Noah Ennis on
Unearthing Hidden Lists

Carlos G. Sucre on
The Future of Latin American Democracy

Erin Dahlgren on
The Language of Dance

Margarit Davtian on
Adolescent Identity Online

Ben Field on
America’s Legislative Lunacy

and

Joshua Katz on
Testicular Tomfoolery
The Midway Review is a forum for civil debate across the political spectrum and among the humanities and social science disciplines, and for reflection on current events, culture, politics, religion, and philosophy.

We are accepting submissions to be considered for our Spring 2010 issue. Please consult http://midwayreview.uchicago.edu/ for submission guidelines.

Letters to the editor may be addressed to midwayreview@uchicago.edu. We ask that letters for publication be limited to 350 words.

The Midway Review is printed by In-Print Graphics on thrice-recycled paper.

Publication of the Midway Review is made possible by the Student Government Finance Committee, the College of the University of Chicago, and the Collegiate Network.
THE MIDWAY REVIEW

WINTER 2010 • VOLUME 5, ISSUE 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Fate of Latin American Populism
Carlos G. Sucre
Though the appeal of populism is still robust, liberal democracy in Latin America will become stronger and more consolidated as Latin Americans’ experience with it is lengthened.

The Underworld of Movement
Erin Dahlgren
In movement communication, we relinquish the control of knowing that we are understood in order to gain the control of knowing how to respond.

Myface Tweets When I Blog: I’m Having an Identity Crisis!
Margarit Davtian
Perhaps the link between self-made profiles and real-life identities is so tenuous that after decades of longitudinal studies we discover that social networks are as much of a phase as adolescence itself.

Tooling Around With the Western Tradition
Joshua Katz
Central not only to our conceptions but also to our culture, the phallic farce may be the one thing that holds the key to our global salvation.

Rethinking Congress
Ben Field
The major questions facing legislatures are primarily non-political, and the complexity of those questions are so great that generalists are unfit to answer them.

Infinite Gist
Noah Ennis
The compendia of Piero Scaruffi and Martin Seymour-Smith.
The Fate of Latin American Populism

By Carlos G. Sucre

A superficial analysis of Latin American politics would have almost any would-be analyst believing that all of the region’s democracies are in danger. Such a quick conclusion is understandable. After all, leaders such as Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega are all clearly populists, tearing down with varying degrees of success the democratic institutions in their countries. The worries about the future of Latin America’s liberal democracy worsen when we see that the populist challenge does not only come from the left. Conservative leaders like Colombia’s Álvaro Uribe also undermine democratic principles from a populist standpoint.

Yet, it is our belief that Latin American democracy will endure the strong and difficult trials that populism has posed for it. Indeed, as The Economist’s Michael Reid notes, “The chances remain good that in many countries liberal democracy will withstand the populist challenge.” In this essay we will look at Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, Brazil and Mexico to argue that though the appeal of populism is still robust, liberal democracy in Latin America will become stronger and more consolidated as Latin Americans’ experience with it is lengthened.

For the purposes of this essay it is necessary to establish a working definition of populism. Reid defines it as “a brand of politics in which a strong, charismatic leader purports to be a saviour” who obscures the “distinction between leader, government, party and state.” Building upon Reid’s definition, Julio Carrión outlines four elements of populism: personalistic leadership, reliance on direct democracy that lacks representation, divisive political discourse, and a dislike for limits on executive power. It is also important to understand that populism has little to do with the political spectrum. A populist leader can come from the right, as with the case of Peru’s Alberto Fujimori, or from the left, as with Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Why is populism so appealing in Latin America? First, the political culture of the region lends itself well to populism. Almost all Latin American countries have had a political love affair with the “man on horseback,” who somehow embodied “the will of the popular masses and was destined to solve the people’s problems.” Second, democracies in the region have failed to effectively represent their citizens and have created situations where the under-represented can be easily attracted by a charismatic figure speaking out against the established system. Lastly, the region’s massive economic inequality, “where the richest tenth earns 48% of total income while the poorest tenth earns just 1.6%,” makes leaders who promise economic improvement very appealing.

Quite simply, the political, historical and economic circumstance of the region does not afford many Latin Americans the luxury of analyzing populism for what it is instead of what it purports to be. When living in utter poverty it is difficult to recognize that populism does not cater to the people but rather only offers “short-term solutions that actually worsen the long-term prospects of the poor,” as Francis Fukuyama writes. Given that political participation is also unevenly distributed, we thus have an environment where the majority of the population can neither enjoy the benefits that democracy offers nor voice its concerns. Under such conditions, the rise to power of leaders who can channel these worries is reasonable.
How then can we argue that liberal democracy will survive in Latin America? We must first note the extraordinary advances that this mode of democracy has made in the region since 1979. Today, Latin America’s long history with military governments and frequent successful coup d’états is almost a faint memory. Indeed, the removal of President Manuel Zelaya from power in June of 2009 was only the third successful ousting of a president since 2000. Latin America has managed to leave the possibility of unwanted military involvement in political affairs behind. Since 1979, there have been four successful coups in Latin America, not counting Alberto Fujimori’s self-coup of 1992 in Perú. To put that in some perspective, in the thirty years before 1979, there were approximately 30 successful coup d’états in Latin America. This is clear evidence of Latin America’s democratic progress.

The constituencies of the different Latin American countries have come to regard democracy as the most desirable mode of government. Indeed, as shown by Orlando J. Pérez, most Latin Americans view democracy as the best form of government, despite its flaws. Using results from a study carried out by the Latin American Public Opinion Project, Pérez shows that while there is variation “from a high of 82% for Uruguayan... to a low of 53% for Panamanian citizens,” democracy enjoys widespread support from Latin Americans. There is, however, less satisfaction with how democracy works, with “half of the countries in the survey below the 50% level.”

It is important that we understand what an achievement it is for Latin America to show relative governmental stability and popularity of democratic governance. We must remember that it was only in the 1980s that most Latin American nations made the transition to democracies from authoritarian governments. With little time to consolidate itself, democracy has nevertheless made tremendous progress in the region. Most Latin Americans have come to understand that it is not under dictatorships that nations develop, but under democratic regimes guaranteeing civil and political liberties. Given more time, surely democracy’s relevance to progress, improvement and development will become clearer to Latin Americans, and they will fight to uphold and defend this form of government.

We now move on to our analysis of populism in some of Latin America’s most important countries. We begin with Venezuela, the nation where populism has found the most success. It is obvious that President Hugo Chávez is a populist since he fits the definition perfectly. The President has done away with separation of power, has weakened
important institutions, and has raised the cost of political opposition. The regime’s personalistic nature is undeniable and clear to whoever visits Caracas and is welcomed by numerous building-sized posters of the retired army colonel.

The Chávez government has made unsustainable redistributive policies central to its political model, a key feature of populist governments. Chávez has used record oil revenues (estimated at around 500 billion dollars in total from 1999 to 2009 by Ramón Espinasa, a former Chief Economist at PDVSA) to fund policies designed not for economic development but for political gain—as Chávez himself confessed in 2004.

