



Social Studies

João Magueijo

BIFES MAL PASSADOS

Passeios e outras catástrofes por terra de Sua
Majestade

187pp. Gradiva. €12.

978 989 616 583 3

Two small Atlantic nations punching above their weight, Portugal and England were originally linked through a historical alliance forged in 1386 by the marriage of King Edward III's granddaughter Philippa of Lancaster to King João I – the defender of his country's independence against the encroaching Spaniards. Seen as arrogant and overweening, whether as merchants in Lisbon and Oporto or as a military presence during the Napoleonic wars, the English earned from the Portuguese the resentful nickname “Bifes”, from their favourite dish. It is as “underdone beefsteaks” that the title of João Magueijo's potentially enjoyable anglophobe pasquinade signals its true intentions.

Having spent most of his working life as an astronomer in London (he is currently a professor at Imperial College), Magueijo has had plenty of opportunity to scrutinize the sheer otherness of England from a Continental perspective, in a tradition stretching all the way back to the age of Voltaire and Montesquieu. Portuguese literature features a sparkling example of the genre in Eça de Queiróz's beady-eyed *Cartas de Inglaterra*, written during the 1880s when he was a consul in Bristol and Newcastle. But Magueijo, alas, is no Eça de Queiróz, whether as a stylist or observer. In its intransigent antipathy, *Bifes mal passados* opens valves of rage, contempt and frustration, the hiss of escaping steam monotonously audible throughout. Magueijo's criticisms of his host country have all been more acutely articulated elsewhere, as much by native authors as by foreign visitors. Readers will hardly be surprised to learn that the English can be gross in their habits, rancid with class consciousness, strangers to the bidet, obsessed with *punctilio* (“Mind the gap between the train and the platform”) and unregenerate barbarians in the kitchen. Much is made (including an obscure link with vegetarianism) of the inherited evils of empire, a case of pots and kettles given Portugal's own scarcely creditable imperial record.

What seems at first to be a “don't get me wrong” epilogue, in which the writer discloses a modest indebtedness to England for giving him a job, soon turns into a flailing anathema, in which he warns his compatriots not to quit their sun-kissed shores for the fogs and brutishness of “the Planet of the Apes”. Since his book is now in its eighth print run, it may be that some of them have taken his advice to heart.

JONATHAN KEATES

Japanese Essays

Steven D. Carter, editor and translator
THE COLUMBIA ANTHOLOGY OF
JAPANESE ESSAYS

‘Zuihitsu’ from the tenth to the twenty-first
century

560pp. Columbia University Press. Paperback,
£27.50 (US \$40).
978 0 231 16771 0

Japanese literature scholars have this joke: if Sei Shōnagon, the tenth-century lady-in-waiting generally seen as the originator of the *zuihitsu*, were alive today, her gossipy anecdotes and lists of “things that make the heart race” would be on Tumblr. Somewhere between a personal essay and a literary opinion piece, *zuihitsu* is a little-translated Japanese genre that resists easy definition, which perhaps ironically may have helped it survive in a recognizable form for over a millennium. By turns philosophical, humorous and poetic, a *zuihitsu* shows a more intimate side of its author, revealing something about their society in the process.

In this anthology, Steven D. Carter brings together over fifty *zuihitsu* covering the past thousand years, from world-renowned authors including Higuchi Ichiyō, Natsume Sōseki and Osamu Dazai to those less well-known in translation, such as Kafū Nagai, Taeko Kōno and the poet-physicist Torahiko Terada. Carter's selections show the vast range of the *zuihitsu*: while Kan Kikuchi writes about the role of writers after a natural disaster, Sōseki gets hopelessly lost in the fog that oppressed London at the turn of the previous century, and Bashō makes a classic, reasoned argument for a reclusive life – written as much to convince himself as to convince us. In writing about trying to write a *zuihitsu*, Dazai says, “But after working at it so long, I no longer knew what was what; I didn't even understand what a *zuihitsu* was supposed

to be”. If only he'd had this anthology available to him.

Carter's introductions and well-judged footnotes make this collection rich and highly enjoyable for those with little knowledge of Japanese history or culture. This evocative selection serves both as an excellent introduction to the genre for the English-speaking world and as a reminder that, no matter how distant or seemingly different the society, people's individual struggles, aspirations and aesthetics transcend their own times.

MORGAN GILES

Architecture

Nicholas Adams

GUNNAR ASPLUND'S GOTHENBURG
The transformation of public architecture in
interwar Europe

288pp. Penn State University Press. \$64.95.
978 0 271 05984 6

Is modernist architecture necessarily “progressive”? Does a monumental portico always symbolize a rigid social hierarchy? Can traditional form ever be properly incorporated into modern society without appearing as kitsch? These are the questions which animate Nicholas Adams's thorough tale of Gunnar Asplund's extension to Gothenburg's courthouse, a work of modern architecture in a prominent location that attempted to respect the classical language of its host building, and caused a calamitous uproar.

