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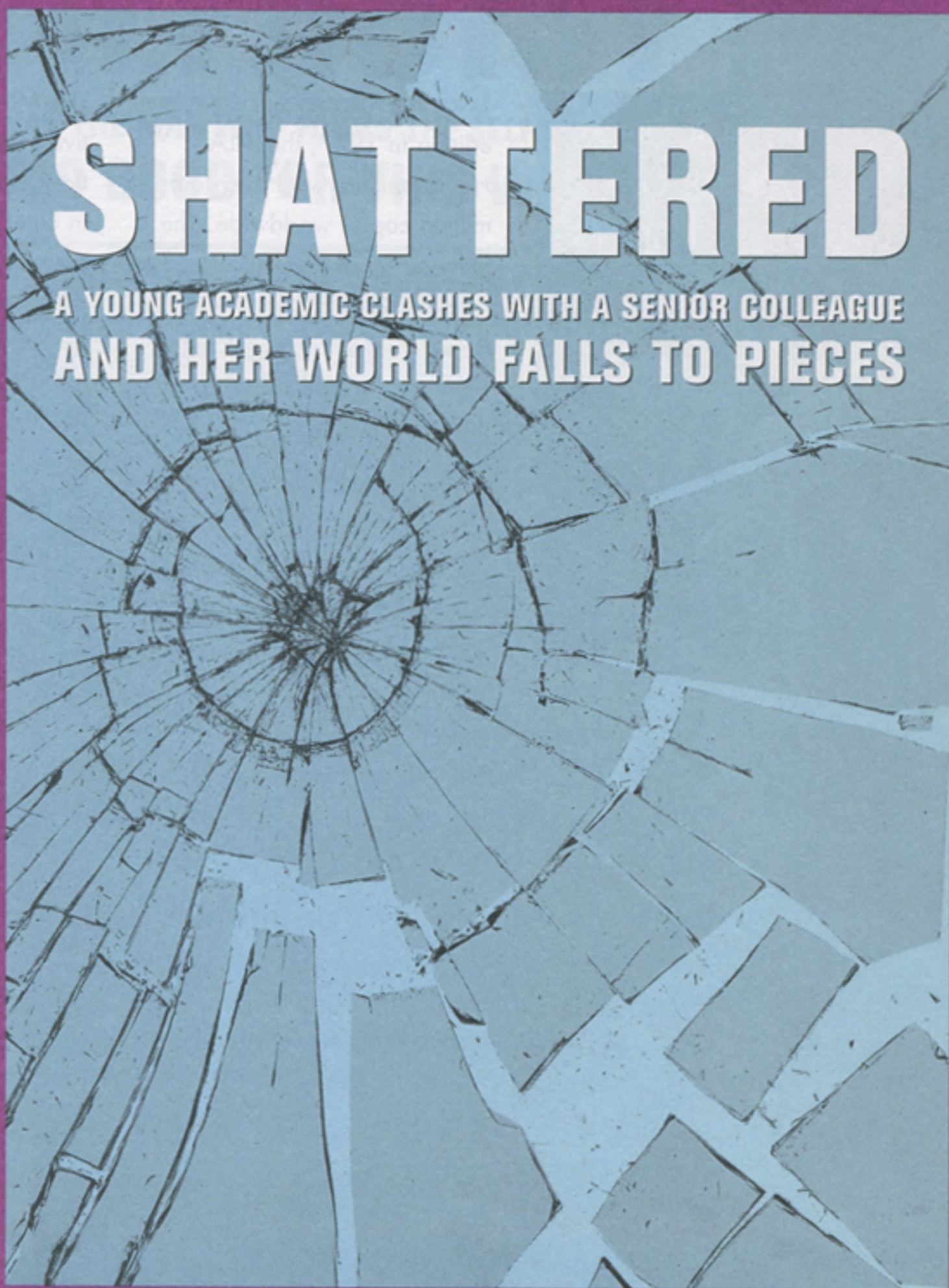
**EVOLUTION'S
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**DID LESLIE NIELSEN
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SPACE?**

SHATTERED

A YOUNG ACADEMIC CLASHES WITH A SENIOR COLLEAGUE
AND HER WORLD FALLS TO PIECES





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A YOUNG ACADEMIC CLASHES WITH A
SENIOR COLLEAGUE AND HER
WORLD FALLS TO PIECES

BY JOHANNA BERKMAN



IN JANUARY 1999, A CURIOUS SERIES OF LAWYER'S LETTERS BEGAN circulating through Vanderbilt University. In a style that was one part Moses Herzog, two parts Johnnie Cochran, the author alleged that his client, a Swiss-born assistant professor, had been hounded, humiliated, and discriminated against by her fellow French department members. Aline Baehler, Jeffrey Duban asserted, was the victim of a string of "tawdry deceits," and her two-and-a-half-year Vanderbilt stint had been marred by sexual harassment, defamation, and national-origin discrimination. What's more, Duban informed the university that Baehler had empirical proof: She had surreptitiously tape-recorded telephone conversations with some of her colleagues.

The letters sent shock waves through a department already deep in disarray. "Let me show you how paranoid things are," offers Larry Crist, a retired professor of French medieval studies, when I arrive at his cream-colored home on the crest of a wooded hill outside Nashville. "Do you have a card? Because for all I know you could be sent by Aline's lawyer." Crist is one of the people Baehler taped, and the first thing he wants to discuss is his newest area of expertise: Tennessee's laws on the use of tapes secretly recorded by one party to a conversation (they're legal, and admissible as evidence). Virginia Scott, the new department chair, who presides over her colleagues from a turretlike office on the fringes of the Vanderbilt campus, is relaxed and friendly—until I remove a tape recorder from my briefcase. "I really would hate that," she says, her face tightening, when I ask if I may turn it on. "I chose academia because I was not going to be involved with the Linda Tripps of the world."

More corporate than collegiate, Vanderbilt's campus seems an unlikely setting for such intrigue. Although it is bordered by busy roads and a commercial strip that seems to include one outpost of every fast-food chain in America, there is absolutely no litter and little noise. Small steel ID tags beside each of the hundreds of trees give the grounds the staged look of an arboretum, which it was designated in 1988. Student posters are neither tacked to bulletin boards nor taped to the walls but rather neatly fastened by fishing line to the trunks of the chestnuts and pines. From the inside, Kirkland Hall, the college's main administrative building, could easily be mistaken for the headquarters of a lucrative private company: There is the hush that comes from too much central air-conditioning, the charming receptionist impeccably dressed in a cashmere twinset, and the requisite long hallway lined with portraits of the family of the up-by-the-bootstraps genius who started it all, in this case, railroad baron Cornelius Vanderbilt.

