For this Sunday, September 6, 202 The Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the New York Review of Books.

From the August 20 issue, page 27, Sophie Pinkham, ""Living by Lies," a review of *Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition and Compromise in PUtin's Russia* by Joshua Jaffa

From the September 24 issue, forthcoming, Fintan O'Toole, "Night and Day," a discussion of the use of religious imagery in American politics, particularly by Biden.

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education building next to the Church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings, following social distancing guidelines. Please read the essays and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the essays follows:

Living by Lies
Sophie PinkhamAUGUST 20, 2020 ISSUE
Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia
by Joshua Yaffa
Tim Duggan, 356 pp., $28.00
Vladimir Putin and Konstantin Ernst admiring a replica sword from a film produced by Ernst
Michael Klimentyev/AFP/Getty Images
Vladimir Putin and Konstantin Ernst admiring a replica sword from a film produced by Ernst, Moscow, December 2016
In the early 1970s, during the Soviet Union's long era of stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev, the frustrated writer Sergei Dovlatov moved from St. Petersburg to Tallinn, where he got a job at the newspaper Soviet Estonia. His darkly comic realist fiction was unpublishable even in Estonia, but at least he could make a living as a writer. In 1979 Dovlatov emigrated to New York, where he wrote The Compromise (1981), a chronicle of the "hard road from the reported facts to the truth" he had encountered at the paper. It consists of twelve numbered "compromises," each of which opens with a snippet of a newspaper article: anodyne and wholesome, propagandistic in the limp, halfhearted late Soviet manner. Then comes reality: hilariously squalid, ruefully funny. The narrator's editor berates him for ideological blunders—for instance, failing to list countries according to the success of their class struggle rather than alphabetically. (Needless to say, the USSR comes first.) Then there's the reality the journalist-narrator sees but can never write about: binge drinking, rigged horse races, girls who will do anything for a

pair of imported platform boots, the dilemma of childbearing when you know your child might end up in a labor camp.

Dovlatov's book is one of the inspirations for Between Two Fires: Truth, Ambition, and Compromise in Putin's Russia by Joshua Yaffa, The New Yorker's Moscow correspondent. Yaffa analyzes seven examples of how state pressure has distorted the careers and lives of people in contemporary Russia. A television producer sacrifices his journalistic integrity for clout. A Chechen single mother becomes a human rights activist during the second Chechen war and exposes Russian abuses, but after the brutal murder of a colleague she allows herself to be coopted by Ramzan Kadyrov's government and denounces those who criticize him. A Pskov parish priest loses everything because of his steadfast rejection of the corrupt union of church and state under Putin. A Crimean Tiger King with his own private zoo uses his big cats to advocate for Russian annexation, only to fall victim to a state-sponsored scheme to ruin him. The founders of a museum that exposes the horrors of the Gulag are fired and replaced by a government functionary, and the museum's exhibits are censored. A doctor's humanitarian missions are used as state propaganda supporting a war she abhors. A prominent Moscow director makes an uneasy peace with the authorities and pushes Russian theater in bold new directions, until he is put under house arrest for supposedly embezzling state funds.

Yaffa understands compromise under state pressure as the defining experience of life under Putin. Besides Dovlatov, another, very different inspiration for Between Two Fires is Yuri Levada (1930–2006), the sociologist who founded the independent Levada Center, now Russia's most reliable source of sociological data. Levada analyzed what he viewed as a peculiarly Soviet combination of fear and dependence in relation to the state, and how Soviet people learned to profit by exploiting the system rather than opposing it. He had high hopes that Homo sovieticus—submissive, cunning, and amoral—would die out with the Soviet Union, that the population would rise at last to Solzhenitsyn's 1974 admonishment to "live not by lies." (The furiously righteous Solzhenitsyn—in some ways the antithesis of Dovlatov—also makes frequent appearances in Between Two Fires.)

Instead, Levada wrote, "after the crash of the Soviet system, the person who rose to the surface was not a fabulously liberated hero, but someone inclined to adapt to what is required of him in order to survive." Homo post-sovieticus bore an uncanny resemblance to Homo sovieticus. In 2000, after Putin was elected Russia's president for the first time, the disillusioned Levada wrote an essay titled "The Wily Man," describing a character who "not only tolerates deception, but is willing to be deceived, and

even…requires self-deception for the sake of his own self-preservation." After reading this essay, Yaffa

became convinced that the most edifying, and important, character for journalistic study in Russia is not Putin, but those people whose habits, inclinations, and internal moral calculations elevated Putin to his Kremlin throne and now perform the small, daily work that, in aggregate, keeps him there.

