BARRY LOPEZ
EXPLORES THE END OF THE WORLD

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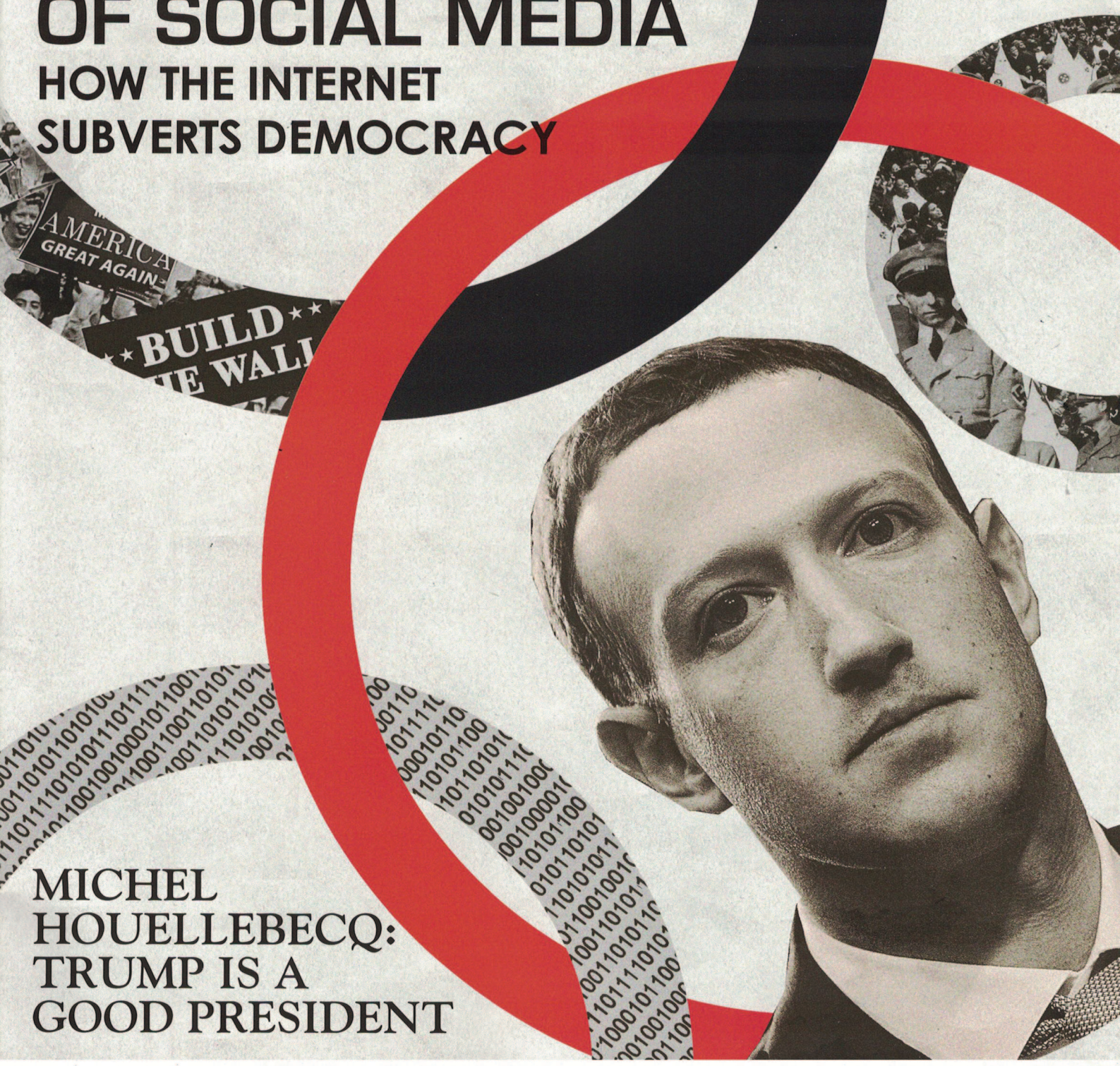
THE DARK HOLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

HOW THE INTERNET SUBVERTS DEMOCRACY



MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ: TRUMP IS A GOOD PRESIDENT

