

## Reflections, Observations, Memories



I

Familiar foolishness:

1. Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? (Every court case, every witness, would go on forever.)
2. The TV anchor's "I'll see you again tomorrow night." He doesn't see us; we see him/her.
3. Love ya.
4. Have a good one.

2

That the carnage, savagery, starvation, ignominy, pain, fury, hatred and pity which rise from the news don't send us all to the loony bin speaks for the indifference developed by even the most sensitive and saintly of the world's privileged.

We write letters to the editor, send a check to a charity, moan to our lunch companions, or, like Proust's wonderful Mme. Verdurin reading about the loss of life on the *Lusitania* as she dips her croissant into her morning coffee, say "How awful," even as her lips curl with delight.

Now and then, we analyze and comment on this or that.

So I, on July 21, 2003, reading the caption on two wonderful photographs taken by Tyler Hicks of the *New York Times* the day before in the holy city of Najaf, decide that it does not represent what I see in

them. The first photograph shows us the backs of seven U.S. marines in hard hats facing a crowd of mostly bearded and beturbaned men, some with arms raised in a salute of appreciation to something unseen by us off to the right; one man is raising a photograph of two white-bearded men. In the background, there is a group of mostly younger, beardless men, most of them seated on what seems to be a low wall. Six of these twenty or so men may be looking in the direction of the photographer or the marines. Two of them are raising their arms, one is standing with arms spread and seems to be shouting something in our direction. The second photograph is of eight men standing on a dais. Three of them wear turbans, one, the most prominent, is waving a sort of forked scimitar. One is taking video photographs of what is probably the crowd in the first photograph. The caption reads, "Iraqi protesters . . . pushed toward American marines yesterday in Najaf. The protest erupted after clergymen claimed that soldiers had tried to surround a prominent Shi'ite leader. Clerics, speaking to protesters from atop a mosque, below, demanded an end to the American occupation." The excellent article, by Neil MacFarquhar, spells out the complexities behind the photograph, the ignorance of the crowd that the marines and helicopters—which are not shown—had been called out as special protection for the visiting deputy secretary of defense, Paul Wolfowitz. It talks of the ambition of Moktada al-Sadr, "scion of a clan of beloved clerics," to assert himself by claiming that the Americans were bent on arresting him. "Moktada Sadr and his supporters are trying to drag us into this kind of confrontation . . ." said a spokesman of the Supreme Council for the Islamic revolution in Iraq, the most established Shi'ite group . . ." It's clear that the crowd in front of the marines is not pressing against them. Only two or three men there are even facing them, and it is not clear what they are thinking. Some in the background fringe of younger men may be expressing indignation, but that is not clear. It does seem clear that three or four of the clerics are worked up and working up the crowd.

What is also clear is that there is much going on that brings people into the street and leads others to inflammatory oratory. It is all part of the complex events which led to the fall of Saddam Hussein and the attempts by many including, perhaps, Saddam, to vie for power in the post-war period.

I compare this to another photograph taken from the album of

lovely Richard Rodgers songs to which I was listening while I read the paper. The photograph was taken at the final performance of the musical *South Pacific* in June 1951. It is the curtain call, and Mary Martin, the show's star, has her hands in front of her mouth and chin in what seems to be overwhelming surprise and pleasure as she sees what we do, the composer, Rodgers, in a sailor's jacket and round white hat, hands clasped in front of him, head bent, next to Oscar Hammerstein, the lyricist and writer, both presented by the play's director, Joshua Logan. Behind them, members of the cast are in various stages of jubilation and tearful nostalgia. One could look at this photograph for a long time, and find next to no space for misinterpretation, whereas in the first two photographs, there seems to be plenty of such space. The clarity comes from familiarity with Broadway traditions of celebration, farewell and public performance; the murk comes from ignorance of the political-social complexities of a very different culture.