Chávez’s rise to power was a clear case of populist rhetoric succeeding in constructing a large following around a charismatic leader. Yet, it is not his rise to power that has made him the most important political figure in today’s Latin America, but his access to seemingly endless revenue from oil. Indeed, as Fukuyama writes, Venezuela can “for the moment afford such [unsustainable] policies,” thanks to its vast natural resources. Perhaps the fate of Chávez’s populist model depends on one variable: the price of oil.

The case of Colombia is often contrasted with Venezuela. Under President Álvaro Uribe, the country has made great strides towards weakening the guerillas and ending the decades long violent conflict in the country. Uribe’s policies have allowed “a free press, independent courts, and a free-market economy” to flourish. It is no wonder then that Uribe’s accomplishments make him a uniquely popular figure among the citizenry. He has achieved what countless governments before his could not, and has been repaid with high popularity ratings and a second term in office. Democracy has been strengthened in Uribe’s eight years in office thanks in part to his policies.

Yet, even Chávez’s antagonist has not distanced himself from populist tactics. Principal among these is his tacit but strong pursuit of a currently prohibited third term as president. We must note that the Colombian constitution was amended in 2006 to allow Uribe to run for a second term but now the president has allowed the calls for re-election to continue and has refused to declare himself out of the running in 2010. His former defense minister, Juan Manuel Santos, was recently named leader of Uribe’s Partido de la U and vowed to support him should he seek a third term. While a third term seems like a distant possibility, a recent Washington Post’s editorial was accurate in its assessment of Uribe’s tacit support for a third term. It declared the Colombian president to be “endangering his legacy, as well as the cause of liberal democracy in the region” by standing for a third term and thus purporting to be an indispensable leader.

Brazil’s election of Lula da Silva to the presidency in 2002 signaled a watershed moment in Brazilian politics. As a former labor union leader of very humble background, Lula’s election was thought to represent the rise and populist politics in Brazilian politics. It was believed that he would pursue his party’s far-left policies, which were contrary to those of his predecessor, the Marxist sociologist turned free marketer Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Instead, Lula has walked a democrat’s path and has not attempted any personalization of power or pursued unsustainable policies.

The Brazilian president has consolidated liberal democracy in his country by continuing his predecessors’ programs and philosophies. Indeed, it is notable that Lula has even refrained from creating scapegoats for the tight fiscal policy he instituted during the early part of his government. Lula has shown himself to be a man more concerned with progress and reform than with revolution and power. By so doing, democracy in Brazil has been strengthened and the appeal for populism lessened. We must, however, note his support of his chief of staff Dilma Rousseff for the presidential elections of 2010. While this is not an attempt to keep him in power, a man of democratic bona fides would do well to stay out of the presidential race—one his party is expected to lose.

An important case when analyzing the strength of liberal democracy relative to the appeal of populism is Mexico. Since the election of Ernesto Zedillo to the presidency in 1994, Mexico has consolidated its democracy by modernizing its politics, pursuing sustainable economic policies, and
creating strong democratic institutions. Giving up the Partido Revolucionario Institucional’s hold on national politics after nearly 70 years in power by refusing to name his successor and by ensuring open and free elections, Zedillo ensured the establishment of true democracy in the region’s second largest nation.

Zedillo’s major achievement was the defeat of his own party during the 2000 presidential elections that saw Vicente Fox, a member of the rival Partido Acción Nacional, elected president. While Fox’s achievements are few, Mexican democracy was further consolidated as the new president echoed his predecessor’s belief in democracy as the truest path for progress. Indeed, in the 2006 presidential election Mexico distanced itself further from populism with the defeat of Andrés Manuel López Obrador and the election of Felipe Calderón. Mexico’s electorate managed, albeit by a tiny margin, to defeat a candidate offering backward looking policies resembling the “authoritarian populism of the 1970s.” The citizens’ refusal to join his mass movement after his defeat only underlines the progress made by democracy in Mexico in only a few years.

The defeat of Ollanta Humala in Perú makes it clear that the populist model is simply not as appealing as it once was. During the 2006 election to replace the successful democrat Alejandro Toledo, who had replaced the authoritarian populist Alberto Fujimori, Peruvians were presented with two options. The first was retired lieutenant colonel Ollanta Humala, an ultra-nationalist populist with a discourse similar to Chávez’s and who was supported by the Venezuelan president as well. The other was Alan García, an unsuccessful and populist ex-president who was rebranded a moderate.

Indeed, the fact that Peruvians chose a man described as inept and a failure during his first term in office over another supported by Chávez is quite telling. Perú has a long history of populism, and we only need to look back to the Fujimori presidency to verify this. El Chino, as the Japanese-Peruvian leader liked to be called, used an authoritarian model of government under the pretenses that it was necessary to fight the Marxist guerilla movement Sendero Luminoso. Yet his concentration of power, corruption, and abuses proved to be his undoing. Peruvians made their disgust clear as evidence of Fujimori’s corruption became public. The election of Alejandro Toledo in 2001 signaled Peruvians’ dislike for populist politics and an appeal for economic growth in sustainable ways. Their rejection of Humala in 2006 only made this aversion for populism clearer and louder.

The work of true democratic leaders like Lula da Silva and Ernesto Zedillo has gone a long way in showing Latin Americans that a way out of poverty and towards social and economic improvement lies not with the populists. While populists leaders may continue in office for a few more years, Latin Americans are in support of modes of governance that are antithetical to populism. Yet, Latin American democrats cannot put down their guard and assume that they have defeated the populist challenge. The reasons for the rise of populism are weaker today than before, but they still exist as democratic institutions remain weak and inequality is extremely high.

Indeed the very rise to power of Chávez, Morales, Correa and Ortega makes it clear that there is still much work to be done to strengthen democratic ideals and tenets in the region. The debate in Colombia over Uribe’s third term is extremely important in this regard. If the heirs of Santander allow their very successful president to remain in power, they will be labeling him indispensable and their democracy a sham. If they do not and instead heed Bolivar’s advice, democracy in Colombia will be strengthened and an important example will be set for the whole of Latin America.
The Underworld of Movement

by Erin Dahlgren

If you were not moving and a long period had passed, your neighbors could rightly suspect you for dead. Among the basic parameters for life on earth—respiration, growth, and reproduction—movement underlies them all. Yet when in a hurry, we are more worried about having the physical capacity to catch that bus than the way in which we expose our anxiousness, thoughts, and hopes through our stride. It is not a huge surprise that the underworld of movement goes uncombed.

An attractive starting point might be to think of movement as a sort of language. It is indeed true that many times our movements during conversation communicate by themselves and even exceed the potential of our words. Upon meeting someone for the first time, as you both fidget with your footing and tense up slightly in your chests, a very mobile energy is being pushed back and forth. And when one of you finally drops his shoulders, letting that energy go, something equally powerful is transmitted: As that person is pulled down, closer to the floor where he stands, so too does the conversation feel more grounded.

