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Julian Bell is a painter and the author of Mirror of the World: A New History of Art.

David Bromwich is co-editor of the Yale edition of On Liberty.

John Burnside’s Black Cat Bone won the Forward Prize and the T.S. Eliot Prize last year.

Stefan Collini teaches at Cambridge. What Are Universities For? came out earlier this year.

David Conn writes for the Guardian. Richer than God, his history of Manchester City, is out now.

Lidija Haas is between contributor’s notes.

Sheila Heti’s novel How Should a Person Be? will be published by Harvill in January.

Benjamin Lytal teaches at the University of Chicago Graham School. His forthcoming first novel is called A Map of Tulsa.

Bill Manhire’s Selected Poems will be published next month.

Karl Miller was the Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English at UCL and the founding editor of the LRB.

A.W. Moore is professor of philosophy at Oxford. The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things appeared earlier this year.

Stephen Sedley, a former Lord Justice of Appeal, is currently a visiting professor at Oxford.

Frederick Seidel’s new book of poems, Nice Weather, will be out in September.

Steven Shapin teaches at Harvard. New Pure, a collection of essays on the history of science, is out in paperback.

Iain Sinclair’s latest book is Ghost Milk.

David Trotter is the King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge. Next year Harvard will publish Literature in the First Media Age.

Bruce Whitehouse teaches anthropology and global studies at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He recently concluded ten months of field research in Mali.

Emily Witt lives in New York. She is working on a book about female sexuality.


The journal is distributed in North America by ProCirc, 1901 Coral Way, Suite 510, Miami, FL 33145. Periodicals postage paid at Miami, FL and additional mailing offices. ISSN 0260-9592, Vol. 34, No. 16 (US No. 747). The LRB is published semi-monthly (24 times a year).
I'm a letter written in July 1926, a couple of months before he embarked on the first version of Lady Chatterley’s Lover, D.H. Lawrence gave voice—as he often did—to the hatred he felt for ‘our most modern world’. Tin cans and ‘imitation tea’ feature prominently on his list of things not to like about being ‘most modern’. Tin cans often featured on such lists, either as litter or as culinary short cut, in both cases signifying degeneracy: ‘modern world’ was then and still remains an expression that summons up a familiar tableau of emblems. But imitation tea public hair signs made in anger for signs made in tenderness. Something similar happens to Bowling in Coming Up for Air, when he revisits the market town in which he grew up. The danger in all such exchanges is that the second performance will simply cancel out the first, without either transforming it in the process or cutting loose from it altogether. The result is stalemate. In an essay on John Galsworthy’s Forsyte Saga written while he was completing the second version of Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Lawrence argued that ‘the thing a man has a vast grudge against is the man’s determinant’. Something similar seems to be true of Mellors.

Connie is a different matter. In September 1927, shortly before he began the novel’s third and final version, Lawrence finished translating a collection of short fiction by Giovanni Verga which was to appear as Cavallura Rusticana and Other Stories. In his preface, he made the case for a ‘formlessness’ in fiction which would more fully capture what happens in the transition from one deed or mood to another. ‘A great deal of the meaning of life and of art lies in the apparently dull spaces, the pauses, the unimportant passages.’ The dull space Lawrence created in Lady Chatterley’s Lover is found in Connie’s movement between Wragby Hall and the gamekeeper’s hut and cottage. In that space, description flourishes. The most important change of emphasis, as Lawrence revised the novel heavily on the 21st century, for better or worse, speaks most directly to the same primitivist text, the ancient woods in which Connie and Mellors achieve consummate love, ‘that peculiar calm, virgin contempt of the world’. It seems to me that Lawrence, whose temperament and prose style might be thought to tend perpetually to the condition of molten lava, was in fact, when the mood took him, an advocate of cool. In Cool Ruins: Anatomy of an Attitude, Dick Pountain and David Robins define cool as a ‘new secular virtue’—the official language of a private or subcultural rebelliousness returned from generation to generation, as well as of worldwide commodity fetishism. According to Alan Liu, in The Laws of Cool, it’s a ‘way or manner of living’ in a world structured by technological and other systems. Cool exploits the element of ‘give’ or ‘slack’ in any such system. It is information designed to resist information: ‘information fed back into its own signal to create a standing interference pattern, a paradox pattern’. Cool doesn’t want to have to choose between the competing demands of technique and technology, free will and necessity. It’s a serious business. According to Pountain and Robins, cool provides the ‘psychological structure’ by means of which the ‘longest-standing contradiction in Western societies’—between the need to work and the desire for play—may yet be resolved.

These, evidently, are definitions for the 21st century. But Lawrence’s novel may be thought in some ways to prefigure them. Various genealogies of cool have been proposed, ever more speculative in tendency as they reach back into the 19th century and beyond. It’s not altogether impossible that one or other of them may have crossed his path. In The Virgin and the Gipsy, in some respects a dry run for Lady Chatterley’s Lover, virgin and gipsy demonstrate their mutual affinity by displays of coolness. His has to do with the way he moves (he’s a proto-rapper), hers with the ‘nonchallenge’ she exhibits from the moment of her first encounter with him. ‘Nonchallenge’ was the contemporary translation of sprezzatura, the doctrine of the well-rehearsed concealment of effort first put forward by Baldassare Castiglione in his Book of the Courtier. She has, we later learn, ‘that peculiar calm, virgin contempt of the free-born for the base-born’. This class-based understanding of nonchallenge was, however, already out of date. In revising Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Lawrence removed from it the last traces of the propaganda for a new aristocracy which had driven his writing in the years after the end of the First World War. Connie’s rebellion will be private, apolitical, consumerist. Mellors, like the gypsy, moves well. But, as an ex-blacksmith and horse whisperer turned game warden, he’s an anachronistic figure: an exponent and advocate of artisanal technique as an alternative to technology. It’s Connie who, for better or worse, speaks most directly to the 20th century. Lady Chatterley’s Lover is generally regarded as a primitivist text, the ancient woods in which Connie and Mellors achieve consummation representing a world not merely pre-industrial, but primeval. Lawrence’s

Lady Chatterley’s Sneakers

David Trotter

It gave me the feeling that I’d bitten into the modern world and discovered what it was really made of. That’s the way we’re going nowadays. Everything slick and streamlined, everything made out of something else. Celluloid, rubber, chromium-steel everywhere, arc-lamps blazing all night, glass roofs over your head, radars all playing the same tune, no vegetation left, everything cemented over, mock-trees grazing under the neutral fruit-trees. But when you come down to brass tacks and get your teeth into something solid, a sausage for instance, that’s what you get. Rotten fish in a rubber skin. Bombs of filth