The concepts of compromise and wiliness work best when Yaffa writes, as Dovlatov did, about the media. How much will the wily television producer or theater director compromise his values, and compromise the truth, in order to become rich or famous, or to realize his artistic vision? In these stories, we feel that the wily man had a genuine choice, which gives his decisions moral complexity. "Compromise in Putin's Russia" is a less useful rubric when applied to matters of life and death, or to people for whom Putin isn't the center (positive or negative) of the moral universe. Yaffa's chapters on a humanitarian doctor and a Chechen human rights activist reveal the limitations of an interpretative mode in which every action is categorized as either for Putin or against him.

Konstantin Ernst, the protagonist of Yaffa's first "compromise," wanted to be a film director from an early age. In 1986, at twenty-five, he abandoned a fledgling scientific career and started shooting music and concert videos. Soon he got a job as a director at a newsmagazine show where he covered subjects that had been taboo before glasnost; he also explored artier, more experimental approaches to television. In the mid-1990s he collaborated with the director Leonid Parfyonov on a bizarre but now classic TV show called Old Songs About Important Things, in which popular performers sang the greatest hits of Soviet pop while evoking scenes from Soviet films. It offered viewers a way to salvage positive memories of Soviet times, smuggling in nostalgia through humor and campiness.

In 1995 the director of one of Russia's largest TV stations, Russian Public Television, was assassinated, possibly because he was considering cutting middlemen out of ad sales. Ernst was tapped by the station's main shareholder, the oligarch Boris Berezovsky, to take over creative production. Berezovsky was using the station as an instrument of political power, and in 1996 it became an unofficial branch of Boris Yeltsin's reelection campaign. Renamed Channel One, it was the venue through which Yeltsin announced his resignation in 1999, and it helped elect Putin in 2000. Shortly afterward, however, Berezovsky broke with Putin, using Channel One to attack him over the Kursk disaster, in which twenty-three survivors of a submarine explosion were left to

die. Putin struck back, and soon Berezovsky fled the country. Ernst sided with Putin, as he continues to do today. Once a lover of Russian alternative rock and international art house cinema, he became a high-ranking apparatchik.

Even so, Ernst prided himself on bringing daring new kinds of television to a large Russian audience. When he could, he allowed edgy voices onto Channel One, navigating the unwritten rules of censorship as they changed from week to week. As one documentary maker explained, “I think of it as the door to Narnia, always opening and closing.” When the door swung open, Ernst might deign to usher you through. He also had the resources to realize his own artistic aspirations on a monumental scale. One of his highest-profile achievements was the spectacular, immensely expensive, and technically complex opening ceremony at the 2014 Sochi Olympics. The performance, which involved a clever mix of Russian references and international artistic influences, was admired even by Putin’s opponents. Such success, Yaffa argues, allowed Ernst to pretend that the tradeoff had been in his favor.

But Ernst also found himself presiding over the kind of humiliatingly primitive propaganda from which he’d imagined he could keep his distance. The production of fake news went into overdrive in 2014, with Russia’s aggression in Ukraine. In one particularly notorious instance, Channel One aired an account of Ukrainian troops supposedly crucifying a toddler in eastern Ukraine. The station also joined in the clamor of preposterous conspiracy theories meant to divert attention from Russia’s involvement in the shooting down of a commercial airliner over eastern Ukraine. In the end, there was no way for Ernst to keep his hands clean.

Yaffa writes that “Ernst, like many in his generation in Russia, wears his cynicism as a sign of enlightenment—he is alive to how the world really works, aware of its true rules and logic, not like those idealists who remain blinded by their naïveté.” This hardly seems a peculiarly Russian trait, especially where television producers are concerned. Ernst’s career could be described rather adequately with an English idiom: he sold out.

One of Yaffa’s most disturbing “compromises” is the story of Dr. Elizaveta Glinka. (The chapter on Heda Saratova, the Chechen human rights activist, is similarly harrowing.) Glinka’s vocation was to give aid and comfort to the dying and the desperate. She discovered hospice care and street medical outreach when she was living in the US with her Russian-American husband, and she went on to help develop these areas of medicine in Ukraine and Russia in the 2000s. Charismatic and selfless, “Dr. Liza,” as she was known in Russia, became a popular figure, thanks in part to her blog about her work. She was soon able to raise substantial amounts of money to pay for palliative

care for terminal cancer patients and for medical care for the homeless and destitute. One of her acquaintances was impressed, Yaffa writes, “by Glinka’s even temper, the way she treated everyone the same, whether the person walked into the basement headquarters wearing a fur coat or a smelly parka.” Asked how she reconciled herself to the death of her patients, she answered, “It makes no difference whether a person dies now, or in two years, or fifty—in the scheme of human civilization, it’s irrelevant. What’s more important is that a person’s death, whenever it happens, should not be undignified.”