It seems fitting that the achievement that recently brought Vanderbilt into the national spotlight was a financial one: luring Gordon Gee, who had been president of Brown University for just two years, to the post of chancellor with an investment-banker-like package worth nearly \$1 million a year. The week I visited campus, the big issue was how to develop a support network for the "VandyGirl," the stereotypical undergraduate woman, whom a letter in the student newspaper, *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, defined as having a "goal of perfection (regarding image, thinness, the best clothes, etc.)." The VandyGirl, I learned, likes to eat salads and jog, favors Tiffany heart bracelets and "slimming black pants." She's also partial to BMWs and SUVs.

It is easy to imagine how Aline Baehler might have had difficulty acclimating to such a milieu. At forty, Baehler has the spare European good looks of a younger, rumpled version of *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour (sans the six-figure clothing budget). She wears little makeup, no jewelry, and lots of black, and rolls her own cigarettes with amazing dexterity. But even before she moved into her new Nashville home—a loft apartment above a German restaurant downtown—her troubles had begun. While Baehler knew that she was one of the first people hired to teach feminism and literary theory in

the Department of French and Italian, she did not know that her appointment was remarkable for another reason. She was the first professor hired without the consent of the department's erstwhile leading light—the world's foremost Baudelaire scholar, septuagenarian Claude Pichois.

THE DAUGHTER of a watch-making teacher and his accountant wife, Baehler was raised in Geneva. As an undergraduate at university there in the early 1980s, she majored in twentieth-century French literature and philosophy, focusing on the work of Claude Simon, a leader of the experimental school of fiction writing known as the *nouveau roman*. After completing her degree, Baehler went to the University of Paris VII to study Lacanian analysis under the direction of Julia Kristeva. In 1988, she headed for New York University, the center for the study of the *nouveau roman*.

At NYU, Baehler thrived. Tom Bishop, who has been chairman of the NYU French department for thirty years, remembers her as "one of the very, very brightest students" the department had ever had. After studying writers like Alain Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, Baehler wrote her dissertation on the concept of the literary pilgrimage, in which a writer transforms himself from, as Harold Bloom might say, an ephebe into a strong poet by following in the literal and metaphoric footsteps of the masters. (Baehler considered, for example, Violette Leduc's retracing of Simone de Beauvoir's travels.) But even for outstanding students like Baehler, the mid-1990s humanities job market was tough, and it wasn't until the spring of 1996, after three years of searching, that she received an attractive proposal: \$38,500 a year and a shot at tenure in a department that billed itself as mid-upper level. Although she was reluctant to leave the city she loved, Baehler packed up her things, got into her silver Chrysler, and drove south to Tennessee.

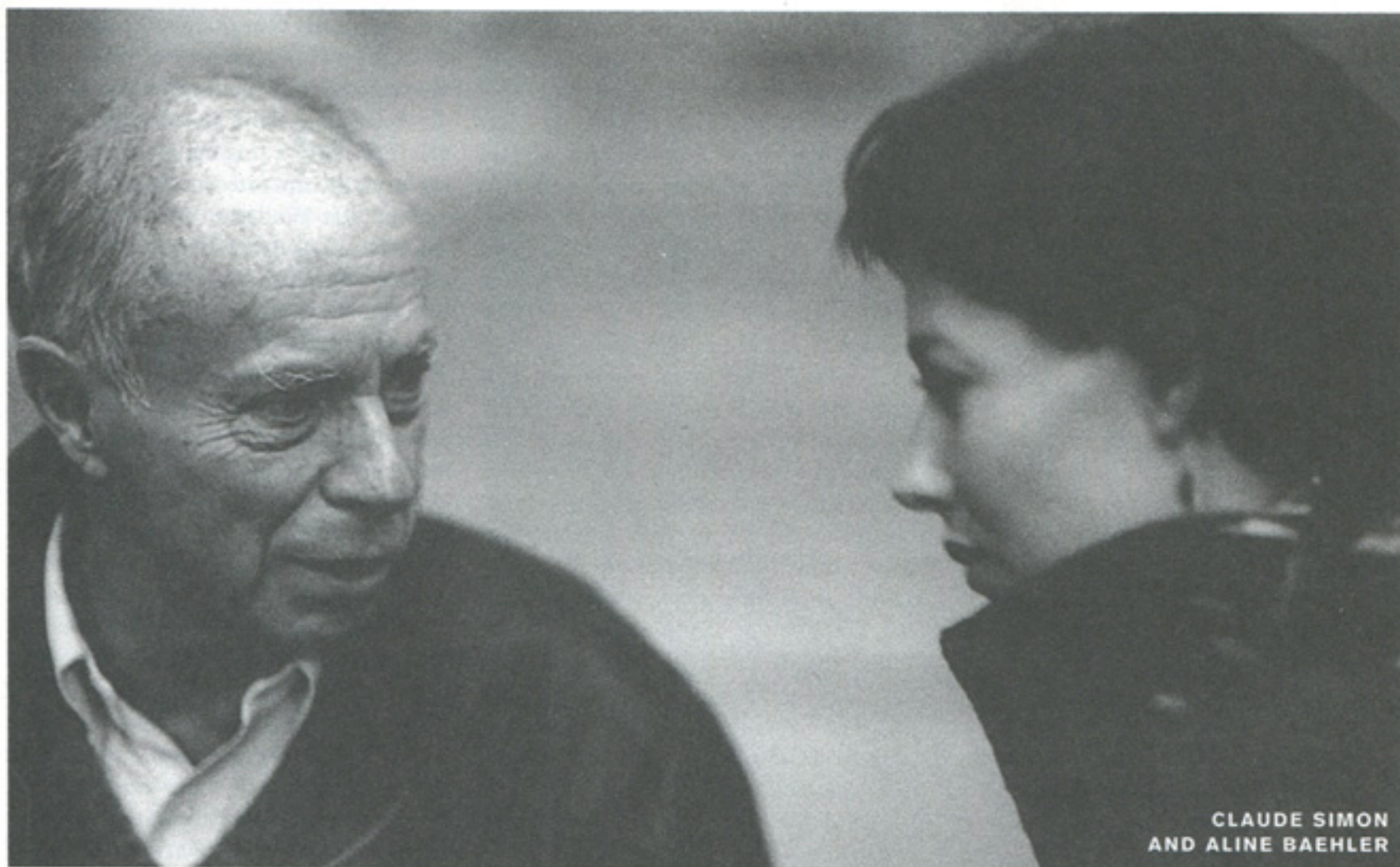
TWENTY-SIX years earlier and equally unexpectedly, Claude Pichois also struck a path to Nashville. Then a professor at the Sorbonne, Pichois had made his reputation by editing the complete works of Charles Baudelaire, as well as those of Gérard de Nerval and Colette, for the Pléiade Library. Of all his contribu-