On a simpler level, society has taught us that a drooping head means “don’t bother,” while crossed arms mean “don’t try.” We recognize a frozen stance as “spacing-out” or “surprised.” When we see someone’s arms and legs speeding robotically down the sidewalk, we know to jump out of the way.

But do these postures and movements function on the same level as words? On the one hand, words contain much less. By verbalizing “the road is slippery,” we know less about how to proceed than if we see a poor fellow walking at a certain speed get flattened on his back. When asked the standard “How are you?” if we only stood in silence for a few seconds, letting our current state of emotions surface, our questioner would have plenty of information to walk away satisfied. On these grounds, one might wonder why humans are so biased to speaking over movement communication.

Verbal language carries with it a powerful difference, one in fact so powerful that it has shaped the structure of human society. When we stare at that brown wooden object with a sturdy back and four legs, and call it “chair,” we have somehow fit that object into a nice little box. We have created ownership over that chair by calling it “chair.” We now wield a fierce power over it: we can explain it to our friend beside us, we can compare it to the object behind it. We are the god of this thing’s identity, reassuring ourselves the whole time that our label serves an absolutely necessary communicative purpose (for what would we be as a species if we could not talk about chairs?).

Erin Dahlgren is a second-year in the College, majoring in Linguistics.
Now with movement, such ownership is not possible. One could try to pin down the tightness of someone’s shoulders with terms like “anxiousness” or “frustration”, but then verbal language returns. Instead of any reason or motivation for tightness, what one can understand is how exactly to react to this person. You understand how to react because you have tightened your shoulders before as well. And this is where the huge significance is buried: in movement, the communicative meaning comes from human empathy. In verbal language, meaning is compartmentalized and controlled. In movement, meaning is recognized.

From this, it seems evident that movement cannot be given a direct parallel to spoken language; to apply the same structures of phonology, morphology, and syntax to strings of social movements is therefore just as futile. To become more intimate with movement as communication, let us look to an area where it is actually encouraged.

Art is one of the few times society allows for communication that is not necessarily specific. One looks at a Van Gogh painting of a field, and despite the mundane scene, despite the simple color contrasts, there is an energy acknowledged from your pure experience of the image. Listening to Beethoven’s famous fifth symphony, at times one might want to say “aggression,” and at others one might point and exclaim “pride”; but after a while, after settling into the complexity of the experience, all you can resort to is a non-word: “Wow.”

When watching dance, such an experience of needing to let go of labels is equally possible. And even yet, something extra places this need above the visual and musical arts. It comes from the very simple fact that the audience possesses the same human bodies as the dancer. The audience members need not be moving or swaying at all; but their practice of using the same muscles—subtly throughout each day of their life—initiates an empathetic, understood dialogue between artist and viewer. The growing appearance of “authentic movement” in modern dance allows for a most organic and extreme version of this non-verbal, responsive dialogue.

So in the end, what can we make of movement? For those who take from this “communication without control,” you are in some sense mistaken and in another sense right on the mark. The popular picture of communication emphasizes speech and its fierce precision. We want to be understood with that word stressed in that sentence, couched nicely between those two euphemisms. But in movement communication, we relinquish the control of knowing that we are understood in order to gain the control of knowing how to respond. Movement communication offers the beautiful possibility of opening up a dialogue that pulls us out of our ego and back into the world.
Myface Tweets When I Blog: I’m Having an Identity Crisis!

by Margarit Davtian

Love me or hate me, it’s mind over matter: I don’t mind and you don’t matter,” is 17-year-old Courtney’s headline statement on her Myspace page. As I peruse an endless pastiche of quotes, images, videos, links, and phrases, remnants of my own adolescence remind me of a time when immense energy was expended on ambivalence. Nearly a century ago, David Elkind coined the term imaginary audience to describe this ubiquitous phenomenon observed among adolescents. According to Elkind and his predecessors, the egocentricity manifested in adolescents’ behavior functions as a way to protect themselves against the potential rejection from their peers; during this stage group affiliation is crucial to one’s self-esteem and sense of identity.

Thus, the preoccupation of presenting the self according to the standards of “cool” for one’s “in-group” is demonstrated in every way possible—from dress, to music, to fury over Mom’s public display of affection. This self-presentation style also accounts for the rigid dichotomy between “likes” and “dislikes” for many adolescents. Hence, in the process of constructing their own identity, adolescents often “over-identify” with peers, cliques, and influential media or religious figures. Consequently, “I don’t care what you (the out-group) thinks,” translates into, “I’m in dire need of ‘in-group’ acceptance.”

The medias through which adolescents express themselves usually vary according to culture and generation, as they naturally determine what adolescents have access to. My own expression of “in-group” identity was limited to clothes, pins, keychains, posters, bumper stickers and the like—and even that did not effectively relay my full-fledged passion towards indifference. With the advent of social networks however, adolescents have ample opportunities to communicate themselves via blogs, Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, and Myspace (to name just a few). Nearly a century after Elkind’s revelations about adolescent identity development, computer-generated personalities are created to fulfill the expectations of a virtual audience that is not so imaginary. To what extent does this new-age medium for self-presentation influence identity development for adolescents? Social networks are certainly changing the way people communicate, but are they surreptitiously reshaping identities too? In other words, which comes first: the profile, or the person?

Forming an identity is an intricate process in which a person constructs a unique image of his psychosocial self. Transcribing this identity in its inchoate form onto Myspace however can be much more complicated. We learn from Courtney’s page, for example, that she: does not take “no” for an answer; is mysterious, creative, impulsive, and extreme; loves attention, raves, and animals; and thinks you have a staring problem. She has 457 friends and is tagged in 3,226 pictures…and counting. Courtney has also joined various groups such as, “Relationships are Overrated,” “Support Gay Rights,” “Math is for Losers,” and “Fashion Makes the World Go Round.” While adults may regard Courtney as contumacious and her peers may think she’s sassy, both sets of untrained eyes would probably agree that Courtney has a strong identity. James Marcia, however, would remind them of his seminal contributions to the theory of identity formation, and would call it moratorium with a chance of foreclosure.

Margarit Davtian is a MAPSS student, concentrating in Psychology.
The *moratorium* stage of identity is an orotund term that refers to the growing pains experienced along the grueling journey towards “finding oneself.” As cliché as this phrase has become, the process itself is paramount to identity formation. During this stage, adolescents are confronted with existential and abstract issues regarding their social, political, religious, and educational realms. In the attempt to explore many newfound and unresolved questions, they may “try on” different roles in unfamiliar territories. As their subjective worlds are suddenly imperfect and unpredictable, they may also experience a significant amount of discomfort and disenchantment along the way (which accounts for the door-slamming, “no-one-will-ever-understand-me!” phenomenon). However, this process of exploration allows adolescents to absorb different consequences and develop a personal value system with which they can attain inner-harmony and stability towards commitments.