3

I drove back from downtown Chicago along the Outer Drive immediately west of Lake Michigan on a mild, cloudy June day. I'd just bought cans of tennis balls at Sport Mart, where they can be bought cheaply. I pay with what's familiarly called plastic. Since I'm not using what I ignorantly regard as "actual money," the pleasure of getting a bargain is augmented by the self-pampering illusion that I'm not really paying. What occurred to me is that such postponement of payment, an example of artful separation from unpleasant actuality, is one of the fundamental components of human life. The pleasure comes from the illusion of escape, evasion, overcoming of a difficulty. What we call money, whether metallic or paper, is itself an instance of such separation. Instead of the exchange of commodities or services, instead of a brutal takeover by theft or conquest of what's desired, there is this almost weightless exchange which marks the way human beings have learned to live with each other.

Almost sixty years ago, I read in *God without Thunder*, a little-read book by the poet John Crowe Ransom, that the human separation from food, by cooking it, using utensils to cut and get it to our mouths, dividing the day into mealtimes, and finally the transfiguration of such times

into occasions of conviviality, family intimacy, symposia and religious sacrament, is what differentiates people from animals. Ransom compared it to the democratic “separation of powers” which, although far less efficient than tyranny, elevates instead of degrades the citizen. (Isn’t the function of religion itself the elevation of the weak and transient via at least the illusion of identification with more or less absolute power?)

Apropos “the elevation of the weak,” I read in the *NY Times* (June 12, 2003) of “a Chicago man . . . Michael Garner, 39 [who] used an axe to break the arms or legs of a dozen people, then took them to the sites of pre-arranged car accidents. Mr. Garner made hundreds of thousands of dollars during the two years he led the scheme while the homeless victims made hundreds . . .”

Elsewhere the great newspaper reports on a Palestinian suicide bomber disguised as an Orthodox Jew who exploded a bus in central Jerusalem with bombs filled with nails and glass, so that not only were sixteen people killed but a hundred others were horribly wounded.

Then there is a picture of an Israeli soldier inspecting a long line of exhausted men and women waiting to go to work on the other side of a barbed wire boundary.

4

Every day, every newspaper reader and television watcher around the world is flooded with the injuries to the great social systems which constitute the orderliness of civic life. Most such readers and watchers have become addicted to these law-breakers. Not only do newspaper and television record them, but much of our literature, plays and films are built around them. Writers, dramatists and filmmakers understand the art of creating this derivative excitement which works on the emotions of audiences without damaging their flesh. I myself have spent much of my adult life either conjuring up such works or teaching students to understand and treasure them.

A year and a half ago, after fifty such years, I retired from teaching and, to a lesser degree, from writing them. I have entered another stage of life, the one often known now by a chess term which Samuel Beckett made the title of a play about it, *Fin de Partie* (some party!). *End Game*. It is this part of life which I want to talk about now.

Our memories are picture galleries in whose corridors a large number of images hang ready for re-inspection. There are also libraries of sounds, musical and non-musical, smells, tastes, movements and emotions. Another gallery is full of the slogans, mottos, poems, jokes and dialogue which constitute a too large portion of our active memory. There is finally a gallery of ever-deepening attachments to the past, not only to one's own past experience but to that of the often imaginary or dim remembrance of one's ancestry.

In Hungary for the first time in my life, it was almost a duty for me to think of my paternal grandfather, Adolf Stern, whom I remember vividly although he died sixty-five years ago. Grandpa was a Hungarian Jew, and those of my cousins who knew him better remember what they called his Hungarian temper and accent. My late cousin Ruth Worms Tishman remembered that he could not pronounce "th" and always called her—and my sister, another Ruth—"Russie." She also remembers that during the first three years of World War I, 1914–17, she and her sisters used to scratch out of the rotogravure section of the newspapers the faces of British soldiers. Grandpa was a partisan of Germany. When the United States entered the war in 1917, this changed, but she did not remember how or what Grandpa said to bring about the change.