tions to scholarship, the Baudelaire Pléiade is probably his greatest. "There is no comparable edition," says Marc Froment-Meurice, a Vanderbilt colleague. "It's complete. You have a guarantee that the pieces in this edition are absolutely double-checked. This is something not very easy to do with Baudelaire because he was constantly rewriting." In 1968, Vanderbilt offered to create a new Baudelaire Center to house the world's most extensive private Baudelaire collection, which was the property of W.T. Bandy, a Vanderbilt alumnus and professor of nineteenth-century French literature at the University of Wisconsin. After Bandy accepted, Pichois followed, taking a position concurrent with his post at the Sorbonne.

Like Baudelaire, whose photograph he kept on the desk in his office in Furman Hall, Pichois is reed-thin with an intense gaze. A ferocious chain-smoker, he dressed like Baudelaire too, sporting natty three-piece suits, even in the southern heat. In Vanderbilt's French department, the Parisian professor quickly acquired a mythic status that endures today. "He is the god of French literature in France!" graduate student Richard Espenant exults over a cup of coffee at the campus branch of Alpine Bagel. "You mention the word 'plague,'" says Espenant, "he will tell you all the plagues of the nineteenth century. You mention anything, he will tell you all about it." Even his colleagues describe him as a genius. "A person like that," says Larry Crist, "you want to give them free rein and let them do their work."

On Vanderbilt's campus, Pichois was regarded as a sort of local representative of *la vieille France*, but for some, the professor's conservative, old-world charm also had its dark side. Barbara Bowen, a professor of sixteenth-century French literature who has been teaching at Vanderbilt since 1987, describes Pichois as "an extremely narrow-minded, prejudiced old gentleman." That said, she adds, "One cannot expect one's colleagues to all be perfect."

Some of Pichois's alleged antipathies, say colleagues, fell along national lines. "He doesn't like people from Switzerland," says Bowen. "That was [Baehler's] main defect." According to Froment-Meurice, these feelings were "a matter of intellectual stance" emanating from Pichois's admiration for Baudelaire and Baudelaire's dislike of the Swiss-born philosopher Jean-Jacques



CLAUDE SIMON
AND ALINE BAEHLER

THE CHAIR OF NYU'S FRENCH DEPARTMENT REMEMBERS ALINE BAEHLER AS "ONE OF THE VERY, VERY BRIGHTEST STUDENTS" THE DEPARTMENT HAD EVER HAD.

Rousseau. "Rousseau is in favor of nature," he explains, "and of course this is the complete opposite of Baudelaire, ... [who believed that] man is naturally evil or bad." But such explanations went only so far. In one of the secretly taped conversations, Patricia Ward, then department chair, explained to Baehler that Pichois once made "*une critique sévère*" of a potential hire simply "*parce qu'il n'aime pas des Polonais*"—because he doesn't like Polish people. Ultimately, the woman was not hired. In the same conversation, Baehler repeatedly asked Ward what Pichois might have against her personally. "*Il y a des accents*," said Ward at one point. "*Il y a des choses différentes*."

When I contacted Pichois to discuss these and other allegations, he declined to be interviewed. Since he had retired from Vanderbilt nearly two years earlier, he believed there was "*aucune raison*" to speak to me for this story. But Pichois's friend and former student, Balzac biog-

rapher Graham Robb, says Pichois is "the opposite of prejudiced." According to Robb, "The thing that makes Pichois a good literary scholar is that he is able to understand points of view that are very different from his own. If he were a prejudiced person, I don't think he would be a very good literary scholar."

THE problem Pichois had with Baehler wasn't personal—not at first, at least.

As Ward noted in Baehler's file, Pichois was absent when a new position in the modern novel, for which Baehler ultimately would be hired, was defined. He had wanted the department to appoint a nineteenth-century specialist who did historically based scholarship. His colleagues, however, wanted someone more contemporary and cutting-edge—a literary critic, not a philologist—and while interviewing those sorts of candidates, they happened upon Baehler. Although her

specialty was literary theory, the fact that she could also teach feminism, and was willing to, made her attractive to Vanderbilt, which had gaping holes in both subjects.

In the spring of 1996, Baehler went for her campus interview, to meet with each of her would-be colleagues. Her meeting with Pichois lasted about ten minutes, but the exchange was thoroughly polite and professional. They talked of Switzerland, where Pichois had taught for some years before moving to the Sorbonne. We are just opposites, Pichois told her, referring to the fact that he had once moved from France to Switzerland, and she had done the reverse. Since he did not mention her writing, Baehler asked him if he had read her dissertation. No, he hadn't. What about the article she had published in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, in which she describes her visit to Rousseau's tomb? Oh yes, he told her. It was refreshing to find such a piece in the *NRF*. Baehler took

it as a compliment. But when she gave a sample lecture to the department on André Breton and his fascination with kitsch objects, Pichois was not pleased. Her talk, he later told Crist, had been *une salade*, a jumbled mess.

Pichois's colleagues did not concur. They were impressed by Baehler's talk, as well as her writing, and felt strongly that she was just the right sort of person to teach the subjects they'd been ill equipped to handle for so long. When it was time to decide, Pichois opposed Baehler's appointment, but he was outvoted by her supporters. Perhaps the others, who normally heeded Pichois's views, were mindful of the fact that he would soon be retiring, or perhaps they simply wanted Baehler badly enough to risk clashing with their senior colleague. Regardless, when Pichois learned that Baehler had been hired in spite of his protest, he is rumored to have told a colleague that it was now simply a question of honor: He would put *des bâtons dans ses roues*, sticks in the spokes of her bicycle. "I'm not a Christian," he told Larry Crist. "And therefore if I hate someone, I hate them."

