experiment by experience, conjecture by conjecture, into the vast sphere of the unknown. For Newton, though, the words may plausibly have had a very different meaning. He was simply using the instruments of geometry and history to pare away the greasy crust and canker of forty misguided centuries.

If there was one man who in Newton’s eyes had done more than any other to lead humanity astray, it was Athanasius. The bruising Bishop of Alexandria had battered his way through the fourth century’s Christological controversies with such implacable force that Trinitarianism—the belief that God is a communion of three divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are all equal manifestations of the same metaphysical substrate—became the touchstone of Christian orthodoxy.

For Newton, this creed was nothing short of devility. The worship of Christ as a face of the godhead was not just akin to the cult of the golden calf; it was far more insidious. As Iliffe shows, Newton threw himself into the proscription of Athanasius with much the same furious zest and legalistic diligence that he brought to his academic disputes with Hooke and Leibniz. Athanasius and his followers were not simply wrong; they were a cabal of thuggish crooks who had hijacked an entire religion by falsifying texts, perverting holy Scripture and threatening to bring down the Roman Empire through violence. This incandescent hatred of a man who had been dead for 1,400 years formed perhaps the greatest passion of Newton’s life.

Regarded as an exercise in sheer industry and insight, *Priest of Nature* is an immensely impressive book. Newton satirized vigorously, through a quite bewildering amount of primary material, the rhetorical details out of the apparatus criticus as cleverly as he corralled obscure historians with names like Socrates Scholasticus and Salmunius Sozomenus. Iliffe seems to have followed him for pretty much every step of the way. It is a rare person who has the stomach and the spectacular mastery of intellectual history to determine which precise edition of Calvin’s *Institutes* Newton would have been referring to, or how he came upon Palladius’s *Lausian History*.

One puzzling absence is that of Johannes Kepler, who coined the conceit that gave this biography its title, describing astronomers in a letter of 1598 as “priests of the heaven’s newest temple, with respect to the book of nature.” Besides Kepler’s influence on Newton’s philosophical inquiry, they shared a deep interest in theology and a personal experience of conflict with the religious establishments of their day. There are so many parallels between the men’s lives that a comparison might have been useful.

Readers who are not scholars of Restoration theology may also feel that *Priest of Nature* never quite lives up to the dourly promising promise of its introduction. The writing is seldom less than lively and elegant, but the methodical trawl through Newton’s sources and Rob Iliffe’s part-chronological, part- thematic structure can be a little like a slog at times. This is a shame. With a little more editing— or brutality, the book might have made Newton new and strange for a very sizeable popular audience. The story of his lonely and quixotic pursuit of the truth, against the prevailing winds of his own age and a dozen ages that had passed before him, should make anybody pause to consider what folly and wisdom are and how they relate to each other. It deserves to be better known.
family twice away from the fascist threat, first to Paris, later to New York, where Steiner attended the Lycée Français, whose faculty was fielded by an extraordinary roster of émigrés. For his undergraduate studies, Steiner moved farther west, to the University of Chicago, where he was part of the educational experiment conducted by Robert Maynard Hutchins in which promising thirteen-year-olds—Steiner’s classmates included Richard Wrong, Robert Bork and Robert Silvers—were purposely thrown into dormitories with returning American GIs from the war. The New Yorker called it the greatest magnet for neurotic juveniles since the Children’s Crusade. When Steiner first entered a seminar by the Weimar exile political philosopher Leo Strauss on the dialogues of Plato, Strauss mentioned that one contemporary philosopher’s name—“who is, of course, strictly incomparable”—would not be mentioned in the class. Who could this possibly be, Steiner earnestly asked his older classmates? When he learned the name, Steiner rushed to the library where he immediately checked out a copy of Martin Heidegger’s as yet untranslated Sein und Zeit. Though he could make little sense of its opening paragraphs, Steiner was determined to go on. The result, several decades later, was his Martin Heidegger (1978), which may still be the most intellectually thrilling and accessible introduction to the thinking of the great modern existentialist’s main virtues as a reader is his intellectual discipline: he simply does not give up when he encounters difficulty in a text, but takes resistance to his understanding as a welcome gauntlet.