Yaffa explains in his introduction that, like Dovlatov, he set out to write about people who are neither heroes nor villains. Glinka, who displays many traits commonly associated with sainthood, is an awkward fit. He quotes the novelist Ludmila Ulitskaya’s description of her first encounter with Glinka, when a mutual friend of theirs lay dying in the hospital. When Glinka arrived, Ulitskaya was already occupying the only chair in the room, so Glinka soon left. When Ulitskaya departed a few hours later, she found Glinka in the hallway, lying on a hospital cot next to an elderly dying man—a stranger—and caressing his head. “Liza’s behavior at that time seemed a little weird to me,” Ulitskaya later wrote. But then again, “ordinary people tend to find the behavior of saints a little weird.”

Yaffa depicts Glinka as something of a holy fool, with “no conception of how individuals assemble and wield power.” He suggests that she was ignorant “of politicians and their motives.” But perhaps she simply didn’t care, except to the extent that politicians could help her to achieve her goals. As one of her friends put it, “Her battle was not for the state or against it, for Putin or against him. Her battle was against injustice, suffering, pain.” Yaffa explains that she was good at identifying people who could help her. Over time, her network of contacts in the government grew, enabling her to expand her humanitarian operations, which came to include an organization called Fair Aid. She had become an influential figure.

When Glinka did dip her toes into opposition politics, she learned that engagement came at a high price. During the wave of protests against the falsification of Russia’s 2011 elections, she joined a group called the League of Voters, which promoted fair elections and included several high-profile opposition activists and Leonid Parfyonov, the television presenter and director who once worked with Ernst but chose a more righteous path. Fair Aid’s bank accounts were promptly blocked on the grounds that documents were missing—a standard government tactic for punishing dissenters—which made it impossible to feed and clothe the homeless in the middle of winter. It’s easy to imagine that Glinka, with her single-minded mission to help the

needy, would find it impossible to reconcile herself with this interruption to her work. She provided additional documents and the accounts were unfrozen, but her organization was subjected to a lengthy investigation by the tax authorities. This was the end of her involvement with Russia's political opposition.

Strangely, Yaffa omits this episode. He describes only how Glinka prepared hot soup and tea for the demonstrators in 2011–2012, characterizing her actions as driven by disposition, not principle: "Her sympathies lay with those out in the streets, not out of some deeply held conviction about the evils of Putin's rule, but from an instinct to always take the side of the weak." Might she, in fact, have been interested in doing political work to advocate for democracy, only to discover that the Russian government was forcing her to choose between Fair Aid and any kind of engagement with the political opposition? From this point on, she tried to do her humanitarian work while swimming with the political current. She joined the Kremlin's human rights council in 2012. Though the council was deeply compromised, Glinka managed to use its influence to improve provincial hospitals and children's homes.

As with Ernst, the most serious stains on Glinka's reputation came with Russia's aggression in Ukraine. In the spring of 2014, she visited the separatist-controlled "People's Republic of Donetsk" to survey hospital capacity, then returned to bring medicine and first-aid supplies. Over the following months, she went back again and again. When she saw someone in need of medical assistance, she did whatever was necessary to get it, or to take them out of the separatist-controlled area. Just as she hadn't cared whether someone was wearing a fur coat or a smelly parka, she didn't care whether her patients were involved in the war or not. If saving someone required, say, transport on a Russian military plane, so be it. This led to disputes with a colleague who had accompanied her to Donetsk but saw any cooperation with the Russian military as reprehensible, given Russia's involvement in the conflict.

Ernst compromised largely for personal gain: for influence and money, to gratify his artistic ego. He's easy to condemn. Glinka engaged in political compromises because of her inexorable drive to aid the most vulnerable people in society. She risked her own life in war zones as she rescued children who would probably have been left to die without her help. She made numerous trips to Donetsk to take ill, disabled, and wounded children out of the conflict zone. Yaffa provides a gripping, cinematic description of a series of trips she took in an old ambulance; the only other adult with her was the driver. She had personally negotiated safe passage with Ukrainian forces and with the separatists, but she came under fire anyway. She didn't much care who was shooting: for her, war was "senseless in the truest sense of the word," as her husband put it. It

was difficult for international groups like the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières to carry out humanitarian aid work in occupied Donetsk, because of separatist hostility and, during some periods, because of the Ukrainian government's blockade on the occupied territories. Glinka's ties with the Russian government compromised her, but they were also the reason she had access.

The Kremlin avidly promoted Glinka's work, which bolstered the false image it had been cultivating as a savior swooping in to rescue innocents from the Ukrainian "fascists." The Russian government was winkingly denying any complicity in the conflict, which most likely would not have occurred, and certainly couldn't have lasted more than a few months, without its support. So was Glinka a dupe, a tool of Russian propaganda? Or worse, was she actively and willingly supporting a morally repugnant war?

Even as she was celebrated by the Russian government and in state media, she began to receive hate mail in relation to her work in Ukraine. She caused dismay in opposition circles when she told interviewers that she hadn't personally seen Russian troops in Ukraine. This may well have been true—Russians fighting in Ukraine were not declaring their identity, so if she had seen Russians she wouldn't necessarily have known it—but state media used her statement as support for the fiction that Russia was not intervening in the conflict. Close friends accused her of providing "indulgences" to those responsible for the war in Ukraine, of becoming "a tool they employ to buy their place in paradise."

