

Invitation to a garrotting

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Michael Jacobs

EVERYTHING IS HAPPENING

Journey into a painting
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Michael Jacobs, who died last year aged sixty-two, was among the best travel writers of his generation, a passionate Hispanist and a source of encouragement to anyone who fears that making a living as a freelance writer may no longer be possible. To judge from his books and the stories of his many friends (declaration of disinterest: I never met him, though I wish I had) he was also a wonderfully enriching companion, someone to whom travel, art history and getting to know people were interdependent, and were all about having a good time.

Madrid for Pleasure; The Most Beautiful Villages of Provence; The Painted Voyage: Art, travel and exploration, 1564–1875 – titles like these give a fair idea of what’s in his books. It all began at Westminster School in the 1960s, where Jacobs painted, read prodigiously about both art and travel and was a magnet to other people – masters as well as boys – with similar enthusiasms. As a teenager on holiday he wandered the streets of Madrid dazed by Velázquez’s “Las Meninas” – the keystone of his last, unfinished project – and fantasized about being an artist. A decade later, he embarked on a series of trips to eleven countries in preparation for a book about nineteenth-century artist colonies. Everywhere he went, from Abramtsevo to Yaddo, his zest, knowledge and humour made him new friends: by my count 160 people are named in the acknowledgements to *The Good and Simple Life: Artist colonies in Europe and America*, among them, characteristically, the proprietor of Provincetown’s “infamous A-House bar”, who “brought the town vividly to life for me”.

Jacobs later wryly recalled that he had hoped the book – published in 1985 and already his seventh – “would take the art historical world by storm”. It opens with a manifesto:

to me the particular attraction of the subject lay in the opportunity which it gave to delve into the minutiae of artist life. Much of the material which I have included would be dismissed by many art historians because it has no direct relevance to art, and by others because it is too ephemeral and anecdotal. I feel none the less that the type of history which discusses simply objects, ideas, or sociological patterns, can be a limited one. The circumstances surrounding the creation of a work of art invariably make for more interesting reading than an analysis of a work’s style; what an individual says or professes to believe in frequently bears little relation to what he actually does; and any attempt to reduce the past to simple patterns has necessarily to ignore the quirks of human behaviour that make history so much easier to relate to one’s own everyday experiences.

As with all his work, logic isn’t the main strength here and, however disarming his enthusiasm, the insistence that everything has to be relatable to oneself and to one’s own time makes you want to argue with him. But argument is part of what makes him enjoyable to read – that and an appetite for the vagaries of individuality that helps explain why this part-Irish perpetual student was so at home in Spain. The subject of *The Good and Simple Life* is fascinating and he did a lot of research

into it. He was right that the result is much more about people than painting – the former annual cricket match between the artist colonies of Newlyn and St Ives will never need another historian – but people are in the end the subject of all his best books and in this one he took some steps away from what he had most recently thought he was going to be: a historian of art.



“Las Meninas, or The Family of Philip IV” (1656) by Diego Velázquez

Between Westminster and the late 1970s, Jacobs had given up on painting, or vice versa, and completed what was then the classic British apprenticeship for an academic career in art history: a prolonged but successful PhD under Anthony Blunt at the Courtauld and many hours in the Warburg Library. He seems to have found all that stimulating: he became a loyal friend of Blunt and although he satirized the Warburg he valued its unique holdings and atmosphere. But academe increasingly irked him and we learn from his friend Ed Vulliamy

in *Everything Is Happening* that when he was offered a lectureship at Edinburgh University, he turned it down. In the publishing world, art history was a boom topic. Jacobs lived in a Primrose Hill squat, wrote books for Phaidon and other imprints (the first four, *Mythological Painting*, *Nude Painting in the History of Art*, *A Guide to European Painting* and *The Phaidon Companion to Art and Artists in the British Isles*, all appeared within two years of each other) and generally got the hang of what a freelance writer had to do to survive. Meanwhile, in arguments with friends and introductions to books he developed his feelings – they are that as much as thoughts – about what an engagement with art meant.

