

into “a very dark cubbyhole, whither he had already brought his overcoat, and together with it, a certain odor all his own, which had been imparted to the bag brought in next, containing sundry flunkeyish effects.” “Sundry flunkeyish effects” is true to the spirit of Gogol, Morson asserts, since “Gogol often chooses words less for their meaning than for their humorous sound and resonances.” Guerney also stays true to Gogol by ending the passage with a funny image, as in the Russian.

P&V’s translation is quite different. In their version, the bureaucrat settles into “a very dark closet, where he had already managed to drag his overcoat and with it a certain smell of its own, which had been imparted to

the sack of various lackey toilettries brought in after it.” The use of “toilettries” in the P&V version is prompted by the Russian word *tualet* in the original, but Gogol’s intention, Morson says, was for *tualet* to be funny and jarring. This effect is achieved by Guerney, but not in the P&V translation.

A handful of instances in which P&V emphasize semantic accuracy over tone and overall meaning round out Morson’s indictment of the lauded literary pair. For Morson, a great work of literature is an “experience, not just [a] sequence of signs on a page.” If translators are not able to convey that experience, they risk leading readers to think that the book’s greatness is the real sham.

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Forgotten Bauhaus

**THE SOURCE:** “The Powerhouse of the New” by Martin Filler, in *The New York Review of Books*, June 24, 2010.

SAY THE WORD *BAUHAUS* AND the thing that pops into just about everyone’s mind is Bauhaus architecture, codeword for boring, sleek, soulless, corporate design. This is all a terrible misunderstanding, declares architecture critic Martin Filler. The Bauhaus was not an architectural movement but a school for artists, architects, and designers whose uniqueness was found “not so much [in] its departure from prevailing aesthetic norms—specifically its rejection of historical styles—but rather

## EXCERPT

### Creation Mists

*Just about any person fascinated by books has felt the seductive pull of the writer’s archive. Human beings love creation stories, and that’s what the researcher hopes to discover: to witness, in retrospect, the birth of a masterpiece. . . . [Sam] Tanenhaus writes excitedly [in The New York Times] of the trove of materials that went into the making of Rabbit at Rest: snapshots of storefronts in a Pennsylvania town, photocopies of pages from medical books on heart disease, a memo from a researcher on sales practices at Toyota dealers, a list of basketball moves. There’s even the wrapper from a Planters Peanut Bar, “as lovingly preserved as a pressed autumn leaf,” which Tanenhaus imagines [John] Updike using to come up with the novel’s vivid*

*description of Rabbit dumping the “sweet crumbs out of the wrapper into his palm and with his tongue lick[ing] them all up like an anteater”—one of those actions we’ve all done but would be at pains to describe.*

*But if these are the keys to a literary universe, where are the locks? None of us, presented with this miscellany of sources, could sit down and write the Rabbit novels. What they actually reveal is how mysterious the essential act of creation is. You might as well gather together Picasso’s paint jars, canvas, and easel and try to reconstruct Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, or imagine a ballet by looking at the music, costumes, shoes. What’s missing is the alchemy that takes an assortment of random objects and transforms them into a work of art. And that process leaves no trace.*

—RUTH FRANKLIN, senior editor of *The New Republic* (June 30, 2010)

[in] its systematic recasting of the way in which the fine and applied arts were taught.” (Many buildings deemed Bauhaus are actually Modernist works by Modernist stars who had nothing at all to do with the Bauhaus, Filler insists.)

The school was founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919 and closed at its final location in Berlin (on suspicion of *Kulturbolschewismus*—cultural Bolshevism) when Hitler came to power in 1933. The Bauhaus’s key innovation was the *Vorkurs*, “a required introductory class that provided intensive back-to-basics immersion in the fundamentals of color theory and composition.” The course was conceived and taught by Johannes Itten, “the extravagantly eccentric, mystically inclined Swiss Expressionist painter . . . an oddball even for a radical art school,” who often donned medieval-style robes and sandals and “consumed copious quantities of garlic.”

Itten, Filler writes, was “the id to the superego” of architect Walter Gropius, the school’s first director. Together, the pair represented “both sides of the Bauhaus’s bifurcated nature, at once utopian and pragmatic, intuitive and scientific, highly ordered and subversively anarchic.” Itten left the Bauhaus in 1923 in protest over Gropius’s intent to focus on commercial prototypes rather than theoretical design.

An exhibit that ran from November 2009 to January 2010 at the Museum of Modern Art, “Bauhaus 1919–1933,” offered “an eye-opening experience for those familiar only with the cliché of the Bauhaus as a soulless assembly line of mechanistic design.” The show included *Untitled*

(*Pillar With Cosmic Visions*) (1919–1920) by Theobald Emil Müller-Hummel, a wooden sculpture carved from a World War I fighter plane propeller. “Closely resembling an oceanic tribal totem, this *objet trouvé*—taken from an engine of mass destruction and metamorphosed into a talisman of social transformation—movingly summarizes the Expressionist search for spiritual treasure amid the wreckage of industrialized warfare,” Filler writes.

Beyond the characters of Itten and Gropius, those interested in understanding the Bauhaus should turn to two artists who exerted a “tremendous” influence on the school, Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946). Kandinsky’s “pulsating colors and hyperactive forms” and Moholy-Nagy’s innovations with photography and sculpture are a far cry from the Modernist architectural style “Bauhaus” normally evokes.

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

## Welty’s Southern Discomfort

**THE SOURCE:** “Intimate Strangers” by Ellen Ann Fentress, in *The Oxford American*, Issue 69.

EUDORA WELTY WAS NOT ONLY A jewel but an emblem of the South. Richard Wright, self-exiled from home at the age of 17, became a symbol of black anger and empowerment. Both writers hailed from the same small town of Jackson, Mississippi, and were born within nine months of each other—Wright in 1908 and Welty in 1909. Yet they never met.

Eudora Welty and Richard Wright were born in Jackson, Mississippi, nine months apart, yet they never met.

Ellen Ann Fentress, a writer living in Jackson, ponders why. Though the writers’ childhoods—Wright’s one of deprivation and discrimination, and Welty’s one of privilege and parental pampering—were spent “a Jim Crow galaxy” apart, their careers ran roughly parallel as they worked in the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration, published early-career short stories in 1936, came out with well received books (Wright, *Uncle Tom’s Children* in 1938 and *Native Son* in 1940; Welty, *A Curtain of Green* in 1941 and *The Robber Bridegroom* the next year), received a Guggenheim each, and won multiple O. Henry awards.

And there were mutual acquaintances to introduce them—the writer Ralph Ellison and the 1940s “literary powerhouse couple” of Edward Aswell (Wright’s editor) and Mary Louise Aswell (Welty’s close friend). Welty visited both New York City and Paris while Wright was living in those cities, and when Wright’s memoir *Black Boy* came out in 1945, she refused *The Journal of Mississippi History’s* request that she review it. The two writers’ failure to connect, concludes Fentress, “had to have been deliberate.”

While conceding that it is a “slippery business” to speculate about a “relationship that didn’t happen,” she insists it’s worthwhile to consider why