

of pure chance, but an elaborate form of trial and error that creates harmony, yet does so without advance planning.

Most impressive in Thomson's artfully told tale is his evenhanded respect for the losers as well as the winners. All wanted to get at the truth, but in the shift from religious to scientific understanding, the meaning of truth itself became the subject of contesting philosophies. The debate nowadays, with both sides lobbing

slogans back and forth, seems paltry by comparison. Thomson's spirited book brings to mind another adage about the repetition of history—how it comes first as tragedy, then as farce.

>DAVID LINDLEY, a freelance writer living in Alexandria, Virginia, is the author of *Boltzmann's Atom: The Great Debate That Launched a Revolution in Physics (2000)* and *Degrees Kelvin: A Tale of Genius, Invention, and Tragedy (2004)*.

## *High Ground, Low Life*

*TOULOUSE-LAUTREC AND MONTMARTRE.*

By Richard Thomson, Phillip Dennis Cate, and Mary Weaver Chapin.

Princeton Univ. Press. 294 pp. \$60

*Reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers*

Perched on a 500-foot butte, the Montmartre quarter of Paris, with its windmills, empty fields, and quaint cobblestone streets through which herds of animals were driven, still seemed like a village in the late 19th century. Yet it also offered a bustling nightlife. The cheap wine and entertainment in the Moulin Rouge, Moulin de la Galette, and other dance halls and bars attracted many artists. They lived among ordinary workers, circus performers, tramps, and petty criminals, in decrepit tenements and rough studios made of wood and corrugated iron, and they often painted their Montmartre. Auguste Renoir's *At the Moulin de la Galette* (1876) portrayed a sunny, congenial evening of drinking, dancing, and joie de vivre. By contrast, Maurice Utrillo, a hopeless alcoholic, depicted a Montmartre of dreary urban landscapes with flyspecked walls and leprous streets confined by endless rows of iron railings.

One of Montmartre's artists was especially conspicuous. Four feet, 11 inches in Cuban heels, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) lurched along on crutches and sniffled, drooled, and lisped. The singer Yvette Guilbert, whom he befriended and often portrayed, was shocked upon first encountering his “enormous dark head, . . . red face, and very black beard; oily, greasy skin; a nose that could cover two faces; and a mouth . . .

like a gash from ear to ear, looking almost like an open wound!” But his fine draftsmanship, psychological insight, and biting wit made him “court artist to the superstars,” writes Mary Weaver Chapin, a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago.

This handsomely illustrated catalog—for an exhibition this year at the Art Institute, as well as the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.—is factual and clearly written, with sound and convincing analyses and no theoretical or ideological obfuscations. Between them, Chapin and Richard Thomson, a professor of fine art at the University of Edinburgh, describe the settings of Lautrec's work in six quite useful chapters, on the history of Montmartre, cabarets (restaurants with floor shows), dance halls, “cafés-concerts” (offering everything from shadow plays to boxing kangaroos), whorehouses, and the circus.

Three additional essays are more substantial. In “Depicting Decadence in Fin-de-Siècle Paris,” Thomson focuses on 1885–95, Lautrec's greatest decade, and seeks to “explore the aspects of contemporary society with which Lautrec's work interacted, examine the visual culture of Montmartre, and assess Lautrec's images alongside those of others.” He successfully explains “the modernity of Lautrec and how it was formed by social and cultural circumstances.” In “The Social Menagerie of



At the Moulin Rouge (1892–95), by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Toulouse-Lautrec's Montmartre," Phillip Dennis Cate, director emeritus of the Rutgers University Art Museum, points out that Montmartre was home to both the Nouvelle-Athènes café, where Manet, Degas, and other Impressionist painters gathered, and Le Lapin Agile (*The Lively Rabbit*), where Picasso and Modigliani met before the Great War. And in "Toulouse-Lautrec and the Culture of Celebrity," Chapin describes the fluid society of the 1890s, in which "an actress more beautiful than talented, a fashionable courtesan, an outrageous writer, or a scandalous cancan dancer from the lowest echelon of society could rise to unprecedented heights."

