

Boyagoda keeps his focus on Neuhaus's growth in integrating the personal, the political, and the public as his mission grew and his circle of influence expanded. He did not always succeed. Some critics found him too political and too conservative, but that did not stop him. In a 1975 interview with *Time*, Neuhaus said, "When I meet God, I expect to meet him as an American." Boyagoda comments "if so then God should be prepared to meet a rather long-winded American, with sharp opinions and extensive citations on everything under the sun . . ." In 1986 Neuhaus wrote *The Catholic Moment* while still a Lutheran and raised many questions about his interest in Catholic controversies. As he reflected on arguments for morally framed foreign policy positions and defended the virtues of democracy, he was writing his way toward what he saw as a Church with an intellectually coherent vision of reality that strongly attracted him. He did not make that move until 1990 when he was mentored by Cardinal Avery Dulles and ordained by Cardinal John O'Connor.

Boyagoda offers a realistic assessment of Neuhaus's personality and literary gifts. When his famous book, *The Naked Public Square*, was published in 1984, his book sales were greatly helped by the presidential election of Ronald Reagan. Perfect timing. Neuhaus thought that the metaphors he composed in his writing helped people to think about things that confused them. Boyagoda notes that he had an "incisive and perfectly timed attentiveness to the rise of Christian fundamentalists" who tried to call attention to the loss of basic American values, his greatest concern. He had the capacity to be involved in internal debates of groups he supported (like the evangelicals) but, at the same time, he would also be involved intellectually and physically with matters that took him elsewhere. He was a constantly moving target.

Over the years, as Neuhaus pursued activism, preaching, writing, protesting, and lobbying, and founded a magazine, it was clear that he was guided by an entrepreneurial and elastic sense of ministerial vocation. When he later became Catholic, Cardinal O'Connor allowed him to continue his work confirming

his unique vocation as an intellectual with a profound vision and ability to communicate with a wide public. With his wide circle of popes, presidents, and political leaders, and frequent media exposure, Neuhaus wielded influence and power from his desk at *First Things*, which celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary this year. In two hundred issues over twenty years, he wrote ten thousand words each month. He was criticized by some for being little more than a pundit with a Roman collar. When his health suffered from cancer, he wrote about that experience with death with personal insight into sickness and suffering and the role of faith. He never lost the sense of his priestly vocation and he never stopped trying to live out what he believed. In 2000 he wrote, "Our lives are measured by who we are created and called to be, and the measuring is done by the One who creates and calls."

When his friends Pope John Paul II and William F. Buckley Jr. died in 2008, he reflected on the "possibilities of lives lived greatly" and their power to inspire us to expand our horizons. With Neuhaus's death in 2009, many people said the same of him: a man of faith who shaped the intellectual and public conversation of his tumultuous times with lasting influence.

The empire business

Amitav Ghosh

Flood of Fire: A Novel.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 624 pages, \$27

reviewed by Robert D. Kaplan

In 1992, at the age of thirty-six, the Kolkata-born novelist Amitav Ghosh published a sort of breakthrough book that was a mixture of travel writing, investigative reporting, and history. The muskily titled *In an Antique Land* has as one of its points of departure Fustat in Old Cairo, a place greasy with dust and pollution where, as the narrator tells us, were found "huge quantities of Chinese pottery" and "valuable fragments of Indian textiles." Ghosh locates this dun-brown wasteland in Egypt's sprawling capital at the center of

medieval global trade routes: attesting to an Indian Ocean world that melded Islam, Confucianism, and Hinduism long before the divisions erected by twentieth-century area studies. Indeed, the Afro-Asian Middle Ages were defined by a rich confusion of accommodating cultures, without the communal partitions wrought by modernism. In this early book, Ghosh was well on his way in a lifelong project of revealing the most exquisite of cultural subtleties: to wit, he would write about institutions of servitude that were far removed from the current definition of slavery, and about Jews who spoke Arabic and were influenced by Sufism, all in a universe of flexible, paper-thin hierarchies. In unraveling this Indian Ocean world of the Middle Ages—and later of the nineteenth century—Ghosh has shown us again and again where globalization might be headed, given a few more decades.

In much of this, Ghosh's preoccupation has been less with aristocrats than with traders. It is a healthy preoccupation, since it allows him to rescue seemingly unremarkable individuals from the anonymity of history. It makes him an obscurantist in the best possible way. For example, there is his story of a merchant on a caravan traveling from Upper Egypt to the Red Sea in Sudan in 1183, as manifested through the surviving notes that the man took. Ghosh's worldview is akin to that of another contemporary Indian Ocean novelist, Abdulrazak Gurnah, born in 1948 in Zanzibar, who allows one of his characters to declare: "This is what we're on this earth to do. To trade." Trade, not ideology, not revolution, not politics even, is what normal men do, in other words. And trade, even when it is nefarious as in the opium business, is the throbbing engine that motivates many of Ghosh's plot lines.