Asplund, an acclaimed young architect, won the competition to design the extension in 1911. Over the next twenty-five years the project waxed and waned with municipal ambitions, from the initial overhaul of the seventeenth-century courthouse, to the complete redesign of Gustav Adolf square, before eventually shrinking back to the extension that was finally built.

At the beginning of the project, Asplund was still practising a form of National Romanticism (the Nordic cousin of art nouveau), then in the 1920s the design took on influences of stern American neoclassicism. Asplund's conversion to functionalism coincided with the coming to power, in 1932, of the Swedish Social Democrats, whose commitment to public spending meant that the project was finally rushed to completion.

Public reaction only came on the removal of the scaffolding in 1936 which, despite having strong hints of its neighbour, revealed a façade that abstracted the details and reinterpreted them in a modernist manner. Although from today's perspective the extension appears polite, the local worthies were shocked. The chastened council declined to hold an inauguration ceremony for the building, and Asplund's reputation plummeted.

It is the interior of the courthouse which tells the more striking tale. A fascinating pair of drawings, depicting the plan of the building in 1925 and 1935, shows how the passage of a decade transformed Asplund's design from a monolithic stone interior into a bright, more open space, with exposed-steel structure and surfaces lined with timber, and featuring furniture and lighting also designed by Asplund. Adams notes that the Social Democrats viewed law reform as one of the main pillars of their programme and Asplund's revised building is clearly understandable as a part of this process. The modernist interior downplays the architectural monumentality that so often represents the power of the state, in favour of an enlarged sense of domesticity. The shallow staircase that leads up to the courtrooms, for example, slows the pace of the walker, prompting reflection and reducing anxiety.

The impact of Asplund's courthouse took its time to be felt, but the relaxed Swedish modernism it represented was taken on in Britain after the Second World War for the architecture of the welfare state. The Festival of Britain in 1951 was heavily indebted to Asplund and the Scandinavian school and the influence of the courthouse's extension can be seen strongly today in a public building such as the British Library by Colin St John Wilson (completed in 1997).

DOUGLAS MURPHY

Literary Criticism

Andrew Warnes

AMERICAN TANTALUS

Horizons, happiness, and the impossible pursuits
of US literature and culture

208pp. Bloomsbury. £74.
978 1 62356 107 9

Homer's Tantalus endures a “precise and pitiless ordeal”. Tormented by eternal hunger and thirst, he stands surrounded by water and food which endlessly elude his grasp. Andrew Warnes, in *American Tantalus*, presents the American canon in the context of Tantalus' punishment, revealing the “unusual persistence” of the “tantaling effect” in literature. Defining tantalization as “the peculiar torment whereby, whenever we try to reach something we want, it withdraws, maddeningly, from touch”, Warnes shows that frustrated desire pervades American writing – from the “fantasies of invisibility” prevalent in Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Henry James, to the “built tantalizations” embodied by cars, guns, hotel rooms and swimming pools in

Robert Penn Warren, Hunter S. Thompson, Raymond Carver, John Cheever and Stanley Elkin.

The limitation of *American Tantalus* is that Warnes does not consider the phenomenon of tantalization in the context of the reasons behind Tantalus' punishment, which were manifold. As a result, tantalization seems to be experienced arbitrarily and without causality. Nevertheless, he provides a compelling re-examination of numerous American writers. Focusing on "historically meaningful" American texts which "accentuate their nationality", Warnes explores a national tendency to "traffic in a set of cultural codes and conventions" that "envision new land, new cities, and new bodies as untouched and untouchable". Thoreau, for instance, attempts to "creep up on nature transparently and unseen", knowing that his "touch can only ruin the scene". James "derides the 'devouring American'", whose presence despoils the "outdoor museums" of Venice and Florence. Rudolph Fisher mocks white visitors to Harlem, "doomed forever to wander Harlem looking for Harlem" in their "tantalizing flight from whiteness".

The pursuit of a tactile, immersive relationship with any given object of desire (an empty horizon, a beautiful woman, a well-crafted toy, a city's "real" culture) is central to the idea of tantalization. Crucially, however, "beautiful things must be untouched" – touching leads to "automatic ruination". The consequence, for society, is a suspicion "of all touch", and the "constant possibility" of violence. This takes shape in the "devastating imperial fantasy" of the American wilderness, in the "frozen and already politicized" encounter between black and white children in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, for example, and in Warren, Thompson and James Agee's "demonic" steering wheels and gas pedals. Equally central to the Tantalus myth, however, is the notion of perpetual repetition: from Herman Melville to Toni Morrison, *American Tantalus* shows that the pursuit of the untouchable continues, regardless of the consequences.