An identity in *foreclosure*, although not nearly as unnerving as the word suggests, is considered to be a developmentally stagnant period in adolescence. Individuals who do not experience the opportunity to explore their psychosocial boundaries may uphold the value systems prescribed by peers, parents, media personalities, or other “models.” Consequently, they may exhibit a dogmatic yet superficial adherence to a personal ideology, giving off the impression of a strong and genuine sense of self. While these circumstances in and of themselves don’t pose any psychological risks, a foreclosed individual may manifest a rigid frame of reference; eventually, their fixed ideologies may impede their capacity to develop effective coping strategies for new and complex situations.

It goes without saying that we all take precautions to present ourselves a “certain way” in public, finding the task to be much easier, and often more satisfying, when no one is really watching. However, while we may acknowledge the distinction between our self-efficacy and self-esteem, these boundaries are less clear for adolescents, as they are still in the nascent stage of self-discovery. Within the realm of virtual playgrounds, adolescents can, will, and most certainly do exaggerate and undermine various aspects of their personalities; the possibility of misrepresenting the self is not as troubling as the susceptibility to compromise or alter in ways that acquiesce to the standards set by disparate social contexts. Now that we have considerable empathy towards our model teenager, Courtney, we may care to wonder how and at what point social networks can either facilitate or disrupt the process of her identity formation. For example, does she still endorse gay rights during Sunday mass with her devout Catholic parents? Is she inclined to not do her math homework because a popular girl invited her to join the online group?

On the one hand, disposable identities may actually provide the opportunity to experiment with different social roles and ideals—she may have been a Goth in the past, may be a Raver at present, and possibly will be a Hippie in the future. This form of self-exploration appears shallow, but it may expose Courtney to just enough of a frame of reference to develop her own. On the other hand, she may become so hyper-attuned to her online facade, that it might inadvertently encourage her to evade the active process of introspection. This barricade may eventually lead to a certain degree of detachment from experiences, taking them as they come but never fully committing to any one value system. However, there is hope for Courtney: with the help of a loving, real-life support network, she may overcome her intransigence and continue to refine her identity well into her adult life. Or, she can join a network of narcissists and be just as satisfied.

As much as we can speculate on potential outcomes, we must bear in mind that correlation never implies causation. Perhaps the link between self-made profiles and real-life identities is so tenuous that after decades of longitudinal studies we discover that social networks are as much of a phase as adolescence itself. And who knows, maybe in the motley of “LOL’s, OMG’s, TTYL’s, and JK’s,” there is some hidden message about identity formation that neither Elkind nor Marcia could help us detect.
While the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been at the forefront of the national consciousness, and with the tragedy in Haiti still a key part of the news, everyone has their minds on physical suffering and conflict. What truly lurks under the surface though, tearing our country apart, is the culture war. With Fox News trying to prevent homosexuals from marrying animals and with MSNBC working to let us all know just how cool our President still is, it seems that there is nothing that the two sides can agree upon. If only we could find once more the unity that everyone felt around the time of the Obama election. Such an important event, destined to leave a long thick mark on the American timeline, penetrated every aspect of prejudice so deeply that it truly brought everyone together around the mantle of its historic enormity.

If we go back to one of these central parts of our shared experience, perhaps we can once again feel that feeling of unity and of purpose. And there is one thing that all peoples can truly come together to love: to laugh. Central not only to our conceptions but also to our culture, the phallic farce may be the one thing that holds the key to our global salvation.

In first considering the effect of the junk joke in everyday life, one only need to remember that the many variations on the line “Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?” will almost always elicit a chuckle from nearby listeners. Such is the power of the phallic joke in casual conversation. Regardless of how many times a person has heard the joke in the past, even a vague allusion to that magical appendage will enable the least funny person to pull forth laughter from his compatriots. Moving past common discussion, which unfortunately does not leave much record to analyze, we can move to works of cinema and literature to examine the complex nuances of the knob.

With seemingly every single person in the world going to see Avatar, movies are clearly one of the key common experiences across culture and society. Although the line “say hello to my little friend” along with “I am big, it’s the pictures that got small,” seem as if they fit the bill, nothing on the American Film Institute’s list of one hundred greatest movie lines could be directly characterized as a dick joke. The film Forgetting Sarah Marshall made over one hundred million dollars with a story that opened and closed with a full on shot of Jason Segel’s dangling member. Beyond R-rated comedies, even some PG rated films rated showcase the meat thermometer theme, such as the 2010 family action flick Spy Next Door, where Jackie Chan uses a bike to the balls to incapacitate an attacker. There is nothing like taking in some testicular tomfoolery with an

Joshua Katz is a third-year in the College, majoring in Economics.
auditorium full of eight-year-old girls to make a person commiserate with the common culture.

Rather than the Hollywood movie as the art form appealing to the lowest common denominator, we will have to turn to examine a slightly older writer, famous for pandering to the groundlings. There is perhaps no better evidence for the dick joke as low-brow humor than the comedic work of William Shakespeare. From Samson’s “naked weapon” to Othello’s “black ram” to cupid’s “love-shaft” the prominence of the penile pun spans the complete works. Both the common people, who are clearly low-brow, and the elite have come to appreciate the great works of Shakespeare. Now all people can rejoice in some classic cock clowning.

Although the adoption of Shakespeare’s great plays into high-brow art has opened our the eyes to the greatness of the genital gag, classical plays have long been the realm of the elite. While some may think of the ancient Greeks as high minded philosophers concerned with nothing but metaphysics and arithmetic, one of their most famous and popular playwrights, Aristophanes, had no theme more central than the tool trick. One of Aristophanes’ most interesting works, recently performed at the University of Chicago, was Lysistrata. This play tells of the women of Athens’ plan to starve their men of sex in an effort to end the prevailing war. As one can imagine, the play centers almost entirely around erections jokes, a subset of the general dick joke. “Oh god, oh god, she treats my tool just like Heracles!” is a leading line typifying the type of penis parody that the Greeks seemed to eat up.

Now that there has been established high-brow as well as low-brow takes on dick drollery, the example of the ancient Greeks also serves to highlight the international appeal of meat mischief. From the shores of California, to the British Isles, to the Greek peninsula, people just seem to love the penis. An important example of its international appeal comes from an Irish playwright who lived all over the world, whose work has been translated and performed in many languages, and whose plays have excited critics and have graced all types of theaters: Samuel Beckett.

Throughout Beckett’s thoroughly modern and intellectual Waiting for Godot, there are few greater jokes than those centering on the members of the case members. Early on in the work, Vladimir buttons his fly and imparts the immortal wisdom that one must “never neglect the little things of life.” Moving slightly later on in the play, we find that the two main characters are incredibly excited about the potential excitement from hanging themselves in the form of “an erection!” Another modern playwright, American Edward Albee also had important use of the erection throughout his work. He writes in The Zoo Story that a dog “almost always has an erection . . . of sorts. That’s red, too.” Even though the source matter is very serious, Albee’s references to the dog’s red warrior provide much needed comic relief.

