



BROWSE

 **Disappearing Ink**

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REVIEW

[View Citation](#)**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Marowitz continued from previous page improvisation, color, and imaginative play," without alluding to the fabulist aspects often found among certain "bullshit artists": persons wholly enveloped in self-dramatization who, at their most extreme, exhibit an almost psychotic lack of awareness about the implausibility of the tales they are spinning. Had he widened his orbit to include British idiomatic phrases, he would have been able to peg the subtle distinctions between "balderdash," which is outright nonsense devoid of any form of convincing validation, and "a load of cobblers," a pejorative working-class term which denotes a brazen attempt to put something over on gullible common folk. It is just too reductive to equate "bullshit" with "lying" no matter how much you try to qualify the definition, for it sidesteps many lesser but related categories—for instance, how do you define "little white lies" or "bending the truth"! How is "embellishing the truth" different from out-and-out lying? What would you call someone who "selects" certain truths but evades others? Then there is the contemporary malaise of "hype," a form of publicized aggrandizement that bears no relation to the poverty of the persons or objects being elevated. You can call

an outrageous lie "a whopper," but it isn't in the same class as a premeditated, nationally disseminated, politically-motivated, Goebbels-like Big Lie about the genetic inferiority of Jews. "Bullshit" is too amorphous, too multifaceted, to be wedged into the cubbyhole of a dictionary definition or a sixty-seven-page treatise—no matter how elaborately qualified. "Bullshit" is sometimes an exclamation; sometimes a verdict; it can be a sneer or a proclamation, a challenge or an epithet. Sometimes it is simply an indefinable scent that certain people emit while speaking—which is why Hemingway urged us always to check our "bullshit detectors." Frankfurt's parameters are so narrow that one feels the frisson of the book is simply the fact that a distinguished Princeton University professor is dealing with a subject that is mildly obscene—itsself a kind of hype. Towards the end of a circuitous train of thought that never delves deeper than hairsplitting definitions, Frankfurt finally arrives at his terminus. "Bullshit," he writes soberly, is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person's obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. This discrepancy is common in public life where people are frequently impelled—whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others—to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant. Closely related instances arise from the widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything, or at least everything that pertains to the conduct of his country's affairs. Frankfurt goes on to deplore the fact that, unable to determine what is false or true, we have lost the sense of "objective inquiry," and, as a result, "correctness" (by which he means verifiable conclusions) has given way to "an alternative ideal"—viz., "sincerity." But, he concludes, "Our natures are, indeed, elusively insubstantial—notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit." One would think that having spent most of his life in academia, Frankfurt would have a firm handle on bullshit, but like the pedagogue whose lectern has become an inextricable extension of his waist, he never looks beyond the semantic nuances of a subject which, to be properly understood, has to be related to a variety of non-academic phenomena such as advertising, sports, electronic media, politics, journalism, televangelism, celebrity, corporate malfeasance—every branch of life where the arts of mendacity are practiced and perfected. The ultimate effect of Frankfurt's treatise is like students trying to learn the meaning of baseball by tossing a beanbag around the environs of a classroom. Confronted with bogus spectacles, both in the public arena and in our private lives, forced to come to terms with broken promises and tantalizing offers that never materialize, assailed by language from which all true sentiment has been thoroughly drained, we are obliged to fashion a tongue out of American speech which...

improvisation, orator, and imaginative play," without alluding to the fabulist aspects often found among certain "bullshit artists" persons wholly enveloped in self-dramatization who, at their most extreme, exhibit an almost psychotic lack of awareness about the implausibility of the tales they are spinning. Had he widened his orbit to include British idiomatic phrases, he would have been able to peg the subtle distinctions between "bullshitish," which is outright rompsome devoid of any form of convincing validation, and "a load of cobblers," a pejorative working-class term which denotes a brazen attempt to put something over on gullible common folk.

It is just too reductive to equate "bullshit" with "lying" no matter how much you try to qualify the definition, for it sidesteps many lesser but related categories—for instance, how do you define "little white lies" or "leading the truth"? How is "embellishing the truth" different from out-and-out lying? What would you call someone who "selects" certain truths but evades others? Then there is the contemporary malaise of "hoax," a form of publicized aggrandizement that bears no relation to the poverty of the persons or objects being elevated. You can call an outrageous lie "a whopper," but it isn't in the same class as a premeditated, nationally disseminated, politically-motivated, Goebbels-like *Big Lie* when the genetic inferiority of Jews.

"Bullshit" is too amorphous, too multifaceted, to be wedged into the cubbyhole of a dictionary definition or a sixty-seven-page treatise—no matter how elaborately qualified. "Bullshit" is sometimes an exclamation; sometimes a verdict; it can be a snarl or a proclamation, a challenge or an epithet. Sometimes it is simply an indefinable scent that certain people emit while speaking—which is why Hemingway urged us always to check our "bullshit detectors." Frankfurt's pessimism is so narrow that one feels the private of the book is simply the fact that a distinguished Princeton University professor is dealing with a subject that

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Towards the end of a circuitous train of thought that never delves deeper than unhelpful definitions, Frankfurt finally arrives at his terminus: "Bullshit," he writes solemnly,

is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about. Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person's obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic exceed his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. This discrepancy is common in public life where people are frequently impelled—whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others—to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant. Closely related instances arise from the widespread conviction that it is the responsibility of a citizen in a democracy to have opinions about everything, or at least everything that pertains to the conduct of his country's affairs.