It’s her understanding of the things she takes with her when she leaves for the forest which bids fair to protect her not only against emblematically celluloid Sir Clifford, but also against emblematically supple and rooted Mellors: a pair of rubber-soled tennis shoes, a lightweight mackintosh, a overcoat keeps off the chill night air; per-

unuaken and rooted Mellors: a pair of rubber-soled tennis shoes, a lightweight mackintosh, a champagne, which contains the gamekeeper’s hut and cottage. Connie gets ready to swap celluloid and radio sets for forget-me-nots woven into her hair, signs made in anger for signs made in tenderness. Something similar happens to Bowling in Coming Up for Air, when he revisits the market town in which he grew up. The danger in all such exchanges is that the second performance will simply cancel out the first, without either transforming it in the process or cutting loose from it altogether. The result is stalemate. In an essay on John Galsworthy’s Forsyte Saga written while he was completing the second version of Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Lawrence argued that ‘the thing a man has a vast grudge against is the man’s determinant’. Something similar seems to be true of Mellors.

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Letters

Gandhi and After

Perry Anderson believes that to attribute political acumen or historical agency to Gandhi (for the mass mobilisations that led to de-colonisation) is to play into the ‘Indian ideolog’, a fantasy that runs from the early days of Indian nationalism right down to Mnmohan Singh (L&Q, 3 July, 19 July and 2 August). I am loath to assent to Nehru and Gandhi have ebbed and flowed, arguably reaching a critical low in the 1980s, in the wake of the Emergency and widespread disillusionment with Congress politics. Gandhi himself has always been a polarising figure: the hagiography is met with an equally insistent counter-narrative that purports to unmask Gandhi as a political manipulator and/or a religious crank. In India today, under the veneer of official reverence, the public attitude to Gandhi is one of revulsion and disavowal, from the Hindutva right to the side, and Dalits, on the other. The current reassessment of nationalist-era leaders and thinkers – the rehabilitation of Nehru especially – is not, as Anderson argues, simply the latest episode in an unbroken tradition of blind self-congratulation and collective egoism.

Rather, it is an effort at an intimate criticism of India’s democratic experience – one that seeks to understand the specificity of that experience, its contradictions, failures and future trajectory. Instead of engaging directly with these analyses of the intellectual and institutional foundations of Indian democracy, Anderson opts for a ‘cosmopolitan’ broadside against nationalism as such, in which modern Indian politics appears hopelessly atavistic, parochial and saturated in Hindu superstition. The most startling of his simplifications is his obsessive return to the ‘Hinduism’ and ‘caste’ as the explanation for the limits of Indian politics and political imagination. Plenty might be said about the Orientalism of his description of Hindu nationalism and Hindu caste. But most egregious is his wish to reduce the deep dilemmas of modern representative democracy to religious belief and sectarianism.

The struggles over majority and minority representation before and after partition are genuine conflicts about the meaning and practice of democracy, and have very little to do with arguments about religious worship, belief or authority. Congress can and ought to be taken to task for neither understanding nor taking seriously Muslim anxieties about Hindu political hegemony, and for the new and often threatening ways. The causal force here is not religious piety or premodern superstition but the logic of modern politics. Where has universal suffrage led to the massive redistribution of wealth that 19th-century liberals feared and socialists hoped for?

In his detached historical judgments Anderson offers a style of political criticism which he wishes Indian intellectuals would emulate, riddling themselves of romantic intuitions and deference to Hindu social and political institutions. His concluding hope and recommendation is that the rough and tumble of Indian politics be corrected and purified by the exit of Congress and the removal of ‘caste consciousness’ and ‘Hindu superstitions’ (which may, on his account, amount to a complete repudiation of secularism) – but especially in the demand of a secular politics free of irrational and prudish deities – political fantasy is offered in the language of cool realism. To Weber this would look very much like an ethics of conviction where the purest radicalism is prized over political truth.

Karuna Mantena
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New Haven, Connecticut

Why does Perry Anderson, in ‘Gandhi Centre Stage’, rehearse in such detail what we’ve heard about India so many times before? I will take just one example, his use of Macaulay’s minute of 1853, ‘The modernising force of the Raj’, where Anderson writes, was not limited to its locomotives and law books. It was official policy to produce a native elite educated to metropolitan standards, or as Macaulay famously put it, ‘a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’.

Anderson, in my view, is guilty of a classicised appeal to the prestige of Western science. The hybrid national life that was to emerge in an attempt to change those policies, Ram Mohun Roy, and other eminent Indians, approached the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Sir Edward Hyde Earl, to tell him of their desire to form, as the judge recorded, ‘an establishment for the education of their children in a liberal manner as practiced by European countries’. Further: when they were told that the government was advised to suspend any declaration in favour of it, they complained that their proposal is contrary to a liberal education. But if they found anything in the course of which they could not reconcile to their religious opinions, they were not bound to maintain it; but they still should wish to be informed of everything that the English gentlemen learned, and they would take that which they found good and liked best.’

tained the predominant national attitude to Western thought throughout the following century. Later, Tagore, Nehru and Gandhi all endorsed that point of view when they spoke of the beneficial effects of extending Indian philosophies with Western science. The transformation of the repressive force in colonial India was not given to the Indians by the Raj alongside locomotives and law books, but wrested from them by different classes of Indian for their own purposes and profit.

Why does Perry Anderson’s evocation of Macaulay is appropriate in an article that misses a swathe of contemporary Indian intellectualists – Meghnad Desai, Ramanchandra Guha, Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Amartya Sen, Sunil Khilnani – while also falling to engage with the full spectrum of Indian historical and political context. While I am sympathetic to his irritation that these writers ‘fall over themselves in tribute to their native land’, I wonder that he couldn’t find a few Indian scholars in more oppositional mode; or is he saying there are none? In their place, he seems to invoke a Tidrickian ending of a history en- miding us of that other infamous Macaulay quote, that ‘a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole nat- ural literature of India and Arabia.’ One can only ask, after Said’s epigraph to Orientalism, taken from Marx, if we must continue to be represented because we cannot represent ourselves.

