

Francine Prose, *Peggy Guggenheim: The Shock of the Modern*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2015. ISBN 978-0-300-20348-6

For the past seven years my wife and I have traveled to Switzerland with a group of Vanderbilt students, where we dive headlong into the UN and NGO worlds through visits to the plethora of international institutions based in Geneva. After a week of these meetings, it's difficult to feel optimistic, if only because the spokespeople and leading representatives with whom we meet don't convey strong optimism themselves. With the exception of the more independent, and independently funded Doctors' Without Borders, who have the luxury of relative autonomy, most of the people we meet convey a sense of guarded optimism that is the inevitable result of such policies as 'name and shame', invoked in regards to calamities like the Syrian war.

After a week of this exploration of hallowed halls, we all suffer from a sense that the ceiling of social justice is very low in a world in which the UN is forced to kowtow to its member states, with the knowledge that speaking truth to power also means speaking against the hands that feed them. Luckily, the course goes beyond status quo efforts to solve the world's problems by way of such institutions, because after the Geneva sojourn we then hike in the footsteps of the Romantic poets, writing our own Romantic treatises along the way, we visit Monte Verità, the bohemian community that from 1900-1920 welcomed the virtually who's who of the disenchanting artistic intelligentsia (including Hermann Hesse, Carl Jung, Erich Maria Remarque, Hugo Ball, Isadora Duncan, Paul Klee, Rudolf Steiner, Mary Wigman, Max Picard, Rudolf von Laban, Frieda and Else von Richthofen, Otto Gross, and Max Weber), and then we head to Zurich, to encounter the Cabaret Voltaire, and the Dadaist movement that started there, 100 years ago. Relieved from the confines of the so-called 'real world', we are able to discuss the idea of seeking refuge from war, from censorship, from persecution, and invoke many of those who sought refuge at Monte Verità, and many others who have for centuries fled oppression and chosen to reside in Switzerland, or Paris, or Italy, or America, places where they could practice their art, and other enjoyable proclivities, without falling under the eye or club of authorities. This course focuses upon a particular canon, including of course the Shelleys' and Byron, who are by their travels and writings irrevocably linked to Switzerland, but we also discuss an array of American figures, including the Lost and the Beat Generations, who found in Paris what the Dadaist were searching for in Zurich.

What we learn from various sources, most recently from Francine Prose's concise and very readable biography, is that we need to know more about Peggy Guggenheim if we are to understand these movements, and indeed the modern art movement tout court. Her 1942 *Art of This Century* alone includes figures associated with Dada, as well as leading figures in French modernism whose imprint is itself enormous, and is magnified exponentially on account of the influence they had upon others (to say nothing of Jackson Pollock and Man Ray, for whom she had a singularly powerful role). Re-reading descriptions of the mid to late century New York art scene, Guggenheim's own gatherings in what is now the museum on the Grand Canal in Venice, and her notorious personal life through Prose's lens, gave me the impression that Guggenheim's life promoting the avant-garde can almost be viewed as a kind of avant-garde performance in itself, and descriptions in the book of her precocious but rather awkward love and sex lives (and these need to be distinguished) become from this perspective the *mise-en-scène* of some really important demonstrations and collaborations.

This biography is short, and pays particular attention to specific details of a life recorded elsewhere, including in Guggenheim's memoir *Out of This Century*, which first appeared in 1946 to significant negative acclaim. What struck me after reading Prose's work is

Guggenheim as provocateur, and in this regard she fits very well into the collection of people who benefitted from her grandeur, including Dadaists, surrealists, and Beat writers such as Gregory Corso. She wasn't so much a carnival queen/king figure, like Ginsberg, or a clown, like Corso, or a performer, like Hans Arp, but Prose does describe her performing a life of open sexual relations, and conscious challenging of the mainstream. A great hero in Prose's book is Marcel Duchamp, whom we are all the more anxious to get to know in light of what we learn about him alongside of Guggenheim, but I think that the real hero here is an American woman who, in some ways like Voltairine de Cleyre, declared her independence, acted upon her beliefs, and forged a path for which everyone, and in particular women, can be grateful. She didn't throw around huge sums of money, because she didn't really have as much as many may have imagined, but she did act with assuredness, and, moreover, with incredible discernment. The very list of artists she supported and enjoyed is worthy of our attention, to a person, and Prose has in an accessible and interesting fashion drawn our attention to Peggy Guggenheim's independence, brilliance, and willing to put herself out there for the cause in a world dominated by both anti-Semitism (this book is part of the Yale UP Jewish Lives series), and male chauvinism.