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.

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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*

London: May 1940 (1999) and some two dozen other works, is the latest to join the chorus of alarm. Indeed, the noted historian's condemnation of populism ranks among the most sweeping and unqualified ever written. He's as upset about politicians who rush to indulge the masses as he is about those who bedazzle them. He even comes close to condemning nationalism as no more than a species of rabble-rousing.

Populism can be defined as a style of political appeal that glorifies the masses and casts the opposition as a hostile, undemocratic elite. In the contemporary United States and Europe, it has spawned, according to Lukacs, the "tyranny of the majority" Tocqueville warned against. A loathsome marriage of mass culture and mass democracy, consummated by demagogues, has corroded public virtue, weakened belief in absolute truth, and sparked "a steady increase in carnality, vulgarity, brutality." If unchecked, populism could destroy the social order itself.

Though often labeled a conservative, Lukacs views the governing Republican Right in the United States as just one more symptom of the disease. "President Bush and his advisers chose to provoke a war in Iraq . . . for the main purpose of being popular," he contends. "This was something new in American history."

One can reject the assertion about the president's motives yet still credit the author for underlining a key transition. What goes by the name of conservatism today, particularly in the United States, bears scant resemblance to conservatism before the Cold War. Beginning with the antics of Joe McCarthy, an aggressive populism that rails against a liberal elite in the name of the patriotic, God-fearing masses has all but replaced the earlier conservatism characterized by the defense of social hierarchy, respect for state authority, and an aversion to heated rhetoric and the rapid social changes it seeks to inspire. Edmund Burke and John Adams might be amused by the likes of Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh, but those bewigged gentlemen would also recognize that such provocateurs have, in effect, rejected the philosophical tradition they cherished.

Unfortunately, Lukacs delivers more a rambling set of convictions than a reasoned analysis. He denounces the imprecise use of terms (Hitler was a National Socialist, *not* a fascist), dispenses grand truths without taking the trouble to argue for them ("What governs the world . . . is not the accumulation of money, or even of goods, but the accumulation of opinions"), and spits scorn at celebrated figures with whom he disagrees (Hannah Arendt was "a muddled and dishonest writer"). He spins off on tangents and repeats himself, too.

Still, one pays attention. Who can tell when he'll say something wise, or at least original? And a few nuggets do emerge. Drawing on his deep knowledge of Nazism, Lukacs portrays Hitler as an evil genius who created a belligerent style of nationalism, one that survived his death and flowered again in the authoritarian populist regimes of leaders from Juan Perón to Saddam Hussein. Lukacs also points out that "totalitarian" poorly describes the Communist states that ruled Eastern Europe in the 1970s and '80s. The would-be Lenins in East Berlin, Prague, and Warsaw were propping up a sclerotic system that already had one jackboot in the grave.

But ire at the growth of populism leads Lukacs to make some quaint and ahistorical statements. "Like Tocqueville," he writes, "I do not know why God chose to have mankind enter the democratic age." In Lukacs's view, "there may be room for an argument that, for the sake of proper democracy, voting should be made not easier but more difficult." He sniffs at the "questionable results" of the 19th- and 20th-century reforms that magnified the electorate's power as well as its size: Discerning party leaders got replaced by pollsters, with their vulgar efforts to quantify and manipulate the national mood of the nation. But Lukacs ignores the corrupt legislative deals and special favors that, during the Gilded Age, routinely elevated party hacks to the Senate. It's simply a myth that the old order was more honest and intelligent than the new.

What fueled the triumph of populism on the Right? Lukacs hardly pauses to reflect on the question. The answer is actually rather simple: The populist style wasn't invented by conniving politicians of the Right or the Left; like democracy itself, it arose largely in response to demands from below.

In the 19th century, Americans and Europeans organized with gusto to further their group interests, the definition of which could

change almost overnight. At the same time, the gradual emergence of universal suffrage and the steady rise of incomes in a freewheeling market society emboldened the common folk to question authority of all kinds. Nationalism, which Lukacs is correct to call the most durable force in modern politics, fit the needs of people who no longer trusted the verities peddled by monarchs and bishops but who still longed for a transcendent community. By dramatizing the ideals of his beloved country, a Lincoln (and, later, an FDR and a Churchill) could persuade ordinary people to make sacrifices they wouldn't make for hereditary authorities with transnational connections.

In the United States, reformers and radicals held a near-monopoly on the language of populism from the age of Jefferson through the heyday of the New Deal, but inevitably, plain-speaking conservatives took it up too. Resolving to oppose liberal ideas and policies, they adapted the rhetorical dualism of their opponents: scorn for a self-appointed elite, and undiluted praise for the virtuous masses and their glorious republic. Activists on the Right substituted middle Americans for heroic strikers and tax-eating bureaucrats for greedy plutocrats, but the technique of mobilizing the grass roots was the same.

Democracy and Populism is an entertaining, occasionally instructive polemic by a scholar who has learned a great deal in his long career. But for all his erudition, Lukacs fails to heed the famous sentiment expressed by Churchill, one of his few political heroes: Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.

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Arts & Letters

SONGS FROM THE BLACK CHAIR: A Memoir of Mental Illness. By Charles Barber. Univ. of Nebraska Press. 202 pp. $22

Tobias Wolff, author of the autobiographical *This Boy's Life*, selects the memoirs published in the University of Nebraska Press's American Lives series, and what a beautiful choice he's made in this modest, bittersweet story of three boys' lives that didn't turn out as expected.

Three best friends grow up in a New England college town in the 1970s. Together they enact the ritual rebellions of adolescence: drinking, driving too fast, smoking pot, playing nasty music. The brilliant one, Nick, from a working-class Italian background, gets straight A's and goes to the local college on a full scholarship. Henry, the classic WASP underachiever, is a shoo-in to join Nick at the college, where both his parents teach. Fellow faculty brat Charles, the author of this memoir, goes off to his father's alma mater, Harvard.

Fast-forward two decades: Nick lives in his parents' basement and works as an aide with people who are mentally retarded. Charles, who dropped out of Harvard after suffering a full-blown episode of obsessive-compulsive disorder, now does intake interviews at the Bellevue Men's Shelter in New York City. And Henry is dead. He, too, dropped out of college, briefly worked as a busboy, then committed suicide at his parents' summer cottage, after a drunken weekend there with Charles and Nick. A few years later, Henry's mother replicated his suicide almost exactly.

Barber's title isn't phony symbolism. It refers to *Songs from the Big Chair*, the recording that Henry put into the tape player of his truck before letting the exhaust fumes take him out. It also refers to the black chair next to Barber's desk at Bellevue, where the crazies sit and tell their stories, singing the atonal notes of their lives. Barber is supposed to check off all comers by category: SPMI (seriously and persistently mentally ill), MICA (mentally ill chemical abuser), Axis II (per-