Rosinka Chaudhuri
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences
Calcutta

Perry Anderson underestimates the extent of collective mass politics and mass politics in Congress under Nehru and ignores the political pluralism within the party at the time of Nehru’s supposed passing of the mantle to his daughter. He suggests a seam- less succession and elite consensus, where the process was protracted and messy, and the outcome uncertain. The Congress leader- ship, the old guard known as the Syndicate, understood Indian politics as a collect- ive effort and their own role as a shared responsibility. Such policies were of course modulated as primus inter pares. In the years after Nehru’s death, the Syndicate did not understand Indira Gandhi’s appointment to the party leadership as anointing her as lead- er of the country. They persisted in the illusion that they could control her, and fought hard to preserve their collective power in the party. Her struggle for dom- inance against the Syndicate was based almost entirely on a forceful appeal to the aspirations of India’s poor and marginalised, to economic and social inclusion. Such policies were of course populist play and enfranchised the aspirations of the poor. They unleashed permanently opened up Indian politics in unanticipated ways. Anderson’s suggestion that the wealthy farmers’ break from Congress in 1977 was a break from their caste subordination in the Congress system is belied by the sub- stantial benefits Congress policies had long conferred on them. Their break with Indira’s government had everything to do with economic interests and policy. The ‘wealthy farmers’ were a broad group including the moderately well-to-do, and were practising capitalist farmers rather than feudal elites or latifundists. They in- cluded groups enriched and empowered as a result of agrarian and fiscal policies after independence.

Anderson’s discussion of the perrin- cious role of caste in the Indian polity de- serves credit. But to suggest of Nehru’s Congress that it was the medium by which, and at the controls of the state machine, were Brahmins’ is incorrect, as the figure of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (cited often by Anderson) and the presence of other Vaisyas, Khatriyas and even Mus- lims in the senior leadership of party and government demonstrate. An Uncle Tom the Dalit Jagiivan Ram may have been, but he proved one of the most powerful politi- cians of his era.

Anderson misses something vital about contemporary caste politics. Whatever the distrust and dysfunctions of symbolic identity politics, and whatever the weak- nesses of a fractured polity, the big story of modern India is that the newly empower- ed political forces Anderson describes are the result of social, economic, occupational and educational empowerment of historically disadvantaged castes by state actions and policies. The alliances of convenience between castes with disparate interests, which Anderson finds distasteful, could just as well be seen as a sign of political maturer. They are little different from the interest group politics, coalitions and policy-making found in most democratic societies.

Finally, Anderson’s outrage at the Indian state leads him to a puzzling indulgence of Indian fascism. He downplays the fascist potential of the RSS on the grounds that there is no ‘subcontinental equivalent of the interwar scene in Europe’; a strange basis on which to judge. But most egregiously he downplays the significance of the Gajaput pogrom – massacres, rapes, dismember- ment and torture – and other high- est levels of state leadership, directed by state politicians and officials, and car- ried out or permitted by state officials and police. He argues that these were no worse than other massacres that had occurred in the past. But they were. When such atroc- ities come out of the blue in peacetime, they carry a distinct significance and are peculiarly threatening to their victims.

Amit Pandya
Silver Spring, Maryland

Perry Anderson’s critique of Gandhi re- capturates a number of problems in the historiography of modern India that have become staples over the past three decades, ever since Ranajit Guha’s Dominant without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India and Eric James’ Agents of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (1983). The possibly derivative character of Indian modernity; the belatedness of the arrival of capitalism; the continuities between the colonial and the postcolonial state; the conundrum of a caste society before, during and after colonialism; the eccentricity...
of Gandhi as a man and a leader; the dissonance between the effort to build a non-violent independence movement and the reality of a violent partition; the incompleteness of India’s revolutionary transition from feudal colony to democratic nation-state; the gap between the historical experiences of subaltern and elite classes: historians of India, and especially those on the left, have debated these claims with exemplary thoroughness. Anderson makes no reference to Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, or other subaltern scholars, whose books might have strengthened his argument on a number of fronts. Nor does he do justice to the Indians he quotes in his opening salvo, all of whom, while being occasionally appreciative of the achievements of Indian nationalism, have also provided detailed analyses, criticisms, corrections and models that have laid the foundation of a new history of political thought in modern India.

As for the essay itself, to say that Gandhi did nothing on numerous occasions is one thing. But the claim that India’s anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements, including the national movement led by the Congress (which treated Gandhi as its leader for the three decades leading up to independence), were in no way responsible for the decolonisation and democratisation of India is indefensible. Gandhi may have called off this or that mobilisation, withdrawn from active politics when he ought to have stayed in the game, backed a worse candidate rather than a better candidate (for some position of influence within the party, or made any number of miscalculations or bad decisions in the course of his political life. But what counted was that he, together with his associates in the Congress, the ahimsa and the public at large, inculturated habits of personal and communal praxis (kriya, or being aware by hand, head, or making hand-span, woven cloth; satyagraha, or non-violent resistance), created and sustained a climate of ideas (satyada, aware, ahimsa), and made the quest for justice a means to achieving independence become the principal political project of the age. With the freedom of India the path was cleared for the decolonisation of huge swathes of Asia, Africa and Latin America. No doubt the Second World War hastened the dissolution of the British Empire, but neither Allies nor Asia powers came to rescue India: in the end, India liberated itself.

**Ananya Vaiphei**

Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
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Perry Anderson says that Kashmir became part of India in 1947 ‘with a forged declaration of accession’, and that the document then disappeared for ‘over half a century’. Not quite. The maharajah of Kashmir was, in fact, deposed and his kingdom absorbed into Pakistan, as the proviso of Pakistani tribesmen, and there’s little doubt that he signed the instrument of accession. A facsimile of the crucial page bearing his signature was published more than forty years ago, and the entire document was posted on the website of India’s Ministry of Home Affairs. However, when I sought permission to consult the original, it was then – it would be nice to think that the play on words was intentional – that the Indian government had ‘not acceded’ to my request.

There is certainly something fishy about the circumstances of the accession. The evidence is compelling that the maharajah signed on 27 October, but was told to record the date as 26 October. In other words, he put his name to the document a few hours after India began an airlift of troops to the Kashmir valley (the beginning of a military operation that continues to this day), but in a manner which suggested it had been signed before the military operation began.