Then, in 1990, after a few earlier shots at the genre, he produced a long, idiosyncratic,

later in relation to South America, he makes it distinctive partly through an increasing element of reference to relevant aspects of his family history: a grandfather who had been a railway engineer in the Andes; more adventurously, his mother’s Alzheimer’s as thematic background to a perilous trip up Colombia’s “Robber of Memories”, the Magdalena River. Meanwhile, in his bestselling *The Factory of Light: Tales from my Andalusian village* (2003), he recounted his first visits to and subsequent adoption of and by the *pueblo* of Frailes in Jaén.

There could scarcely be a bigger gap between the impulsive, hectic, egalitarian encounters that enliven Jacobs’s travel books and the formalities of Philip IV’s court which Velázquez spent his career depicting. Perhaps that’s among the reasons why, having been stunned by the painter’s work in his teens, Jacobs never stopped thinking about it. There is anyway something about the challenging, quizzical looks on the faces of the painter, princess and dwarf in “Las Meninas” that, however else they’re interpreted, makes everybody wonder whether they’re being invited in or are about to be garrotted for trespassing. Rival readings of the picture take up part of *Everything Is Happening: Journey into a painting*. So, too, do the circumstances in which, at various times, Jacobs looked at it, and in which other people looked at it, too: he is particularly interesting about a period when, partly perhaps out of a playful response to the painting itself but also as a means of making it available to yet more of the visitors who crowded to see it, it was hung in front of a mirror.

Another theme is how people have most usefully written about art, and how much better it was done in the past. He had already introduced a reprint of the first serious accounts of Velázquez, by the artist’s teacher and father-in-law Francisco Pacheco and the early eighteenth-century Spanish artist-critic Antonio Palomino. A still bigger influence on Jacobs was a book he read at school by R. A. M. Stevenson, Robert Louis Stevenson’s elder cousin. Bob Stevenson was in an exact sense an impressionist critic. After Cambridge, he had been an art student in Edinburgh and Paris and became a dominant figure in the colonies at Barbizon and Grez-sur-Loing (hence in part Jacobs’s interest in such groups). He did the canoeing trip along the Meuse with RLS which the latter recounted in *The Inland Voyage*. Unlike his cousin, though, and unlike his later fan Michael Jacobs, Bob Stevenson settled for a British life of teaching, criticism and art theory. He championed Impressionism, wrote with distinction for the *Saturday Review* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and produced a few books, of which *Velasquez* (1895, revised and expanded in the year of his death, 1900) is the most substantial.

In today’s art-historical terms – the terms Jacobs was at odds with – Stevenson’s book is an unsatisfactory hybrid. It is based on a very brief though intense spell in the Prado, coloured by memories of the author’s journey there, and quick to generalize from those experiences with the egotistical confidence of his cousin. “Travelling in Spain, after all, is not so

bad as many would have it. Neither are the trains so slow and so dangerous, nor the food and wine so unpalatable, as they have been reported”: you can see what Jacobs liked about this but there is much more to the book and he pays eloquent tribute to it in *Everything Is Happening*.

Jacobs’s last work is drastically incomplete, the result of what he was able to write during his illness and of conversations with Ed Vulliamy. The latter has carried out Jacobs’s wish that he should complete the project and provides a freely associative, self-referential introduction and “coda” (between them amounting to half of the total length) that must have been intended as a homage but in effect seem both over-elaborate, intellectually, and intrusive. The result is a bit of a mess. It doesn’t help that neither Vulliamy nor the editors at Granta have saved Jacobs from a distinctly 1960s wide-eyedness about coincidence, evident, but kept under better control, in his other books. Webs of connection such as that his teenage sketch of “Las Meninas”, done before he knew about Picasso’s devotion to the artist, “looked crudely and unintentionally like a Picasso”, and that Picasso had first seen the painting at a similar age to Jacobs himself, and in the same year as R. A. M. Stevenson had published his book on the artist, and that Stevenson had spoken of the artist’s needing to regain the “innocent eye” of a child, which, “Unknown to me at the time . . . was a sentiment identical to one expressed by Picasso”: the kinds of impatience these prompt get in the way of our appreciation of the text at its best, which is more profoundly to do with a dying man’s recapture of and meditations on a lifetime’s experiences of a picture and an artist, and through them of a country which he made his own and which warmly repaid his devotion.