A SENIOR faculty member of Pichois's intellectual stature is bound to wield considerable influence in a department. But according to some colleagues, the situation at Vanderbilt was exceptional. After all, Pichois was not only a star scholar; he was also a benefactor.

Although acquaintances have often mistaken Pichois for an aristocrat, his fortune derives from his family's grocery business. Since 1984, he has underwritten the Claude and Vincenette Pichois Scholarship, which awards a yearly dissertation fellowship to a student in Vanderbilt's French department. (Some years, the scholarship instead goes to a pair of undergraduates.) According to the dean of the college, by 1997 Pichois's contributions totaled \$173,000—but French department members involved with disbursing the funds name a figure closer to \$400,000. By the time Baehler arrived on campus, Pichois had also drafted a will in which he designated Vanderbilt University the ultimate beneficiary of his more than \$1 million in assets. But his planned gift is by no means certain, as it would be had he established, say, an irrevocable trust. "It's prearranged, yes,"

explains Pichois's financial adviser, Woodrow Richardson, "but one can change one's will anytime one wants to."

According to Crist, who retired last year, Pichois's donations bought him no influence over academic affairs. "That's fairly clear," he says blithely. "I didn't see him throwing his weight around. Now, we listened to his opinion with great care, but it wasn't the last word—always." Other colleagues are more skeptical. As Ward explained to Baehler in one of their recorded conversations: "During his entire career here, [Pichois] did things like call professors before votes on nominations in order to assure that [the candidate he preferred] was appointed.... You were the first person [over whom] he lost the vote." Indeed, another professor remembers only one situation before the Baehler vote in which Pichois and his colleagues were at loggerheads over a hire. It was about ten years ago: "We had narrowed the field down to three candidates. Pichois told us one was unacceptable, and somehow or another that candidate got lost."

I asked department veteran Luigi Monga whether it was true, as I had been told, that Pichois used to present his colleagues with a list of the graduate students he wanted admitted to the department each year, and that each year his wishes would be granted. Monga says Pichois was "smarter than that. He was not an open bully." As for whether Pichois is controlling the department in spite of his retirement, Monga scoffs: "When a person is gone from Vanderbilt, that person is dead, even if that person has lots of money to give to Vanderbilt. I don't think he has any influence."

Nonetheless, an assessment by a member of the department's January 1999 external review committee is particularly stark. Says Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, a professor of comparative literature at Stanford: "There were senior faculty from that French department who had basically for years yielded on their knees to Pichois's power." In a letter to the review committee chair suggesting several issues for inclusion in their report, Gumbrecht described the situation thus: "It is my opinion that our assessment of the 'Pichois-scandal' at Vanderbilt is that of a serious threat to the university.... It cannot be completely excluded that academic influence and the 'freedom' for harassment, and even for

racial slurs, has been bought through donations. The University would be ill-advised not to take this situation very seriously."

According to the dean of the college at the time, Ettore Infante, those statements were not incorporated into the review document that Vanderbilt received. But, he adds, he had already looked into the matter of Pichois's influence. "I did a considerable amount of investigation," he says. "All the donations that Professor Pichois made...were donations he made for the support of the graduate students—graduate students who were fundamentally in many cases working with him—so any implication that somehow donations were made for the implementation of policies or particular decisions, as far as I'm concerned, there was absolutely no basis for that."

Another member of the review committee, Elaine Marks, a professor of French and women's studies at the University of Wisconsin and a former president of the MLA, calls Gumbrecht's conclusions "overly dramatic." Marks observes that "certainly the senior people in any department have a lot of influence." The case of Pichois was not particularly remarkable; and as for the Vanderbilt French department, she says, "My sense was that it was quite a small department that was doing quite well."

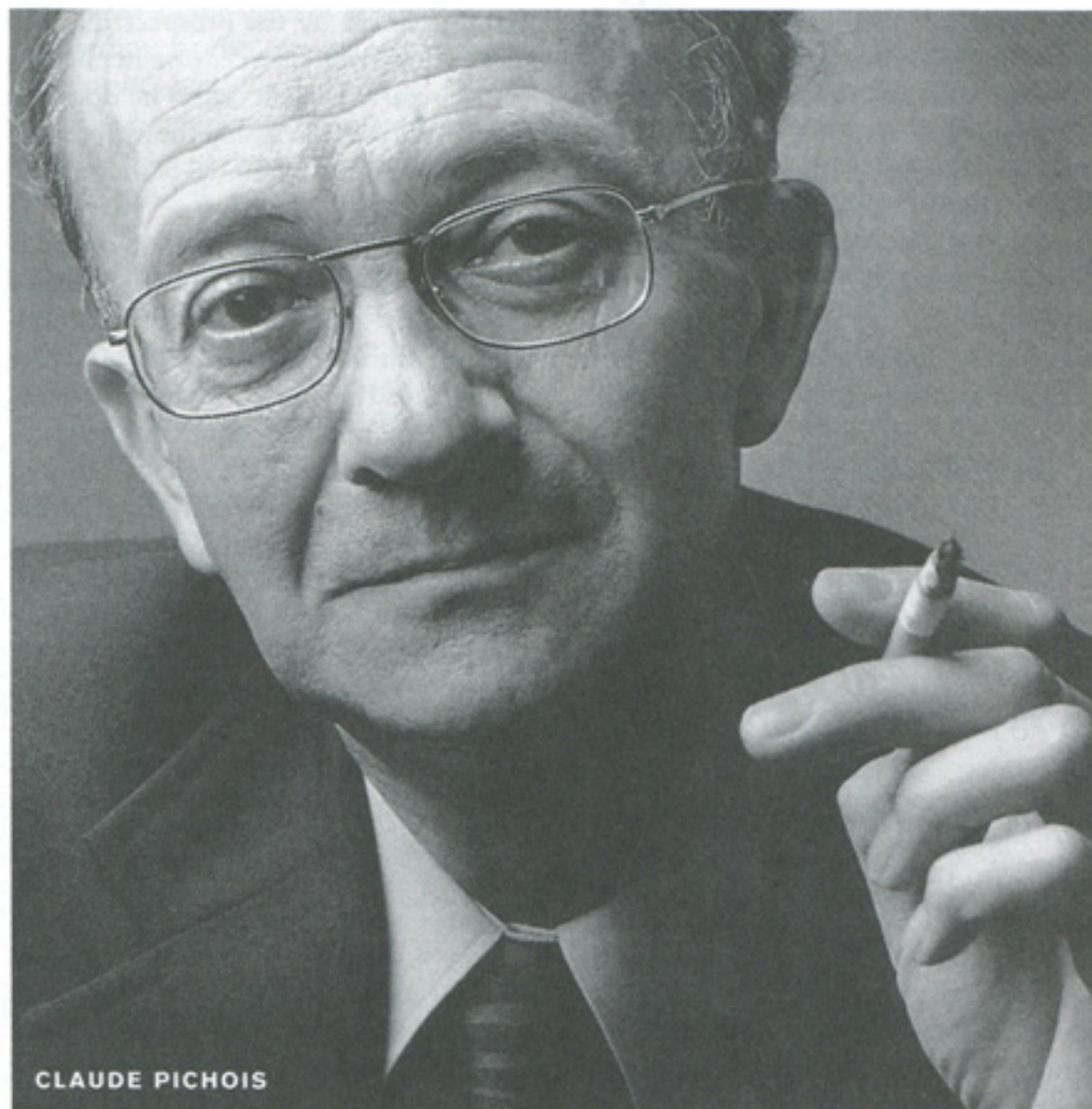
BACK IN 1996, the year Aline Baehler arrived at Vanderbilt, Pichois's influence was not something that would immediately concern a new junior faculty member. Besides, Baehler had a great many reasons for optimism. She quickly impressed her students as hip, witty, and outspoken. Graduate student Heather Garrett cites Baehler as one of the reasons she came to Vanderbilt: "She's just one of those rare brilliant professors who really helps you apply theory to literature, but she gives you a direction to go in so you're not drowning in books." In a report on her observation of Baehler's teaching, Ward described Baehler as a "skilled Socratic questioner who has a strong classroom personality" and as an "intense teacher who respects her students." "Everybody liked her," says Barbara Bowen. "She was a valued colleague and teacher. She took part in all the extracurricular things we do in the department, and several of my colleagues thought of her as a friend."