**Andrew Whitehead**

London NW5

While Perry Anderson’s analysis of the disastrous process and poisonous legacy of decolonisation and partition in India is welcome, his focus on the (undoubtedly) personal shortcomings of Gandhi, Mountbatten and Nehru distracts attention from the mutual and implied factors at work, in which, the handover of power in India and Pakistan served as a blueprint for the wider process of decolonisation. Central to this was the overriding aim of British politicians and administrators (supported by the United States) to hand the keys of newly independent nation-states to a single nationalist party and its (usually moderate, Western-leaning) leader, in whom the diverse interests of complex societies were vested and conflated, and who received the covert or overt sponsorship of the colonial administration in the years immediately before and after independence.

In this process – carried out with increasing haste across the diminishing British Empire in the 1950s and early 1960s – complex, disparate and contesting anti-colonial movements were, as in India, reduced to monolithically nationalist parties. In colonies such as the Gold Coast, Tanganyika, Kenya and Northern Rhodesia such parties, modelled on Congress, conflated their particular interests (political, economic, social, cultural) into the interests of the colonial state, mapping their party symbols and slogans onto the nation. This had the effect of rendering illegitimate, anti-nationalist and even treasonous the interests and perspectives of those sections of these diverse societies that could not or would not be subsumed under the leadership of such men as Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta or Kenneth Kaunda. The British national archives demonstrate the significant extent to which the departing colonial power contributed to the rapid transition to de facto or de jure one-party states and dictatorships in many newly independent nation-states, the logical consequence of prioritising the self-serving myth of national unity over democratic self-determination.

**Miles Larmer**

University of Sheffield

Of Time and Temples

John Gale rightly points out that the word **temenos**, a word frequently used for a shrine or sacred precinct, depends on an underlying metaphor of cutting and demarcation, from the Greek verb **temenéo**, used literally for slicing and hewing and wounding, and metaphorically for a ship cutting the waves or a plough furrowing a field (Letters, 2 August). The difficulty that imagining or describing time presents to the human mind led to a further spatial usage of this metaphor to mark off duration. Ernest Cassirer connects this to time-keeping before clocks, which might be done by observing the passage of the heavenly bodies and shadows on the ground: ‘The simplest spatial relations,’ he writes in The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, ‘such as left and right, forward and backward – differentiated by a line drawn from east to west, following the course of the sun, and bisected by a perpendicular running from north to south – and all intuition of temporal intervals goes back to these intersecting lines.’ This idea of sectioning and marking off became a metaphor we live by, and produced the Latin tempus and tempulum, and myriad derivatives – maybe even ‘temperature’, another kind of measurement.

In my piece about Damien Hirst, I was quoting the Catalan philosopher Eugenio d’Ors, who, in his essay ‘Time and Temples’, articulated the idea that ‘as in ancient Greece, the ashrams and the public at large, led to such intense and fervent displays of abstraction, their precincts and stretching pace that is powerfully seductive to artists and audiences.

However, the connection between mass assemblies, their pre-cincts and stretching time seems to me even stronger in the wake of the Olympic Games, which have led to such intense and fervent displays of secular public symbolism. I hadn’t noticed before just how important accurate demarcations of the lanes, the pitch, the track, the field and the ring are in every sport during the Games: all those shots of the ground being examined to ascertain exact measurement or split-second off-speed records, world champions surpassing their nearest rivals’ highest and longest jumps by infinitesimal increments. But even as the athletes were running or swimming faster than anyone ever had, the effect of all these sections and truncations was to prolong the passage of time. For a sports virgin like myself, it was unimaginable that a nanosecond – how long is 0.004 of a second? – could count at all, let alone make a difference after a race of ten kilometres. And it was astonishing to experience a race that took less than twenty seconds as a momentous event: the 100 metres race seemed to take longer than I would shuffling along for miles. In the setting of a temple on a global platform, the athletes were in effect cutting up the passage of time in this way, and in another way: according to the logic of imagining space-time, and the stadium turned into a gigantic and special kind of clock, in which time was moving both faster and slower in front of our eyes.

**Marina Warner**

London NW5

Pain and Peril

Diarmuid MacCulloch sees ‘overtones of purification from ritual uncleanness’ in the service for ‘thanksgiving of women after childbirth, commonly called . . . churching’ in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer (LB, 24 May). Perhaps MacCulloch is thinking back to the similar service in the 1549 first prayer book of Edward VI, which indeed refers to purification. The 1662 service, however, has no suggestion of uncleanness or purification: it is a simple service of thanksgiving for delivery from ‘the great pain and woe of childbirth’. The Church did not wait for the ‘revolution in gender relations’ of the 1960s to remove all references to uncleanness and purification.

For that reason, when in 1987, during its work on a New Zealand Prayer Book (He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa, the General Synod of the Church of the Province of New Zealand proposed to remove ‘The Churching of Women’ from the list of authorised services, and replace it with one of Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child, I successfully opposed the deletion of the 1662 service.

**A.J.E. Hitcher**

Dunedin, New Zealand

**Where have all the gay writers gone?**

Christopher Glazek asks how we can account for ‘one of the more puzzling features of the postwar literary era . . . the collapse of the gay novel’ (LB, 19 July). That’s like asking about the ‘collapse’ of the Eastern and Central European dissident novel. Just as the collapse of communism diminished the need for ‘dissident’ novels, the success of the gay movement in North America and Europe diminished the need for ‘gay novels’.

Gay novels may no longer be necessary in the way they once were, but representations of same-sex relations remain open to writers who can figure out their relevance to present conditions. When books like Edmund White’s A Boy’s Own Story (1982), Andrew Holleran’s Dinner from the Dance (1978) and even Armistead Maupin’s Tales of the City (1978) appeared, they had, for their mainly gay readership, the function of securing the recognition of the group’s existence. Indeed, Maupin’s book was first published in serialised form in the San Francisco Chronicle. Its merits as realistic novels were inseparable from their political function. Glazek asks where the significant contemporary gay writers can be found. He should look in places (and there is no shortage of them) where homosexuality is still a contested issue. The Hungarian writer Péter Nádas is one example, Poland’s Michał Witkowski’s Lovetown (Lovenet, 2005) another.

Glazek’s brief history of contemporary gay fiction leaves out what were, in many cases, homophobic novels. The same-sex doesn’t mention the ‘new narrative’ group of mostly gay writers, active from about 1985 to the mid-1990s, who were explicitly interested in modernist and postmodernist prose. The best known of these is Dennis Cooper, whose novels include The Doll-Master (1989) to Closer (1997) explores the queer punk scene; other examples include Robert Glack’s Jack the Modernist (1985), Kevin Killian’s various books and my own Buddy’s (1991).
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"For nothing had been done, chemically or aptitudes. 'The cushion of "live" rubber less-...%40ordinates the system. Lawrence establishes by means of their matter-of-factness a view of the modern world not determined by any "vast grade" against the rubber shoes (as such, enough to guarantee a silent exit) only became rubber tennis shoes in the novel's second version. I've often wondered why.