Ghosh is a traveler and social anthropologist who can listen for hours to people's stories and piece together the minutiae of their lives—lives lying behind a screen of exotic mystery that has for too long distorted the reality of the Orient. He is guilty neither of orientalism nor—despite his implicit and explicit criticisms of European imperialism—of

gratuitously bashing the West. Ghosh's art is a diatribe-free zone.

Ghosh's craftsmanship reaches an apex in his epic *Ibis* trilogy, about an old slave ship and its crew plying the Indian Ocean to play a role in China's nineteenth-century Opium Wars. The first volume, *Sea of Poppies*, was published in 2008, and the second, *River of Smoke*, in 2011.

These two volumes are typical of Ghosh: he paints a heterogeneous cast of individuals—a convict, an orphan, a widowed poppy grower, a horticulturist, an opium trader, among many other characters—all deliciously sketched as if in oily brushstrokes against a geopolitical panorama focusing on the commercial links between India and China during the unraveling of one of the last great chapters of European colonialism. Again, no lectures, for in the second volume the reader finds himself frantically sympathizing with a money-is-everything opium trader and his awful fate.

Ghosh shows us geopolitics not from the vantage point of generals and strategists, but from that of impossible-to-stereotype individuals desperately adapting and thrashing about in historical currents. And there is both the travel writer and set-director about him. Ghosh's Canton, with its noisy backstreets, "vast honeycomb" of shanties and godowns, and foreign enclave with their mahogany-paneled, porcelain-cluttered "factories," evinces both the banging clash and artful confluence of civilizations.

Yet the first two volumes were also atypical of the author in their very scope and ambition. It is a wider canvas and yet so much more textured than his previous works, particularly in the way he compresses time (and centuries, even) through the brilliant use of rare dialects and local terminology. Whereas *The Glass Palace*, his sweeping Bay of Bengal saga, published in 2000 about the Indian middleman minority in British Burma, was mainly cinematic, the first two volumes of the *Ibis* trilogy go further in the way of a complex plot and elaborate nuances of characterization: it's like dipping into an *Asian War and Peace* and occasionally discovering the circuitous intricacies of Henry James. To say you're hooked on a writer is not necessarily a

compliment, since in many cases it indicates an escape from serious thinking. But Ghosh is one of the relatively few novelists who should be required reading for contemporary Asian area studies.

The third volume of the *Ibis* trilogy, *Flood of Fire*, is bigger in size and with many more plot mechanics, crowding out the Jamesian character subtleties, yet with the same delicious landscapes that resemble a "scroll-painting." And, as with the first two volumes, *Flood of Fire* is a catalogue of all the superstitions, narrow-mindedness, cruelties, eroticism, and heart-rending love that allow the reader inside the past in a way that most conventional historians—or old photographs even—cannot match.

Flood of Fire is the most political of the three books, and it is clear from the narrative that Ghosh is no fan of empire, even as he is impressed at times with the way it functioned. But he is simply too fine a novelist to say that outright. Instead, he provides a singular, frankly objective dissection of the British imperial system and how it actually worked.

While the opium trade seems altogether noxious according to our own contemporary sensibilities, in the eyes of the British in 1840, as the author explains, the trade would, it was hoped, allow for a new, more efficient pattern of war-making that would, in turn, combine business and military affairs, opening the immense market of China to the world. "It was misguided, even sinful . . . of the Chinese government to cite the public good in opposing the free flow of opium," says one of the author's characters. "The truth was that the best—indeed the only—way that the public good could be arrived at was to allow all men to pursue their own interests as dictated by their judgment. This was why God endowed Man with the faculty of reason . . ." Of course, this may be sophistry in order to justify the strong (imperial Britain) dominating the weak (a tottering imperial China), though the author is careful to point out that such were not universally held views among the British, as even some of their own soldiers were against the dirty business of drug-dealing. What makes his commentary

of the drug trade all the more powerful is that he situates it amid all the other horrors, heroism, faux idealism, and drudgery of empire, as seen from the perspective of both British opium traders and Indian sepoy and havildars (sergeants).

Objectivity abounds. On one page, one of Ghosh's characters observes: "it is true that many people have become rich by helping the British. . . . And there are others [in Bengal] who are happy to have them just because they have brought peace and security." Yet, on the next page a character relates the insulting manner of British non-commissioned officers towards the natives.