Yaffa characterizes Glinka's position as pragmatic and utilitarian: "The moral value of helping a person in need trumped how that help might be obtained." But such terms don't fit someone so single-minded in her altruism, someone operating according to such an absolutist set of morals. For some people, any cooperation with Putin's government is reprehensible. For Glinka, it was reprehensible to fail to take any action that would help those in need.

"I purposely keep neutral," she said in an interview. "I don't want to make clear my position. I try to separate myself from everything that prevents me from saving a person's life." What would have been accomplished, she asked, if the children had been left to die? Could Putin's opponents advertise those deaths as his latest crimes? How could anyone count that as a victory? These are legitimate questions.

Yaffa rejects the concept of neutrality, writing that Glinka "tried to steer clear of politics, but the thing about war is that it is an inherently political event. Neutrality itself is a position: refusing to apportion blame for violence means letting one side or the other off

the hook." But neutrality is fundamental to wartime humanitarianism, which seeks to reduce harm while bracketing the question of which side is in the wrong. A humanitarian who loudly apportions blame rarely makes it past enemy lines. Glinka's mistake was not that she failed to condemn Putin, but that she compromised her neutrality by working so closely with the Russian government. Yaffa's definition of the "political" is also overly narrow. War and authoritarianism are undoubtedly political, but so are homelessness, poverty, and lack of medical care—the issues Glinka started off addressing—especially in a country flush with oil money.

Glinka died in a 2016 plane crash, along with an entire military choir. They were a "humanitarian delegation" to Syria, where Russia was aiding Bashar al-Assad. Unlike most of the compromises in Between Two Fires, Glinka's was fatal. Her end seems straight out of a maudlin, moralizing short story, the kind Dovlatov never would have written.

Yaffa argues that outsiders like himself must acknowledge that Russians find it almost impossible to avoid compromise, while also "reserving a space for the sober judgment of what such individual choices and behaviors lead to in the aggregate." Dovlatov's Compromise, by contrast, offers no sober judgments of right and wrong. Instead, it makes you laugh at the debased nature of late-Soviet journalism and late-Soviet life. The narrator is a drunken schlub, doing his best but usually failing, hopelessly compromised just like everybody else.

One of my favorite scenes in Between Two Fires is when Yaffa agrees, for the sake of his research, to appear on a Channel One show in which guests and hosts scream at one another about politics. Nefarious Western schemes are mentioned in every episode, making foreign guests indispensable foils. Yaffa offers himself up as a token Russian-speaking foreigner. Almost as soon as the show starts, he realizes that he "was meant to play the role of the pitiable imbecile and birthday party piñata: everyone would get a chance to step up and have a whack." He only manages to get in a few sentences. Yet he appears on the show again and again,

each time certain, as I sat in the makeup chair, that this would be the day I would manage to say something subversive and devastatingly convincing on Russian state television, the day I would break or otherwise disrupt the choreographed rules of the genre.

Needless to say, he never succeeds. If he'd been more venal, he could have gotten a contract for $2,500 a month to keep appearing, as one American acquaintance of his

did. Dovlatov probably would have leapt at the money—he was always broke—and then drowned his humiliation in fortified wine.

Yaffa is good at using himself as a comic character, and I wished he'd done it more often. (Another amusing moment comes when the Crimean zoo owner bullies the terrified Yaffa into posing for a photo with a tiger.) The television episode stands out as one of the few times he implicates himself in the endless succession of compromises he documents. It's easy to write about other people's compromises; it's much harder to write about your own. Between Two Fires would have benefited from a reflection on the compromises made by an American journalist covering Russia at a time of rapidly escalating tensions between the two countries.

Foreign correspondents in Russia have protected status, and they are vastly less likely than their Russian counterparts to face harassment, violence, or imprisonment as a result of their work. But this relative safety doesn't mean that foreign correspondents can publish whatever they want. American coverage of Russia is inevitably shaped by American political and editorial priorities. Liberal American news outlets and publishers are hungry for stories about Putin's misdeeds, especially as they relate to Donald Trump, but there is relatively little appetite for stories that look at Russia from other angles. Media budgets are tight, space in a magazine like The New Yorker is precious, and few editors are prepared to devote the resources needed for, say, an in-depth investigation of corruption in the Russian provinces. It can be a hard road to reported facts for American journalists, too.