RONA CRAN

Medicine

John Berger

A FORTUNATE MAN
The story of a country doctor
176pp. Canongate. £14.99.
978 1 78211 501 4

Almost fifty years since its publication in 1967, *A Fortunate Man* – John Berger's account of the life of a GP in Gloucestershire – has been reissued, with a valuable introduction by Gavin Francis which quotes its first reviewers, including Tom Maschler and Philip Toynbee (a patient). Francis calls it "a masterpiece of witness", although the witness is now historical since communities and their physicians have been transformed in recent years. GPs back then were legally responsible for the care of their patients, twenty-four hours a day, and some continued to look after them in the local hospital or delivered their offspring. Now GPs are considerably better off (Marx would have recognized them as highly remunerated wage labourers), but subject in their professional lives to standard-setting bodies and government agencies in a way Berger's subject Dr John Sassall would have found intolerable. Except in the most remote parts of the United Kingdom, readers are unlikely to

encounter a physician like him.

What is still striking about this memoir is how, in six weeks, Berger was able not only to form a bond with his subject but to gain insight into the nature of his standing in the community – the peculiar respect enjoyed by a relatively new addition to the pantomime of British national life: "the unconventional doctor". John Sassall started out as a kind of Master Mariner. He served in the navy during the war and had been a great reader of Conrad, before becoming a physician of exemplary tact and sensibility: if doctor unquestionably still "knew best", Sassall offered his patients a candid kind of fraternity, as "an ideal brother". They allowed him, in a capacity both intimate and curatorial, to be "the clerk of their records".

The impression of the book as being frozen in time is heightened by Jean Mohr's lambent black-and-white images, one of which catches Sassall standing in a doorway – a telling image in a book about inner and outer landscapes – and Berger's meagre afterword from 1999. The elisions in *A Fortunate Man* call attention to themselves: his wife is not mentioned in the text and she seems to have had more bearing on Sassall's professional life than Berger allows. (Francis tells us that her unexpected death caused Sassall to abandon his practice and travel in China "learning the ways of the barefoot doctors".) And we are given nothing about the circumstances of his troubling suicide, with a firearm, fifteen years after the book's first publication.

IAIN BAMFORTH

History

Ali Ansari
IRAN

A very short introduction
144pp. Oxford University Press. Paperback,
£7.99.
978 0 19 966934 9

It is a considerable challenge to sum up the essence of Iran, with its recorded history of more than 2,500 years, in only a little more than a hundred pages. But Ali Ansari does so effectively by focusing on the multi-layered identity of the Iranians. He rightly regards the great Persian epic the *Shahnameh*, or "Book of Kings", composed by the poet Ferdowsi (940–1019/25 CE), as the bedrock of Iranian identity. The *Shahnameh* preserved the mythology and what was remembered of the history of ancient Iran. In large part it was an ethical guide, with a strong emphasis on the concept of justice, and Professor Ansari writes that its value lay "in the truths it held about what it meant to be Iranian".

On top of the identity shaped by ancient Iran, new layers were added by the Arab-Muslim conquest of Iran in the mid-seventh century CE, the gradual conversion of the country from Zoroastrianism to Islam, the Turco-Mongol invasions from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, and the imposition of Shi'ism by the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century. The Arab-Muslim conquest was potentially the most serious threat to the Iranian identity, but unlike Egypt, Iran did not become an Arab country. Its language survived to become for centuries the lingua franca of the eastern Islamic world and the *Shahnameh* ensured that the memory of a great pre-Islamic past was never forgotten. Ansari emphasizes that the promotion of the Persian language and culture owed much to the Persian bureaucrats who ran the administrations of the Abbasid Caliphate

(750–1258 CE) and its successor states in the east. He also notes that the Turkic warriors, who provided many of the rulers of Iran into the twentieth century, identified strongly with the heroic culture of the *Shahnameh*, while Shi'ism echoed its emphasis on justice.

The challenge for Iranian regimes has been to accommodate this composite identity. The last Shah made the mistake of playing down the Islamic element, while the Islamic Republic made a similar error to begin with by belittling Iran's pre-Islamic heritage. Growing popular enthusiasm for Ancient Iran, however, has now compelled Iran's clerical establishment to embrace Zoroaster and Cyrus the Great. But Ansari warns against what he sees as a tendency among Iranians to seek refuge in the past from the anxieties of the present. As a better path, he points to a long-standing progressive agenda which transcends inherited traditions and harnesses them for the future.

