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# THE PARADOX OF YELTSIN'S RUSSIA

*Recent events in Russia raise fears that authoritarianism is making a comeback. Our author finds that the danger is not an overly powerful state but an enfeebled one.*

BY S. FREDERICK STARR

Russia today may be a new federation of 21 republics and 49 oblasts (regions), but it is still the legal successor to the Soviet Union, the most powerful and centralized state in history. While the passing of the communist regime has been widely celebrated, many observers fear that Russia's new leaders are resorting to the old top-down methods to prove that their state is just as much a great power as its predecessor.

The Russian army's blast-and-burn assault on Grozny, Boris Yeltsin's power under the 1993 constitution to brush aside even popular opposition groups, the aggressive response of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and police to the country's



crime wave, Foreign Minister Andrei Kosyrev's ominous warnings about Russia's rights and its readiness to use armed force in the so-called near abroad—all of these have reminded the rest of the world that the Russian state can be a mighty but blunt weapon.

Russia, in fact, appears to be bucking a global trend. In an era of devolution,



when country after country is cutting back state functions in favor of private initiative and civil society, this land on the eastern fringes of Europe seems to be headed in the opposite direction.

In truth, however, something very different may be under way, something we in the West misperceive at our peril. The basic facts are not in dispute. Every instance

*Members of the National Salvation Front demonstrate against Boris Yeltsin's policies outside the Russian parliament building in August 1993.*

just cited seems to underscore the power of the Russian state. But they also lend themselves to an opposite conclusion: namely, that the Russian state is acting out

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of a sense of its own profound weakness.

Much of the bluster and posturing that we interpret as evidence of a resurgent Russian statism in fact suggests the inadequacy of the central institutions of the state. And strange to say, this weakness, more than the purported resurgence of the Russian state, poses serious dangers to the United States and other democracies. That is the great paradox of Russian life today.

To understand this paradox, we need to look more closely at the evidence, beginning with military and security matters. However ruthless the Russian army's effort to pulverize Grozny last winter, the campaign revealed a state of utter breakdown in the armed forces. Neither the commander in chief in Moscow nor the regimental leaders on the spot could develop a coherent strategy or have their orders carried out in the field. Coordination was nonexistent. None of this is surprising in an army that has had its procurement budget slashed by more than four-fifths and its troop level cut by more than half. But these occurrences are strikingly at odds with the aspirations of the Red Army a mere generation ago, or even those of the tsarist army of earlier times.

And what of the vaunted security system, the heir of the KGB? Every day, one seems to read of new powers that have been ceded to the security organs. Yet for all their power on paper, it was these fine fellows who brought about the Chechnya disaster by making bold promises to clean up the tiny region of the Caucasus in a tidy, covert campaign.

Nor does the national police force look any better. True, when our television

shows Moscow's plainclothes officers shooting their way into a nest of gangsters, or when it is rumored that the police themselves are in collusion with criminals, it gives one pause. But this is only part of the picture. Underpaid and undermanned, the police forces are pitifully unable to protect citizens and businesses from criminal elements. No wonder individual Russians and business firms look elsewhere for security, even to organized criminal bands.

The weakness of the central government is no less apparent in the economy. Over the past year, the government of Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin successfully laid the foundations of monetary stabilization. Nevertheless, fiscal discipline weakened during the autumn of 1994, when the ruble lost and then regained a quarter of its value in the span of a single day. Nor could the central government stem the illegal flight of tens of billions of dollars abroad, or compel its repatriation. And the government's blundering in Chechnya now promises to throw the budget out of whack once more, triggering a new round of inflation.

Privatization of state industries has been a notable success. Indeed, no republic of the former Soviet Union has moved more decisively to turn over both large and small firms to private owners than Russia. But the government has yet to guarantee basic property rights, including clear title to land on privatized state firms. Agricultural privatization is limited to a few thousand experimental farms and will not go further unless the government is able to face down a powerful collective-farm lobby. So far it has not. And while a fledg-

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ling stock market is booming, the government has so far failed to set up even a minimal regulatory process or to secure the basic rights of shareholders.

Another major function of normal governments is to establish a coherent pattern of financial relations between the center and regions, among regions, and between businesses in the same or different regions. Such matters are normally defined in laws and regulations and are administered by courts and executive bodies. But to the extent that such institutions exist in Russia, they perform ineffectively at best.

To its credit, the Duma passed a new civil code on November 30, 1994. Although it went into effect on January 1, its enforcement is not assured. The central government in Moscow has still not set up the kind of judicial structures—courts, a modern bar, and a cadre of knowledgeable officials to make it all work—that could enable citizens to adjudicate conflicts. Nor does the new civil code cover most property in land, which awaits a new land code.

With the fall of the Communist Party, Russian society emancipated itself from the pervasive regimentation and meddling of the old statist system. But even as the state withdrew from such functions as censorship, cradle-to-grave involvement in citizens' life decisions, and oversight of morals, it also drew back from many functions deemed essential by all modern societies. The provision of unemployment benefits, social security, and pensions for the elderly are among the many areas in which the Moscow government has shown itself weak and ineffectual in recent years. Add to this list the ability to build and maintain roads, a postal service, and telecommunications, and the picture appears even bleaker. Schools are struggling and public universities are a mess.

Predictably, these problems of communal and individual security, economic

stabilization, and social welfare can be traced to severe shortages of money and human talent. Nor is it surprising that the government's thirst for revenues and its need for good people are closely related.

From the Gorbachev years (1985–91) onward, Russians have successfully mounted what may be the biggest tax revolt in recent history. Indeed, the Soviet Union's end was brought about not by the ringing words of orators or the exhortations of pamphleteers but by the refusal of local and republic governments to turn over tax money to the center. Even today, millions of Russian citizens and many of the new private firms find reasons for not paying taxes to a democratically elected government that most accept as legitimate.

**B**ut even if Russia's citizens and local governments were suddenly to display an eagerness to pay, the Moscow government would be in no position to collect. Its version of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service is pathetic, with no adequate information on taxpayers, either individual or corporate, and insufficient computerized systems for processing that information. As a result, barely a quarter of all taxes imposed from Moscow are actually collected and turned over to pay for the normal functions of government. And of all taxes collected at the local level last year, barely seven percent went to cover the operations of the central government, down from a still-paltry nine percent the year before. The rest went for the pet projects of the republics, oblasts, and cities, which carry on as if they were sovereign entities recognizing few if any obligations to the country as a whole or to its national government.

Unable to collect the taxes it levies, Russia's central government resorts to desperate measures. In April 1994 it re-established the age-old state alcohol monopoly, which covered nearly half of the

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military budget under both tsars and commissars. Knowing that foreign businesses are more punctilious than Russians about paying taxes, the central government also imposes unusually heavy and often capricious duties on foreign firms operating in Russia. In other words, the Russian government hits up whomever it can, regardless of the impact of such actions on society or the economy. Foreign businesses respond by scaling back their commitments in Russia—or by canceling them altogether.

The problem underlying the weakness of Russia's central apparatus of state traces as much to people as to money. With the budget in shambles, the Russian government underpays its bloated staff. The brightest civil servants read the portents a half-decade ago and began bailing out for more lucrative pursuits in the private sector. Of those who stayed, many engage in business on the side or in corrupt dealings.

Like the federal government in Washington, Russia's government has been downsizing with a vengeance, but more from desperation than from principle. Since the most talented civil servants leave first, those left are invariably the ones with the least ability or initiative. For all the downsizing, there still remain hordes of Russian functionaries, including the thousands who staff Yeltsin's presidential office. Yet the sheer number of remaining bureaucrats cannot hide the fact that the Russian government today lacks the cadre of capable and loyal civil servants that any normal state requires. These include not just administrators and tax collectors but also teachers, the best of whom have been quitting in droves.

**I**t cannot be denied that the travails of Russia's central government are to some extent offset by the great strides that have been made by many new centers of power. Many of Russia's republics and oblasts are doing far better today

than under Communist Party rule, if only because they are spending much of the money that the central government needs in order to operate. The government's financial infrastructure may be crumbling, but scores of private banks are thriving. Thousands of senior administrators who kept Soviet-era trains running on time, both literally and figuratively, now work in private firms that are turning handsome profits and are able to lobby effectively in Moscow for policies favorable to their needs.