The RGA's crêpe rubber campaign amounted to techno-primitivism in action, by working on, and provoking a strong awareness of, the compound quality of synthetic and semi-synthetic substance. That awareness could itself be considered 'primitive' despite its focus on plastics, so far as it drew primarily on the evidence of senses which Victorian psychophysiology had classified as primitive: touch, taste and smell. Techno-primitivism, exploiting slack in the system of consumption of luxury goods, makes cool possible. In Lawrence's narrative, it became a way to think about how cool works.

Connie Chatterley puts on her semi-synthetic rubber tennis shoes in order to make the transition from the civilised space of the hall to the primitive space of the woods. In Chapter 15, she and Mellors meet at the hut in the woods in which they first made love and she dances naked in the rain clad only in her Air Jordans. The dance, as modern in style as the shoes she wears to perform it, is a response to another of his rants against the 'industrial epoch' and its products: 'all these artificial insects.' Techno-primitivism is cool, however, because ancient practices echo into its modern beat. In April 1927, after completing his first revision of the novel, Lawrence undertook an extensive tours of Tuscany, in order to examine the famous painted tombs and other vestiges of the ancient Etruscan civilisation in which he had for a long time taken an interest. By the end of June, he had written pretty much all he was ever to write of his posthumously published Sketches of the Past. The debt to the prehistoric from the rubber trees was prepared for export either as crêpe or as ribbed smoked sheet. The distinctive feature of crêpe was that it didn't need to be vulcanised before use. The material out of which a commodity was to be made could be prepared on the plantation itself, by 'native' artisanal labour, rather than by a chemical process in a factory in Europe or the United States. The proportion of raw material to added mineral matter in any commodity made from this material was very high indeed. The supreme opportunity for the market of crêpe rubber came with the increasing popularity of that ultimate modern fashion accessory, the sports shoe. The RGA campaigns characterised sports shoes and boots with crêpe rubber soles as a way to suggest a certain amount of innovation and aators. 'The cushion of "live" rubber lessen..." that admission, 'adding hours to endurance and a spring to every step.' For nothing had been done, chemically or otherwise, to 'impair the natural live quality and nerve of the virgin product.' By putting the emphasis on unvulcanised rubber, the 'virgin' product of colonial abundance, the RGA cleverly sold reinvention to the (literally) well-heeled metropolitan middle and upper classes: a bit of wilderness on golf course and tennis court. Today, the marketing of Nike's Air Jordan basketball shoes, made plausible by association with their talisman's legendary 'hang time', strikes the same note. "High-end foot foam and a Zoom Air heel deliver lightweight, responsive cushioning for instantly quick cuts, jumps, spins and stops."

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Plus or Minus One Ear
Steven Shapin

World in the Balance:
The Historic Quest for an Absolute System of Measurement
by Robert Crease.
Norton, 317 pp., £18.99, October 2011, 978 0 393 07298 3

The geeks at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are fond of merry japes, locally known as ‘hacks’. One of the more memorable happened one night in October 1938 when an MIT fraternity decided to use one of the new pledges as a rule, and selected Oliver R. Smoot, the shortest of the lot at 5'7". The other pledges laid Smoot out at one end of the bridge, marked his extent with chalk and paint, then picked him up and laid him down again, spelling out the full measurement every ten lengths, and inscribing the mid-point of the bridge with the words ‘halfway to Hell’. In this way, it was determined that the span was 364.4 smoots long, ‘plus or minus one ear’ (to indicate measurement uncertainty).
The hack was too good to let fade away, so every now and then the fraternity makes its pledges repaint the markings. You might wonder why every now and then the fraternity makes its pledges repaint the markings. You might think this isn’t the sort of vandalism the police would tolerate, but they do. The Smoot markings soon became convenient in recording the exact location of traffic accidents, so (as the story goes) when the bridge walkways needed to be repaved in 1987, the Massachusetts Department of Public Works directed the construction company to lay out the concrete slabs on the walkway not in the customary six-foot lengths but in shorter smoot units. Fifty years after the original hack, the smoot markers have become part of civic tradition: the City of Cambridge declared 4 October 2008 ‘Smoot Day’. MIT students run up a commemorative plaque on a precision milling machine and created an aluminium Smoot Stick which they deposited in the university’s museum as a durable reference standard; the unit-smoot is now detached from the person-Smoot. Through the legions of MIT graduates driving global high-tech culture, the smoot has travelled the world. If you use Google Earth, you can elect the units of length in which you’d like distances measured: miles, kilometres, yards, feet – and smoots.
The history of the smoot recapitulates much of the deep history of measurement standards. Most stories about the emergence of length measures track back to the human body. The cubit ran from the elbow to the fingertip; the yard was the distance from the tip of an outstretched hand to the middle of the chest (or to the tip of your nose); the fathom was the distance between the extremes of a person’s outstretched arms, and the ell (an abbreviation of elbow) was traditionally an arm’s length, though English, Scottish and Flemish ells were reckoned differently. Human bodies and their parts vary in size and so do the measures derived from them.
Central European foot measures generally ranged from 10½ to 12½ modern inches, but the Sicilian foot was 8.75 inches and the Geneva foot 9½, so we can’t be certain that all foot standards really did come from any human foot. Maybe the Geneva or even the 12-inch foot belonged to heroic specimens, or maybe the original foot measure included a generously proportioned foot. Maybe both human feet and the length that the foot measure measured increased over time. Maybe too there were other ways of establishing the foot. Sixteenth-century writers claimed that French workmen calculated it by joining the extremities of their thumbs, clenching the fingers, and extending the thumbs as far as they could. Try it yourself and you’ll see that you can get pretty close to a 12-inch foot. The concept of the ‘average foot’ (understood as the mean of the population) probably wasn’t intelligible before the emergence in the 17th century of the notion of the ‘average man’, but a 16th-century German source reported an ingenious way of arriving at a reliable foot measure: lurk outside church on Sunday and, when the worshipers come out, ask 16 men to stop – both church on Sunday and, when the worshipers come out, ask 16 men to stop – both short and tall – and make them line up their left feet, one after the other. The length you get will constitute the local land measure called the rood, and a sixteenth part of that ‘shall be the right and lawful foot’, even if it corresponds to the foot length of no one of the 16. Similarly, one story about the inch says that it was taken as the width of a man’s thumb at the base of the nail, and another derives it from the Latin word for a twelfth (uncia), as in 1/12th of a foot is an inch and 1/12th of a Troy pound is an ounce. Length units could be systematically related because bodily dimensions were understood as organically related. ‘Man is the measure of all things,’ and Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man represented confidence in the proportionality of human body parts: ‘The length of the outspread arms is equal to the height of a man; from the hairline to the top of the head is one-eighth of the height of a man; from below the chin to the top of the head is one-eighth of the height of a man.’ Tailors as well as artists knew some of these systematic relations: the Lilliputians in Gulliver’s Travels were measured using their giant guest using a rule of thumb – ‘twice round the thumb is once round the wrist.’ The human body was a cosmologically and aesthetically resonant measuring-kit. It was metrically intelligible, useful and, above all, it was at hand. ‘Traditional measures were “human” in many respects,’ the Polish historian Witold Kula wrote in his great study of Measures and Men. ‘They were expressive of man and his work.’
But anthropometric units don’t get you very far in measuring volume, weight and time. Any appropriately shaped vessel whose general dimensions were recognised by a relevant community could serve as a volume measure and, it might be expected, as a measure of the weight of stuff the vessel contained. The passage of time might be measured in many ways: by the length of a day, and parts thereof, in which case you would have annual variation; or by reference to noon, solstices, equinoxes and lunar motions; or by the amount of time it took to perform some locally well-understood task – for example, how long it took to cook a pot of rice or plough a furrow.
Intelligibility, accessibility and at-hand-ness were among the virtues of traditional measures; among their vices were their variability, imprecision and the difficulty of converting between them. Travelling through France just before the Revolution, Arthur Young found the ‘true per-square yard’ a unit ‘amidst the perplexity of the measures’ used: ‘They differ not only in every province, but in every district and almost every town.’ A quarter of a million distinct units of weights and measures were employed in different parts of the country. Worried by the high price of grain in 1796, the British government was concerned that uncontrollably varying systems for measuring it out were contributing to political unrest – ‘an evident fraud on the consumers of bread, and an advantage to none but the jobbers in corn, who, from practice, are as well acquainted with the size of every farmer’s bushel as with his face.’

