the plant. An opinion piece in the Cincinnati Enquirer makes a case to rename the plant wandering dude, noting that wandering Jew “sounded wrong—offensive even. We just need big-box garden centers to grow with the times and sell Tradescantia zebrina as ‘The Wandering Dude.’”

Matt Arrington, the life science greenhouse director for Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, decided to stop using the name wandering Jew after reading about the movement and the supposed antisemitic nature of the plant’s name. He now uses the moniker as a teaching opportunity. Like many, Arrington originally believed that the plant’s common name meant perseverance.

“I had always felt like the ‘wandering Jew’ moniker had more to do with wandering in the wilderness and the fact that the plant seemed to be successful regardless of how neglected it might get. It was kind of new to me to read about the European folktales associated with the Crucifixion and some of these more negative stories,” he said. “If nothing else, then it creates a talking point. A place to have these discussions and err on the side of sensitivity without erasing the past name.”

Some of those who are renaming the plant, like Arrington and Hughes, are not Jewish and are unsure whether the Jewish community is for or against the name wandering Jew. Hughes said none of the Jews that she has spoken to view the label negatively. Arrington asked a BYU Jewish professor, who was ambivalent but agreed on it being a good talking point. Mintzker—who is Jewish—said that due to a reclamation of the figure of the Wandering Jew by Jews as a positive figure, starting in the late 19th century, many would not view it as antisemitic.

“It’s kind of amazing that this anti-Jewish legend is somehow re-claimed by Jews as a positive,” Mintzker said. “They use it as an expression of their own exile and many wanderings and even the eternal nature of the Jewish people. [The Wandering Jew] is a very Jewish story as well.”

However, Hughes and Arrington say that the progressive younger generation tend to be advocates for changing offensive paradigms. “It comes from a good place, a desire to be thoughtful,” Arrington said. “I think that there’s an added sensitivity because of the distance from those physical hardships, those horrible things that had happened in the past.”

According to Hughes and Arrington, no one has complained about the plant’s name change.

“People are receptive,” Hughes said. “Older customers laugh because they think ‘wandering Dude’ is a funny name. It is a little bit silly. When possible, we go by the Latin name.”

This article was originally published on June 9, 2022.
Dairy Borscht

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 2 1/2 pounds beets, peeled and quartered
- 1 onion, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 stalk celery, cut in 3 inch chunks
- 1 medium carrot, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 apple, cored and chopped
- 1/2 cup sugar or to taste
- 1 tablespoon sour salt (citric acid) or lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon curry powder
- 1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon salt or to taste
- sour cream
- 2 tablespoons fresh dill, chopped

PREPARATION

Step 1
Simmer the beets, onions, celery, carrot, and apple in 10 cups of water, covered, for 30-40 minutes, or until the beets are tender.

Step 2
Put the soup in a blender and puree. Add the sugar, sour salt or lemon juice, salt, curry powder, and dried ginger to taste.

Step 3
Either serve hot, or place in refrigerator to cool. Spoon into individual bowls and top with sour cream and, if you like, sprinkle with chopped fresh dill.

The borscht will keep, refrigerated, for at least a week.

Yield: 8 to 10 servings

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