**R**ussians, like Americans, are eagerly cutting back the overgrown structures of the central government in order to balance their country's budget. Like Americans, they are turning many functions back to local government. Yet even the most thoroughgoing decentralization and devolution, if they are to be effective, still require the central government to perform certain essential services. Self-managed regional governments and independently controlled businesses cannot thrive without central institutions of government, even if they are far smaller than, and different from, those that existed under communism. Moreover, the relations among these institutions must be clearly defined and work smoothly.

The constitution introduced by Boris Yeltsin in 1993 specifies the powers of the various branches of government. (The president, for example, appoints the prime minister, who is in turn approved by the legislature.) But by no means all of the constitution's precepts are applied in practice. Worse, many well-informed Russians expect yet another constitution to be adopted once the most destabilizing phase of the present transition is past. If this happens, basic questions about the core structures of government will be wide open once more.

Such ageless questions of political philosophy are under constant debate in any

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healthy democracy, including America's. But in Russia, the inadequacy of the central government and its incapacity to meet the normal needs of society are so glaring that millions see no need to wallow further in theoretical debate. Instead they react, shouting for Russia's leaders to save the state from what appears to them as breakdown and from the deep national humiliation to which such disorder and recklessness give rise.

Many in the West dismiss the noisy demands of Russia's nationalists as the primitive rantings of people unable to adjust to the realities of a postcommunist world. While the views of self-styled "reformers" enjoy respectful coverage in the Western press, the nationalists' appeals for a strong Russian state are virtually equated with the desire for an authoritarian or even fascist regime.

Reformers in both the West and Russia call for a stronger civil society in which rules are imposed by law and government is reduced to the status of one institution among many in an open society of free citizens. The prescription is sound, but reformers make a leap of logic when they conclude that strengthening the central institution of Russia's government will inevitably lead the country away from a civil society and back to authoritarianism.

It is true that many of those seeking to strengthen the central government in Moscow would like also to roll back civil liberties, reimpose state control of the economy, and even re-establish a unitary, centralized state in the former territory of the Soviet Union. However, if one strips away such bombast and the psychology of victimhood that it feeds upon, there remains a quite reasonable demand that should be familiar to any citizen in a democratic country, namely, for normal central institutions that work. Surely, this is not only compatible with the idea of civil society but essential to its realization.

For the last six years, Russia has been in the midst of a revolution far more massive,

all-embracing, and swift than nearly all the other great revolutions of the modern era. National borders, form of government, structures of society, economic institutions, the political system, and values all have undergone significant changes, and have done so not seriatim but simultaneously. Is it any wonder that the country appears to be on the brink of chaos? Yet to future historians it will be clear that the process is more rational than it now seems, and that it can be divided into two phases.

Up to now, the main thrust of the new Russian revolution has been negative. It has dismantled and stripped away the entire system under which Russians lived for three-quarters of a century. The first wave of destruction pulverized the Soviet empire into 15 new countries. It also pounded the Communist Party, which was forced to give up its monopoly of power and then to disband. Successive waves dismantled the regulation of prices and the entire structure of state control over the economy. They also brought about the denationalization of thousands of state-owned industries, including large parts of the military-industrial complex and the state's chief hard currency earner, energy. Moscow also ceded control of dozens of functions to regional governments, including housing and most social welfare. So thoroughgoing was this latter process that many reasonable observers who can in no sense be considered Russian chauvinists feel that Yeltsin gave away far too many central prerogatives in the negotiations leading up to the March 1992 Federation Treaty on which the new constitution is based.

**E**ven as this initial, negative phase of Russia's revolution was proceeding, the first signs of a second, positive phase began to appear. While old institutions were still being destroyed, new ones began to be constructed: the presidency, a bicameral legislature, pri-



vate businesses, and an independent social sector. The simultaneous processes of destruction and construction have raised a noisy and bewildering cacophony.

A parallel to the present situation can be found in the 1850s, when Russians began dismantling the system of serfdom that had kept 90 percent of the population in bondage. The job could not be done all at once, of course, and as a result the country for many years seemed caught between two worlds. As the writer Alexander Herzen put it a century and a half ago, tsarist Russia had struck out from one shore of a river but had not yet reached the other. Meanwhile, to those with no sense of the larger movement under way, the country indeed seemed in a state of utter confusion. Only by the end of the 19th century did Russia emerge, briefly, as a relatively prosperous semicapitalist country.

A similar state of transition has prevailed during the last three years. To provide some semblance of order amid the epochal changes, Yeltsin sought extensive presidential powers of decree under the constitution that was drafted in 1993. As part of the same strategy, Prime Minister Chernomyrdin focused his attention on the reform and development of the pub-

lic sector, even as he allowed further dismantling of the old system through state-owned massive privatization.

As of this writing, Russia is still "between two shores," with the destructive phase of its revolution now far advanced but the constructive phase still at an early point. Pessimists both in Russia and abroad argue that this phase will proceed no further, and that the most likely course for Russia will be an atavistic return to

authoritarianism. Scanning Russia's political landscape, they are quick to detect in any effort to consolidate the central institutions of government a move in this direction. Some, with claims of clairvoyance that would humble Merlin the Magician, even assert that a shift toward authoritarian rule is inevitable. Never mind that the future will be shaped by decisions and forces largely unknowable today. The faith of these doomsayers is as hard to shake as the faith of those who foretell the apocalypse. Meanwhile, life goes on.

Given the unprecedented scale of the revolution under way in Russia, it is remarkable that more blood has not been shed. Millions of people who gained their identity through the old regime have good cause for anger now. However, sheer fatigue at the scale of suffering imposed by Lenin, Stalin, and their successors has caused such people to moderate their natural desire to vent frustrations. Then too, the constructive phase of the revolution has already brought benefits to millions, and particularly to members of the rising generation, most of whom have placed their hopes on the emergence of what they call a "normal" government, economy, and society in their country.

The rapid rise and fall of the blowhard

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Vladimir Zhirinovskiy attests to the fundamental health and good sense of the Russian polity down to the midpoint of 1995. Whatever Russia's success to date, though, the financial, political, and psychological crisis brought on by the war in Chechnya reveals starkly how fragile the new order remains. If the ability of the Moscow government to carry out basic social functions is further impaired by the need to divert massive funds to rebuilding the military and to emergency relief in Chechnya, that basic good sense could be overwhelmed by a wave of disoriented demagogues eager to mask the central government's failures through aggressive actions at home and bullying abroad.

**T**he reality of Russia in 1995 is that it is *undergoverned*. And an undergoverned Russia is dangerous both to itself and to others. The world's democracies should take heed of this. The United States, rather than scat-

tering its aid on whatever "projects" happen to be in fashion among consulting firms along the Capital Beltway, should concentrate on building up the government infrastructures that are essential to open societies. These include laws, police, and a judicial apparatus, which together provide security to individuals; the regulatory bodies and courts that assure the sanctity of contracts; and the administrative and social organs that address the population's education and basic welfare.

Above all, this rebuilding requires attention to the budgetary practices that assure fiscal stability and, no less, to those unexciting but essential agencies that collect the taxes necessary to pay for all of these core functions. In this fragile period of transition, the perils of an underfunded and underperforming central government in Russia are enormous. Until this condition of undergovernment is addressed, progress toward an open and free society will be slow, if it occurs at all.



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## CURRENT BOOKS

### Two Reports from Greenland

**THE LIFE OF GRAHAM GREENE**, Volume II: 1939–1955. By Norman Sherry. Viking. 672 pp. \$34.95

**GRAHAM GREENE: The Enemy Within.** By Michael Shelden. Random House. 442 pp. \$25

It seems certain by now that the work of Graham Greene (1904–91) is, after that of Joseph Conrad and D. H. Lawrence, the last expression of what F. R. Leavis once called the “great tradition” of the British novel.

Surely, no other storyteller of the period managed to be at once as popular and as respected by “serious” readers, in the grand manner of the Victorian novelists. (It was a point of pride for Greene that a distant cousin had been that consummate entertainer, Robert Louis Stevenson.) No writer of comparable genius concentrated as fiercely on the *craft* of narrative and representation, eschewing the involuted experiments of the modernists.