I remember feeling happy when I saw Grandpa. He had white hair, parted in the middle, and a droopy white mustache. He dressed in stiff collar, cravat, gold tiepin, dark jacket, vest and pants. He was strong. When the laundress came upstairs with the wicker basket loaded with a week's wash, Grandpa hoisted it to show that he could. I sat on his knees, he gave me quarters. Only when I played checkers with him did I experience the man who could not bear to lose. When I crowned a king, he shouted, and once accused me, his beloved little grandson, of cheating him. I was bewildered; my parents calmed him, ended the game and later told me that I must never again play checkers with Grandpa. The last few years of his life, my father, my sister and I took him every winter to Grand Central Station and put him on the train for Palm Beach. The last time I saw him was beside the train in 1938. He died in Florida, a month before a ninetieth-birthday party, the invitations to which had been mailed out. I don't remember his death, only that one day my father, who almost never rebuked us, rebuked my sister and me for not condoling with him on Grandpa's death. I remem-

ber once again bewilderment. Who had said anything about his death to us?

What do I know of him beside what I have said? A handful of perhaps distorted stories: his being orphaned at seventeen; his being somehow enlisted by Count Esterhazy to work on a railroad; his working in a bar and there encountering a soldier who wished to recruit him for the Austro-Prussian War; young grandpa broke a beer bottle, threatened the man with its jagged edge, then fled, perhaps to Berlin where he met and married beautiful Rosa Wildman, the grandmother who died thirty years before my birth. In Berlin, she and Grandpa had the first two of their six children, then sailed for New York City where she bore the rest of them including my father; she died of puerperal fever after the last birth, that of my aunt Mildred. Grandpa, after peddling, cigar rolling and other jobs, became the businessman he was when I knew him, founder of Stern Merritt Inc., a firm that manufactured men's accessories including the red neckties he himself always wore, one of which he sent annually to his idol, Theodore Roosevelt, who once sent him a thank you letter, a treasure, which, like so much else, disappeared. In 1887, Grandpa named his last-born son, my father, Henry George, after the famous single taxer whose theories excited the likes of Leo Tolstoy. Grandpa's politics were not socialist or single tax; as far as I can guess, he named my father as he did because George was an idealist who ran, fruitlessly, for mayor of New York. Grandpa was a Republican who in 1912 became so furious at my father voting for Woodrow Wilson instead of the Republican Charles Evan Hughes that he kicked him out of the house. My father sneaked back in at midnight, let in by his loving stepmother, Leontine, probably on the instructions of Grandpa. Another of the extravagant grandfatherly gestures which memory has softened into cosy eccentricity.

What is the meaning of these scarcely documented anecdotes which stand along with a few sensuous memories as my grandfather? A grandfather myself, I wonder about my place in the heads of my grandchildren.

I already see my children turning me into a comic figure, one that releases some of the pressure I exerted on them at various times. Indeed, I already see that my oldest grandchild, a wonderful twenty-year-old girl, seems to regard me more realistically than her mother, my

daughter, although the realism lies beneath a layer of affection, of love. Are there lessons here for historians, particularly for biographers?

5

One thing I can't remember is if in my first twenty or so thoughtful years I was ever overwhelmed by the sheer mass of event out of which thoughtful people try to make sense. Perhaps charitable oblivion erases this memory as it does many others. The algorithms which govern memory have been treated better by novelists than by psychologists, but I suspect that there's enough individuality in them to make it a serious occupation of the elderly. Why do we remember what we do? How much of what we remember applies to what we have to make sense of now?

What counts? What are the influences which lead to action or inaction?

What seems odd, strange, sometimes shockingly novel to an elderly American writer and professor may appear like matter-of-fact diversions and pleasantries to younger European, African, American and Asian intellectuals. ("The wildest dreams of Kew / Are the facts of Katmandu.") Let me try out a number of—let's call them—oddities which cropped up in the issue of the *New York Times* the day, April 29, 2003, I am writing this.