From long experience, and with much effort, the wide-boy jobbers might come to know the difference between the bushels used in Winchester and Basingstoke, but those whose sphere of familiarity was more restricted might not. And even in Basingstoke, the ordinary purchaser might get a nine-gallon bushel while, in ‘a shameful fraud on the consumer’, a gentleman might get 10½ gallons. A bushel for measuring barley and bushels of the same volume might contain different amounts of grain if they were heaped or levelled, filled from a greater or a lesser height. You might heap a bushel if the grain was of low quality or you might do it if the purchaser was of high quality. Not all grain was the same and not all transactions between people were the same. Traditional measures persistently linked quantity and quality.

You use standards to measure – and that’s a practical matter – but measures are not merely more or less, they may be just or unjust. There is no way to disentangle their instrumental and moral aspects. Standards were norms, just as the Roman norma was a tool for obtaining right angles, the usage later extending to standards of right moral action. God traditionally kept standard weights and measures in his kit: ‘A just rule and balance are the Lord’s,’ Proverbs said: ‘All the weights of the bag are his work.’ He created the world by ordering ‘all things in measure and number and weight’ and his measures were an index of justice: ‘Thou shalt not have in thy bag divers...’
God kept weights and measures in his bag, but in human society the objects tended to be enshrined in the houses where authority lived — on the Acropolis, on the Capitoline Hill, in the Temple at Jerusalem, in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, later in the seats of secular government and in institutions linked to government. The Saxons kept their standards of volume — bushel, peck, quart and gallon — at their Winchester capital and the Normans then had them removed to Westminster Abbey. In medieval Europe, you could check your rule against metal rods built into the walls of churches or other public buildings. Just to the left of the main entrance to the cathedral of St Stephen in Vienna are two iron bars embedded in the wall — the linen ell and the shorter drapery ell. If you were a visitor and wanted to know local standards, or if you wanted to check your local rules against the references, there they were. And if you needed to be reminded of their authority, there it was.

Variability and imprecision were long-standing problems that might have local solutions, if indeed they were seen as problems at all. This was the point at which Robert Crease’s World in the Balance gets going. He is indebted to Kula, as is every recent historian writing about measurement and modernity, but he takes the story onwards, dealing in more detail with 19th and 20th-century metrology and its engagements with local variation. How did we get from the body-reference yard to the artifact-standard of a metal metre bar in Paris, to the metre as 1,650,763.73 wavelengths in vacuum of the krypton-86 atom, to its present official definition as the length of the path travelled by light in vacuum in 1/299,792,458th of a second? Every modern scholar now accepts that the seeming banality and just-so-ness of standards mask massive contingency and struggle in their establishment and maintenance, recognising, as the historian Ken Alder puts it, that ‘the price of standards is eternal vigilance.’ Contingency and struggle were the drivers of Thomas Pynchon’s great metrological novel Mason & Dixon, as they are of Crease’s book, whose special strength is attention to the last several decimal places of modern measurements, how they were arrived at through the 19th and 20th centuries, why and to whom these things mattered.

The first move away from metrological tradition was to cut down the heterogeneity: it’s easier to govern a country with 246 varieties of cheese — which De Gaulle thought was hard enough — than with many different weights, measures and time systems. Effective role needs stable rules. That sensitivity to the link between standardisation and governance at a distance developed much earlier than the French Revolution and the metric system. Magna Carta declared that ‘there be one measure of wine throughout our whole realm . . . and one measure of corn . . . and one width of cloth . . . of weights also let it be as of measures.’ What was an irritant in transactions between millers in Winchester and buyers of flour in Basingstoke became intolerable in governing a nation-state from London or Paris. The ability of standards to act over a distance was useful if you meant to govern over a distance.

The standardisation of the coinage was the most visible of these concerns, with its attendant enshrinement of reference standards, the establishment of assay offices, standard-marks warranting composition and judicial arrangements for punishing counterfeiters. In England, the legal definition of composition standards was promulgated after Magna Carta but the regulation of purity standards was probably Saxon. You can’t govern if you can’t control your currency, so metallurgical standards and their enforcement are tools of statecraft. So too is the ability effectively to levy taxes — and to make visible their material and legitimate bases.