For the most part, on the rare occasions when their paths crossed, Pichois ignored Baehler. When he did speak to her, it was usually in order to correct her French. Whereas her colleagues would defer to Pichois, abstaining from contemporary language in his presence because he considered it vulgar—they would, for example, drop the colloquial “*ouais*” in favor of the formal “*oui*” that Pichois preferred—Baehler refused to follow the convention, thinking it ridiculous.

When Baehler wasn’t around, Pichois referred to her as *la Suisse*, the Swiss woman, “which she is in fact—it was just that he didn’t like Swiss women,” explains Bowen. Baehler also contends that Pichois spread the rumor that she was a lesbian. Although the rumor wasn’t true—Baehler believes he based it on the facts that at the time she was unmarried, taught feminism, and had been strongly supported in her appointment by a lesbian member of the department—it was no small issue on the fairly conservative Vanderbilt campus. Patricia Pierce, the director of the university’s Opportunity Development Center, would later write in her investigation into Baehler’s allegations: “I did verify during my interviews with some of the faculty members that there were rumors about [Baehler’s] sexual orientation during [her] first year at Vanderbilt. However, these individuals reported that they did not believe the rumors nor did they give them any credibility.”

Nonetheless, Baehler’s experience at Vanderbilt had begun a downward spiral. At the start of her second semester, Baehler reports, two graduate students informed her that Pichois had forbidden them to work with her. Baehler was outraged, and she was also anxious. If she were deprived of the opportunity to mentor graduate students in her field, would she be penalized at a later stage, such as when she came up for tenure? Concerned, she called a meeting with department chair Patricia Ward.

As a relative newcomer to the department, and one who took her administrative responsibilities rather seriously, Ward was perhaps the best suited of all her colleagues for what had once seemed an unthinkable task: loosening the department from the grip of Pichois. And if there is a consensus about anything in the fractious Vanderbilt French department, it is that Ward did her best to defend



COLLEAGUES ABSTAINED FROM CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE IN PICHOS'S PRESENCE BECAUSE HE CONSIDERED IT VULGAR.

Baehler and that Baehler, inexplicably, repaid her with betrayal. (In June of last year, at the end of what one colleague calls her “*annus horribilis*,” Ward stepped down from the chairmanship and took a yearlong sabbatical.)

During their February 1997 meeting, Ward apologized for “the unprofessional behavior of my colleagues” and tried to allay Baehler’s concerns about her academic future. In a memo Ward filed about their discussion, she described her efforts to remedy the situation: “...upon reflection of the legal consequences of Professor Baehler’s report, I spoke with [acting] Dean [of the college Jacques] Voegeli and asked if he could find a way to caution Professor Pichois when he meets with him to discuss his teaching arrangement for next year.” According to Ward, Baehler

later communicated that she would prefer Voegeli not speak to Pichois. And Ward maintains that she left Voegeli a message to that effect.

In the meantime, Baehler’s colleagues were reiterating their support for her and counseling her to ignore Pichois, whom they reminded her would soon retire. Those reassurances, combined with the satisfaction that she was getting from teaching, enabled Baehler to put the unpleasantness behind her. She did, and was happy for a time.

But with the spring came a series of troubling episodes that stoked Baehler’s growing sense of alienation. At a party at Barbara Bowen’s home, Bowen asked Baehler not to enter the designated smoking room where Pichois was holding court. “It might be nice if we could avoid

confrontation," Bowen told Baehler by way of explanation. Baehler was stunned. "Are you kidding?" she asked, but decided to comply, not wanting to cause a scene. "What's so terrible about that?" replies Bowen when I ask about the episode. "I prefer not to have people scratching their eyes out at my parties. I prefer to have cordial parties, but I can't see that that's so terrible. [Aline] has certainly been digging up every conceivable incident that she can think of, hasn't she?"