NEW BOOKS

By Lidija Haas

So audacious was Babitz's self-involvement, you could read most of her oeuvre without learning anything about what else was going on in the 1960s and 1970s. What survives of Babitz will have to be her style—the literary kind, that is. The midcentury writer Ann Petry, two of whose novels, THE STREET and THE NARROWS, are now being republished in a single volume by the Library of America ($35), could be said to have the opposite problem. Remembered mainly as a practitioner of the protest novel in the vein of Richard Wright—in which social environment tends to determine fate—she's often underrated as a stylist. Her first and best-known book, *The Street*, in which impoverished Lutie Johnson struggles to keep herself and her son afloat in Harlem, sold more than a million copies when it appeared in 1946. Vivid and tightly plotted, it places its spirited heroine in a slow-springing trap, showing how every effort she makes to better her circumstances only tightens the net around her: working for a wealthy family takes her away from her child and speeds the collapse of her marriage; the apartment she manages to rent puts her at the mercy of the cramped building's predatory super. The story is grim—dark and hemmed-in—but Petry manages to wring an array of color and feeling from Lutie's doomed struggle—the description of the nightclub where she auditions as a singer, for instance, shifts with her mood, reflecting her hopes in the "soft, moving bands of light" that send a rainbow across the empty dance floor and her anxieties in the tux-clad bouncers whose "heads drew back into their shoulders as though they were dodging punches."

Though *The Street* was undeniably impressive, Petry drastically expanded the range of her ambitions in her third novel, *The Narrows* (1953). The book centers on Lincoln "Link" Williams, a Dartmouth graduate living and tending bar in the titular black neighborhood in Monmouth, a fictional Connecticut town. He takes up with a white woman who turns out to be a married heiress, Camilla Treadway Sheffield, the scion of the town's dominant family. Catastrophe ensues—a false rape accusation, a car crash, a kidnapping—yet while *The Narrows* shares the high drama and social conscience of *The Street*, what's striking is the formal leap Petry took between the two. *The Narrows* draws on a much larger cast of characters, and, as it follows the inner lives of each in great detail, attains a polyphony that enriches and complicates the novel's worldview. The rhythms of people's thoughts—sudden fears and drawn-out self-justifications, the memories that unexpectedly assault them—continually invade the structure of Petry's sentences. A husband intuiting that he's been cuckolded thinks first in shocked staccato fragments, then in a looping, catching rush:

> Starched white shirt. No necktie. Collar open at the throat. Sleeves rolled up.... He saw a man put together like a statue, no fat on him anywhere, [with] a face like the face of one of the early popes ... a cruel face, with eyes that saw everything and disclosed nothing, with a narrowlipped, cruel mouth, a shark's mouth.

The thoughts of a young man wielding a gun sway and stutter, conveying weakness and hesitancy:

> He lifted his arm, tried to aim the gun, and his hand was shaking so that the gun went back and forth, back and forth, as though he had reverted to infancy and was waving byebye with it, his hand shaking and trembling so violently that the gun began moving in wide loose circles.

It's this roving, generous novelistic eye, constrained before by the Gothic-tinged claustrophobia of *The Street*, that makes *The Narrows* funnier and more buoyant despite its plot. Link's adoptive mother Abbie is among other things a snob, thrilled to rent her room to the Treadway butler in his crisp tailoring and smart shoes, and crushed when, too late to renege, she meets his loud, voluptuous, blues-singing wife Mamie, whose footwear alone would have been enough to raise the alarm. And Link wryly reflects on the earnest, simplistic sociological analyses of his dates, "those Vassar-Wellesley housing-crime experts":

> Most of them were put together all right but they talked and talked and talked about housing and crime, about Stalin and Churchill and Roosevelt and housing and crime and Churchill and Roosevelt and Stalin. And they all had names like Betsy and Karen.

In a short 1950 essay reprinted here, Petry contested the notion, then "as fashionable as Dior dresses," that art with any discernible political meaning must be aesthetically worthless. She even tentatively made the case that

> the finest novels are basically novels of social criticism, some obviously and intentionally, others less obviously, unintentionally, from *Crime and Punishment*, to *Ulysses*, to *Remembrance of Things Past*.

She noted, too, that the public seemed undeterred by critics' dismissals of protest novels, perhaps because readers have "a streak of masochism." Perhaps, but *The Narrows* suggests that she knew there are worse ways to ensure a hearing than to show your listener a good time. ■

Coastline Dr., by Johnny Robertson. Courtesy the artist and George Billis Gallery, Los Angeles