But there are other moments in these interviews where Steiner displays his self-parody. One of these is the encounter with Robert Oppenheimer. Steiner has come to the School of Advanced Study at Princeton to interview Oppenheimer for The Economist; Oppenheimer cancels the meeting at the last moment. Steiner is invited into the office of the Plato specialist, Harold Cherniss. Cherniss, sensing something special in the financial journalist, shows Steiner a passage of Plato he is editing. There is a lacuna Cherniss is trying to fill. “Oppenheimer cannot in and out of his mouth,” Steiner recounts. “It was the ideal trap: if the people you’re talking to can’t see you, they feel paralyzed and you become master of the situation.” Oppenheimer asks the young financial journalist if he has any ideas on how to fill the passage. Steiner buys time with a round of ad infinitum. But when you are trying to prepare an edition of Plato for the Oxford University Press, as a reader is his intellectual discipline: he simply does not give up when he encounters difficulty in a text, but takes resistance to his understanding as a welcome gauntlet.

Steiner tells of his near fist-fight with Ernst Nolte at a Martin Heidegger centennial celebration in Freiburg. Steiner is placated when Gersham Portman intercedes. “I’m a great admirer of Martin,” Steiner proclaims. “Martin was the greatest of thinkers and the basest of men.” All was patched up after that; nothing satisfies Steiner like a good paradoxe. But perhaps the most interesting of Steiner’s ethical pronouncements is not touched on in A Long Saturday. Back in 1967, when Noam Chomsky (who himself would make an interesting candidate for a special supplement in the New York Review of Books, Steiner forced on him the question of what should actually be done in real time by scholars to stop the Vietnam War. Chomsky admitted he had no adequate response, and confessed to being embarrassed that all he was prepared to do was not pay his taxes, but that perhaps, if he were braver, he would travel to Hanoi to be a hostage. Steiner, you feel, has got his man. The futility of Chomsky’s gestures are pathetic in Steiner’s eyes. “I consider myself a retreat from political responsibility becomes a matter of maintaining personal dignity.”

There are some illuminating passages in this book about Steiner’s sexual technique. Like that of a clinician, Adler describes what gives Steiner erections, and quotes one of Steiner’s raucier passages back to him:

A-M took pride in the thicket of her “burning bush.” Gardens are the scenes of assignation, of sexual witchcraft as in Tasso. My first tongue was to brush, barely brush, the outer petal. Penetration could ensue only with almost unbearable rallentando and lightness. The violets had to be . . .

These may be words of wisdom in the Weinstein moment, but Adler can only take so much of it. The main embarrassments in A Long Saturday come in the form of provincialism, not a charge usually pinned on Steiner. His inaccuracies about foreign countries (“Malaysia . . . where one grows up speaking three languages”) and his sub-tabloid depictions of Islam are unworthy of him. Steiner admits that he “missed the boat” when it came to jazz, rock and rap, and that while he recognizes that some films are great, he still suspects that they are not meant to be taken more than three times, “but the fourth time, it’s dead. Completely dead.” He suggests that no woman has ever produced anything great in science out of a sadistic or fascist impulse, but then admits he might be wrong about that. What comes through in the end is that it was never Steiner’s specific judgments that mattered, nor his strained oppositions, or endless lists of angels and demons, but rather something that materialized between the lines: the relationship he established with his interlocutors, that’s it. It was not the messages, rather than the messages themselves, that got through.

One of Steiner’s long-running provocations is that human evil is not only not foreign to high culture, but has formed some kind of pact with it. This is typically paired with his other, companion, point: that great art is more likely to be produced under the strain of totalitarianism and authoritarianism than under democratic regimes. (“I wonder why”, Philip Roth once mused, “all the writers I know in Czechoslovakia loathe the regime and passionately wish it would disappear from the face of the earth. Don’t they understand, with Steiner, that this is their chance to be great?”) Both of these claims have been repeatedly overstated over the years, to the point that the Bach-was-played-at-Buchenwald mantra has transformed in Steiner’s mind into a necessary affinity between high art and depravity. In full provocative mode, he confesses to Adler that as someone who is occupied with great work for many of his waking hours, he is therefore less likely than most other citizens to save the proverbial bystander from drowning:

When I’m on my way home and hear someone yell “Help” in the street, my ears might hear, but I’m not listening. That’s the difference between hearing and listening. I should run to help, but I don’t because what’s actually occurring in the street has a sort of disorder to it, a contingency that doesn’t reach the transcendent immensity of the suffering that is described in a great work of art – music, painting, or poem.

Lo, reader: there is an evil form of negligence cultivated by high art towards the quotidian! You can save a drowning person, and that gets through. But it was always more the passion of his delivery, rather than the messages themselves, that got through.

George Steiner, 2005

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