Among the dilemmas involving the study of great art that Michael Jacobs ponders here are that the nature of its greatness eludes most of those who claim to admire it, and that while enjoying it is best achieved in solitude and silence, these conditions are unavailable to all but the most privileged in a crowded world. It is one of the themes Vulliamy takes up and makes more complicated. I wish instead he had told us how the book’s title was chosen, and whether Michael Jacobs knew the MGMT number “Everything’s Happening So Fast”. He wasn’t much for pop culture but might well have heard it in a bar. The song is relevant to some of his feelings, and still more pessimistic: “Tinseltown is coming . . . So we must destroy your art . . . things go by so quickly I can scarcely stop to grasp . . . Everything’s happening so fast”. Title apart, though, it is the idea of a noisy club, not the pessimism, that prompts the connection. Melancholy in Michael Jacobs’s writing is usually overtaken by appetite – as it was, he believed, in the career of R. A. M. Stevenson, whose thoughts in 1895 he imagines in a beautiful, self-revelatory passage of *Everything Is Happening*:

He was not thinking, as he often did, of life’s failings: of having given up painting; of his precarious existence writing . . . ; of not having had any children; of [his] continual money problems. Instead I saw him briefly returned to his earlier exalted self, heading off on another artistic adventure, travelling through what he described as “the scenery of Velázquez’s pictures”, on his way to see for the first and only time a work of art in which his own unrealised brilliance could find at last some form of outlet.

PAUL SEABRIGHT

Richard Layard
and David M. Clark

THRIVE

The power of psychological therapy
384pp. Penguin. Paperback, £10.99.
978 0 249 96111 7

William Davis

THE HAPPINESS INDUSTRY

How the government and big business
sold us well-being
320pp. Verso. £16.99.
978 1 78168 845 8

The appointment of Luciana Berger as shadow minister for mental health in Jeremy Corbyn’s shadow cabinet, the first politician in the UK to hold such a portfolio, is a sign of how far mental health has come as a subject fit for public discussion and action rather than for purely private misery. What has changed in recent years is not so much public awareness of the scale and the costs of mental illness, whether in terms of direct suffering or of disruption to active life and work. There has indeed been some advance in public understanding, so that fewer people would now be surprised to learn that, as Richard Layard and David Clark put it in their book *Thrive*, “depression and anxiety account for more of the misery in Western societies than physical illness does. And they account for very much more misery than is due to poverty or unemployment”.

More important even than this is the growing awareness that mental illness can be treated, not always and everywhere but still more reliably, humanely and economically than could ever have been imagined a generation ago. Surprisingly perhaps, the treatments that have been found to work include not just pills, which continue to be the treatment of choice for psychotic conditions and bipolar disorder. In addition, unipolar depression and anxiety disorders have been found to respond systematically to some forms of psychotherapy, most of which were considered until fairly recently so impossible to evaluate objectively that only in comic fiction could they have been imagined being available on the National Health.

In particular, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which consists of short sequences of focused sessions aimed at treating specific problems through management of negative thought processes and behaviours, has now been subjected to randomized controlled trials that have shown it to be both clinically and economically effective. To quote Layard and Clark, “Psychological therapies taking less than sixteen sessions produce 50 per cent recovery rates which are often permanent; and, when they are not, they greatly reduce the risk of relapse”. The cost of such therapies is small compared to many courses of treatment for physical illness (comparable to six months of anti-diabetes treatment, for instance). They can also produce savings on physical treatment for those patients whose physical and mental illnesses are interconnected.

Many individuals and institutions have been

Cheering up



responsible for this change, including in particular the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), which has been reviewing systematic evaluations of various forms of psychotherapy. Not all the kinds of psychotherapeutic intervention that common sense would suggest do in fact work, and some are positively counter-productive. It was once widely believed that immediate debriefing of road accident victims would help them to come to terms with their trauma and reduce the risk of subsequent post-traumatic stress disorder. Careful controlled trials have shown that post-accident debriefing actually reduces natural recovery rates from trauma. Common sense suggests that facing up to your trauma is the thing to do; but common sense appears to be wrong.

