

are on the cusp of ending the tyranny of highways in the United States and will reclaim their birthright as the premier mover of people, freight, and mail.

“When the railroad returns, not *if*,” Stilgoe declares, America will be transformed. “Return [of train travel] will alter everyday life more dramatically than the arrival of personal computers, Internet connections, or cell phones.” His certainty about a rail renaissance is surprising. Passenger trains are few and far between today; in 2005, Americans traveled 900 miles by private vehicle for every mile by intercity rail. The disconnect between Stilgoe’s

Are we witnessing “the final, sickly sweet blossoming of the automobile”?

vision and reality is just evidence of “the final, sickly sweet blossoming of the automobile,” he argues, which only “masks the desperation

of real estate developers terrified that people will not buy the last of the structures built according to automobile thinking.”

Some books are of interest because they reveal a mindset that is part of the problem that the author is trying to correct. So far, train advocates have been unsuccessful in wresting America’s heart from SUVs and three-car garages. Despite \$3-a-gallon gasoline and worry about global warming, debate over transportation priorities hasn’t figured in this year’s presidential campaigns. Convincing taxpayers that trains could save them money and improve the environment is a subtle educational task.

Stilgoe, a historian of landscape at Harvard, swings a sledgehammer against anyone who does not share his opinions. And some of his opinions are idiosyncratic. In 1962, he writes, the wise men of the Kennedy administration recognized the “futility” of building more highways, but they were thwarted by Lyndon B. Johnson and his Great Society program. (For the record, today’s Northeast Corridor got its start with the 1965 High Speed Ground Transportation Act, signed by Johnson, who also spurred the development of Washington, D.C.’s Metro subway.) More often, the arguments are simplistic. Amtrak, Stilgoe declares, was organized as an “elegant means of keeping railroad innovation under the control of a Congress controlled

by road and airline industries—and by the military.”

After exhausting his prophecies and conspiracy theories, Stilgoe addresses various aspects of train service with more success. There are interesting chapters about the poor state of mail delivery after the Post Office Department abandoned railway transportation in the 1960s and the revival of freight traffic in the past 20 years with the growth of global trade. But the book sidesteps the crucial issue of how we get from here to there—from Amtrak’s threadbare service (outside the Boston-Washington Northeast Corridor) and freight railroads’ clogged infrastructure to 200-mile-per-hour passenger trains and just-in-time product shipments. Or, more realistically, how we can build strategic rail links, ranging from 50 to 200 miles, that complement highways and relieve the worst of traffic congestion and pollution.

Stilgoe forsakes footnotes and offers instead a laundry list of sources at the end of each chapter. Inexplicably, he fails to cite the work of a number of recognized experts, including Maury Klein, Albro Martin, Joseph Vranich, and a forebear, John W. Barriger III. Back in 1956, Barriger published *Super-Railroads for a Dynamic American Economy*, in which he asked why “super-highways and super-markets and super-everything-else [are] part of modern America’s burgeoning economic life, while there are no super-railroads.” That question has yet to be adequately answered.

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RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Turn That Smile Upside Down

Reviewed by Sarah L. Courteau

ADD TO OIL GUZZLING, OUT-size coffee drinks, and celebrity malfunctions another American addiction. Happiness, if we’re to believe Eric G. Wilson, is “an obsession that could well lead to a sudden extinction of the

AGAINST HAPPINESS:
In Praise of Melancholy.

By Eric G. Wilson.
Sarah Crichton
Books/FSG. 166 pp. \$20

creative impulse,” a disaster he compares to those foreshadowed by global warming and other apocalypses. Once he’s clucked over his Chicken Little scenario, Wilson, an English professor at Wake Forest University, lays out the case for allowing a little rain to fall into our lives.

In the pursuit of happiness, Americans pop pills and read step-by-step guides as never before, cheered on by the popular new field of “positive psychology.” In a 2006 Pew Research Center poll, nearly 85 percent of Americans said they were at least moderately happy, a finding that dismays Wilson, given the world’s woes (see global warming et al.) and life’s irritations (see this morning’s spousal spat at breakfast). Might these inane “happy types,” with their taste for McMansions, televangelists, and Cool Whip desserts, lure the holdouts to the bright side?

What most alarms Wilson is the specter of a “police state of Pollyannas” that could deprive us of the creative frisson we experience when we careen between agony and ecstasy. He fears the birth of a nation “denuded of gorgeous lonely roads and the grandeur of desolate hotels, of half-cracked geniuses and their frantic poems.” Or, put more epigrammatically (he has a weakness for variations on his refrain): “The blues are clues to the sublime.”

There’s a powerful argument to be made that the brave new world of psychiatry could extinguish a certain creative genius that shows up in people we label depressed. Wilson is at no loss for historical examples of writers, painters, musicians, and others who complained of symptoms that would get them a clinical diagnosis today. (In a letter to a friend at the tender age of 16, Ludwig van Beethoven revealed that, in addition to asthma, he suffered from “melancholy which for me is almost as great an evil as my illness itself.”) As for the rest of us, Wilson argues that a healthy helping of “pervasive gloom” will heighten our appreciation of life and of who we are.

The best retort to Wilson’s thesis is Peter Kramer’s book *Against Depression* (2005), which Wilson’s title clearly references (though only in

Against Happiness’s bibliographical notes, a useful digest of the literature on happiness and depression, does Kramer’s book merit a mention). Kramer argues that Western society has romanticized a condition that ought to be treated aggressively, like any other debilitating disease. Depression itself, he holds, bestows no special generative magic. His is an extreme stance, but important to remember when we wax poetic about tortured poets.

Wilson says he is not questioning therapy for “lost souls” who might harm themselves or others or who simply find existence unbearable. But that leaves a lot of pain to be celebrated rather than medicated. Though he wrings his hands at our tendency to treat everyday sadness as if it were a disease, Wilson makes the opposite mistake of failing to engage with the dark side of darkness. After a few pages cataloging the devastation many of his creative heroes wrought in their own lives and others’, he blithely concludes that “out of their suffering emerge things rich and strange.”

Perhaps Wilson’s bigger mistake is that he underestimates the resilience many “happy types” display in the face of life’s miseries, large and small. In that Pew poll he cites as evidence of Americans’ shallow bliss, only a third of those surveyed claimed to be “very happy.” Another 50 percent characterized themselves as only “pretty happy,” which could easily describe folks who, despite the recent death of Fido, yesterday’s parking ticket, and a fraught relationship with Mom, just grin and bear it.

SARAH L. COURTEAU is literary editor of *The Wilson Quarterly*.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Peddling Metal

Reviewed by Daniel Akst

PEOPLE ARE FOREVER DEBATING which inventions have had the greatest impact on the world, but it’s safe to say that few make much of a case for corrugated metal. Now this humble yet versatile material

CORRUGATED IRON:

Building on the Frontier.

By Adam Mornement and Simon Holloway. Norton. 224 pp. \$60