Some feel that Greene’s traditional approach is unremarkable, coming as it does after such works as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Yet no one else so caught—or was so caught by—the spirit of paradox that both protected and undermined the modern temper between the rise of the Third Reich and the evaporation of the Soviet Union. (The period coincided almost exactly with the years of Greene’s flourishing.) He was a Catholic whose strongest novels were disapproved of by the Vatican, and who liked to call himself, in later years, a “Catholic atheist”; an avowed leftist contemptuous of the blandness of socialism and fascinated with the intricacies of realpolitik; an eloquent analyst of love and fidelity who could also detail the awful compulsions of betrayal.

The locales of Greene’s fiction—from Central Europe to Africa, Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, and Vietnam—include some of the

most troubled spots of our troubled age, and Greene himself, indefatigable wanderer and sometime secret agent, knew them all intimately. He is a figure whose biography should enthrall at least as much as his work.

Alas, that’s not the case with these two new offerings by Norman Sherry and Michael Shelden. They are both disappointing and both more than faintly annoying—indeed, disappointing and annoying in complementary ways. Sherry’s biography is a studiously awestruck piece of hagiography; Shelden’s, a bitter, elbow-nudging exposé. I begin with Sherry, whose sins are (as Dante would say) of excessive rather than deficient charity.

Greene appointed Sherry, a distinguished Conrad scholar, his official biographer in 1975. Given access to letters and journals, entrée to personal interviews, and *lettres de crédit* for surviving old friends, Sherry embarked on a 20-year (and counting) quest to understand Greene and present him to the world. The first volume of *The Life of Graham Greene* appeared in 1989, and the second, covering the years 1939–1955, this year. A third, presumably final, volume is still to come—if Sherry lasts, that is, for he has turned the writing of the biography into a one-man, personal-best literary endurance contest. One is both impressed and distressed by his substitution of athletics for judgment. The dauntless Sherry has visited most of the venues familiar to his quarry. He relates with pride how he caught dysentery in the same Mexican village Greene did while writing *The Power and the Glory* (1939). He has suffered malaria, temporary blindness, and all manner of unpleasantness on Greene’s trail. Thank God, one thinks, he didn’t choose Malcolm Lowry or William S. Burroughs as a subject.

This is biography by total immersion.

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Sherry's hunger to share the Greene experience is equaled only by his diligence in walking every blind alley of the man's life. One begins to wonder if there are any letters, journals, or trivialities he *doesn't* quote. The net effect is like living in a house where everything is painted red: all details are equally significant, so none is really salient. Sherry should have studied his man's own talent for concision and judicious observation.

Nevertheless, this second volume of the biography is better than the first, mainly because Greene published his greatest books, including *The Power and the Glory* and *The End of the Affair* (1951), between 1939 and 1955. These years span the failure of his marriage; the great, consuming affair of his life with the brilliant Catherine Walston; and his growing obsession with the moral ambiguities of the Cold War world. Sherry performs a real service in limning both the macro- and microhistorical context of Greene's golden decades.

There is a worse way to write a biography than to be in awe of your subject, and that is to dislike him. Michael Shelden's *Graham Greene: The Enemy Within* seems written out of a variant of that worst of feelings, unrequited love. "When I began work on this biography," Shelden says, "I intended it to be an affectionate portrait of a novelist who deserved all the prizes the world could give him. . . . But . . . I kept uncovering unpleasant facts, and my understanding of Greene's life and art gradually changed." "Gradually," perhaps; "changed," for certain. Here, at length, is the conclusion to Shelden's discussion of Greene's 1938

masterpiece, *Brighton Rock*:

Some readers . . . cherish the author's works as noble political and religious statements; they recommend him for Catholic literary awards, the Jerusalem Prize, the Nobel Prize. . . . And all the time they refuse to listen to the record. They do not hear—or do not want to hear—the anti-Semitism, the anti-Catholicism, the misogyny, or the many jokes made at their expense.

This litany of offenses is partial. Among the other things readers do not want to hear—which Shelden hears quite clearly—are the homosexuality, pederasty, drug addiction, and probable high treason. Robert

Louis Stevenson's cousin would have been amused: Sherry finds him a troubled but kindly Dr. Jekyll; Shelden sees only the abominable Mr. Hyde.

I hesitate to accuse Shelden, who has done a very good book on George Orwell, of the worst kind of literary naïveté, mistaking the tale for the teller (as if the author of *Richard III* were himself a nihilistic, infanticidal schemer); but he forces one's hand. Greene is

no more one of his characters than Milton is Satan. And while Shelden repeatedly cites "interviews" and "conversations" with people who can verify or at least support suspicions of Greene's sneaky dealings, his references provide only the vaguest, most marshmallowy indications of who these people actually are.

Shelden was specifically denied access to Greene's estate, and it seems that much of his critical apparatus is either borrowed



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from Sherry's authoritative book or is wishful thinking. Scobie, the tormented hero of *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), believes himself guilty of a mortal sin and is led to commit suicide out of his deep desire to serve God and do good. The action evokes the quite serious problem of what Kierkegaard, in *Fear and Trembling*, called "the teleological suspension of the ethical." Yet Shelden sees the book as yet another instance of the writer's melodramatic posturing, and cites Orwell's prim review as back-up. "Unlike Orwell," he sniffs, "[Greene] was not trying to make the world a better place. He was engaged in a private dance with sin."

Greene was a friend and colleague of the master spy Kim Philby. To his cost and honor, he defended their friendship even after Philby's scandalous defection to Moscow, and he wrote a controversial introduction to Philby's memoir, *My Private War*. Asked late in life what he would have done had he known his friend was a traitor, Greene replied that he probably would have given him a week to get out of the country, then turned him in. For Sherry, this story is a sad, honest reflection by one old man on a friend who has terribly erred. For Shelden, however, it is proof—contrary to the findings of British intelligence (MI 5), whose agents interviewed Greene extensively—that the writer may have known his friend was a double agent and kept silent for the sheer perverse joy of vicarious treason.

Shelden is intrigued by Greene's fascination with espionage and declares that the writer's family "had no shortage of spies." At various points, he suggests that Greene spied for the Soviet Union in the 1930s or—contradictorily—that he used his loudly proclaimed leftist sentiments in the '50s and '60s to cover his MI 5 activities while traveling to Moscow, Kenya, and Haiti. Yet again, Shelden's strongest sources for these assertions seem to be Greene's novels themselves. Greene did serve as an intelligence agent during World War II, as did virtually every smart person the British could recruit,

and never blushed to admit it. The man's morals may have been questionable. But it is more likely that he wrote about whoremasters, addicts, traitors, and perverts because, as writers from Dostoevsky to Auden to Mailer have known, such figures—especially the double agent—are apt metaphors for the jumbled morality of our age. "Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things," says Robert Browning in a poem Greene loved to quote.

*The Enemy Within*, as it builds up steam, progresses from distaste to malice to whatever is on the other side of malice. Why all this studied outrage? Yes, the "real" Graham Greene got a kick out of espionage, liked drink and opium, had numerous affairs, and enjoyed prostitutes. These were open secrets, despite Shelden's constant harping on his man's duplicity. Greene was a stern, complex moralist in his fiction but a sensualist in real life.

And yet, for all its unfairness, I can't help thinking that Greene would have enjoyed Shelden's book more than Sherry's. Greene had an appetite for scandal, and a biographer such as Shelden, who gets the scandal of every novel, is a much more compelling companion than the bland, wide-eyed Sherry.

What is missing from both books, however, is the principal gift a literary biography should deliver: a formula for mapping the chaos of the life onto the achieved order of the work. This is what Maynard Mack did with Alexander Pope, Leon Edel with Henry James, and Richard Ellmann with Joyce, Yeats, and Wilde. Someday Greene's prince may come, but not yet. Until then, the "real life" rests in a handful of imperishable tales, crafted, passionate, ironic, and holy. Not a bad resting place, that.

—Frank D. McConnell, a former Wilson Center Fellow, is professor of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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## What Kind of Bootstraps?

**ONE BY ONE FROM THE INSIDE OUT:**  
Essays and Reviews on Race and Responsibility in America. By Glenn C. Loury. Free Press. 332 pp. \$25

Glenn Loury has lived an amazing life, and the resulting temptation to interpret his life rather than his work is almost irresistible. Loury himself heightens the temptation by ending his book of essays on "race and responsibility in America" with a very intimate epilogue exploring his experience of being "born again": "Because of this encounter with Jesus Christ, the death and vacancy, the emptiness of my life, has been relieved." His final paragraphs offer a personal testimony to the truth of the Gospel: "I know primarily, and I affirm this truth to you, on the basis of what I have witnessed in my own life. This knowledge of God's unconditional love for humankind provides moral grounding for my work in cultural justice and racial reconciliation, economics, and social justice."