Within our analysis of so many different geographical areas and time periods, the Victorian era is very noticeable absent. In this time of incredible restraint and sexual frustration a playwright known for his vulgar commentary, Oscar Wilde, surprisingly has work without shaft specific themes. Although there can be no direct causation established, it is no coincidence that when culture was in a dearth of dicks, the United States suffered its greatest cultural split: the Civil War. We can clearly see that as the dick joke succeeds, so does world culture.

Clearly, phallic humor is the one thing that unifies high-brow and low-brow, Americans and French, ancients and moderns. Since this subject of humor is such an important unifier of culture, perhaps those who understand the true nature of wang witticism hold the power to truly understand the culture of the world. Perhaps in the future, if we learn to embrace the dick joke, not just softly touching upon the themes therein but firmly taking this message deep inside ourselves, we might begin to see and think together as people of one country and, beyond that, of one world.
people hate Congress. With a passion. Even last January when the new president enjoyed exuberant popularity, the Congress controlled by his party had approval ratings rivaling the recently arrested governor of Illinois. And this open contempt for Capitol Hill was well justified. The legislature had been complicit in and encouraging of the regulatory and subsidy structure that paved the way to the housing bubble and subsequent economic catastrophe. In the past decade, it had accomplished essentially nothing but a run-away debt powered by entitlement program expansion and reckless military adventures—administration priorities such as tax, social security, and immigration reforms went nowhere. Of course, it is easy to pick out particular figures (perhaps Tom Delay or Nancy Pelosi depending on your ideological affinity) and blame them for the legislature’s failing, but it is also worth considering that Congress is simply an institution doomed to fail at the jobs we’ve given it.

The reason that Congress doesn’t happen to work well isn’t simply that its membership is ignorant, corrupt, or narrow-minded (though one could make credible arguments that all those are accurate descriptors); rather, it is that the institution simply isn’t built on a foundation from which it can accomplish its goals. And this isn’t a phenomenon confined to the United States. As just one of many international examples, Britain’s parliament has similarly been unable to tackle the problem of a ballooning deficit, failed schools, or jumpstarting the world’s only major economy still in recession as of the new year.

The basic problem is that modern liberal representative institutions simply are not fit to tackle the problems that face modern liberal nations. Liberal representative legislatures fail on two counts: first, that the questions they face are increasingly inappropriate for their purpose; and second, that the scope of those questions is simply too broad for them to handle. Elected representatives are policy generalists who are supposed to represent the political opinions of their constituents and see those translated into congruent policies. The major questions facing legislatures, though, are primarily non-political, and the complexity of those questions are so great that generalists are unfit to answer them.

To explain what I mean when I say that the issues facing legislatures are non-political, let me compare the current major issues before Congress with those from the early history of our republic. In 1787, when the Constitution was drafted, the major issues of the day were the balance between federal and state sovereignty and whether to favor an industrial society or an agrarian one. In the Jacksonian period, the proper scope of the federal government remained an important question, along with the appropriate extent of suffrage. By the 1850s, the issue that almost fatally divided the nation was the morality of and legal protections afforded to slavery. All these questions are essentially political: there are two sides that are largely mutually exclusive, and the arguments for both sides rely on moral first principles rather than empirical debate. In such cases, it makes sense for us to rely on some form of majority rule, since there is no evidence or argument that can effectively resolve a stalemate. In such a situation, the best we can do is to act on the opinions of as many constituents as possible.

Today the most important policy questions have a fundamentally different character. We are attempting to achieve universal healthcare, to reduce a debt spiraling out of control, to ameliorate dependence on fossil fuels, and to grapple with other issues where the goal is virtually universally ac-

Ben Field is a fourth-year in the College, majoring in Economics.
cepted with the debate revolving instead around means. Even such contentious issues as war policy fit into this category. Whereas in the late 19th century there was serious debate over the principle of whether the U.S. should become an imperial power, today there is general consensus that we would like Iraq and Afghanistan to become liberal democracies. The real debate, as with the domestic issues listed above, is about means, and particularly whether military-backed regime change is a good mechanism for democratization. To be sure, there are some hot-button issues that deal with moral principles, and perhaps they get such disproportionate attention in campaigning because they are relatively few in number. In the end they are not the fundamental questions facing the body politic in the same way that states rights or slavery were to the early American republic.

So why is it so important that the central policy questions are now practical, with debate over means, rather than principled, with debate over ends? The first reason is that such empirical questions have objectively right and wrong answers. If you want to help families struggling to pay rent, setting rent ceilings is an objectively bad policy; if you want to maximize a developed country’s wealth, most trade barriers are unambiguously counterproductive. This means that majority rule in a representative legislature lacks the kind of authority that it does on issues of principle. If a majority vote of the legislature says that 2 + 2 = 5, that does not make it so any more than a vote in favor of rent control can do away with the forces of supply and demand.

“If a majority vote of the legislature says that 2 + 2 = 5, that does not make it so any more than a vote in favor of rent control can do away with the forces of supply and demand.”

A second reason that politicians may avoid the correct answer to a policy question is that while a policy may be overwhelmingly beneficial to the country as a whole, it may harm particular constituencies. For example, consider a trade bill that lowers prices for millions of consumers and creates thousands of new jobs in America’s most competitive export industries but that simultaneously forces a few hundred out of work in a small town’s textile plant that is no longer competitive. In such cases of diffuse, indirect benefits matched with acute, direct harms, the injured constituency’s representative is likely to fight the policy tooth and nail. Since the benefits are diffuse and hypo-
theoretical, other representatives are unlikely to put up a strong fight, especially when they fear that they may one day be in the loser’s position. The logic of electability overwhelms the obviously correct economic answer. Had the US trade representative been making the decision instead, looking at the issue from a national level, he would realize that the injured parties could be compensated from the gains to the winners, with surplus left over. A narrow-minded representative is unlikely to see it this way.

So if it is legislators’ poor understanding and political baggage that prevent them from agreeing on proper policy prescriptions, why is it that informed and non-political technocrats also disagree on many major issues? One reason is that there may be matters of principle that divide them. Security policy specialists may be divided over the morality of racial profiling, and writers on welfare may disagree on what kind of social safety net a modern liberal democracy ought to provide. These questions of principle are the proper domain of the legislature—after all, they are subject to broad, non-technical debate and ultimately cannot be resolved with empirical evidence.

Far more frequently technocrats disagree not because of normative differences but because of different empirical premises. On many crucial issues there is simply insufficient data to know the correct policy. For instance, school vouchers may allow students to escape failing schools and move to schools that perform better because they are in competition for students’ vouchers. Or, they may simply break up neighborhood schools without leading to a successful replacement since the underlying reason for the schools’ failure lies more in the students’ social circumstances than in the classroom. Though theory may recommend either of these views, the question is at heart empirical. To answer it, we quite simply need better data than we currently have. Even though technocrats may disagree on their predictions, they would be more susceptible than politicians to finding an answer. Technocrats espousing both points of view would understand that pilot programs, experimentation, or a search for further existing evidence would resolve the question. Politicians, on the other hand, would be burdened by political pressure from PTA’s, teachers unions’, and churches, and would ultimately be more concerned with which answer would garner more votes at the next election rather than which answer is right.