Lautrec himself became instantly famous with his first poster, *Moulin Rouge: La Goulue* (*The Glutton*), 3,000 copies of which were pasted around Paris in December 1891. Besides making the 27-year-old artist a celebrity, the astonishing work transformed lithography into high art. The poster contains four distinctly layered elements, emphasized by the receding vertical lines of the wooden floorboards. The tall, purplish, grotesque,

Pulchinello-like male dancer in the foreground, Valentin le Désossé, has a stovepipe hat, hooked nose, and jutting chin, and seems to push his right hand up the skirt of La Goulue, who dances behind him. She herself, also in profile and facing the opposite direction, wears a blond topknot, choker, polka-dot blouse, and burgundy stockings. Swirling on the axis of one leg and raising the other high enough to kick off a man's top hat, she reveals her bountiful petticoats. (She sometimes "forgot" to wear undies, and revealed a good deal more.) Behind her are the all-black, shadow-play silhouettes of her audience: two women and eight men, one of the latter notably porcine. In the rear, the egg-yolk lights that brighten the spectacle seem to trail off in a spume of yellow smoke. The effect is both seductive and slightly sinister.

One of Lautrec's most important pictures, *At the Moulin Rouge* (1892–95), depicts five well-dressed men and women seated with drinks at a marble table. Thomson perceptively observes that "the seated group forms

a vortex of precarious stability around which flow different currents." Lautrec himself cruises through the background, La Goulue arranges her hair before a mirror, and an orange-haired, green-faced, wide-eyed, large-mouthed woman lurches toward us in the right foreground. "These contrasting but insistent pictorial presences," Thomson adds, "are compositional contrivances that increase the vertiginous impact of the painting. All is artifice in this quintessential image of decadence."

The louche entertainments had a dark side—the cancan dancer Jane Avril, for instance, Lautrec's loyal friend and patron (and a rival of La Goulue), though unusually well educated and refined, had been treated for mental illness by the famous Dr. Charcot—but they served to inspire many artists besides Lautrec. The famous conclusion of W. B. Yeats's "Among School Children" refers to the dancer Loïe Fuller, one of the stars of Montmartre: "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" In Georges Seurat's *Chahut* (1889–90), the cancan dancers are seen from below, the viewpoint of the orchestra and of the audience. Onlookers smirk in the front seats. Seurat's lines are straight and long, his dancers stiff and fixed. As the art historian

Robert Herbert has observed, "There is something almost frantic in *Chahut*, whose mannequins grimace not so much in fulfilled pleasure as in frenetic attempts to realize it."

Edgar Degas' *Café Singer* (1879) also portrays the performer close up and from below. The singer wears an elaborately trimmed mauve dress and raises her black-gloved right hand in a dramatic gesture. Her head is thrown back, her eyes are in shadow, her skin is chalky pale, and her open, red-rimmed mouth pours out a full-throated song. Unlike Seurat's mechanical dancers, Thérésa seems to enjoy her turn on stage. The inclusion of these and other pictures by Lautrec's contemporaries greatly enhances this exhibition catalog.

The squalid side of Montmartre foreshadowed its inevitable decay. A modern *Blue Guide* for tourists warns that it is "now the focus of the seedy nightlife of an increasingly sordid area, where colorful and motley crowds congregate in the cafés and around the so-called 'cabarets artistiques,'" whose denizens are not favored by a latter-day Lautrec.

>JEFFREY MEYERS is the author of the newly published *Impressionist Quartet: The Intimate Genius of Manet and Morisot, Degas and Cassatt, as well as biographies of George Orwell, W. Somerset Maugham, Ernest Hemingway, and many others.*

## *The People, No*

DEMOCRACY AND POPULISM:  
*Fear and Hatred.*

By John Lukacs. Yale Univ. Press. 248 pp. \$25

*Reviewed by Michael Kazin*

Hostility toward populism has a long history in American intellectual life. Yale students shouted down William Jennings Bryan when he came to New Haven during the 1896 presidential campaign, and renowned professors regarded the agrarian rebels of the same era as anarchists who knew nothing about how the economy worked. Half a century later, Richard Hofstadter and Daniel Bell described populism as an impulse of the ill educated, the paranoid, and the anti-Semitic. In the 1960s, Elizabeth Hardwick, in

*The New York Review of Books*, characterized the backers of George Wallace as self-destructive, "joyless," "sore and miserable."

Common to all these judgments is a suspicion that resentment drives the politics of ordinary people. Clever, unscrupulous leaders, it's charged, gain influence by playing to the irrational anger of the mob. As a result, the erudite, responsible minority is perpetually at risk, and, along with it, the highest achievements of Western civilization.

John Lukacs, the author of *Five Days in*