Loury, a professor of economics at Boston University, had enjoyed great secular success: "I had reached the pinnacle of my profession. When I went to Washington, people in the halls of power knew my name. I had research grants. I had prestige." The oblique remark reminds us that, in March 1987, President Ronald Reagan had nominated him—a child of Chicago's South Side, born to a black, solidly working-class family in 1948—to be deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. His public fall from secular grace began when he withdrew his name from consideration a few days before assault charges were filed against him by his mistress. Drug charges followed in November. In early 1988, Loury checked himself into McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, to start drug rehabilitation. There he was helped to begin

the reconnection with Christianity that has brought him to a new state of spiritual grace.

These private facts, made public in part through Loury's all-too-brief period of candidacy for high public office, are bound to be in the background of every response to these essays. For in them he addresses the crisis of the black ghetto, and his authority to speak of the necessity for moral reform in the life of the drug abuser, the unwed father, and the unfaithful husband derives, in some measure, whether he likes it or not, from the fact that he can say, "I am the man, I suffered, I was there."

The pathos of Loury's public tragedy and private triumph has another unavoidable consequence: it raises the stakes in criticizing his work. Don't kick a man when he's down, we say. But it's not much more attractive to kick a man who has just gotten up.

Still, I think we should resist the temptation to take Loury's life as an emblem of anything, least of all the state of black America. He is an extraordinary individual—a man of prodigious intellectual gifts, in particular—and we will learn more from engaging with his ideas than from reading his life. If we must face the question of Loury's life at the start, it is so that, in the end, we can put it aside.

The ruling idea developed in these essays is that black Americans should heed the call of Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) and act in their own communities to address the crisis of values in the ghetto by "religious, civic, and voluntary efforts of all sorts." This is what Loury calls the "inside game," and its players are the black community and its leaders. Instead of debating what actions the government should take to help black people, black leaders should be guiding them to their own salvation. Self-help, not state intervention,

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should be the primary focus.

Loury admits that Washington's call for such a focus may have been mistaken in its own day. Then there was still the task of undoing the work of Jim Crow segregation, and Loury is clear that black Americans were right to insist on equality under the Constitution. But the civil rights war is largely won, he thinks, and simply insisting that America still owes a debt to black people is both undignified and politically counterproductive.

It is undignified, Loury thinks, because the gesture of petition keeps black Americans in the subordinate position that has its roots in slavery; it is counterproductive because the behavior of some young black men and women—the latter irresponsibly giving birth to children they cannot afford because the former do not face their responsibilities as fathers, preferring to live lives of violent crime—has alienated many white Americans. So too has the failure of black political leaders to condemn this behavior. Loury believes, with Washington, that black Americans have to earn from the rest of the country “honor, respect, equal standing . . . and worthiness as subjects of national concern.”

So far, so conservative. But Loury also insists that the state does have a role in helping to deal with black poverty: “Medical care for the poor, education in the inner city, job training for welfare mothers, discipline for criminally offending youths, funding for improvement of community infrastructure and for housing, nutrition for infants, drug treatment for addicts seeking help—all of these and more require the provision of public funds and are essential to black progress.” The rub is that, to get these desperately needed services funded, there has to be a public will to pay for them. And that can be created, Loury argues, only if Americans generally believe that the black poor *deserve* their help. To persuade white Americans of this black Americans must—

as Loury puts the matter in deliberately old-fashioned language—“comport themselves” in a more dignified way.

Persuading Americans generally to attend to the problems of the most disadvantaged is the object of what Loury calls the “outside game,” and his critique of the civil rights leadership is both that they have played this game badly and that it has led them to ignore the essential “inside game.”

Moral reform, the objective of the inside game, “is not a task for the state in our liberal society,” Loury argues, but requires instead, “religious, civic, and voluntary efforts of all sorts.” It is such skepticism about state action that makes Loury an American conservative. Yet Loury's opposition to current civil rights policy—and to affirmative action in particular—is unlike that of many conservatives. It is not based on the idea that America's debt to black people has been paid; nor is it rooted in the notion that anti-black racial discrimination is gone (though he *does* think its persistence is exaggerated by the black political leadership). Rather, Loury believes that affirmative action hurts black Americans more than it helps them.

Loury's opposition to much affirmative action—in particular, preferential hiring of blacks—is not driven by what drives those many (mostly white) conservatives who rail against “reverse discrimination.” His worry is not that affirmative action is unfair to white men but that it is ultimately bad for blacks, and for the worst-off blacks particularly. When Loury argues that welfare is bad for the poor, it is clear that he is not just another guy who will use any argument, fair or foul, to reduce his taxes.

Loury is unmistakably a “race man”: an African American who is deeply—and, in the end, unapologetically—preoccupied with the well-being of black people, especially those who are trapped by poverty and by crime. In the prologue, he writes:

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Who am I, then? Foremost, I am a child of God . . . I am a husband, a father, a son, a teacher, an intellectual, a Christian, a citizen. In none of these roles is my race irrelevant, but neither can racial identity alone provide much guidance for my quest to discharge these responsibilities adequately.

But the cool tone here is a little misleading. "Not irrelevant" doesn't quite capture how central racial identification is in Loury's life. What captures it better is his subsequent confession that he was worried when his middle-class, suburban son took up hockey, a "white man's game." "My aversion to my son's involvement...was rooted in my own sense of identity as a black American man who grew up when and where I did." I rather suspect that Loury would go along with another of Booker T. Washington's sentiments: "From any point of view, I had rather be what I am, a member of the Negro race, than be able to claim membership with the most favored of any other race." *That* remark has the kind of grand, dignified sense of self that Loury wants to see in the children of the ghetto. And he wants them to be helped to live lives that *merit* that self-respect.

The claim that affirmative action has bad effects is, of course, familiar. There is the self-doubt of some beneficiaries of affirmative action, made familiar by Shelby Steele and Stephen Carter (whose books are reviewed here by Loury). There is the anger of white Americans, the legitimacy of whose "competing interests" is ignored, Loury says, by the "entitlement-oriented" rhetoric of affirmative action's defenders. There is the fact that the major black beneficiaries of affirmative action have been middle and upper-middle class, with little trickle down to the black working poor. There is the way affirmative action encourages everyone to think of other people not as individuals but as members of races. Loury makes these points strongly and carefully.

But he also develops a novel argument to the effect that holding blacks to lower standards than whites reduces the incentives for black self-improvement, thus perversely making belief in black underachievement a self-fulfilling prophecy. Loury is at pains to insist that "*this discussion is theoretical*," denying that he has evidence of its significance in the real world. Yet because he devotes an appendix of 15 pages—about the length of some of the chapters, and much longer than most of the book reviews—to these ideas, we are presumably to take them seriously.

To be sure, no one can deny that affirmative action has negative effects. The question, though, is whether they outweigh the positive ones. And that can be addressed only by someone who seeks to measure evenhandedly what affirmative action achieves as well. Spending 15 pages on a confessedly "theoretical" objection (however elegantly developed) in an essay that doesn't say much about what good affirmative action has done leaves one suspecting that Loury's discussion is not the fair-minded exploration of the issues we so desperately need.

**T**he claim that blacks would be better off, on average, if racial preferences were abolished tomorrow strikes me as wildly implausible. But Loury's view would trouble me less if he had more plausible things to say about what policies should replace affirmative action. He correctly insists that it is not "enough merely to be right about liberals having been wrong." He recognizes that we cannot just abolish affirmative action, reduce welfare, and leave the ghetto to its own devices. Yet the solution he does see—the "inside game"—is addressed to a recovery of values within black communities, a recovery that he believes must begin "one by one, from the inside out," a consummation that would best be advanced, he clearly thinks, by the revival of Christian faith.

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Loury does not seek to promote this course as a matter of government policy. Indeed, in his discussion of the work of Stephen Carter, he defends—against Carter—a fairly tough separation of church and state. He insists, like a good liberal, that public policies should be defended by appeal to secular principle. One can invoke moral principles that are rooted in religious experience and conviction in Loury's public sphere, but one cannot invoke the religious grounds themselves. It follows that public policy can play only a secondary role even in the worldly salvation of the truly disadvantaged.