The art critic Michael Kimmelman reports from his recent trip to London. The headline reads "London Is Agog over Art, Especially Saatchi's." The article describes an exhibition of Titian paintings attracting "art besotted . . . mobs" to the basement of the National Gallery. Nothing shocking there, but when Kimmelman crossed the Thames to the Tate and other galleries and saw Ron Mueck's trompe l'oeil *Nude Man with Arms Folded Sitting in a Rowboat* and very small figures whose "forlorn and troubled expressions make them seem so vulnerable and childlike that they provoke the embarrassment of invading their privacy," something beside semi-mindless relaxation into an art critic's report occurred to me. Nothing exactly mind-blowing, but some of what Kimmelman called "the visual chestnuts" of Saatchi's old "Sensation" shows was agitating: *Marc Quinn's frozen cast of his own head in his own blood . . . Chris Ofili's*

*glittery Madonna with elephant dung . . . Sarah Lucas's photograph of herself with cash stuffed between her legs or fried eggs on her breasts . . . Cornelia Parker's version of Rodin's Kiss wrapped in marble strings . . . David Batchelor's tower of colored light boxes looming over Jim Lambie's eye-popping vinyl floor . . . and the famous Damien Hirst's famous cow sliced up into parts exhibited in a row of glassy telephone booths aligned as in old-fashioned train stations. These roused me, but perhaps not entirely as the artists intended I should be roused from the spectator's complacent torpor.*

The lust for novelty once satisfied by fantasies and myths, by sphinxes, dragons, griffins, plumed serpents and other fanciful creatures or, more physically, by exotic, difficult and dangerous voyages on earth and, more recently, in space has now overflowed the boundaries and proprieties of art, sex, family and crime. Almost every age offers similar violations often inflicted by the bored, the cruel, the idle rich and powerful. The violations occur when other powers are tightening the bonds of middle- and lower-class behavior. So out of the April 29 *Times* comes a list of strictures on schoolbooks inspected by Professor Diane Ravitch in her book *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*. Here are things students are not supposed to find in their schoolbooks: Mickey Mouse, because mice and rats might upset small children; a mother cooking dinner, because it enforces a gender stereotype; stories set in jungles because they suggest “regional bias”; angry, loud, quarreling people, because they are not “uplifting”; birthdays, because some poor children can't afford to celebrate theirs; mention of cakes or cookies instead of healthy foods like yogurt and bran; words like “swarthy,” “senile,” “crazy” and “heroine” which could trouble the swarthy, the senile, the crazy and those driven mad by gender inequality. Old people must be described doing something active, not as weak or dependent; men must be considered nurturers, not, say, doctors, lawyers or plumbers. “Founding Father” is objectionable. I suppose Washington, Adams and Madison should be depicted along with their estimable spouses, Martha, Abigail and Dolley, as state-nurturers. Finally, children should not be shown as disobedient.

And we—rightly—complain of those Saudi schoolbooks which teach the inadequacies, if not sinful criminality of unbelievers, Westerners, Americans and Jews.

How much of this touches my own life in a way which would alter my decisions? Very little, if any. I may be amused, annoyed, disgusted,



perhaps angry, but my day is not seriously altered by any of this. What is Hecuba to me?

I have offered two lists of oddities. Here is a third, which doesn't seem odd to me because it is part of the university life which for almost half a century has been mine. It is comprised of a few of the lectures offered this past week at my university. Any university member, indeed, anyone at all, can attend these lectures without paying a fee. Indeed, after many of the lectures, there are receptions with wine, cheese, fruit and vegetables, so that if one attended a number of them, one's weekly food bill could be substantially reduced. Our focus, though, is on intellectual diet. So: "Nero's Cultural Politics"; "Sexual Politics and the Enlightenment; Women Writers Who Read Rousseau"; a discussion with Vikram Chandra, author of *Red Earth* and *Love and Longing in Bombay*; a reading of his poems by (my former student) Campbell McGrath; a showing of Max Ophuls' *The Earrings of Mme. de* followed by a discussion and reception; establishing a Quarto text of *King Lear*; "Pheromones, Social Odors and the Unconscious"; "Religious Symbolism in the Fatimid-Tayyibi Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry"; "The Dative Absolute in the *Kievan Chronicle*." I attended the last four, because they are part of my weekly routine which includes a—once again free—luncheon seminar of the Humanities Division. A good lunch is served, and then there is a talk by one of my former colleagues, followed by a discussion. The luncheons occur during three of the four annual terms, and there are about eight lecture-lunches a quarter. I have learned a great many odd things in these hours. I could also attend other university lectures. Indeed, within walking distance, I could hear three or four authors of new books speaking at bookstores which offer their work for sale and signature. If I were bold enough to walk fifteen minutes in another direction, I could take the Number 6 CTA bus, the Jeffrey Express, downtown, stop at the Art Institute of Chicago, then cross the street to Orchestra Hall and listen to one of the world's greatest orchestras. I have not mentioned university and neighborhood concerts, many of them free, plays in local and downtown theaters and the movies showing all over the city. I have not mentioned the offerings on cable television. What I'm talking about here is the cornucopia of high culture offered in many centers of contemporary Western civilization.