Frankfurt goes on to deplore the fact that, unable to determine what is false or true, we have lost the sense of "objective inquiry," and, as a result, "objectivity" (by which he means verifiable conclusions) has given way to "an alternative ideal"—viz., "sincerity." But, he concludes, "Our attitudes are, indeed, ethically substantial—merely less stable and less coherent than the attitudes of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit."

One would think that having spent most of his life in academia, Frankfurt would have a firm handle on bullshit, but like the pedagogue whose lectures has become an inextinguishable extension of his waist, he never looks beyond the semantic matters of a subject which, to be properly understood, has to

be related to a variety of non-academic phenomena such as advertising, sports, electronic media, politics, journalism, televisionism, celebrity, corporate malfeasance—every branch of life where the acts of mendacity are practiced and perfected. The ultimate effect of Frankfurt's treatise is like students trying to learn the meaning of baseball by tossing a baseball around the environs of a classroom.

Continued with bogus spectacles, both in the public arena and in our private lives, forced to come to terms with broken promises and tantalizing offers that never materialize, assailed by language from which all true sentiment has been thoroughly drained, we are obliged to fashion a tongue out of American speech which will rationalize our disappointments, deflect our rage, and camouflage antisocial feelings which, if they were given release, would brand us as monsters or psychopaths. Subject to this constant pressure, we construct a language one-third of which is bogus, one-third defensive, and one-third elusive, and that is how bullshit is born. It is not a blight on the American tongue; it is the American tongue—in commerce, in politics, in daily intercourse with transient strangers, familiar colleagues, and so-called loved ones. Like any other foreign language, it comes out the translation, but there is neither grammar, syntax, nor vocabulary adequate to convey what our psychic life is obliged to suppress. We all learn how to interpret this language the way we learn the secrets of any cipher: by trying to dope out its symbols and mantras, divining what partial bits of intelligence we can in order to try to extrapolate deeper meanings.

This, more than semantic misprizing, is what bullshit is all about—and no one to my knowledge has yet tackled the subject.

Charles Marcovitz completed the first English-language biography of Michael Chabon, entitled *The Other Chabon*, published by Applause in October 2004.

DISAPPEARING INK

BIRDS AND BIRDS

Claire Malroux
Translated by Marilyn Hacker

Sheep Meadow Press
<http://www.sheepmeadow.com/simplists.html>
192 pages, paper, \$17.95

Author of nine previous poetry books, two of them also translated by Marilyn Hacker—*A Longtime Sun* (Sheep Meadow, 2000) and *Edge* (Wake Forest, 1996)—Claire Malroux is herself a professional translator. She has won the Pitt-Manning-Holger Couillard in 1989 for her translations into French of Emily Dickinson and, in 1995, the *Grand Prix National de la Traduction* for her translation of such contemporary poets as Derek Walcott. In 2000, she was made *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* for the same range of her work.

Birds and Birds (*Birds et Oiseaux*) is collected from *Saisons* (2001) and *Mi si lointain* (2001). In her introduction to the book, Hacker likens the poems to those of Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and C.K. Williams. She points out that narrative, so crucial to most contemporary American and British poems, is present only in Malroux's autobiographi-

cal book, *Séjour de jadis* (1995), about her life in southwestern France just before World War II and the life of her father, a Revisionist leader.

Many of the poems in *Birds and Birds* are joined by similar free-associated images of trees, clouds, stars, oceans, and storms that follow a pattern by which a picture is drawn—a landscape, usually—and then erased or unweaved, as if done in disappearing ink or invisible thread. There are many variants of this pattern, one example being "[l]andscapes erased away like crumpled / Tissues or which nothing is left printed..." in which landscapes are sketchy as postcards ("Kynes's temple gardens, / Syrian rain-mountains...") or "suggested cragms / We should have explored," then fragments of a music buried under "the casual weeds of history," then a vanishing perspective of remote jungles. The poet suggests if it were to meet oneself "for life on a single page," becoming an invisible voyageur instead of a part of the here and there of travel.

The run-on phrases in these poems—mostly very well and literally translated by Marilyn Hacker—are, no doubt, derived from Emily Dickinson and serve to replicate her abrupt, terse, and paradoxical leaps of thought. Written here without dashes, both the French and English versions of the poems can be read to parse and are far more confusing at times than Dickinson's. Sometimes, however, they flow and are musical, as in "Pursuing the Islands," in which the first line repeats one phrase with slight

change: "For six temps, de nary six de temps," which Hacker renders as "Islands of time, of one type in time." This is one of the poems created by its last line, in which the inhabitants of the poem are like children playing house on different islands. "Pursuing the slow shipwreck of one island."

The last stanzas of many poems are about catastrophe and ruin—"The scar breaks open again as daybreak" and "Life splits in two / like a bad impetuous"—with ecological disasters often thrown in to shake the reader as if dog might shake a rat. All good and treasuries wishes and purposes seem betrayed or false in the end. For example, in "Dereliction":

It will live again, a new stage-set replacing
the old one.

Humans substituted for other humans,
Then one day a wracking-bull or some war
Will unmake the catastrophe, a life's ornament.

At times, the despairing conclusion is metaphorical, at times literary—or shows books and words—as in "Mourning a Love," which ends:

The book unwrites itself, winter than night
Crumbs, nothing but crumbs of handwriting
Crumbly for birds, those starved lettermen
Twittering to bait they eat.

— Rauschenbusch continued on next page

Stephanie Rauschenbusch





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