Night and Day
Fintan O'Toole
SEPTEMBER 24, 2020 ISSUE
Joe and Jill Biden
Olivier Douliery/AFP/Getty Images
Joe and Jill Biden watching fireworks during the Democratic National Convention, Wilmington, Delaware, August 20, 2020

The grammar of American presidential elections is, for obvious reasons, Christian. The other party's candidate is mired in sin and error; ours will bring redemption and salvation. But not this time. Joe Biden is a devout Catholic, yet the shape of his speech accepting the Democratic Party's nomination at its virtual convention was based on the cosmogony of one of Christianity's great early rivals, Manichaeanism. The Manichaeans believed that the world had been taken over by an

evil demiurge, the Prince of Darkness; while he was in the ascendent, humans had lost their reason and became “like unto a man bitten by a wild dog or serpent.” The great battle of existence is between these forces of darkness and those of light, which must reconquer the universe.

In the twenty-five minutes of his stirring address, Biden used “dark” or “darkness” seven times, “light” or “bright” twelve times. Usually, the terms appeared together in the absolute Manichaean opposition of “a battle for the soul of this nation.” There was no doubt who the Prince of Darkness was. Biden did not name Donald Trump, but his refusal to do so merely served to magnify the president into a vastly malign force who has “cloaked America in darkness,” plunged the country into “this season of darkness,” and written “this chapter of American darkness.” Biden modestly stopped short of identifying himself, as the logical implication would have it, as the god of light, suggesting merely that “I will be an ally of the light, not of the darkness.”

Biden did not want this grand framing of his candidacy to be understood as a flight of poetic fancy. “The choice could not be more clear,” he said. “No rhetoric is needed.” Light and darkness are not, for him, rhetorical constructs, but the defining energies of our present political reality. He truly does want voters to see the election in November as an existential and even cosmological struggle rather than as a normal part of the electoral cycle.

In the buildup to Biden’s speech, the Catholic nun Sister Simone Campbell, delivering the opening blessing of the final night, summoned into the cyberspace of the convention a divine spirit that would create the world all over again:

The very first paragraph of the Scripture that informs the three Abrahamic traditions tells us: The Divine Spirit breathed over the waters of chaos and brought forth a new creation. Encouraged by this promise that a new creation can come from chaos, let us pray: O Divine Spirit!

Normally such prayers can be cynically dismissed as just another part of the established ritual of party conventions, like the balloons and placards. But Campbell’s startlingly millenarian supplication was fully in tune with the political mood music. The cosmological chaos she conjured had already been established in the big speeches as a metaphor for Donald Trump: Michelle Obama, for example, telling voters that “if we have any hope of ending this chaos, we have got to vote for Joe Biden.” Campbell, moreover, gave a very specific political meaning to the termination of existing American history, calling on the divine spirit to inspire “a vision that ends structural racism, bigotry,

and sexism so rife now in our nation and in our history." Most importantly her ecstatic prophecy was a purposeful prelude to Biden's own speech, with its equally rapturous promise that the great chaos of Trump would be followed, not just by a new administration, but by a new moment of creation.

Hence Biden's resort, in his peroration, to one of his favorite passages of poetry, the famous chorus from The Cure at Troy, Seamus Heaney's version of Sophocles' Philoctetes:

> History says, Don't hope
> On this side of the grave,
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed-for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up,
> And hope and history rhyme.

The point of Heaney's concluding phrase is that, of course, hope and history do not rhyme in any existing language. The once-in-a-lifetime tidal wave of justice must come from outside the frame of history's hopelessness. It must have a miraculous quality. Heaney's next verse is explicit:

> Believe in miracles
> And cures and healing wells.

It is thus ironic that in the same speech Biden mocked Trump for believing in miracle cures for the Covid-19 pandemic: "He keeps waiting for a miracle. Well, I have news for him, no miracle is coming." Yet Biden himself is invoking the miraculous, the advent of a moment when the history that has brought the United States into its winter of Trumpian darkness falls away and a new reign of light dawns.

This oracular quality gave Biden's address a genuine and unexpected kind of grandeur. But it also exposed two tensions implicit in his candidacy. One is that you can do Manichaean polarity or you can do hands-across-the-aisle amity—but it is hard to do both. It makes sense for Biden to appeal to Republican and independent voters by aiming, as he put it, "To represent all of us, not just our base or our party. This is not a partisan moment." This appeal is deeply embedded in Biden's political persona, and it was underlined at the convention by endorsements from Colin Powell and John Kasich and a slickly edited video on Biden's "unlikely friendship" with John McCain.

On the level of ordinary electoral history, this is clever campaigning. But on the deeper level toward which Biden is pitching his candidacy, how can the final battle between darkness and light not be “a partisan moment”? If Trump is the Prince of Darkness, the Republicans are his demonic minions. And the difficulty for Biden is that this opposition also has real political purchase. For most of those who will vote for Biden, the Republican Party, as it now exists, really is a dire threat to democracy, and this damn well is a partisan moment.