If Loury's conclusions seem a little thin, his skepticism about the value of government action challenges liberals to

find policies that will be more successful than past efforts have been. Still, nothing he says persuades me that we *cannot* do better, or that racial and gender preferences will not continue to be a useful (if minor) part of the policy mix. The failures of government action are grounds for better action, not for the abandonment of the task. And the continuing challenge of Glenn Loury—the smart, morally engaged race man—is more a spur than an impediment to that enterprise.

—Kwame Anthony Appiah is professor of Afro-American studies and philosophy at Harvard University. His most recent book is *Another Death in Venice* (1995).

## Rebirth of a Nation

**THE NEXT AMERICAN NATION:** The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution. By Michael Lind. 300 pp. Free Press. \$23

Michael Lind is a renegade among American political thinkers, as independent in his reflections upon the state of the nation as his fellow Texan C. Wright Mills was in his earlier readings of American society. Lind, who recently became a senior editor of the *New Republic* after a brief stint at *Harper's*, has even created something of a stir among the intellectuals by publishing two scathing critiques of conservatives and conservatism in *Dissent* and the *New York Review of Books*. To some this was treason, or at least apostasy, for Lind in an even earlier incarnation was executive editor of the *National Interest*, the foreign policy journal founded by neoconservative Irving Kristol.

The book under review will not do much to restore Lind's relations with his former colleagues on the right. But his newfound liberal friends may find much to disagree with as well, especially his trenchant critique of affirmative action. No matter whose ox he gores, though, Lind has produced a highly original polemic, flawed and uneven but always provocative.

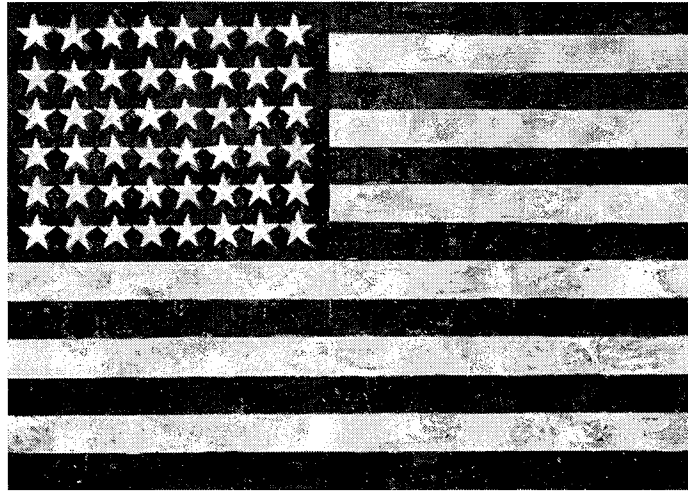
Lind's manifesto, calling for "a third way between laissez-faire capitalism and unworkable socialism," quite consciously follows the model of Herbert Croly's *Promise of American Life* (1909), the influential progressive blueprint for an activist national government. Like Croly, he offers a reinterpretation of American history, dividing the nation's political past into "three republics," or regimes—Anglo-America, Euro-America, and Multicultural America. After describing each, he posits a desirable fourth regime, the "Trans-American Melt-

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ing Pot," which Lind hopes his manifesto will help usher in. Explicit in this fourth republic, in a way clearly reminiscent of Croly's book, is a revised and democratized version of Alexander Hamilton's program for a powerful national government.

At the heart of Lind's argument, as the names of the four republics suggest, is the notion that America, like other nations, has a national culture that binds its citizens together. Here Lind rejects the view of Croly and others who have argued that America is unique among states in owing its coherence to a set of core beliefs or ideas. And while he echoes the arguments against American exceptionalism recently made by *National Review* editors John O'Sullivan and Peter Brimelow, he builds his case on a subtler, more persuasive understanding of American culture that acknowledges its diverse elements and allows for its syncretic growth. So, for example, Lind quite rightly puts the history of black Americans at the center of the American experience, a positioning that would not sit too well with O'Sullivan and Brimelow, who emphasize America's British heritage. (While Lind joins them in arguing for greatly restricted immigration, he does so on strictly economic grounds.)

Rejecting the interpretation of the exceptionalists, Lind invokes America's cultural traditions as the basis of his nationalist credo, which he calls "liberal nationalism." Consequently, he de-emphasizes the role of the Founders—including Washington, Madison, and even Hamilton—in favor of "the conquerors of the national homeland" and "the culture-founders." Among the former, Lind includes General Sam Houston, "hero of the Texas war of independence," and General Winfield Scott,



"conqueror of Mexico." Among the culture-founders Lind includes Governor John Winthrop, Sir William Penn, and Frederick Douglass. Such individuals, Lind argues, founded the nation (in the territorial and, especially, cultural sense) before the nation-state was fully consolidated under a powerful federal government.

There are many virtues in Lind's rebuttal of the exceptionalists' perspective on American history. It reinforces the view of many recent scholars that most immigrants were not drawn to America by its laws or political ideals. Most came for economic gain, and many intended to return to their native countries. Those who remained, however, became assimilated into a distinctively American culture even as they added elements of their own heritages to the simmering pot.

Yet Lind's interpretation can also lead to problems. One is an unnecessarily strident stance that posits dichotomies where none may exist. For example, many conservatives who subscribe to the exceptionalist view are nevertheless highly concerned about recent cultural changes in contemporary America, including multiculturalism and multilingualism. In other words, the two interpretations cited



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by Lind do not appear to be mutually exclusive. Yet Lind never bothers to address this possibility.

**A**nother problem with Lind's brand of nationalism, particularly his emphasis on conquest and territorial expansion, is that it leaves black and Mexican Americans in a very difficult situation. If these (along with Native Americans) are in fact nothing more than the conquered peoples of North America, not unlike those brought to heel by other nation-states, are they not then relegated to the victim status that some of their leaders claim for them? If so, are these groups not entitled to the affirmative action programs that Lind is so critical of—and that he would like to see eclipsed by a revived class-based politics?

Despite this problem, the strongest part of Lind's argument is without doubt his critique of affirmative action, the defining policy of Multicultural America and its grievance-group politics. The essence of his argument is that affirmative action is the cynical response of a white elite, what Lind refers to as the "overclass," eager to buy social peace by co-opting racial-minority leaders. Resurrecting sometimes-forgotten history, Lind correctly points out that affirmative action, as applied to trade unions, got an important boost from the Nixon administration. In the same vein, he points to the racial gerrymandering resulting from the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and advanced under Republican and Democratic administrations alike.

Though not entirely original, Lind's argument here is forceful and persuasive, particularly when he points out that affirmative action has helped white elites—conservative and liberal—respond to minority demands without undertaking "the dramatic reforms of American government and business that are necessary to integrate working-class and poor blacks

and Hispanics, along with the absolute majority of the poor who are white, into the larger society."

What is perhaps most impressive about Lind's case is that, despite his condemnation of the group-rights logic of affirmative action, he does not subscribe to the trendy view that America is breaking up into feuding racial and ethnic groups. Far from it. Lind is too attuned to the absorptive power of our national culture to accept such scenarios. But if Lind is not concerned about Balkanization, he is very much alarmed by what he calls Brazilianization, by which he means the emergence of a rigid social hierarchy based roughly on color.

Confronted by economic forces exacerbating class barriers and political forces undermining class-based politics, Lind advocates an activist, interventionist welfare state. In characteristically high-handed fashion, he declares the debate surrounding the culture of poverty "over"—in favor of those who argue that culture is indeed the decisive factor. Arguing for "maximum feasible paternalism," Lind endorses proposals such as those by James Q. Wilson calling for orphanages and boarding schools for ghetto youth. He also insists on the need to "revitalize the public school system" by equalizing education expenditures and "imposing statewide and national standards," though he is skeptical of voucher and choice schemes.

**B**ut Lind is hardly prepared to stop there. He favors curtailing the entry of unskilled immigrants as part of a "social market contract" to restore the living standards of American workers. Included in this contract would be a "social tariff" designed to "deter American employers in some industries from responding to rising wages in a tight American labor market by transferring production abroad." Lind also proposes to substitute progressive

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income and consumption taxes for payroll levies to finance Social Security and other social benefits.

Lind urges his readers not to get too caught up in the details of such proposals and instead to focus on his overall point that reducing class barriers should take precedence over affirmative action tokenism. Even so, many of his proposals seem dubious economically, though evaluating them is frankly beyond my competence and, I would wager, Lind's as well.