Similarly, even when they are effective on average, some forms of intervention work better than others: CBT appears to work better than interpersonal psychotherapy for social phobia, for example. We don’t really know why, which is frustrating. Clinical trials of psychotherapy more rarely illuminate the mechanisms by which interventions function than do trials of medication. But even in the domain of psychopharmacology such illumination is usually partial. It is one thing to know that a particular pill inhibits serotonin re-uptake, and quite another to have any idea why this is associated with reductions in depressive symptoms in at least some patients. This is especially so since in other patients apparently opposite mechanisms can also be therapeutically effective.

Since 2008, thanks both to the availability of clinical trials of CBT and to a major political initiative undertaken by the then Health Minister Alan Johnson, a programme called “Improving Access to Psychological Therapies” (IAPT) has been under way in England. As of 2013 IAPT was treating nearly 400,000 people a year with short courses of therapy, mainly but not only CBT. Reported recovery rates of those treated, at 46 per cent, are less good than ought to be possible, and are highly variable across the country. But they appear to be correlated with the experience and training

levels of the therapists, which suggests they should improve as the programme becomes more established; more than 5,000 new therapists were trained in its first five years.

On the face of it this is an extremely impressive achievement, and one that begins to compensate for the long-standing neglect of mental health as a public policy priority. It is also a success for evidence-based medicine, since without the evidence accumulated by NICE there would never have been the professional and political consensus required to give impetus to the programme. Layard and Clark (who were both integral to its design and implementation) have written a clear and informative book that has an undisguised agenda but is open about its limitations – faithful to the spirit of evidence-based medicine, in fact. However, they are over-inclined to take randomized controlled trials at face value, and say nothing about the accumulating evidence that these may overstate the case in favour of the evaluated treatments.

We are starting to learn more about the extent to which a scientific consensus may be affected by publication bias – the preference of scientific journals for publishing the results of studies with positive findings and ignoring those with negative ones. A paper in *Science* last August by the Open Science Collaboration reported the results of replication attempts for a hundred studies in social psychology. It was able to report significant findings for only 36 per cent of them, with average reported effect sizes being around half of those reported in the original study. A paper by Ellen Driessen et al in *PLOS One* in September looked more specifically at studies of psychotherapy treatments and reported that including the results of unpublished studies reduced estimated treatment effects by around one-quarter. This may underestimate overall publication bias since it excludes possible biases within published studies. None of this, of course, is an argument against randomized controlled trials – it is an argument for more of them and for better ones. But it also suggests a brake on the enthusiasm with which we draw conclusions from studies

that have not been independently replicated.

A more subtle reason for caution lies in the evaluation of recovery rates. Often a reported recovery from depression is just that. But it may also be reported by a patient in order to please a therapist, or by a therapist in order to please a supervisor, or by an administrator in order to please a manager. None of these individuals need be lying, merely seeing what they very much want to see along a dimension where there are no clear boundaries. They may also be influenced by norms about what counts as ordinary unhappiness and what is a pathology, and such norms can change.

These considerations are an important limitation on our ability not just to evaluate psychotherapy, but more generally to draw conclusions about well-being and happiness from self reports. For instance, a 2009 study by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers showed that women's self-reported happiness in America had declined over thirty-five years from the early 1960s. Was this a sign that economic and social change had really lowered women's happiness (as the resulting heated debate mostly took for granted), or rather that norms about reporting had changed, and women could now own up more easily to dissatisfaction with their lives? It's not impossible to investigate such questions, but the studies that do so are sparse relative to those that simply take reported outcomes at face value. As a general rule, what William Davis calls "the happiness industry" (of which Richard Layard has been a high-profile advocate, for instance in his book *Happiness: Lessons from a new science*, 2005) does not concern itself with such niceties of interpretation but assumes that what people say about their psychological well-being is more or less uncomplicatedly the truth.