The other tension is that elections are won and lost on emotions, and the emotional power of Biden’s campaign will depend on how it answers a question that the convention left hanging in the air: Should Trump be magnified or diminished? If the incumbent is to be seen as an evil demiurge, then the appropriate emotions to bring to bear in the battle for America’s soul are the rather violent ones of anger and fear. But there was, at the convention, an equal and opposite impulse: to minimize Trump, to reduce him almost to nothing. Kamala Harris did this very effectively in her acceptance speech with a single, glancing reference in which she showed her utter contempt by not even bothering to be explicit: “I know a predator when I see one.” Michelle Obama minimized Trump with a different image, as though he were a small man with the waters rising above his neck, “clearly in over his head.”

In The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, Charles Darwin suggested that our physical reactions to feelings of “scorn, disdain, contempt, and disgust” manifest themselves only in the presence of something “which does not excite in us certain other strong emotions, such as rage or terror.” This implies that revulsion is a kind of luxury—we can afford to express it only when we are not in the grip of the more potent sensations of fury and fear.

Running counter to Biden’s tendency to raise Trump to the status of spiritual evil, the broad thrust of the convention suggested that Democrats believe that mere contempt for him is a luxury they can indeed afford. The gamble is that abhorrence of Trump is sufficiently strong to motivate voters and that Biden and Harris, rather than tapping into their wrath and dread, can therefore offer them comfort and empathy instead.

Certainly it is hard to imagine a more comprehensive display of pure disdain by a former president for his successor than Barack Obama’s masterly speech to the convention. Without the presence of a physical audience, and with the speaker facing the camera directly, his facial expressions were magnified into a new kind of visual eloquence. Darwin noted that one of the primary gestures of contempt is a movement of

the mouth that “appears to graduate into one closely like a smile.” Obama signaled the beginning of his attack on Trump with a cold little laugh. Darwin wrote that

> the partial closure of the eyelids…or the turning away of the eyes…are likewise highly expressive of disdain. These actions seem to declare that the despised person is not worth looking at or is disagreeable to behold.

In the middle of his lacerating putdown of Trump, Obama paused and blinked slowly four times, a perfect counterpoint in semaphore to a brutally laconic summary of a presidency too disagreeable to behold:

> He’s shown no interest in putting in the work; no interest in finding common ground; no interest in using the awesome power of his office to help anyone but himself and his friends; no interest in treating the presidency as anything but one more reality show that he can use to get the attention he craves.

The scorn was magnificent, but it signaled an awareness that Trump, even in his absence, was powerfully present. Obama was implicitly alluding to a truth that everyone knows but that cannot be openly articulated at a party convention: that the Democratic ticket is not Biden-Harris. It is Trump-Biden-Harris—very much in that order. The Democratic candidates are primarily defined by what they are not: not Trump. The path of the 2020 campaign is to be a via negativa. Each of those clauses in Obama’s deadly characterization of the incumbent begins with “no,” planting the idea that Trump is a nothing and that a Biden presidency will be the nullification of this nonentity, the double negative that makes a positive.

The strange displacement of the convention accidentally underlined the power of conspicuous absence. The speakers addressed a literal void, but also a figurative one. It was not just the usual throng of delegates and journalists that was patently not there. It was the protagonist himself, Trump—not quite Hamlet without the prince, more Alfred Jarry’s Ubu Roi without the grotesque king. Jill Biden, speaking from a vacant classroom in Brandywine High School, where she used to teach English, acknowledged the ghostliness of the moment:

> This quiet is heavy. You can hear the anxiety that echoes down empty hallways. There’s no scent of new notebooks or freshly waxed floors. The rooms are dark as the bright young faces that should fill them are now confined to boxes on a computer screen.

This is a perfect example of being not-Trump. Jill Biden is here using one of Trump's favorite rhetorical devices: the conjuring of an image through a statement of its absence. Trump uses it against targets as diverse as Megyn Kelly ("I refuse to call [her] a bimbo, because that would not be politically correct") and Kim Jong-un ("I would NEVER call him 'short and fat?'"). Jill Biden occupied Trump's rhetorical form but altered its content from insult to poignancy, from hostility to empathy. In this, she followed deftly along the negative path.

The pregnant emptiness she brought to life is what the Democrats seem to be banking on. They seek to evoke the anxiety that echoes down the hallways of a polity emptied of its grandeur, its self-confidence, its sense of destiny, by a presidency that has made a mockery of them all. The pandemic that shaped the entire form of the convention also killed off the American greatness that Trump claimed to have restored. When Obama spoke of "the awesome power of his office," he was using the same rhetorical trick to call to mind the oxymoron that Trump has brought into existence: an awesome powerlessness, the astounding implosion of the idea of the United States as the most formidable country the world has ever seen.