DAVID BLOW

Travel

Piers Moore Ede

KALEIDOSCOPE CITY
A year in Varanasi
224pp. Bloomsbury. £16.99.
978 1 4088 1849 7

The living and the dead of Varanasi have long enticed Western travellers, especially those fond of "Eastern spirituality". Among them is the British writer Piers Moore Ede, who, after many short visits, recently spent a year in this ancient city in Uttar Pradesh, northern India. From a Spartan flat overlooking the Ganga, he forayed into other parts of Varanasi, always "grateful for return to the familiarity and lyricism of the river bank". *Kaleidoscope City*, an account of his experiences, brims with warmth, humility and curiosity.

Moore Ede covers a fair bit of ground. He marvels at folk theatre performances of the Ramayana. He probes the life and beliefs of an Aghori ascetic, among the most austere of holy men. He meets the city's legendary master silk weavers, almost all Muslim, who still weave exquisite designs on manual looms inside their homes. Sampling Varanasi's foods, he fondly delves into the locals' love of sweets. He learns about the city's great musical heritage, discovering that Muslims often "worked as professional musicians in Hindu temples". He uncovers sad stories too: a prostitute and victim of a sex trafficking ring; white-robed widows who, often discarded by their families, come to die in Varanasi; textile workers fallen on hard times in the age of globalization.

As a Westerner in Varanasi, Moore Ede inhabits a privileged world, which both enables and limits him. If people sometimes trust him for being an empathetic outsider without a threatening stake in their lives, he admits he can often only see "the facade rather than the finer details, and cannot decipher the inner meaning of things". This is partly the lot of all outsiders, for whom encounters can be superficial and realities invisible. Moore Ede seems oblivious to the range of crookedness in the holy men he meets. At times, he is too uncritical, more like a fellow believer than a journalist. His yoga-studio Hinduism seems untouched by dissident voices – of the Buddha, Nagarjuna, or Ambedkar, say. Like many before him, he is prone to reducing the varieties of secular and religious life in pre-modern India to stereotypes. He

writes, for example, that "At the heart of India's change lies an unmistakable shift away from moksha as the central goal of life, towards that of material prosperity". Witnessing the juggernaut of modernity, he comes close to romanticizing the vanishing traditions of village life.

Perhaps the most memorable aspects of *Kaleidoscope City* are the author's respectful encounters with people and his sensitive exposition of several Varanasi traditions. Interwoven are many lovely impressions of the fleeting and the quirky. The rhythms of life and death by the river are vividly rendered in Moore Ede's fluid prose.

NAMIT ARORA

Fashion

Mari Grinde Arntzen
DRESS CODE

The naked truth about fashion
Translated by Kerri Pierce
128pp. Reaktion. Paperback, £14.95.
978 1 78023 439 7

There is one reason for dressing well", wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Namely that dogs respect it, and will not attack you." It is a pleasingly succinct, but not entirely persuasive thesis, since (notwithstanding the restraint of dogs) there are, one suspects, plenty of reasons why people dress well, or even "fashionably". Mari Grinde Arntzen mulls over a few such reasons in *Dress Code*. Her approach is rather more serious than Emerson's witticism, and is, at times, sobering. As its subtitle indicates, the book claims to concern itself not only with clothes, but also with the hidden dark heart of the fashion industry and the globalized consumer culture of which it is a part. "We are dressing ourselves to death", she writes, noting the child labour, grievous working conditions and environmental catastrophes that have characterized the history of what is now the fifth largest industry in the world.

Arntzen writes passionately, clearly burdened by the urgency of the problem of how to square the important values in which fashion trades (beauty, belonging and self-expression etc) with the disastrous ethical and environmental costs it incurs. The difficulty here, though, is that Arntzen's journalistic approach struggles to provide us with the resources to do so. She is never able to impart the actual experience – the texture and detail – of wearing clothes. The writing is, instead, littered with bewildering celebrity stories that feel dated (Lady Gaga's meat dress in 2010; Arnold Schwarzenegger's adultery in 2011), and unilluminating banalities ("People also respond to the things happening around them – and this creates new fashion"). We never quite grasp what is at stake in the wearing of clothes that so fuels the business of making clothes – and neither does Arntzen prompt us into thinking how better to go about it. There are, it is true, other places we might seek that kind of writing (read Lucy Siegle's compulsive, heartbreaking polemic *To Die For: Is fashion wearing out the world?*, 2011, for example, and put your head in your hands), but this feels like a squandered opportunity at a crucial moment. There are some flashes of interest – a loose discussion of the relation of fascism to fashion; an intriguing but unconvincing account of the life of the style savant Isabella Blow – but, though this is a book with every good intention, it lacks both style and substance and is as thin as a supermodel's ankle.

SHAHIDHA BARI