The power of the British state, its capacity to wage war and extend empire in the 18th and 19th centuries, was dependent on excise taxes, and especially the excise on alcohol: government ran on alcohol in more than the usual sense. Yet the state’s ability to enforce and collect that excise was itself dependent on developing instrumental practices objectively to establish alcoholic proof. The excise was widely hated, resisted and often subverted, so, as one assayer put it in 1801, ‘a standard alone can put an end to this contrariety of opinions.’ Crease doesn’t discuss the use of standards in the excise, but fine historical work by William Ashworth has described the struggle over determining proof standards during the 18th and 19th centuries and the role of both bureaucratic procedures and the specific-gravity measuring instrument called the hydrometer in producing the ‘practical objectivity’ that underwrote empire.

The historical trajectory of standards, Crease notes, is often described as disembodiment, as in the detachment of the smoot from Smoot. But under another description that process is a different kind of embodiment, the transference of standards from flesh to metal. An official ell or Troy pound just was the reference bar or lump constituted as such; it was the artifact that gave meaning to the ell-ness or pound-ness of all other things an ell long or a pound in weight — and that is the sense in which Wittgenstein said: ‘There is one thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris.’ It was both handy and politically necessary that the state keep, guard and guarantee artifactual reference standards, and that is what was done, until in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, grounds of dissatisfaction emerged. Discontent took several forms. One concerned the practices of reference which the artifacts were intended to ensure. The standard artifact, kept in one place, had to generate authentic copies — sometimes
mained. What if, however, you could tie it to the "escape of bubbles" trapped in the metal. Uncontrollably varying reference standards aren’t what you want. Nor do you want them to be lost or destroyed. But this happens. Artifact standards of length and weight, designed in the mid-18th century and designated as the first imperial standard in 1824, were kept in the House of Commons—until it burned down ten years later, severely damaging the standards and rendering them useless. What authorities longed for was an order of standards that wasn’t defined by any physical artifact or pattern on the human body, wasn’t the conventional outcome of human history or geared towards any particular practice, whether it was milking or carpentry or ploughing. They wanted standard measures that reflected the order of reality, standards that could be reproduced anywhere, at any time—even if all the existing metal bars and weights and clocks ceased to exist.

The French invention of the metric system in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was a big deal mainly because it allowed easy, and, it was said, intelligible interconvertibility of units. What was intelligible and systematically easy would be naturally fit for global use. Moving from inches to feet to yards to miles means multiplying first by 12, then by 3, and then by 1760, whereas, of course, every metric conversion proceeds by tens and its multiples and there are only a few prefixes designating symbols: kilo, centi, milli, micro etc. Metrication made many calculations much easier, but the problem of reference standards remained. What if, however, you could tie measures not to a human artifact but to the invariant order of terrestrial reality? If you could do that, you would no longer be dependent on the integrity of a particular physical object. Essentially, anyone, anywhere, could reproduce the standards. At that point, standards would be not only nationally and globally uniform; they would be as stable as reality itself, finally disembodied. It was a project that ultimately succeeded, though not without difficulties and never totally. In fact, the original metre was supposed to be a natural standard, nothing to do with fingers, arms and noses, everything to do with unvarying features of the terrestrial world, and intended to be used by all people, everywhere. As Alder puts it, ‘it was only fitting that a measure for all the world’s people be based on a measure of the world.’ The metre would be one millionth of the distance along a meridian passing through Paris between the North Pole and the equator. That length was picked for historical reasons—it was estimated to be pretty close to a traditional unit, the Parisian arshin. (This ‘rational’ measure was therefore, as economic historians say, ‘path dependent’: it took its form, partly because of its intercalation in the past history of human practices.) The problem with a natural standard for the metre, as more fully documented in Alder’s sparkling book, The Measure of All Things (2002), was, on the one hand, the fallibility of the scientists sent to perform the meridional measurements and, on the other, the annoying irregularity of the Earth’s shape, not corresponding exactly to any theorised geometrical figure.

The late 18th-century attempt to estimate the metre as a natural standard did not succeed. In 1879 the ‘good-enough-for-government-work’ measure was nevertheless embedded in a platinum alloy bar, the so-called ‘Metre of the Archives’, and it was this artifact that continued as the reference standard for most of the 19th century, despite the fact that it was known not to correspond precisely to the one ten-millionth of a quarter-meridian criterion. In 1889, new, more stable physical artifacts were constructed: the prototype metre was now an alloy of 90% pure platinum and 10% iridium, measured at the temperature at which ice melts. The further adoption of the metre was commended not because of its naturalness but because, for a host of political, cultural and scientific reasons, it had already become (as Nature said) ‘a cosmopolitan unit, widely recognised, and in general use among many nations’. Or, as Crease writes, ‘the metre was universal because it was universal.’ Custom, convention and artifact had not been eliminated, they had been relocated to a new metrological language, a new set of artifacts, and a new group of administrative bodies that would articulate and enforce standards.

The quest for natural standards was soon to succeed. From the end of the 19th century, the financial resources and organisational energies dedicated to achieving the final form of standards that flowed from the science of metrology were so great that, in 1875, both governmental and non-governmental metrological commissions proliferated: 17 countries at the General Conference of Weights and Measures in 1875 signed up to the Metre Convention, establishing both a physical institute to house the standards and periodically meeting supervisory bodies. The world had international metrological government long before it had the League of Nations. In 1980, an international commission of metrologists established the krypton-86 spectral line definition of the metre, fundamental further because it was secured through its redefinition as the distance travelled by light in a precise span of time. The physical standard, at that moment, ‘became a historic object; the new standard was universal, everywhere, not localised’.