Not only are legislators’ incentives and qualifications for office ill-suited to answering empirical policy questions, legislatures in general are out of touch with the complexities of government that have arisen with the modern bureaucratic state. In 1787, the governments of the United States and other Western countries had a fundamentally different role than they do today. They had no standing armies (nor even police forces), intervened only minimally in the economy, and generally yielded to churches to provide social services. Today, however, in developed countries, the government accounts for anywhere from one-third to two-thirds of output. In 2008, the US spent $682 billion on Medicare and Medicaid, more than the entire GDP of all but the world’s 17 richest nations. This means that the U.S.’s public health insurance scheme is a larger program than the entire economy of countries such as Poland, Indonesia, and Saudi Arabia. People can, and do, spend their entire lives devoted to understanding and improving small parts of this sprawling apparatus. How on earth can we expect congressional representatives serving two-year terms to be experts on this program, as well as the nearly equally large Social Security system and
defense establishment, along with foreign affairs, education, and every other issue facing the U.S. federal government?

The simplest answer is that we don’t. To a greater and greater extent, developed nations’ elected legislatures leave complex decisions to bureaucrats by drafting bills with general mandates interpreted and implemented by government agencies. Even these bills are hardly understood by the representatives. An army of specialized staffs writes bills and their impact is analyzed by the bureaucrats in organizations such as the Congressional Budget Office and the Government Accountability Office. In general, this is a pretty neat arrangement. The people’s representatives get to set the general guidelines and the experts get to implement those mandates. Look a little closer, though, and this flawless division of labor seems a little less polished. While the story works decently for old legislation which agencies interpret under Congressional supervision, it falls apart when dramatically new legislation is needed. In this case, Congress writes bills that are hundreds, if not thousands, of pages long, involving convoluted language, contradictory positions, and politically motivated provisos and exceptions. Within that mess, there are major components that are outright bad policy.

The time has come to change our opinion about the proper division of powers. We are taught since kindergarten to worship Montesquieu’s three branches of government. We conveniently forget, though, that such a division was born in a world where governments were tiny. In the modern world, the executive branch is managing vast portions of the national economy rather than simply carrying out half-dozen page laws passed by part-time legislatures. It may be time to now transfer much of that legislative authority to the executive, whose non-partisan administrators are the most capable to handle it. We already have successful precedents to follow. Virtually all of the past decades’ expansion of global free trade, from NAFTA, to the WTO treaty, to the early Bush era bilateral treaties, was negotiated under the auspices of Trade Promotion Authority (better known as “fast-track”) whereby the president could preclude Congress from amending trade agreements negotiated by the US trade representative. In the most recent economic turmoil, the federal government’s rapid response was led by the highly politically insulated Federal Reserve, to which Congress delegated almost complete autonomy to prop up the country’s capital markets.

None of this is to suggest that modern representative legislatures are obsolete—they have a crucial role to play. Rather than trying to be the generators of legislation they should serve the role of the citizenry’s tribunes, setting the general priorities of government and overseeing their successful execution. Executive agencies have immediate interests that may not align with the constituency they are supposed to serve, and that constituency must have the power to bring those outfits into line. Legislatures thus have a vital role to play in combating harmful bureaucratic empire building and in preventing agencies from being captured by the groups they are supposed to regulate. Bureaucratic experts can also lose sight of broader issues of prioritization or morality. Legislatures are needed to represent the people in directing the priorities of the executive and in ferreting out abuses. If the experts overstep the sensibilities of the populace—as happened with “aggressive interrogation”—the people must have the force to push back through a legislative veto.

So far, this all sounds like a bunch of abstract moralizing without a concrete proposal. That’s unavoidable to a certain extent, since the most important shift to be made is not one of institutional structure...
but instead one of public attitude. Once the public embraces a technocratic vision of government, is willing to acknowledge that each person is only qualified to definitively answer a small number of policy questions, and is consequently willing to cede most legislative authority to the administrative or executive branch of government, then institutional change will follow. It could take the form of a radical constitutional reformation whereby the executive is given the power to initiate laws and present them to Congress, which may then accept, amend, or reject them. Presumably, Congress would retain the powers of subpoena and impeachment to hold the executive to account, and it would probably also be given explicit powers to compel executive action on certain issues, even if it could not dictate the specific form of that action. There is no reason, though, that formal constitutional change would be necessary. Once we have adopted an ethic of legislation by informed experts on empirical matters, Congress could simply agree to leave it to the executive to draft bills, which would still be nominally introduced by representatives and senators. Parliamentary rules could be adopted, such as the past example of fast-track and the continuing example of reconciliation, to limit the ability of legislators to impede legislation for narrow parochial interests. In the end, what matters is that we as the citizens of a liberal democracy demand expert crafting of laws and that we trust our legislature to protect our interests and represent our principles rather than set policy outside of its expertise.

Is such a wholesale shift in our political culture truly necessary? Couldn’t we instead adopt some less dramatic changes to solve the policy impasses in our legislative process? For instance, many have suggested limiting or abolishing the filibuster, thus allowing swifter passage of legislation through unbridled majority rule. However, this addresses none of the concerns raised in this essay. It would be a poor strategy for legislation on matters of principle, since allowing 51% to systematically outvote the other 49% seems unlikely to lead to reasonable and widely acceptable solutions. Instead, we would probably see radical changes in policy as shifting legislative majorities change after each election. On the most important matters, though, the practical ones, simple majority rule is of no value. Two plus two is not five whether 51% believe it or 60%; changing the threshold for passing legislation does not in any way alleviate the fact that legislators are policy generalists incapable of fully grappling with the breadth and depth of the issues on which they legislate.

In response to ballooning deficits and intractable problems of entitlement reform, a second panacea has been proposed: the blue-ribbon committee, a group of experts who convene to settle contentious matters in an authoritative and non-partisan way. At its best, this is exactly what I propose. If we limit ourselves to such ad-hoc committees, though, we consign ourselves to only solving difficult policy questions when they become so troublesome that people clamor for a blue ribbon committee. Better to work on all policy questions at the same time in this fashion, allowing solutions before they become a tremendous burden. Further, blue ribbon committees only work if everybody accepts the basic premises that I am advocating. If representatives believe themselves to be entitled to meddle in the details of legislative formulation, then blue ribbon committee reports will have little more weight than think tank monographs.