The eerie, gothic quality of Jill Biden's performance was superbly judged because it was intended to summon too those ultimate absences that haunt her husband, the dead. Trump got elected in large part because he could evoke, however crudely, a sense of loss. He could suggest that there was a world of pure white Americanism, of good industrial jobs, of proper authority, that used to exist but had been stolen by the forces of change that put a Black president in power. Trumpism is a Ghost Dance for white, male America, an act of faith that the invaders can be banished and the old order restored. The mines and steel mills have no more returned to the Midwest than the buffalo did to the Great Plains, but this soured, curdled grief for a vanished world (part real, part imagined) remains at the heart of Trump's emotional appeal.

So it makes sense that part of the Democratic strategy is to take this idea of loss and give it a much more personal, physical, and poignant content. Jill Biden set this tone of mourning when she spoke of

the indescribable sorrow that follows every lonely last breath when the ventilators turn off. As a mother and a grandmother, as an American, I am heartbroken by the magnitude of this loss—by the failure to protect our communities, by every precious and irreplaceable life gone.

And she moved skillfully from this general lamentation to the image of her husband as the embodiment of the nation's grief. After the death in a car accident of Biden's daughter and first wife, Jill inherited, as she put it, "a man and two little boys standing in the wreckage of unthinkable loss." That "wreckage" rhymes with the "carnage" that Trump, in his inaugural address in January 2017, claimed as America's condition after the Obama years. But the echo is also a transformation—from political hyperbole to human event. She dramatized her husband as a man who has metaphorically twice walked away from the wreckage of death, once from that car crash in 1972, and again from the death of their son Beau from cancer in 2015. Having begun with the notion of a hauntingly empty space, she returned to an image of Joe, four days after Beau's funeral, putting on his suit to "walk out into a world empty of our son."

The image of emptiness was also used by Michelle Obama: "Joe knows the anguish of sitting at a table with an empty chair." Biden himself practically ushered his audience into the void: "I have some idea how it feels to lose someone you love. I know that deep black hole that opens up in the middle of your chest and you feel like you're being sucked into it."

This is not, to put it mildly, the sunny rhetoric of uplift that party conventions usually broadcast. Yet it addresses another inescapable fact: death is on the ticket. With Biden being potentially the oldest president ever inaugurated, the possibility of his death in office is very real. The selection of Kamala Harris as a relatively young running mate cannot be divorced from the understanding that she might have to assume the higher office if Biden dies or becomes incapacitated. Jill Biden, by placing death at the center of her husband's persona, also managed to suggest that he transcends it. He contains it within him, carries it on his back, but still somehow survives.

The main idea of the convention—and the big wager of the entire campaign—is that Biden's personal mourning can be generalized as the state of the nation. In her acceptance speech Harris said that "we are a nation that's grieving. Grieving the loss of life, the loss of jobs, the loss of opportunities, the loss of normalcy. And yes, the loss of certainty."

Here again, Trump's rhetorical territory is being occupied. Though the expression is radically altered, this is conceptually not that different from what Trump might have said in 2016. It implies that there was once a shared "normalcy" and "certainty" that has been taken away. This is a highly dubious proposition, but it occupies the empty space of loss that Trump created. And the thrust of so many speeches at the convention was to negate Trump's hold on that imaginative desert by suggesting that Biden has a

superabundance of what Trump so cruelly lacks: empathy. In praising his vice-president Obama homed in on “his empathy, born of too much grief.”

The message is that Biden’s terrible excess of grief leaves him with plenty left over to share with the whole country.* It is an extraordinary notion: Biden as the philanthropist of sorrow, possessed of more than he can ever use himself. The great negative of grief becomes a positive asset to be redistributed in the form of empathy—a word that echoed through the convention speeches like the refrain of a hymn. (Michelle Obama used it five times in eighteen minutes.)

This is the apotheosis of that great slogan of second-wave feminism: The personal is political. The personalities of presidential candidates always carry weight, but Biden’s own suffering is made to carry almost the entire weight of his political appeal. There is a kind of sympathetic magic at work—because Biden transcends the darkness of grief, America can, through him, transcend the darkness of the history that has produced Trump. He embodies the term coined by the psychologist Henri Nouwen—the “wounded healer.” Jill Biden expressed this utter personalization of politics most explicitly: “How do you make a broken family whole? The same way you make a nation whole. With love and understanding—and with small acts of kindness. With bravery. With unwavering faith.”

But when we bring it back to real politics, the notion is at once deeply affecting and highly problematic. On the one hand, there is something appropriate about the image of America as embodied in a man with a deep black hole in the middle of his chest: that hole is a portal through which the Democrats have passed into a language of brokenness and grieving. Perhaps, in this, there is evidence that something has been learned from the debacle of 2016. Trump won in part because both Obama and Hillary Clinton explicitly countered “Make America Great Again” with “America is already great.” It might have seemed like a smart soundbite, but it reeked of smugness and it was, for millions of voters, patently untrue. It relied on the clichés of American exceptionalism that so many citizens knew to be hollow. Trump ruthlessly exploited the gap between the rhetoric and the reality.