Lind gets into even more trouble with proposals for political reform. Convinced that we now live in a campaign-finance driven "plutocracy," he argues for the "separation of check and state" and calls for the prohibition of paid political advertising and the subsequent provision of free informational public-service notices in the print and electronic media. He also calls for European-style multiparty democracy and proposes that U.S. senators be elected by proportional representation in national elections every four years, concurrent with the presidential election.

Lind's goal here is to eliminate the factors "that are alienating an ever-growing number of Americans from the political process." His concern is surely on target, yet the remedies he proposes would just as surely exacerbate the problem. For the nationalized, mass democracy he envisions would almost certainly be dominated by the media (whether free or not) whose biases have already helped alienate millions of Americans from politics. But even more to the point, the minor parties that get increased clout under proportional representation would compete for media attention and thereby increase the stridency of our politics. Finally, it is particularly ironic, given Lind's concern with the class bias of today's politics, that his proposals in all likelihood

would do further hurt to the less affluent, for whom the political process would be all the more complicated—unless drastically simplified by the emotional appeals of media demagogues.

As for Lind's hopes for a more rational and substantive class-based politics, these too could founder on a nasty, media-fed brawl between the haves and the have-nots. What Lind completely overlooks is that the last time our politics was more class based, under the New Deal, we had much stronger locally based institutions—including churches, political parties, and labor unions—that not only articulated and organized interests but did so in ways that linked citizens to the process through everyday, face-to-face relationships. Such mediating structures and the vital role they play in making politics comprehensible to ordinary Americans are completely left out of Lind's analysis.

For all his iconoclasm, then, Lind falls into the same trap that snares many contemporary writers and intellectuals. Preoccupied with overarching historical themes and contemporary value conflicts, the chattering classes give short shrift to the messy and sometimes arcane details of the institutions that make society work. Nevertheless, at a time when political and policy debates seem increasingly locked into boring set pieces, Lind deserves credit for attempting to break the molds. He has written a book that, even when wrong-headed, challenges and stimulates in a realm where predictable cant is the norm.

—Peter Skerry, a Wilson Center Fellow, is the author of *Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (1993).

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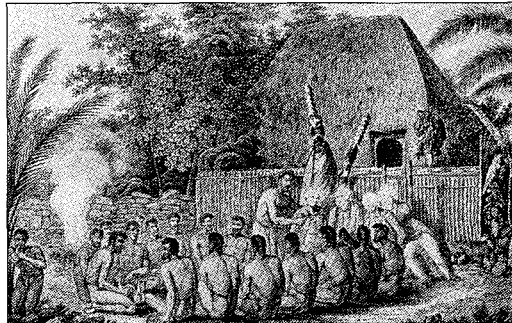
## History

**HOW "NATIVES" THINK:** About Captain Cook, For Example. By Marshall Sahlins. Univ. of Chicago. 318 pp. \$24.95

Captain James Cook, the famed 18th-century British navigator, came ashore on the island of Hawaii in January 1779 and died there the following month at age 51. That much is indisputable. What happened between his arrival and his death, however, has become the subject of intense debate between two noted contemporary anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins of the University of Chicago and Gananath Obeyesekere of Princeton University. Their fight is not just about what occurred more than 200 years ago in Hawaii. It goes to the heart of a continuing debate about the ability of anthropologists working in the Western tradition to understand other cultures. Sahlins argues for the plausibility of modern anthropological inquiry in the face of a creeping political correctness that threatens to silence the very "natives" it ostensibly seeks to defend. He insists that there is a way to look at other cultures objectively that need not become the kind of "imperialistic" anthropology he has been accused of practicing.

Obeyesekere fired the first shot in *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (1992). He argued against the long-accepted view advanced by Sahlins and others that the Hawaiians believed Cook to be an incarnation of the god Lono. (The captain's appearance coincided with an important annual religious festival.) The idea that the Hawaiians took Cook for a god was, in Obeyesekere's view, a contrivance of imperialist ideology, a myth "fundamentally based on the Western idea of the redoubtable European who is a god to savage peoples." He offered a different interpretation: Cook was not received as Lono but was installed honorifically as a taboo chief and deified only after his untimely death at native hands.

*How Natives Think* is Sahlins's response, a compelling and thorough, if occasionally plodding, indictment of Obeyesekere's scholarship (shoddy) and political agenda (misguided). *Apotheosis*, Sahlins claims, is "a veritable manual of sophisticated and historiographical fallacies," and



Obeyesekere's theory, for all the critical acclaim it has received, is "undermined by reason, historical evidence, and the ethnography of Western culture." If these seem like strong charges, they are aimed at a formidable ideology. Obeyesekere wants to defend the Hawaiians against the ethnocentric forces of the West, but he does so, Sahlins maintains, by practicing a "symmetrical and inverse ethnocentrism": Hawaiians are accordingly "endowed with the highest form of Western mentality, while Western scholars slavishly repeat the irrational beliefs of their ancestors."

Sahlins is a careful prosecutor, and his sometimes trying detours into such matters as the Hawaiian lunar calendar are important to the argument. He wittily dismantles Obeyesekere's case, accusing him of taking a "scholarlier-than-thou-attitude" and of creating a "pidgin anthropology." There is a sporting thrill to this unusual (because public) bloodletting in the academy, but the fight is likely to continue well beyond Sahlins's round-two punch.

**MONSIEUR D'EON IS A WOMAN:** A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade. By Gary Kates. Basic Books. 363 pp. \$25

Spies tend to have more complicated inner lives than the rest of us. What sort of person chooses to live an uprooted existence, change identities at great risk, and deceive friends, family, and lovers on a routine basis? As Kates demonstrates in his absorbing study of the 18th-century Chevalier d'Eon, spies in the past were every bit as complex as their modern counterparts.

Charles d'Eon de Beaumont was born in 1728

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to a family of lesser Burgundian nobility. By his mid-thirties, this workaholic bachelor was a captain of the elite corps of Dragoons and had received from Louis XV the coveted Cross of Saint-Louis for distinguished diplomatic service in Russia and England. But while pursuing the French crown's official policies abroad, d'Eon also worked as a spy furthering a clandestine agenda to put a Frenchman on the Polish throne and to undermine English domestic politics. When financial tensions escalated between the chevalier and his "handlers" in the 1760s, this model civil servant's career began to come apart. D'Eon threatened to blackmail the French government, and to show he was serious, he published a collection of highly confidential documents. Ordered to return to France, he refused.

But none of this accounts for d'Eon's lasting notoriety. In 1770 a rumor circulated in London that d'Eon was actually a woman; soon the wild speculation led to heavy betting. In 1772 d'Eon and a French official confirmed the startling "truth" that the chevalier was really a chevalière. Mademoiselle d'Eon lived for another four decades in England and France, only to stun the world once more upon her death in 1810: examination of the corpse indisputably proved that she was a man after all.

D'Eon was one of the most talked-about characters in 18th-century Europe, and his story has been told before. But at a time when gender-bending tales such as *M. Butterfly* and *The Crying Game* have enjoyed great success, this reopening of the d'Eon dossier was inevitable. Kates, a history professor at Trinity University in Texas, tackles the central question head-on: why would an 18th-century man choose to jeopardize his status by passing for half his life as a member of the "lesser" sex?

Kates's answer is likely to be controversial: d'Eon, he insists, was neither a transvestite nor a transsexual. None of his abundant autobiographical writings suggest that d'Eon made a fetish of women's clothes or was ill at ease with his male body. Kates uses these works and d'Eon's library (he owned at least 60 books relating to the nature and status of women) to argue that d'Eon's decision to live as a woman was an intellectual one, an early form of feminism later bolstered by his revived religious faith.

Women, d'Eon believed, were spiritually superior to men.

Kates will not convince every reader that Chevalier d'Eon was the man of (feminist) principle he depicts. Intent on removing d'Eon's story from the realm of pathology, Kates makes his transformation seem implausibly rational. But this does not detract from his lively, novelistic account of an extraordinary life—or from a wonderful tour of the politics and culture of 18th-century Europe.

**THE END OF REFORM:** New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War. By *Alan Brinkley*. Knopf. 371 pp. \$27.50

Between its beginnings in the early 1930s and the end of World War II, New Deal liberalism underwent a fundamental change. Its principal architects, including Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, gradually backed away from trying to deal with difficult issues of wealth, class, and economic power, with consequences for American liberalism that persist to the present day.