Concerning the British East India Company, as rapacious as it was, for Indian recruits it offered a world of professionalism and material benefits unavailable elsewhere at the time. There was extra dispensation "for marching and another for campaign rations; still another for uniforms." As for battle booty, "the splitting of the spoils was always scrupulously fair." There were also pensions and land grants for retiring troops. Concerning the weaponry, the English sword was meant for impaling with the tip and not for cutting with the edge, so that East India Company troops could advance shoulder to shoulder without endangering each other at the start of battle. This was merely one detail in an ingenious system of technique, hierarchy, and loyalties. Indeed, great civilizations, as Ghosh intimates, make war well, since war requires mastery of technology, complexity of coordination, the utmost precision, as well as self-confidence and tactical creativity. Thus, "a battle was a distillation of time: years and years of preparation, decades of innovation and change were squeezed into a clash of very short duration," radiating forwards through the decades so that the fate of millions could be determined by a small number of men in the span of a few hours or minutes. "Nothing could be a greater injustice, yet such had been the reality ever since human beings first walked the earth." Art requires not just empathy but cold-blooded analysis: that is, intelligence. Ghosh, unlike so many in the fiction business these days, does not fail in this regard.

The Company was not only a war-making machine but a profit-making one. The opium business required a meticulous system of agents, loans, and crop management. It was cunningly exploitative. Unfortunately for the farmer, “there were so many middlemen—sudder mahtoes, gayn mahtoes, pykars, gomustas—to be paid off that he often ended up earning less than he had spent on his poppy crop. The Company on the other hand would earn eight to ten times the cost-price. . . .” From the point of view of many of the novel’s characters, not only the British ones, opium was not a vice, but a legitimate commodity from which careers were made. It meant wealth, and more. “By the time the last lot of opium was sold Zachary . . . felt drained; no less spent than he was after a bout of love-making.” There is, too, the author’s darkly sensuous description of smoking “the flaming pellet” itself, whose “consistency was almost that of a liquid, dense, oily and intensely perfumed; it poured into his body like a flood, coursing through his veins and swamping his head.”

Ghosh’s trilogy from beginning to end is built on research. A budgerow (houseboat) in Calcutta is minutely described with all its head-works, stem-cheeks, gammonings, hawsettimbers, knightheads, and bobstay pieces. The hardships of sepoy and havildars are described down to the mud that had caked “into a second layer of skin” between their toes. Few tricks, moreover, are as difficult for a novelist to pull off—even as the result must appear effortless—than bedroom scenes. Ghosh succeeds grandly—and comically—in demonstrating the increasing emotional texture of a rather kinky relationship between a poor young sailor and an older, voluptuous society woman.

Ghosh’s completed trilogy couldn’t be more timely. The collapse of distance wrought by early-twenty-first-century weaponry has created a new and unprecedented strategic geography encompassing India and China, as Indian warships prowl the South China Sea, Indian missiles can hit Chinese cities, and Chinese fighter jets based in Tibet can include India in their arc of operations. Yet, for most of history India and China have had relatively little

to do with each other, separated as they are by the high wall of the Himalayas. The maritime opium trade, in addition to the spread of Buddhism in middle antiquity, represents an exception to this rule, bringing as it did Indian-grown opium to Chinese markets via the Bay of Bengal and South China Sea. Thus, the *Ibis* trilogy places India and China together on one rather incestuous canvas. It is a canvas that now embodies the centerpiece of American strategy, which is about getting India and China *right*: to wit, using India to balance against a militarily rising China, even as we attempt to fit them both inside a unified Asian security system. Any work of art or strategy that advances the primacy of India and China in our thinking is a help, therefore. This is a remarkably hard task, made, perhaps, just a bit easier by inculcating a rich historical perspective among our diplomats and other officials of the kind that Ghosh offers.

Dying art

Mario Vargas Llosa

Notes on the Death of Culture:
Essays on Spectacle and Society.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 240 pages, \$22

reviewed by Malcolm Forbes

In his essay “Culture and Anarchy,” Matthew Arnold defines culture “as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a *study of perfection*.” Those in pursuit of human perfection—those who aim to be enriched and ennobled by art, literature, science, and philosophy—incline naturally towards what Arnold famously called “sweetness and light.”

Almost a hundred and fifty years on that sweetness has soured, that light has been crudely snuffed out for the Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa. Anarchy, or at least philistinism, has triumphed over culture. *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society* is a provocative essay collection on the fast decline of intellectual life, and one that manages the dual feat of shedding light while spreading gloom. As with the artful Freudian