At least this time, “America is already great” is off limits. Democrats obviously cannot use it when fighting a Republican incumbent, but what is striking now is how stark, how dark, the alternative is. Under the pressure of the political chaos of the Trump presidency, the horrors of the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests, and Biden’s mournful persona, the party has embraced a radically different image: of an America that is shattered, sagging under the burdens of mass death, economic

disruption, malign government, and national impotence. The Democrats' battle hymn in 2020 is a De Profundis, a cry from the depths.

It is not, of course, unusual for opposition parties to suggest that a great malaise has taken hold under the reign of the incumbent. What is different this time is that having adopted a language of grief, the Democratic convention also edged toward an acknowledgment that American suffering just might be a chronic condition rather than an aberration. The standard rhetoric imagines pain as a temporary affliction, created by the idiot currently in the White House and sure to end when our man replaces him. The underlying assumption is that the default and the defining condition of the US is its unparalleled perfection.

It was little remarked that in his address Barack Obama used a short but explosive word: "myth." He was speaking of the generations of migrants and of African-Americans and of their actual experiences: "They knew how far the daily reality of America strayed from the myth." The myth is all those big words embedded in the foundational political texts: democracy, freedom, equality. Biden, too, used a short word with a sharp edge: "And finally, to live up to and make real the words written in the sacred documents that founded this nation, that all men and women are created equal."

"Finally" here means to do at last what has not been done before. These two small words, "myth" and "finally," pointed to the presence of another black hole—the perennial gap between American ideals and the millions who are excluded from their remit. They also implicitly conceded that simply putting the good guys back in charge does not fill that hole, since even eight years of Obama-Biden did not "finally" end structural racism and poverty. A just and decent normality, these words admit, cannot be restored. It has to be, as in Campbell's prayer, "a new creation."

To that extent, Biden's persona as a man of sorrow, acquainted with grief, does help to create an imaginative space for radical change. Acknowledging brokenness is a necessary condition for a genuine fix. Grief leads to magical thinking, and there are moments when magical thinking might have its place as a way of leaping beyond the bounds of a history that has continued to repeat itself in racism, impoverishment, and injustice. In the Heaney poem that Biden quoted, believing in miracles and cures and healing wells is not mere fantasy—it is a way of breaking the cycle of despair and releasing a powerful surge of justice.

But a broken nation is not a macrocosm of a broken family. It cannot be healed by love and understanding alone, by religious faith and "small acts of kindness." Both

Biden and Harris placed family at the center of their candidacies. Both suggested that America is a family that looks and feels like theirs—like Biden's in its sense of loss, like Harris's in its diversity. Because it has a basis in truth, this creates an illusion of intimacy that is indeed the negative of Trump's persona. Trump says: I am not like you; I am richer, smarter, superior. Biden and Harris are saying the opposite: I am just like you; my family is a representative fragment of the American mosaic. If Harris can bring together a family with Indian, African, and Jewish heritage, America can glory in its diversity. If the Bidens can overcome tragedy, America can emerge from its present nightmare. The Harris and Biden clans are the parallel, in the world of light, to the Trump brood's cynical privatization of power in the world of darkness.

This impression of intimacy is a political asset, but it is also deceptive. It implies that the problems that Trump's accession brought to the surface are primarily problems of his personal character—and that they can be solved by having nicer leaders with nicer families. The nation, as Michelle Obama put it, has been "underperforming not simply on matters of policy but on matters of character." "Character," said Biden, "is on the ballot." And yes, of course it is. Maybe most of the electorate feels the same disgust that Barack Obama enacted for them at the convention. Maybe that's enough. Maybe the strategy of leaving rage and fear to Trump in his domain of darkness will pay off in November. But kindness and empathy are not a program for government or tools for structural change. A real republic is one in which citizens are not dependent on the benevolence of others for their basic needs.

The decision, it seems, has been made: to campaign more in sorrow than in anger. But if the soundtrack of the Biden-Harris road movie is to be a lament, it is crucial that the idea of mourning at its heart be properly understood. It is not the same as the toxic nostalgia that fueled Trump's success in 2016. The difference lies in the idea of restoration. Trump told his voters not just that they had lost something (which was often true) but that he could bring it back (which was mostly a lie). But the point of genuine mourning is that the thing you are grieving for cannot be restored. The grief is an acceptance that the loss is irreparable. There is and always will be the empty chair at the table, the black hole in the chest.

Perhaps this true sense of bereavement is a necessity for America—a hard, sad, relentless reckoning with the knowledge that much of what it has been should be allowed to die, that the structures of inequality and oppression and rapaciousness that have been a part of its life for so long must finally be let go. A false notion of greatness must be given a decent burial. Biden can perhaps be the chief mourner at its obsequies. If there is really to be a new creation, there must be no doubt that the old world is dead.

—August 26, 2020