I n 1887, an American scientist, William Harkness, thrilled to the prospect that the world would soon have natural metrological standards, reproducible not just in the absence of the usual artifacts but even on distant worlds after the Earth itself had fallen into the Sun and been vapourised. The science of the 17th and 18th centuries could not do that, but today we can, since modern metrologists can derive natural standards by connecting their units with the ultimate atoms which constitute the universe itself’. No one would now have to go to Paris to check out a metal bar; by the middle of the 20th century ‘any country could realise the metre, provided it had the technology’. All that’s needed to achieve this reproduction are a few simple scientific instruments. Connectivity good, correspondence good, an interferometer (to measure angles), and the appropriate spectroscopic apparatus. That is to say, you just need a well-equipped physics laboratory, staffed by physicists rigorously trained in similarly equipped laboratories, and having access to the supervisory and regulatory bureaucracies which would vouch for and enforce the standards thus reproduced. Natural and universal standards are, in this way, locally dependent on a very particular material and organisational culture. To reproduce natural standards you just have to re-create a big chunk of modern human culture. The standards have not escaped history; they are rather markers of where history now is. Attaining these standards was a heroic cultural achievement. What has to be celebrated, however, is the fact that we are not just heroic metrologists but much of the fabric of the modern political and commercial order. In a coda addressing what he calls the ‘dark sides of the metrscope’, Crease reflects on the social distribution of modern metrics. While in the past ‘metrical matters were never really in the hands of the average citizen,’ he says, ‘comprehension generally was.’ Modern metrological units, he writes, are easy to apply, while understanding their bases has become ‘too complex for all but scientists to grasp’.

No reason for nostalgia. We used to live in a world, it’s said, that had different measures, but we now, and continue to fly around the world at 30,000 feet rather than 9,144 metres (except in China, Mongolia, North Korea, Russia and a few of the former Soviet republics) and that Americans haven’t a clue how hot it is when we say it’s a summer day. Harkness noted when they weigh 12 stones—a unit which a table in Crease’s book equates to 14 ounces. It’s also that we continue to use all sorts of traditional and locally varying measures for all sorts of everyday purposes. Horses continue to be hands high. A dozen bags of trash on the Upper West Side of Manhattan count at 13. I make risotto by filling up a certain saucepan with stock; I have no idea how much stock that is, but it works well and I’ve screwed up when cooking risotto in someone else’s kitchen. When I go to buy a new washing machine, I will choose it by measuring with my feet and only if the result is ambiguous do I get a tape measure.

The 19th and 20th-century drive to precision and to homogeneity of all sorts of standards—quantitative and qualitative—was powered by a range of practices that deliver us the goods and services we want and whose ability to do so depends on effective action over very long distances and exquisitely precise co-ordination of things and people. The origins of the present-day International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) can be traced back to late 19th-century concern among engineers over the specifications of nuts and bolts. Telegraphic communication went better with internationally agreed standards of electrical resistance; the railroads called for national and international standards of time; manufacture of goods through interchangeable parts depended on metrical standards for precision engineering; burgeoning road traffic generated demands for national, and later international, standard signals. The Streets of London, the place where the modern airport was one of the sites in which we learned how to interpret those odd icons guiding us to the appropriately gendered toilet.

During the 1913-18 war, the Fabian sociologist Leonard Woolf spoke in praise of the largely voluntary international organisations that had given the world standards of length, weight, colour, electrical resistance and agricultural produce; he celebrated an ‘international commission for unifying the nomenclature of apples’, and he looked forward to a bright future in which ‘even our chickens will be internationalised’.

The worlds of science and commerce had shown the way to a harmonious international order in which voluntarily arrived at standards would embody reason, enhance productivity, eliminate confusion, and be guided by the wise counsel of technical expertise. A pattern of rational international governance had been established; modern metrology virtuously modelled modern political order; and the world had finally been made to measure.
**On the Feast of Stephen**

**Karl Miller**

*New Selected Journals, 1939-93*

by Stephen Spender, edited by Lara Feigel and John Sutherland.

Faber, 792 pp., £45. July, 978 0 571 23757 9

The ne...
he was going but always seemed to know, that cunning goose, the shortest way to get there. Meanwhile his son was credited with a like skill by his father: ‘Matthew always seems not to know his way and then surprises you by knowing it.’ The father came to feel that he had lost his way, and his confidence, as a writer, and may perhaps have lost his taste for writing verse, for the struggle of the modern.

As far back as 1950 Stephen had told his diary: ‘Accompanying everything I do there is a voice which says: “You are wrong.”’ In time, he could think of only a handful of poems of his that would be remembered. He had failed. He had even failed to fail.

I blame myself not so much for failure – but for not having pressed ideas of work original work to the point of proof where they either failed or succeeded. What I blame myself for is that I didn’t have enough failure – but that I so often put aside the things I most deeply wanted to do – the things that were my own thing from inside myself – and did things which were proposed from the outside.

The book is brave in causing you to feel that these really were his misgivings, and it was brave of him to state them and to face them.

He can’t have been helped by belonging to a Vanity Fair (the name spoke to him via a title of the time) with quite so many cruel and spiteful people, to offset some excellent friends. The word was that other people were boring or vulgar. Virginia Woolf threatened that he might one day be boring. Stephen felt that it should be considered an honour to be insulted by the truly great: ‘That’s the line we have to take,’ replied Isaiah Berlin.

At the zenith of vulgarity-detection is Diana Duff-Cooper, who disdained ‘that common word “common”’ (a postwar upper-class catchphrase), and for whom the scientist Julian Huxley was vulgar. At a certain party punishment was meted out by Evelyn Waugh. ‘I adored Evelyn but he had a very unkind side to him. He would keep on asking.’

Two of the worst observations cited in the diaries relate to foreign writers, come to Britain. ‘Too bad that Mr Brodsky is trying to push into the scene,’ meaning the refugee poet and the London literary scene, where, in another part of the wood, Auden took pleasure in telling Robert Lowell, with his history of mental illness: ‘Gentlemen don’t go mad.’ This is the scene which was and may still be regarded as the post-Bloomsbury stronghold of the national literature. There’s an affinity between the candour and humour of Spender’s journals and those of the pioneer diarist, egotist and owner-up, Boswell, a performer, an actor, who, with some degree of paradox, wanted everyone to know what he was. Spender’s episode of the famous fart is completely Boswellian. Boswell was frequently taken with a pinch of salt, as Stephen said of himself, and his writings were often slighted. His journals, unknown till fairly recently, would no doubt have been slighted too, had they been accessible earlier: they are his masterpiece. Both men were hero-worshippers who sought fathers in the great, with Auden a less considerate and no less acerbic parent than Johnson.

Lara Feigel’s introduction deals well with Stephen Spender’s troubles and struggles, which it would be harsh to make light of – with what became of his art and with what became of his heart, as it grew old. He took to worrying, she relates, not about posterity any more, but about what his death would mean for his wife and children. It takes confidence to try to grasp, as he appears to have done in his last years, what had gone wrong with his life, and right with it.