Some months later, another incident set Baehler on edge. The French department and its students had been gathering for a series of get-togethers known as *La Table Ronde*. At one such meeting, Baehler referred to Editions de Minuit, the Parisian publishing house that published Samuel Beckett in the 1950s (and somewhat later became a major publisher of the *nouveau roman*), as an "avant-garde" press. Before she could even complete her thought, Froment-Meurice, who some saw as Pichois's ally, cut her off. "This is incredible!" he shouted. "*N'importe quoi! Pas du tout!* There is nothing more dumb than to speak about the avant-garde!" Baehler was shocked. "I think Monsieur Pichois made a comment kind of approving what Marc Froment-Meurice said," recalls a graduate student who was there, "and maybe because of the respect for Pichois, no one else dared to defend her or her statement."

Later that night, the graduate students gathered to discuss the incident. "We said to each other how inappropriate it was," recalls the student. "Because of events like that, we decided to cancel [the series]."

"Yes, I did say that," confirms Froment-Meurice with a laugh. "So what? After that I said that I did realize that I was going too far, and I did make a public apology, so there." It is the French thing, he tells me, "just expressing loudly what you think, but then after, forgetting, just going to another topic.... It's like freedom of speech. You can say whatever you think is right." But even after Froment-Meurice's apology, Baehler never spoke to him again.

THE FOLLOWING fall, at the start of Baehler's second year, she caught wind of some surprising news: Dean Voegeli's cautionary talk with Pichois had never taken place. According to Baehler, she had never asked Ward to preempt Voegeli's intervention; in fact, she had

been mollified by the prospect that the dean would soon intercede on her behalf. (For his part, Voegeli claims he does not recall Ward ever discussing the matter with him. "I don't know if she did or she didn't," he says. "It's been three years...") Disenchanted with the fractious department and provincial Nashville, Baehler was already applying for positions elsewhere. But she was still enjoying her teaching, and her student evaluations spoke for her continued popularity in the classroom. Anyway, Dean Voegeli was retiring, and Baehler hoped the new dean of the college, mathematician Ettore Infante, might be more inclined to act on her behalf.

A diminutive man whose office is decorated with an improbable mix of Japanese porcelain, a huge nineteenth-century harbor painting, and a yellow smiley-face doll, Infante is difficult to read. The cap and gown hanging on his coat tree give the impression of a jaunty academic, but Infante's attire—a blue blazer with gold buttons—and his European good manners convey a more corporate approach. At their meeting, Baehler told the new dean about her problems with Pichois and how she felt his bias against her was interfering with her career. Was there anything in particular, Infante asked her, that she would like him to do? "I asked him to stop the harassment in this situation," Baehler recalls. But Infante denies she ever said that. "Her answer was 'No,'" he insists. "What she said to me was that she wanted to make really sure that she was going to be judged on her performance as a teacher and a scholar, and I said to her, 'That certainly is my intention and that of any institution of the type of Vanderbilt.' She said that she didn't want to be discriminated against, and I assured her that as far as it was in my power, that that would be the case."

THAT WINTER, the university began considering whether to renew Baehler's contract, which would be expiring in the spring. Typically renewals are pro forma. But Ward gave Baehler some disappointing news: Pichois had written a negative evaluation of her scholarship—he was the sole member of the department to do so—and he had forwarded his evaluation directly to Dean Infante.

Although Infante renewed Baehler's contract, Pichois's letter seemed a blow

to Baehler's nascent Vanderbilt career. Still, it wasn't until the following fall, once Pichois was gone, that Baehler learned of the disturbing chain of events the letter had set in motion. In his official renewal of Baehler's contract, Infante was less than enthusiastic, and he cited Pichois's criticism of Baehler's work—in particular, Pichois's contention that her book manuscript was so much "soap criticism." (When asked on what he based his review, Infante, who never attended any of Baehler's classes nor read any of her work, says: "I did the standard review that is done for every faculty member.")

Ward immediately sprang into action on Baehler's behalf, writing a point-by-point rebuttal of Infante's evaluation in which she noted, "The department gave a much more positive assessment of Professor Baehler's teaching than your memo of June 16 gives; we regret the negative and non-encouraging tone of your assessment." While "Professor Pichois's reservations are, in part, due to feelings of deep personal antipathy related to the circumstances of Baehler's appointment," the current tenured faculty do not, despite their "immense respect for him," accept "Pichois's criticism of Baehler's work." On the contrary, the department "finds [Baehler's] work to be original and creative."

Ward then went a step further and asked Larry Crist, the former chair who likes to refer to himself half jokingly as the "depository of all departmental wisdom and history," for his opinion on Infante's remarks. "I find [Infante's] comments unfair," he wrote in a memo to Ward, "but not so absolutely devastating. I find your responses judicious and non-combative. The eventual problem, it seems to me, is [the dean's] excessive evaluation of CP's [Claude Pichois's] criticism." Crist then wrote a formal letter to Ward in which he attacked Pichois's dismissal of Baehler's work as "soap criticism." Wrote Crist:

I have wrestled with the meaning of this locution, casting it into French even, but can come forth with no philologically acceptable meaning.... "Soap criticism" as a pejorative, either in English or as "*critique de savon/critique savonneuse*" in French...has *no meaning* and thus cannot be, in any academically legitimate way, used in judgment, much less as a pejorative judgment, and must, in all honesty, be thrown out of court.... I

am disappointed to see a valued junior colleague depressed by a comment on her scholarship, which comment is ambiguous and opaque, to say the least.... [This memo] is not meant to be a criticism of [the Dean] but the expression of concern about a possible injustice, from one who still regards him as a colleague and not as Pope.

For his part, Infante insists that his evaluation of Baehler was simply meant to be constructive—to suggest what Baehler “should be helped and mentored into doing in order to continue to demonstrate progress”—and that “any dispassionate person” would see it that way. “I did *not* write a negative evaluation of her,” he tells me. “Look—had I written a negative evaluation, she wouldn’t have been reappointed. Come on!”

Although Ward kept Baehler well informed of the efforts under way on her behalf, Baehler’s anxiety was transmogrifying into a sort of desperation. All along, her colleagues had told her that Pichois’s opinions had little currency, that he was on his way out, after all—who cared what the old man thought? But Infante’s evaluation was an unpleasant legacy, one that would outlast Pichois’s Vanderbilt career and, Baehler feared, possibly ruin her own.

JUST AS SHE WAS in the midst of the crisis over Infante’s evaluation, Baehler also found herself embroiled in two others. The first involved her sabbatical. According to Vanderbilt policy, assistant professors can apply to take a research leave for their fourth year. Baehler, who had given birth to her daughter in May of her second year, had spent much of her summer nursing. She was behind in her research and felt she needed the sabbatical to secure publication for either her dissertation or her second manuscript, which was about literary kitsch.