If it seems as if my proposal would neuter the legislature and lead to a tyrannical executive, consider the healthcare reform project. Under legislative auspices, thousands of pages of legislation were tossed about which included farcical promises of future spending cuts, an absurd obsession with abortion, and politically motivated exemptions

“We have moved past the age of –isms. We have reached a broad liberal consensus that matters of God, identity, and morality are best left to individuals.”
and favors for lobbies as diverse as labor unions and the state of Nebraska. In all of that, there was still almost no serious consideration of the most important issue in healthcare: its rising cost and the exponentially growing spending of entitlement programs. Consider, instead, if Congress had passed a guide of a dozen or so pages outlining the goals of a healthcare bill. I have to imagine that the Cass Sunsteins and Paul Volckers of the world could have used it to craft a far more cogent and effective piece of legislation. If they went too far in certain directions for the American people’s sensibilities, Congress could have overridden those provisions. If they failed to address an important topic, the legislature could have mandated that they do so.

We should consider ourselves blessed that we find ourselves in a world where representative legislatures need to be repurposed. Nearly a hundred years ago, a crisis of confidence in representative legislatures led many political theorists like Carl Schmitt to condemn liberal parliaments for their inability to reach compromise on black-and-white matters of principle. Their solution was fascist dictatorship. Today, we have the luxury of questioning our representatives’ purpose because they don’t have to consider such questions of principle. We have moved past the age of –isms. We have reached a broad liberal consensus that matters of God, identity, and morality are best left to individuals, whereas the public sphere ought to be concerned primarily with questions of secular economy. Let us give legislative authority to those best equipped to answer such questions. Our representatives should refrain from mangling legislation on issues far outside their expertise, and instead act as statesmen representing the broad principles and priorities of their constituents. We should release our legislators from the constant drive to give government hand-outs to their constituencies, and instead task them to be the people’s tribunes, keeping a watchful eye on the executive. In the process, we’ll end up with more effective policy crafted by true experts, a more sensible broad debate on the national direction, and—when all is said and done—better government.
I. Piero Scaruffi’s Knowledge Base

There’s been a lot of press coverage of Umberto Eco’s recent *The Infinity of Lists* (2009), a history of Western civilization through its lists and ledgers. But Eco’s 408 page book would be a slight addition to the corpus of the lesser-known Piero Scaruffi, a visiting scholar of cognitive science at Harvard and Stanford and the winner of several Italian national poetry awards. Scaruffi has spent 15 years assembling the material on his Knowledge Base (www.scaruffi.com), a vast online monument to the list form. The festively-colored website serves primarily as a staging area for Scaruffi’s voluminous writings on 20th century music, published in books totaling some 2,000 pages. But he maintains separate sections devoted to politics, art, philosophy, literature, cinema, travel, and science, each extensive enough to be websites in themselves.

The typical Scaruffi experience is to encounter a list of enormous scope (a five thousand word timeline of world architecture, a compilation of major tourist locations in India), and then to notice that the list is only a minor constellation in a background cosmos of hypergraphia. The “Fiction” section includes a timeline of all English literature as well as a ranked list of the “Best Novels of the Twentieth Century”, which is impressive. But then one notices that Scaruffi has also provided timelines for the literatures of thirty-one other languages, plus sections under development for the literatures of “sub-Saharan Africa” and “dead languages”. Another link leads to encyclopedia-style entries for hundreds of twentieth century authors, written in Italian. The entire website is like this.

Scaruffi mixes the world-girdling lists with extensive writings, but his prose is awkward in a way that’s hard to reconcile with the erudition on parade. He has reviewed hundreds of books of science, politics, and fiction with rare deviations from a boilerplate format: a loose rehashing of the plot or argument, followed by scattered thoughts and criticisms. These reviews read like they were written in one sitting and from memory, and they strive to break books down into their component and therefore listable parts. Scaruffi wrote commentary on politics and world news in 2008 and 2009, which does not differ in tone or sophistication from the thousands (millions?) of dedicated amateur political blogs. The best Scaruffi quotes, “selected by his readers,” are by turns banal and cringe-inducing: “Aging is a voyage of the mind through its body as it learns how many organs have to work in order to keep it alive.” Or: “If you can’t always get what you want, may you always want what you get.”

Often his prose breaks down into fragmentary lists, which seem to be his natural form. In the “Philosophy” section, Scaruffi has written hundreds of summaries of philosophers that are not arguments or descriptions so much as lists of key terms. Deleuze (“Post-Modernism”) is described only as “Synopsis: Multiplicity of semiotic levels.” Leibniz’s (“Philosophy of Mind, Nature, Language”) entry begins:

- Panpsychism
- Only minds exist
- There are infinite minds
- Humans are not the only ones to have minds
- Everything has a mind
- Matter is made of minds

And continues for another two pages without synthesis or explanation. This is probably true in

Noah Ennis is a fourth-year in the College majoring in Political Science.
its essentials (or maybe not), but it only makes sense to the veteran reader of Leibniz. To everyone else, the page may as well be blank. The effect is similar to what happens when an inexperienced professor introduces a concept (“What is power?”) and then writes all of the associated concepts and definitions on the chalkboard. For someone who has read widely in the subject-area and can attach meanings to every term (namely, the professor), the resulting list is illuminating. For someone with no knowledge of the subject-area (the students), nothing is clear and nothing is being demonstrated.

Another section contains Scaruffi’s original English poetry, which is not up to the level of his Italian contributions to the form. A representative stanza goes:

I still see you resting above the lake,
doomed to outshine all flowers,
music tinkling in the butterfly of your lips,
summer drifting through your hair,
while clouds melt with the pearls in your eyes

The travel section includes an archive of photographs from Scaruffi’s visits to 122 countries, with an option to order the photographs as posters.

Then there’s the archive from his Twitter, which broadcasts facts like “90% of our cells are not human cells: they are bacteria,” quotes like “History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake” (Joyce), and workaday tweets:

— I hate what i love. I love what i hate. Jun 11th

— Being is in time. Even space is in time. We can control space but not time. In order to control time, we have to die. Jun 17th

— Only silence truly exists. Jun 17th

What is scaruffi.com for? The Knowledge Base aspires to be a reference website, and at one point it might have been one: it seems like, in 1995, Scaruffi could have founded Wikipedia but instead decided to write the entire thing himself. Obviously, it has been superseded. But scaruffi.com is unsurpassed as a purveyor of the unfamiliar: the very brevity and compactness that make it a mediocre reference website make it a fantastic source of things you wouldn’t think to look for. In this way, it can serve as a kind of companion to Wikipedia, giving you the map of an unknown subdiscipline and letting you look up the concepts in more detail elsewhere.

If it has been surpassed as a reference site, it was never plausible as a source of critical judgment. Scaruffi ranks just about everything, but his methods are as opaque as his results are unorthodox, and the reader has no way of knowing where the cathedrals of critical judgment are buttressed by real expertise. Given his books on music, his ranking of the 1,000 best rock albums is probably credible. But surely he doesn’t speak 32 languages, so where are these critical timelines of literature coming from? Whose timelines are they?