What does this mean for a person like me?

I earned a living for over half a century as a college teacher and now

live off a reasonably comfortable pension in a small comfortable house with a wife who has been my closest friend for decades. I have many friends in Chicago, around America, and indeed the world. My health is fairly good, I enjoy food, books, a little activity, some television programs and movies. In short, I have enjoyed the luxe provided by the inventions, industry, political freedom and stability of my wealthy country, where, I know, there are millions of men, women and children who go to bed hungry, have no regular place to sleep, no work, none of the comforts which are almost like second skin to me. Some are ill, some have been mutilated in family, national or tribal struggles. I sympathize with many of these, particularly if a skilled reporter has described them, or if I see them on the street.

6

My professional life has been spent thinking about, writing and teaching literature, the words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, expositions, arguments, scenes, forms and situations which compose it. Almost all of us are language experts and sensitive to its variations and abuses. Those of us who do this professionally claim that we understand much about character from such usage. Let me illustrate what I mean by quoting a few words of the American general who devised and executed the war plan in the Gulf War, General Tommy Franks. I want to move from a look at his remarks to my speculations about the political situation of which he is a part. First, though, a contrasting quotation from one of the great generals of our bloody Civil War of 1861–66.

Some men may think that modern armies may be so regulated that a general can sit in an office and can play on his several columns as on the keys of a piano; this is a fearful mistake. The directing mind must be at the very head of the army—must be seen there, and the effect of his mind and personal energy must be felt by every officer and man present with it, to secure the best results. Every attempt to make war easy and safe will result in humiliation and disaster.

Here are General Franks' remarks:

The threat creates its own battle space. That is epiphanous. This guy [Saddam Hussein], because of fear brought about by isolation from the regime or whatever, likes to aggregate. That's a powerful piece of information for which the regime will suffer greatly.

The first quotation is from the memoirs of William T. Sherman published in 1875, the second is recorded in a news story in the *New York Times* on April 13, 2003. General Franks' remarks were made not from the battlefield in Iraq but from U.S. Army headquarters in Doha, Qatar. He was not to set foot in Iraq for days and then only in a secure area, heavily protected by guards. General Sherman, like his greatly admired chief, General Ulysses S. Grant, was frequently shot at by enemy soldiers, and if he didn't exhibit Grant's almost superhuman indifference to bullets, he was more often than not with his soldiers in the midst of battle.

Of course weaponry of the American Civil War was not as deadly as it was in the Gulf War, and communication with lesser commands was of an entirely different order. General Franks had not only a view of one part of one battle but many views of many battles, and he had them in what is now called "real time," that is, as they were occurring. Moreover, the war General Franks observed and commanded was not a war of almost-equals—though the armament and manpower of the North greatly exceeded that of the South—but what is called in today's nomenclature an "asymmetric war," a David and Goliath war, except that David is not only much smaller and weaker than Goliath but unable to find any stones to throw at him.<sup>1</sup> More, after a very short time, David's brain was not communicating with his arm.

My interest here is not in the war itself. Despite the vast changes in armament, transport, logistics and medical care, parents, children, siblings and spouses on both sides experienced the same fears and mourned the same way they did in Homer's time. Here, though, I want to call attention to the linguistic gulf between the two American generals, though not emphasizing the fact that General Franks is speaking "off the cuff" and that General Sherman was writing his memoirs in comparative tranquility years after the war.

