

lawns and shade trees. Pollen counts soared.

The first half of *Breathing Space* makes a persuasive case that humans, when sickened by the environment they create, will move on. But as a species, we're so high-maintenance that we unavoidably transform the new environment into the old one. Mitman has gathered some delightful artifacts to illustrate his narrative—period brochures from hay fever resorts, cartoons tweaking upper-crusty sneezers, and a quaint photograph of an herbicide truck saturating the roadside to kill ragweed (and very likely many other living things). Other asides—on the history of train transport in Michigan, for instance—contribute to an uneven tone and a wobbly narrative line.

Absent—and oddly so, given Mitman's thesis that disease and environment evolve together—is the mention of two relatively recent developments in allergy and asthma. One is the hygiene hypothesis: A robust body of research shows that infants benefit from gut microbes (filth, in other words), which inoculate the immune system and prevent the overreaction that is allergy. The other is the impact of climate change. Ragweed, the poster child for allergenic plants, is expected to produce more pollen per plant as carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere rise.

Halfway through *Breathing Space*, Mitman abandons the subject of hay fever and human migration. After a brief treatment of inner-city allergy (cockroaches and industrial pollution replace ragweed as the culprit), he turns to criticizing our cultural tendency to treat symptoms. The ensuing history of air conditioners, vacuum cleaners, air-tight housing that traps allergens indoors, and pharmaceutical marketing is not uninteresting. But it's not exactly news. What's provocative is Mitman's notion that the way humans break ground can so profoundly transform an ecosystem that we can't live in it anymore.

—Hannah Holmes

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

## Platonic Thoughts

RALPH WALDO EMERSON remarked admiringly of Plato, "An Englishman reads and says, 'how English!' a German—'how Teutonic!' an Italian—'how Roman and how Greek!' . . . Plato seems,

to a reader in New England, an American genius. His broad humanity transcends all sectional lines." Simon Blackburn thinks Emerson was essentially, but not entirely, right, and in this volume of the Atlantic Monthly Press's Books That Changed the World series, he traces the vexing appeal of Plato's mighty *Republic*.

Plato (c. 428 BC–c. 347 BC) wrote the *Republic* in Athens around 375 BC. By then he had come to loathe the city, which he regarded as little more than an ignorant rabble ruled by corrupt demagogues. The *Republic* seeks to demonstrate what a truly just city looks like and, in the process, to expose Athens—which had executed Plato's teacher, Socrates, some two decades earlier—as a sham.

The *Republic's* central claim, spelled out in a dialogue between Socrates and several interlocutors, is that justice and happiness stand and fall together. Not because good consequences—a fine reputation, say—follow from being just, but because justice itself is so great that nothing gained by injustice could be greater. By "justice," Plato means more than honoring agreements or obeying the law. A just person does these things, but only because his soul is rightly ordered: Reason rules over desire. The same goes for a just city. The wise rule, the rest obey, and justice is the result.

Blackburn, a philosopher at the University of Cambridge, isn't buying it. What about Machiavellians who coolly check their passions so that they can practice even greater injustice—and who seem happy to boot? He has in mind those enfants terribles, American neoconservatives, but his more intriguing example is from the Peloponnesian War. In 416 BC, Athens sent 10,000 men

**PLATO'S  
REPUBLIC:**  
A Biography.

By Simon Blackburn.  
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against the tiny island of Melos, which fielded scarcely 500. The Melians asked Athens's envoys to respect their neutrality, and got this response before they were slaughtered: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." The Athenians, Blackburn says, showed precisely the sort of dispassionate self-governance that Plato associates with justice. Yet they acted unjustly, and were none the worse for it.

Blackburn's criticisms don't end there. Plato's ideal rulers are philosopher-kings who make Blackburn shudder—probably because he knows what despots ruling in the name of wisdom have done. "In so far as Plato has a legacy in politics," he writes, "it includes theocracy . . . , militarism, nationalism, hierarchy, illiberalism, totalitarianism, and the complete disdain of the economic structures of society."

If its argument fails and its politics frighten, why, in the words of Plato scholar M. F. Burnyeat, is there "always someone somewhere . . . reading the *Republic*"? Perhaps for the same reason that someone is always looking at the sun. Both are enormous and abiding, absolutely of this world yet alien to it. And both are things of beauty.

Many remember the *Republic's* haunting metaphor of the cave, to which Blackburn devotes several chapters. But for my money, the *Republic's* beauty arrives more casually. When, for example, Socrates senses a friend growing weary during the discussion, he urges, "We must station ourselves like hunters surrounding a wood and concentrate our minds, so that our quarry, justice, does not vanish into obscurity."

Blackburn calls this "tedious dramatic buildup." Others call it poetry. Blackburn is a philosopher whom John McCain might like—straight-talkin', no-nonsense. This sensibility suits tartly argued earlier books by Blackburn such as *Truth: A Guide* (2005) and *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics* (2001), but he can't quite figure out what to make of the *Republic*. Still, he is awed by the purity of Plato's demand that we change our lives. In the end, he can't help but admire what Virginia Woolf called

"the love of truth which draw[s] Socrates and us in his wake to the summit where, if we too may stand for a moment, it is to enjoy the greatest felicity of which we are capable."

—Brendan Boyle

## The Ambassadors

FAITHFUL SERVICE TO HER Majesty's government earned British diplomat Carne Ross the privilege of being a well-placed pawn during the disastrous exercise in Anglo-American self-deception that became the Iraq war. But he

atoned brilliantly in 2004, testifying before a British commission about how intelligence reports were misused to fabricate an Iraqi threat to the United Kingdom. He then resigned from the civil service to found Independent Diplomat, an international organization that supplies diplomatic expertise to not-quite-states such as Kosovo and Somaliland.

In his memoir, Ross describes with elegant humility his 15-year apprenticeship in the British diplomatic service. The Foreign Office recruits presentable generalists. With no formal training even in diplomatic protocol, they must cope with trade policies, centrifuge technology, and knotty issues in international law. Despite the State Department's vastly larger size and budget, U.S. diplomats are expected to do much the same, so Ross's book is a fine introduction to the diplomatic profession for American readers.

The best portions of *Independent Diplomat* are drawn from Ross's years at United Nations headquarters, where he served from 1997 to 2002. There he was tasked with defending UN sanctions on Iraq against charges that they had caused the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children. Those sanctions were imposed to compel Saddam Hussein to destroy his chemical and biological stockpiles and dismantle his nuclear program. High-level defectors confirmed that by 1996 he had

**INDEPENDENT  
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Dispatches  
From an Unac-  
countable Elite.

By Carne Ross. Cornell  
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