According to Baehler, Ward discouraged her from taking the time off. “I’m reluctant to give you a one year sabbatical because you have been treated so badly,” Baehler says Ward told her. “I’m afraid you will not come back.”

Ward declined an interview for this story, addressing the issue with a prepared statement instead: “A memo from the departmental chair recommending with enthusiasm Aline Baehler’s request for a yearlong research leave was submitted to

the office of the dean of arts and sciences according to the mandated deadline in December of 1998.”

What exactly was said between Ward and Baehler in their conversations on the subject only they will know. What is clear is that Baehler was growing increasingly distrustful of her colleagues, and it was at this time that she began tape-recording Ward. “I was taping in order to have proof of the harassment,” Baehler says. “I had no break, because when Pichois left I had a problem with Infante, who was following Pichois’s advice, and Pat Ward, who was

After Pichois retired in the spring of 1998, Ward asked Baehler to chair her first doctoral dissertation committee. There was just one hitch, Baehler soon found out: Two professors had previously accused this student of plagiarism but never reported their suspicions to the Honor Council, which normally handles such affairs. Instead, they had dealt with the matter internally, with reprimands and low grades.

According to Baehler, the dissertation proposal that the student submitted the following summer was rife with unattrib-



IN HIS RENEWAL OF BAEHLER’S CONTRACT, DEAN INFANTE CITED PICHOSIS’S CONTENTION THAT HER WORK WAS SO MUCH “SOAP CRITICISM.” SAYS LARRY CRIST, THE TERM HAS “NO MEANING.”

trying not to give me my sabbatical.”

Although she read Ward’s response to Infante’s evaluation, Baehler, rather remarkably, believes Ward was not helping her in any way. “She was trying to defend the position of the department,” insists Baehler. “She was not helping me at all.... Is that helping to tell me I’m afraid you will not come back so I will not give you this time to write and research? I had no exit.”

The next firestorm—the one that ultimately led to Baehler’s alienation not just from Ward but from the French department—involved the notoriously slippery allegation of student plagiarism and the even more explosive accusation that the alleged plagiarism had been deliberately overlooked, as her lawyer later claimed in a letter on Baehler’s behalf, “as a means toward maintaining the few graduate students enrolled in the Department.”

uted passages lifted verbatim out of books. But when Baehler brought the issue up at a committee meeting, the subject was quickly dropped. All of her colleagues voted to pass the student; because she believed the student’s work was plagiarized, Baehler abstained from the vote.

When Ward told Baehler it would be inappropriate for a student’s chair to abstain, Baehler resigned from the student’s committee. She then wrote a letter for the student’s records explaining the reason for her resignation, but the letter never made it into the file. “They ask me to cover this up, and I refuse,” says Baehler. “And then I had everyone against me, not just Pichois.”

Baehler’s certainty about the student’s plagiarism and her disapproval of her colleagues’ inaction on the matter raise the question of why she did not report the incident to the Honor Council herself.

"Everybody was lying," she says. "I decided it would be too dangerous for me to go report the thing somewhere. I first wanted an investigation about the manipulation of files in the department."

As one might imagine, Baehler's claims are the subject of great controversy in the French department. The director of graduate studies, Dan Church, insists that he withheld Baehler's concerns from the student's file as a favor to Baehler. "I told her this: 'I'm protecting you because it's your job to report plagiarism if there's plagiarism.'" Department member Luigi Monga says he viewed Baehler's allegation of plagiarism as "probably a very inelegant way for her to get out of the committee." Still, he concedes, "Nobody asked her what exactly the plagiarism was. In hindsight I probably should have said, 'Where is the plagiarism in this text?'" Monga also concedes that there is a "certain concern" about the number of graduate students in the department. "The quality of the graduate students," he laments, "has gone down the drain."

Faced with what she viewed as an impossible situation, Baehler responded with the ultimate American touché: She hired an attorney.

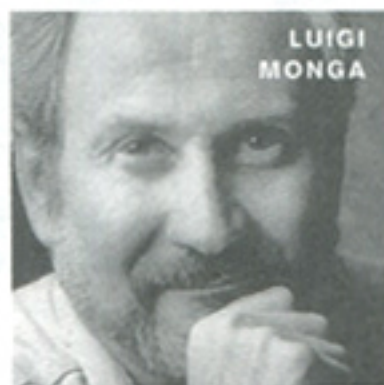
TO THE PROFESSOR at odds with her employer, Jeffrey Duban seems a godsend. A former Georgia State University classics professor, he advertises himself in *Lingua Franca* as an advocate for disgruntled faculty and students. (After being denied tenure in 1982, he lost a five-year battle against GSU both at trial and then again on appeal.)

Over Christmas break, Baehler told Duban she had two chief concerns: getting a one-year sabbatical, and eradicating Pichois's and Infante's reviews from her tenure dossier. Duban told Baehler that if she wanted the sabbatical, she should "take the offensive" immediately, rather than waiting until January to receive the university's response to her request, as she had planned. Although he made no promises, Duban told Baehler that there was a good chance he could get her the sabbatical and get her bought out of the remainder of her contract. He had managed several buyouts in the preceding years, he told her, and if the case went to litigation, Baehler stood to win at least one or two years' salary.

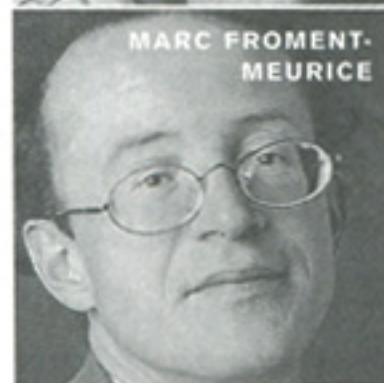
But Duban also issued a warning about the risk of taking aggressive action against a major institution: If you think you have problems now at Vanderbilt, he told her, it could get worse. No matter, Baehler was elated. She had been feeling trapped at Vanderbilt, miserable for the foreseeable future. At last, here was someone who understood her situation, someone who could help her.