To find a contemporary equivalent of the language of General

---

1. 2006. This was written well before the so-called insurgents had turned the war tide.

Sherman, one can go to almost any reasonably well-written book. An easy place to find its equivalent might be the sports pages of today's newspapers. Indeed, in the same issue of the *New York Times* from which I've taken General Franks' remarks, there is a sentence spoken by Tiger Woods, after shooting a good round at the Master's Golf Tournament in which he otherwise did poorly. Woods said, "I just took what the golf course gave me." There we have a complex notion spoken with simple words and straight syntax. If, on the other hand, we are to find a contemporary equivalent of General Franks' murky sentences, we go not to the newspaper or the prose of most letter writers but to—well, here's a quotation: "The deconstruction, rather, annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated that ground, knowingly or unknowingly." This remark about Jacques Derrida's critical practice was written by the literary scholar-critic J. Hillis Miller. (See M. H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel," in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reading*, edited by David Lodge, p. 272.)

I don't think either General Franks or Professor Miller was being deliberately obscure. I do think though that the habit of using language which can be understood by almost all reasonably intelligent speakers of the language regardless of their specialty is not important to them. They are each speaking either to or out of a smaller circle of specialists who will not only understand it, but do not mind that few people outside their circle will. It's as if they are saying, "Look, we are dealing with a subject that we understand and you don't. Leave the matter to us. Don't interfere with your ignorant questions, let alone your so-called contribution to the discussion."

There is another matter of great interest in General Franks' utterance. It may have something to do with what amounts to the ambience of the Bush family since the first President Bush left the softer precincts of Connecticut where his father, Preston, served as senator, to set up more or less on his own in the Texas oil business. There were no chauffeured limousines for his young children; his son, G. W. Bush, attended public schools, until family tradition, connections and money took over and sent him to Andover, and then, despite his mediocre grades, to Yale. The transmigrated Bush family was now identified with the town of Midland—we might call it the Bush equivalent of Saddam Hussein's Tikrit—the town where General Franks himself grew up and where George Bush found the woman he married, the woman who

helped transform him from a drunken playboy who kept failing in business despite repeated and generous help from family connections into the public servant he has been for the last fifteen or so years. The young Bushes worship not in the Episcopal churches of the Bush family tradition but in the Methodist Church where I suspect the Franks family worshipped as well. I am a stranger to religious feelings, but the nexus of drink, transformation and Methodism struck me as I read my colleague Paul Hunter's brilliant book about the origins of the English novel in the eighteenth century. Here is Hunter on Methodism:

The distinctive genius of Methodism was in discounting temporal continuity and emphasizing the possibility of an epiphanic moment that involved experience wholly new and without a basis in the individual's past—a moment that could, paradoxically, be shared with others in a community of believers so that individual, even ecstatic experience could become the basis for a new kind of spiritual communality . . . Gin and Methodism are opposites in the sense that gin drinkers succumb to their lonely feelings and celebrate them to oblivion, while Methodism “converts” these feelings into the basis for a group. The novel . . . uses loneliness as a basis for a fully historical exploration of self. If gin drinking is fatalistic and Methodism similarly evasive . . . the novel offers individuals . . . intellectual and spiritual companionship . . . (*Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*, pp. 133, 134)

I don't know if gin was the young Bush's drink of preference,<sup>2</sup> but in any event, he dropped it when he took to the pretty librarian and reader Laura, and found himself reborn in Christ and Methodism. (Laura's experience included her running over and killing a classmate in her senior year. Perhaps this furthered the introspection which has made her the country's Reader in Chief.) General Franks grew up in Midland, a year ahead of Laura in the same high school. He did poorly in school, joined the army, reformed and became a top student. He married a high school sweetheart on whom he is dependent to the point of uxoriousness (and criticism for allowing her to sit in on meetings she

---

2. Probably not, if Laura Bush's oft-quoted ultimatum to her suitor is taken literally: “It's either Jim Beam or me.” This was pointed out to me by my friend Peter Kovler, whose grandfather owned the Jim Beam company.

was unauthorized to attend). His linguistic excursions were not confined to the remarks quoted above. As his friend General Leo Baxter said, playfully, “Tommy is not quiet about anything . . . he’s very outgoing and very opinionated. In the course of a five minute discussion about how you’re wrong and he’s right, he’ll use words that are and are not in the dictionary.”