Brinkley, a historian at Columbia University, tells how powerful external forces—the recession of 1937–38, the growth of organized labor, World War II—deflected the New Dealers from their original plans to restructure American society and its troubled economy. By the end of World War II, he writes, "New Dealers so transformed their vision of political economy that it no longer bore any direct relation to the progressive traditions that had originally informed their efforts."

Although few New Dealers were ever actually hostile to capitalism, they all believed that something was wrong with it and that government should find a way to set it right. But the consensus of the early Depression yielded, says Brinkley, to "a set of liberal ideas essentially reconciled to the existing structure of the economy and committed to using the state to compensate for capitalism's inevitable flaws." New Dealers replaced their zeal for a fundamental overhaul of the economy with a much less forceful "regulatory impulse." The Justice Department's Antitrust Division under Thurman Arnold did not attempt to eradicate busi-

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ness monopoly but sought merely to contain it.

Just as World War I had put an end to the Progressive Era, so World War II dealt a blow to the New Deal's early ambitions. The rise of fascism made Americans wary of granting more power and control to the central government. And though the war did spur increased government involvement in the economy, it also promoted greater *cooperation* between Washington and the American business community. The experience of the war forced New Deal reformers to acknowledge their own limitations. "By the end of the war they had disabused themselves of the notion that all problems could be helped by fundamental cures," Brinkley concludes. "Instead, they had more modest goals: protecting consumers and encouraging mass consumption, and using fiscal policies and social welfare innovations to find the road to prosperity."

Brinkley admits that a certain measure of present-mindedness spurred his investigation: he wanted to understand why contemporary American liberalism, with its focus on individual rights and group entitlements rather than on the national well-being, has strayed so far from its New Deal roots. Historians frown upon drawing contemporary lessons from their work, but Brinkley's book does provide a cautionary tale when powerful forces in Washington speak blithely once again about fundamentally reordering government and society.

**THE OTHER GREEKS:** The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization. By Victor Davis Hanson. Free Press. 541 pp. \$28

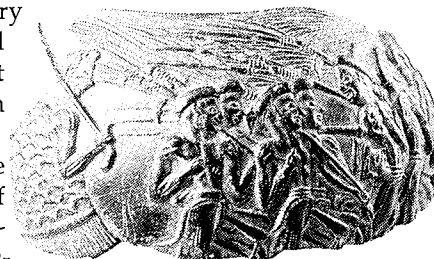
What other Greeks? Who among these ingenious folk have escaped the confines of an old popular tradition? The ancient Greeks were urban and urbane, curious and cantankerous, wrote poems and plays and philosophy, excelled at mathematics and sculpture and architecture, and invented democracy. Hanson, a classicist at California State University, Fresno, does not entirely dismiss this traditional view but sees it as myopic and partial. To understand Greece in its days of glory, he argues, we must look beyond the cities to the countryside, where, from the eighth to the

fourth century B.C., the most important members of the Greek population lived. These essential "other Greeks" were family farmers.

Hanson contends that a new form of agrarianism took hold in Greece sometime around 700 B.C., spurred by the growing population's need for a larger food supply. Central to this change was the emergence of the small farm, rarely larger than 20 acres in size but worked to the limits of productivity by its independent owner. Over time, such owners coalesced as a class and became powerful enough to dictate Greek military and political development through the sixth century B.C.

Many of the fundamentals of Western civilization, Hanson argues, originated in the agricultural practices of the polis: private ownership of land, free choice in economic activity, an economic mentality to improve productivity, constitutional government based on local representation, the subservience of military organization to civilian political control, notions of egalitarianism and equality of property holding, and private ownership of arms. "Agrarian pragmatism," he writes, "not intellectual contemplation, farmers, not philosophers, 'other' Greeks, not the small cadre of refined minds who have always comprised the stuff of Classics, were responsible for the creation of Western civilization."

The startling modernity of Hanson's list signals his larger purpose. He would have us see America through his elaborate Greek prism: the traditional—agrarian—values on which *this* country was founded are disappearing along with the American family farm, and we are slipping into our own Hellenistic age of desultory, untethered pandemonium. Six generations of Hanson's family have worked a ranch in California. When he complains of the farmer's increasing marginalization or describes the hardship of making a life on the land, whether in ancient Greece or 20th-century America, he writes from experience.



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Compelling as his book is, Hanson's thesis about the influence of agrarianism on Greek culture is not entirely persuasive. He makes large claims, on behalf of Greece and America both, and his evidence does not always lend them convincing weight. Those ancient playwrights and poets and philosophers and sculptors are not so easily diminished, nor is the vast impersonality of contemporary American agribusiness self-evidently menacing. The world moves through cycles of change, impossible to resist, as the Greeks themselves knew all too well. Still, there is truth to be seen from Hanson's altered perspective, even if it is not the whole truth.

### Arts & Letters

**THE MAKING OF RUBENS.** By Svetlana Alpers. Yale. 178 pp. \$30

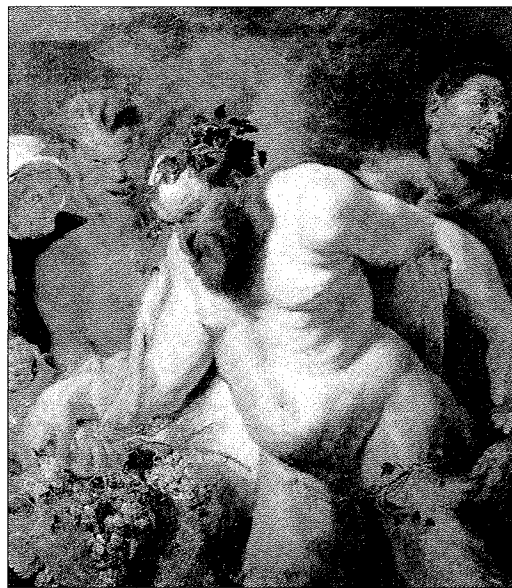
Why would a male painter in the Western tradition represent flesh as Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) does in his great picture *The Drunken Silenus*? Alpers, an art historian at the University of California, Berkeley, asks the question in the last of this handsome volume's three tenuously linked essays. It's a reasonable question, apart from that worrisome "male," to ask of a painter as flesh-absorbed as Rubens. But Alpers's answer is something else again: "I think it has something to do with the problem of male generativity. How are men to be creative, to make pictures, for example, when giving birth is the prerogative of women?" (Do we lack evidence that men, some of them painters, have coped with their disadvantage through the ages?)

Silenus is a mythical figure from Virgil's sixth *Eclogue* who must be tied up before he will sing to his captors. He makes his possession by others, his disempowerment, his surrender of masculinity, the condition of his creativity. So too, writes Alpers, did Rubens seek access to a potent, ecstatic mode of creating and to a feminine kind of surrender. Alpers views the body of the drunken Silenus as neither clearly male nor clearly female. It exists rather "in a curious no man's and no

woman's land, between or eliding genders." By identifying with this ambiguously sexed Silenus, Rubens evokes "a desire—a male desire perhaps—for the merging with a woman that was essential to him in the making of art."

Earlier, Alpers describes the development of a French taste for Rubens's art in the 18th century as opposed to the art of Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665). Rubens was a virtuoso in the use of color, and his work was thought feminine, while Poussin, who excelled in line and design, evoked a male world of significant action. Alpers regards this 18th-century critical "engendering" as odd and arbitrary, and it was indeed soon subject to reversal (i.e. Rubens became "masculine"). Yet it seems no more arbitrary than her own fashionable but implausible rendering of a Rubens for our gender-obsessed age: the artist who needed to get in touch with his feminine side.

Alpers contends that "the making of Rubens is not only a matter of circumstances, or of the viewing of his art, it is also a matter of his own activity as a painter." The statement is remarkable for what it implies about the state of art-historical criticism in the academy these days. The painter's "own activity"—his vision, his genius, the pictures, for goodness' sake, which once would have been self-evi-



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dently primary—needs to have its claims asserted against historical, ideological, and social externalities.

To the extent that Alpers means to argue the importance of Rubens's innate creative impulses—whether masculine, feminine, or modishly mixed—her project is significant. Rubens and his individual genius, not Flanders or politics or posterity, made Rubens. But oh for a bit more Poussinian clarity of line in the argument.