Eventually, the reader’s attention turns from the fire hose of information to questions about the person wielding it. What motivates his project? It seems that Scaruffi is, at minimum, a man of above-average intelligence and enormous energy who has reached expert level in at least three distinct fields (cognitive science/ai, music history, Italian poetry). But his Diderotic enthusiasm is everywhere undercut by the greed of his endeavor. If an expert is someone who has made all the errors there are to make in a narrow field, Scaruffi can’t make errors fast enough to give his website authority in more than a handful of the subjects it treats.

Which could be fine with Scaruffi. I got the sense, as I finished my tour, that this site is primarily intended for Scaruffi himself. What he has constructed is not a reference site per se but a unique window into the massive files that luminaries and polymaths must keep, files that are so incomplete and error-ridden that we never see them, only their polished residues in books and papers. Scaruffi shows the world. This isn’t an authoritative guide to all culture, it’s a decades-long museum of Scaruffi’s brain. And it makes you wonder what
the museum of your brain would look like, what would result if you wrote 10 or 15 pages a day for years without worrying about editing or disciplinary overstep. The more one thinks about this, the more daunting scaruffi.com becomes.

Scaruffi.com fails as a reference site (there are better) or as a source of expert opinion (there are experts) but succeeds as a horizon-expanding blast of information about everything, more or less all at once. It also gives a portrait someone who is in part narrating the history of his life through a mosaic of Western culture: it’s like Being John Malkovich, if John spent 14 hours a day in a library. Scaruffi is often superficial, but he is superficial about everything, and his achievement, such as it is, is without peer.

II. Seymour-Smith’s Who’s Who in Twentieth Century Literature

The English poet, critic, and world-class polyglot Martin Seymour-Smith contents himself with the categorization of world literature, and his achievement is accordingly greater. Among his works are the 1,396 page *New Guide to Modern World Literature* (1985) and the more slender 62 page *Bluffer’s Guide to Literature* (1971). *Who’s Who in Twentieth Century Literature* (1976) is an attempt to explain the achievements, careers, and influences of hundreds of figures in twentieth century world literature, in all languages. If the introduction is to be believed, the 413 page and 200,000 word book is a brutally edited skeleton of the 350,000 word manuscript he originally submitted. The result, he claims, is “necessarily biased towards British and American authors,” which does not stop obscure foreign-language authors from popping up on nearly every page.

While the display of knowledge is less ostentatious than in Scaruffi’s exhaustive listiverse, the short entries (from a few sentences to two pages) reveal Seymour-Smith’s total grasp of biographies, literary movements, influences, and critical opinion (with which he frequently disagrees). He routinely surprises even on familiar authors: Did you know that the suicide of Henry Adam’s wife affected all his work, although he never wrote about it? Or that his view of the thirteenth century was historically inaccurate? Or that H.G. Wells “probably…holds the twentieth-century record for the most mistresses possessed in a lifetime by a public man”? Or that Aldous Huxley struggled with his terrible eyesight all his life, relying on the pseudo-scientific “Bates method” of not wearing glasses? Or that Nabokov’s Russian fiction is, “on balance, superior to the English”?

But the familiar authors are few and far between. Here are the J’s, a fairly typical distribution of known and unknown:


Among the unrecognized names are authors so remarkable that they sound like fictions invented by Seymour-Smith. An Italian named Luigi Pirandello is, in the opinion of Seymour-Smith, “the greatest short-story writer of the century” who “anticipated, without lapsing into incoherence, every aspect of modernism.” The Basque poet, dramatist, and novelist Miguel de Unamuno “knew fifteen languages well” and was “as original as Nietzsche but not (yet) as directly influential.” Yet! Miroslav Holub, Czech poet and “distinguished research chemist,” is “widely regarded as the leading poet of his generation” but “has been overrated.” By comparison, John Updike gets a short paragraph of mild praise, with the note that his too-close association with the New Yorker school has tended to obscure his talents.

The scope of his survey and the depth of his reading leads Seymour-Smith to diverge sharply
from critical unanimity. Although he always provides a nuanced appraisal of career and influence, Seymour-Smith notes that Auden “largely wasted his gifts.” Waugh “certainly had genius but in the end he misused it and must be accounted a failure.” Hemingway “has been seriously overrated” and “knew nothing about bullfighting, as Death in the Afternoon (1932), which purports to be about it, makes painfully clear.” John Barth, though “ingenious, clever, admirable,” cannot “tell a story, create a character, or hold the unfeigned interest of the most willing reader.” And “no reasons have been advanced as to why he employs or should employ a fictional form.” In a momentary foray into children’s literature, he notes that “Peter Pan is typical [of Barrie]: it conceals relentless infantilism and sadism beneath a skillfully sentimental veneer.” The entry on Ayn Rand is an especially venomous treat.

Who’s Who is, like Scaruffi’s website, technically a reference work. But it can also be read as a flawlessly sustained argument for just “how many excellent and interesting authors remain unread.” Finding only twelve familiar authors in 40 pages, indistinguishable in artistic achievement or even influence from those around them, is more convincing proof of this thesis than any direct argument. It is one thing to concede, abstractly, that the particular novels revered in the English critical establishment are not the uniquely best novels, that perhaps some of the best writing of the twentieth century remains unread and untranslated. It is another thing to see great crowds of strange authors and their novels described in vivid detail and staggering variety. The frequent asides by Seymour-Smith about missing or imperfect translations, and the shifting fashions and mis- or reappraisals of the critical establishment, are insignificant in a few entries, but their gradual accumulation begins to suggest a field that is too large to be studied. The force of this insight trickles down to the reader: again, it is one thing to acknowledge that one’s favorite authors could be replaced with currently unknown authors, or that all the books in one’s library could be replaced with new books of unfamiliar titles. It is something else to see these alternate programs laid out for you.

Eventually, the experience becomes disorienting. The sense that one knows the outline of literature dissolves, perhaps irrevocably; one will never again feel comfortable calling something a “best book” in any sense. The fact that Who’s Who (1976) is already in its fourth decade shows that we are well past the point of ever reading a fraction of what’s worthy of being read, and the problem is only going to get worse. Which raises awkward questions about the beloved novels of our own time. Will they survive as novels at all, or only as disciplinary curiosities and entries for the bibliographers of the future? Will there, in other words, be a last person to read The Corrections? Given the enormous weight of forgotten 20th century masterpieces, the prospects do not look good. But if most literature of our time will not endure, surely some novels will survive, although we might not be able to guess them. And the rest die so that new literature may live. Who’s Who in Twenty-First Century Literature is an exciting prospect. If only there is another Seymour-Smith to write it.

“The entry on Ayn Rand is an especially venomous treat.”
**SOURCES**

**The Fate of Latin American Populism**

**Myface Tweets When I Blog: I’m Having an Identity Crisis**
The Midway Review is now accepting staff applications. Please visit our website, http://midwayreview.uchicago.edu, for more details. Applications are due Friday, April 9th, by midnight. Article submissions to the Spring issue of the Midway Review are due Friday, April 23rd by midnight.