Even if accurately reported, recovery rates are not everything. There is a long and (mostly) honourable tradition in psychotherapy that sees its purpose as self-understanding rather than cure. In the view of this tradition, the short, targeted interventions characteristic of CBT barely scratch the surface of our deepest problems, and provide relief (when they do) without corresponding insight. Layard and Clark do not deny this tradition, but they are not very interested in it either, and they certainly don't think it is of any relevance to public policy. So their defence of CBT should be seen as pragmatic. Public funding of treatment cannot reasonably be based on anything else than evidence, and evidence has to rely on randomized evaluations and reported recovery rates. Those who want insight rather than recovery cannot reasonably expect the taxpayer to indulge them. And nobody, least of all Layard and Clark, claims that CBT solves all or even most mental health problems. But on the evidence we have so far it looks capable of alleviating a more substantial proportion of them than any single other treatment that has yet been tried on a large scale.

Richard Layard and David Clark do not spoil a good case by over-pleading. The same cannot, unfortunately, be said of William Davis, whose book *The Happiness Industry* begins promisingly, with an enjoyable historical survey of attempts by psychologists from Jeremy Bentham onwards to understand the roots of human well-being. He writes subtly and amusingly about the many attempts that have been made to reduce the complexity of the human mind to simplistic causal processes, and to consider that all that is worthwhile in human

endeavour can be encapsulated in a single dimension – whether that be Bentham's utility, or the electrical traces recorded on Francis Edgeworth's hedonimeter, or changes in the concentration of neuro-transmitters such as dopamine and serotonin. And he provides many good reasons for thinking that direct observation of brains or behaviour can never fully substitute, either scientifically or politically, for giving subjects a voice in the expression of their own well-being.

But his social and political analysis of the modern heirs of this tradition rarely rises above the pedestrian. Perhaps it is useful for those who have never heard of Aldous Huxley or George Orwell to be told that the urge to understand human well-being may be used to manipulate and control us. But what are we to make of the flourish with which Davis reveals that governments try to understand social behaviour for their own purposes, or that some corporations are trying to set up employee wellness programmes in order to make more money? And that they sometimes employ consultants! Should we also be astonished that aspirin is produced and sold by firms instead of being given away by philanthropists for free? And does that fact tell us anything about the therapeutic qualities of aspirin?

It is disappointing that someone who challenges the use of simplistic theories of human happiness to sell therapies or pharmaceutical products should offer us simplistic socio-political analyses in order to sell books. But it's hard to read sentences like "Markets reduce everything to a question of individual calculation and selfishness", or "Capitalism spreads a plague of materialism, which undermines our connectedness, leaving many of us isolated and lonely" without wishing that capitalism and markets could be analysed with some sensitivity to the different forms they take in, say, nineteenth-century Manchester or twenty-first-century Seattle and a host of times and places in between.

As it happens, evidence exists that is relevant to some of Davis's grander assertions. For instance, a comparative experimental study of altruistic behaviour in small-scale societies published in 2001 by Joseph Henrich and co-authors suggested that integration into markets was associated with more, not less co-operative behaviour by the subjects studied. Davis may disagree with this particular piece of evidence, or think that the behaviour of small-scale societies is not relevant to his larger point, but it would be encouraging for him to acknowledge that relevant evidence exists.

There is something reminiscent here of the techniques of the behaviourist B. F. Skinner (who surprisingly is not mentioned by Davis). Skinner discovered that animals who had been appropriately conditioned could be made to press a lever in a box just by hearing a sound that had previously been associated with certain rewards, sounds that provoke anticipation even in the absence of the rewards themselves. Davis appears to think that readers who have been appropriately conditioned can be made to press Amazon's "one-click" button just by seeing phrases like "big business", "neo-liberalism", "capitalism" and "profit", words that provoke the state of righteous indignation that is most conducive to book-buying. That said, we don't have to accept William Davis's own premiss that the fact that he wants to sell his product is a reason to disparage its quality. It's just a pity he should feel the need to underestimate his readers' intelligence in order to do so.