7

On November 4, two days after the 2004 presidential election, I’m supposed to read a piece of fiction to an audience at the University of Washington. My professorial sponsor, the writer David Shields, emails me that political feelings will be so high that a story may have a rough time getting through to it. I’m writing these few words on October 20 in the hope of bridging these political and esthetic passions. As the deciding game of the Red Sox–Yankee series will be played tonight, it occurs to me to throw in a few words about sporting passion as well.

Almost everyone is roused about candidates, public events and teams, sometimes, as in Nicholson Baker’s recent novel *Checkpoint*, to the edge of murderousness. The emotions excited by works of art are also powerful but more difficult to describe because they reach into or even create new sections of mentality. Artists are emotional specialists. The feelings they manipulate are akin to those roused by everyday experience, but their works condense and intensify the emotional ups and downs of love, ambition, despair and hatred. The sequence of artistic events and their special languages and conventions exclude the static which surrounds almost every worldly event. After a good play or movie, a wonderful song or painting, a powerful poem or novel, there’s a half-dazed transition back to the usual life of contingent events, haphazard sounds and sights.

Like political campaigns, baseball games aren’t controlled by a single artist, but are organized by the conventions of the game. To that degree, they resemble those works of art which unfold in time. They also resemble works of art in that for most fans there is no serious financial or personal consequence of defeat. (I’m not talking about the expense of spirit or a lost bet.) The tension felt by baseball fans is released in bits by partial triumphs and defeats, a homer here, a botched double play

there, but the powerful release comes at the end of the game, misery for losers, exaltation for winners. The release of triumph is brief even for the players who try to extend it by such shenanigans as spraying champagne over each other. The game can be revived and relished in memory, and is embodied in statistical history, but I don't think that such memory has the sustenance of a powerful work of art. Artworks deposit a felt intelligence which doesn't just extend but alters mentality. (Which isn't to say that victories and defeats aren't instructive and formative.) Political tensions can be endured for months, with only the temporary relief of a poll here, an endorsement there. The final release, the defeat of one candidate, the election of the other, also results in comparatively brief exaltation or somewhat more extended anger, a gnawing sourness which only the delayed revenge of the next campaign may assuage. However, the consequences of defeat and triumph affect the lives of millions, even billions, and for years. History, the record of such consequences, reveals how they are entangled in events which derail or even subvert what originally launched them. Games and art may have originated as organized relief, repose, consolation and compensation for these worldly consequences.

8

For seventy of my seventy-five years, I have worked in schools, for fifty-nine of these in universities. For most of these years, one of the great pleasures of my life has been reading. My library is small compared to Hitler's sixteen thousand volumes (see Timothy Ryback, "Hitler's Forgotten Library," *Atlantic Monthly*, May 2003) or the one Jefferson bequeathed to what became the Library of Congress,<sup>3</sup> but it is one of my resources of comfort, inspiration and nostalgia.

A couple of years ago, knowing that after my retirement from the university where I'd spent forty-six of my fifty-three teaching years, I was going to be moving up the hall to an office shared with other emeritus professors and that there would be no room for the books in my old office, I asked a local bookseller if he'd be interested in acquiring them. He spent a few hours in the office, then put aside a couple of hundred

---

3. Most of which was burned when the British set fire to the capital.

books he wanted to buy. I went through them, one by one, and decided that I was unable to part with any of them. I wrote him a letter of apology which he courteously said was worth the time he'd lost that morning; but my problem remained. Although I took most of those two hundred books home and bought another bookcase for them, there still remained the books for which there would be no room. With the help of my friend Jim Schiffer, who was chairman of the English Department at Northern Michigan University, I got in touch with their library, sent them a list of the books I could give them, found that they lacked many of them and that they could sell those which would be duplicates. They would be most grateful if I packed, sent, and donated the books. I said farewell to them, and later went up to the beautiful frozen shores of Lake Superior for a final farewell as they reposed in the University of Northern Michigan's handsome, if book-starved library.