In January, Duban sent Vanderbilt a free-ranging missive. Suddenly, Baehler was not just trying to obtain a one-year sabbatical and find a resolution to her two and a half years of trouble with Claude Pichois. Rather, the letter hurled a *j'accuse* at Patricia Ward too, whom it termed

ciate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, focused on the alleged cover-up of plagiarism in the French department. The probe infuriated Baehler's colleagues and, with its relentless written exchanges, provided the increasingly alienated scholar an opportunity to vent her fury: "It is clear that by misplacing and falsifying these documents the Department of French and Italian was attempting to entrap me," she wrote Dean Graham last March. "I regret to inform you that I have found a way to correct the situation on my own: I cannot anymore expose myself without protection. If I am forced to go to the Honor Council before you correct these official files, and before others are forced to appear before this body, I will



LUIGI MONGA



MARC FROMENT-MEURICE

WHEN BAEHLER CALLED A PARISIAN PUBLISHER "AVANT-GARDE," FROMENT-MEURICE EXCLAIMED, "THERE IS NOTHING MORE DUMB THAN TO SPEAK ABOUT THE AVANT-GARDE!" HE LATER APOLOGIZED.

"a Pichois appointee." "By threatening to withhold a promised sabbatical, Patricia Ward continues to abuse and discriminate against Professor Baehler," Duban charged. And not only had the department tolerated "Pichois's rampant hostility," but it had also required Baehler "to pass a graduate student whose work she had found to be plagiarized." "Unless remedial action is immediately taken," Duban threatened, "co-defendants in the contemplated legal action may sooner look to paying a judgment in Professor Baehler's favor than benefiting from a Pichois bequest."

Within days came an auspicious omen: news that Baehler had gotten her one-year sabbatical. Shortly thereafter, the university launched two internal investigations to examine Baehler's complaints. The first, managed by George Graham, Jr., then asso-

do so under protest, and I will hold a public press conference to explain the situation."

Ultimately, it was this Nancy Drew-meets-Don Corleone approach that convinced Baehler's colleagues that she had gone, as Barbara Bowen puts it, "completely off the rails." The same tactics also foreclosed the possibility of a buyout. Explains Infante: "There is a difference between facilitating something that makes sense and buying somebody out, especially with the implication that 'unless you do it, I'm going to squeal,' which is the way that I perceived it."

In the end, the plagiarism investigation hardly provided the vindication Baehler may have hoped for. In an extensive report issued in April 1999, Dean Graham concluded: "The decision...not to report the case to the Honor Council no doubt was

seen differently by those interviewed. Probably no one would want to take the step lightly. *What seems clear to me is that there was then no conspiracy to cover up the plagiarism in order to achieve other goals.... It is clear to me that a program of information on Honor Council issues would help avoid such confusions in the future.*"

The second investigation was conducted by Patricia Pierce of the Opportunity Development Center. It took up the question of whether Baehler's career had been damaged by sex and national-origin discrimination. "Your progression through the tenure process has gone according to the *Faculty Manual*," Pierce wrote. "You received two grants during your first year; you were reappointed for two years; your tenure clock was stopped for six months during your pregnancy; you have a desirable teaching schedule; you have taught a graduate course; you chaired a dissertation committee; and you were granted a sabbatical." The conclusion was that Baehler had no case.

ON THE LAST DAY of April 1999, just before she left Nashville for her sabbatical, Baehler met with Dean Infante. "This is a time to reestablish that sense of trust which is very badly frayed by the actions you have taken," he told her. "What is it you intend to do?" Baehler's reply was that as the injured party, she did not feel it was incumbent on her to reestablish communication. "I'm sorry to say," Infante recalls, "that was a meeting that went nowhere."

During the year of her leave, a year that, save for a few months in France for research, Baehler spent revisiting her old haunts in New York, Baehler dodged Vanderbilt. Phone calls and e-mails from the new department chair, Virginia Scott, asking what courses she wanted to teach in the next year went unreturned. Then, in February 2000, Baehler sent an angry letter to Vanderbilt's provost, Thomas Burish. In the letter Baehler alleged that Scott had offered Baehler's post to an adjunct in the department, and that "Professor Scott has informed faculty members that she does not want me back..." (Baehler says the allegations were based on a tip from someone who claimed to be in the know.)

The response came from Dean Infante, who denied Baehler's charges with obvious exasperation: "I cannot but voice my dis-

appointment at receiving a copy of your letter... to Provost Burish, the first communication since May 28, 1999, received from you by any officer at Vanderbilt, despite repeated attempts to contact you.... May I say that your lack of responsiveness and contact with Professor Scott is not only uncollegial, but unacceptable on the part of a member of the faculty whose leave is being paid by the university."

I FIRST MET Baehler on a hot summer Friday, at a French café in Nolita, a trendy Manhattan neighborhood known for its purse shops. As I watched her approach, pushing her daughter along in her stroller, Baehler looked like a chic New York mother. She spoke with a thick European accent, and after interrogating me—had I done this sort of thing before? she wanted to know; could I speak French?—Baehler launched into her story, recounting it with such intensity that she hardly seemed aware of her surroundings.

Baehler spoke of her colleagues with vitriol and grand hyperbole. Pichois "bought the department" and is "tacky society trying to imitate aristocracy." She likened one colleague to the Gestapo, but then changed her mind: "Like the Jewish working for the Gestapo, I mean." Another colleague, she said, was both "a drunk" and "quite insane"; yet another was "a complete bitch." She wavered on Dean Infante, first referring to him as a "mafioso" and then later changing her assessment to a "little Napoleon." Everything, it seemed, was related to her case. Larry Crist's retirement: "He couldn't stand the situation anymore." Virginia Scott's promotion to chair: "She took advantage of my position." "These people are pathological liars," she said, starting to cry.

Now, one year later, with no settlement forthcoming, Baehler is preparing to return to Nashville this fall to teach for three semesters. "It's part of my contract," she tells me. "They can sue me if I don't come back." As for finding her next university post, Baehler is less than optimistic. "I'm not really in a situation where I can find a job in academia," she says flatly.

"Anybody will call Vanderbilt. Who is going to hire somebody who taped her chair?"

Johanna Berkman is a contributing writer for *Worth*. Her articles have appeared in *New York* and *The New York Times*.

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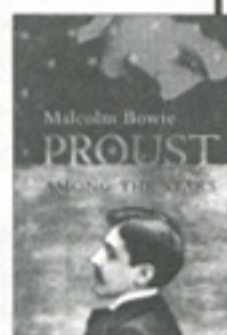
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