9

The European Union debated Turkey's bid to join its August ranks. Frits Bolkstein, a Dutch member of the Union's Executive Committee, warned that Europe would be "Islamized," and the 1683 battle of Vienna against the Ottoman Turks would "have been in vain." In Amsterdam, three young Dutchmen of Turkish origins agreed that the country of their parents should not be allowed to join. "They will flood into Europe," said Akag Acikgoz, a nightclub bouncer. His fellow card player, Firat Hokmanoglu, said it didn't matter to him, one way or another. "I'm already here." In Turkey, meanwhile, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who when mayor of Istanbul in 1999, was imprisoned for reciting a poem that included the line "the mosques are our barracks, the domes are our helmets," said that Turkey had made progress in the protection of expression and would not accept anything less than full membership in the European Union.<sup>4</sup>

---

4. *NY Times*, October 13, 2004. I'm revising this on October 12, 2006, hours after the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to the virtuoso Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, indicted by his country for claiming that it systematically ignored the Armenian genocide, the bloodiest stain on its national escutcheon.



Saddam Hussein arrived in Kirkuk a dozen years ago with sacks of silver to buy out—at a quarter of their value—the houses of Kurds some of whom he had driven to the border, some of whom his lieutenants would gas to death, the idea being to import Arabs from the south to “Arabicize” Kirkuk and the surrounding Kurdish villages and thus protect the nearby oil wells. Now Kurds are demanding that those Arabs—or their heirs—be sent back south and Kirkuk be once again Kurdicized. Otherwise they say that they’ll secede from the forthcoming Iraqi state.<sup>5</sup> These are days when that portion of the West which is fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq is waging what its fiercer opponents are calling “another Crusade.” So Osama bin Laden compared George Bush to Richard the Lionheart, Frederick Barbarossa and “Louis of France.” Saddam Hussein compared himself to Saladin (who took Jerusalem in 1187), and George Bush was warned about not repeating his use of the word “crusade” in the days following the assaults of September 11, 2001.

Thibaut of Champagne extracted some of the 50,000 *livres* it took for his 1201 crusade from the Jewish community in Champagne whose wealth derived in part from money lending, that is, usury. Usury was forbidden to Christians because it sold time which belonged not to man but to God. (See Psalm 15—a righteous man is one who doesn’t put out his money at interest—and Deuteronomy 23:19–20.) In 1096, the People’s/Peasants’ Crusade inflicted horrors on the Rhineland Jews. Fifty years later, during the Second Crusade, similar horrors were inflicted on their descendants.

Said Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, “But why should we pursue the enemies of the Christian faith in far and distant lands while the vile blasphemers, far worse than any Saracens, namely the Jews, who are not far away from us, but who live in our midst, blaspheme, abuse and trample on Christ and the Christian sacraments so freely, insolently and with impunity.” That same year, 1146, Bernard of Clairvaux said, “Is it not a far better triumph for the Church to convince

---

5. See *NY Times*, October 2, 2004, and George Packer, “The Next Iraqi War,” *New Yorker*, October 10, 2004.

and convert the Jews than put them to the sword?” which helped end their persecution.

11

For every set of McDonald’s golden arches, a steeple, mosque bulb or synagogue stands for a place where human beings can to greater or lesser degree exchange their critical, analytic, logical sense for shortcut help from the Great Fog of their Faith, the comfort of celestial embrace. The fanatics of Rapture or Revenge use such tradition to reinforce their fear of the ever faster fastness of modernity, the instantaneities of cyberspace, the terrifying theoretical reach into the infinitude of universes, the darkness of dark energy and matter, the “illogic” of quantum mechanics, as well as to the temptations of the naked gorgeousness of models and actresses, the freedom which for millennia had been reserved for kings. So the turtle in us shrinks back into the shell of superstition.