### *Contemporary Affairs*

**THE CONFIDENCE GAME:** How Unelected Central Bankers Are Governing the Changed Global Economy. *By Steven Solomon.* Simon & Schuster. 606 pp. \$30

Solomon's book couldn't be more timely. Since the end of 1994, the U.S. dollar has plummeted nearly 20 percent against the Japanese yen and 15 percent against the German deutschemark. Such volatility is one of the hallmarks of today's anarchic global economy: trillions of dollars of stateless capital slosh around the world every day, beyond the control, and sometimes even the comprehension, of government officials and central bankers.

How did the world's economy expand so rapidly into this vast, stateless swirl? Solomon, formerly a reporter for *Forbes*, cites several causes: the 1970s breakdown of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates, new communications technologies that allow for instantaneous, worldwide trading 24 hours a day, and marketplace innovations that permit relatively small investors to control huge sums of money. Amid such changes, central bankers in Europe and Japan, as well as the United States, have worked diligently to prevent global economic crises. Remarkably, they have often succeeded—as in their handling of the debt crises of less-developed countries in the early 1980s, and their quick response to the 1987 stock market crash.

Unfortunately, central bankers appear to have more power than they actually possess. Their effectiveness, according to Solomon, lies

in perpetuating what is at least partly a myth: that they are, in fact, in control. Within the parameters of their own currencies, they still manage the money supply (by increasing or reducing banking system reserves) and short-term interest rates (by raising or lowering the rates financial institutions must pay to borrow from their central banks). But central bankers have less power to affect global exchange rates. To influence the foreign exchange value of the dollar, for example, the Federal Reserve needs the cooperation of the president and Congress on fiscal policy—something the Fed only rarely secures.

Solomon recounts instance after instance in which many of the central bankers' threats—to each other, to governments, to market speculators—were at least partially empty. But for the last 15 years, their bluffs have seldom been called, and the confidence game has largely worked. The question, though, is how much longer their luck can continue.

The answer depends largely on how much longer Americans are willing to give unelected officials so much power over the nation's—and, indeed, the world's—economy. Though the subtitle of his book suggests otherwise, Solomon argues that central bankers are the heroes of the new stateless economy. The independence of central bankers needs to be strengthened, he says, rather than weakened. Elected officials are the "bad guys" of his story. Either they don't understand the complexities of the global economy, or they do and nevertheless pursue bad policy for political gain. In either case, Solomon believes, elected officials cannot be trusted with managing their nations' money supplies or their currencies.

But central bankers have weaknesses as well. For one, Solomon says, they lack a coherent theoretical model for dealing with economic reality. Indeed, according to many of the central bankers Solomon interviewed, they have no idea what that "reality" is. No one, for example, knows at any given time whether the dollar is fairly valued. Was it overvalued relative to the yen and mark in late 1994, and fairly valued now? Or was it fairly valued then, and undervalued now? There is nothing even ap-

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proaching a consensus on this question among so-called experts.

If central bankers can't fully comprehend all of what's going on in the global economy, neither can any of the rest of us. That's the important, if unsettling, message of this book.

**URBAN LEVIATHAN:** Mexico City in the Twentieth Century. *By Diane E. Davis.* Temple. 391 pp. \$24.95

In 1940, 1.7 million people lived in metropolitan Mexico City; today it is home to more than 16 million. What was once a charming city with a leisurely air has become, in the words of the writer Octavio Paz, "a monstrous inflated head, crushing the frail body that holds it up." What went wrong? Why has the development of Mexico City proceeded so disastrously? And what have been the consequences of its unchecked growth for the political and economic well-being of the nation? Davis, a sociologist at the New School for Social Research, provides disturbing answers.

While many observers blame Mexico's current crisis on corrupt and power-hungry politicians in the party that has ruled for more than 60 years, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Davis links it to the physical concentration of social, political, and economic resources in Mexico City, the country's capital and geographic center. According to Davis, the PRI lavished its attention on Mexico City, to the exclusion of other regions, in order to secure the loyalty of its sizable population (today, about 20 percent of all Mexicans). This strategy led to the state's long-standing protection of an uncompetitive class of Mexico City industrialists, who produced primarily for local consumption rather than for export. Their loyalty to the party was rewarded with hefty state subsidies.

Moreover, Davis maintains, the PRI's preoccupation with social and economic forces within Mexico City led it to forgo competitive democratic politics and to rely on a pact with urban labor (based mainly in Mexico City), urban industrialists, and the urban middle classes. The system worked so long as party

leaders plowed enough money back into Mexico City to keep its residents and party constituents loyal, or at least acquiescent. But when the PRI could no longer guarantee prosperity or congenial conditions in the city, Davis claims, grassroots opposition flared.

Davis's history helps to explain both the poverty and the political opposition now so evident in the other regions of Mexico, notably Chiapas, where outright rebellion erupted in 1994. If Mexico's current woes have many causes, Davis's account sheds valuable light on why the endangered PRI is now courting rural populations, advocating regional development, and scrambling to compensate for decades of provincial neglect.

**IN RETROSPECT:** The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. *By Robert S. McNamara with Brian VanDeMark.* Random House. 414 pp. \$27.50

Last spring, after almost three decades of reticence, Robert McNamara finally issued his version of what went on in the highest government circles during the Vietnam War. Predictably, the former secretary of defense drew hot criticism from many quarters for his admission that he remained at the Pentagon even after developing grave doubts about the prosecution of that badly conceived war. Read carefully, however, his memoir is less a mea culpa, as advertised, than an often artful sharing of the blame ("We were wrong") with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and his former colleagues in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Nevertheless, to the abundant historical literature he adds a useful, albeit truncated, chronicle of high-level obfuscation and strategic confusion during 1961-68, the years of growing U.S. commitment in Southeast Asia.

As the United States sought to "contain" Sino-Soviet expansionism, both Kennedy and Johnson feared being accused at home of "losing" South Vietnam to the tenacious men in Hanoi. Johnson wanted to "win," but at the lowest possible political cost lest he lose his Great Society programs. That meant no congressional declaration of war, no mobilization



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of the reserves, no risky U.S. offensive strategy in Indochina. The press and Congress initially backed LBJ's approach. So did McNamara.

But the cost kept mounting: first, step-by-step expansion of the bombing of North Vietnam, then the landing of marines to protect the bomber bases in the South, then more U.S. troops (eventually 549,000) to beat back the local Viet Cong and the infiltrating North Vietnamese regular forces. Soon, the conflict became an endless "body count" war. By December 1965, only nine months after the marines landed, McNamara writes, he was convinced that no U.S. military victory was feasible. Thereafter, the secretary of defense became the prime in-house advocate of intermittent bombing pauses and (illusory) peace diplomacy, and resisted the Joint Chiefs' requests for more bombing. Privately, he lamented the war with Robert Kennedy, LBJ's rival. Publicly, he hailed allied "progress" in South Vietnam. Finally, LBJ tapped him to head the World Bank and McNamara left the Pentagon in February 1968. "I don't know whether I resigned or was fired," he writes.

McNamara may have intended his memoir as a rebuttal to an unflattering 1993 biography by Deborah Shapley. But his narrative often reads as if it were cobbled together. For example, McNamara says General William Westmoreland, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, had "no alternative," given Washington's constraints, to waging a war of attrition; then, oddly, he quotes Westmoreland's critics at greater length. McNamara seldom analyzes either the Indochina battlefield or the major war-fighting issues raised by the U.S. military. He brushes by the Communists' surprise 1968 Tet offensive, the last crisis of his tenure. He ignores the sacrifices (more than 300,000 dead) of the South Vietnamese and implicitly blames lackluster Saigon leaders for America's difficulties. He disingenuously lays high-level ignorance about Vietnam to a lack of U.S. experts when in fact many experts,

civilian and military, were available but unheeded.

The supermanager who came to the Pentagon from the Ford Motor Company is most convincing when he illuminates the crucial leadership failure: neither Kennedy nor Johnson ever wanted to confront what "winning" or "getting out" might truly require, just as McNamara himself failed to confront the awful consequences of his private doubt and public silence.

### *Philosophy & Religion*

**GOD: A Biography.** By Jack Miles. Knopf. 446 pp. \$27.50

Clear the couch: it's God's turn for a 50-minute session. Jack Miles's "biography" of God is an ingenious conceit spun out to dizzying, and somewhat wearying, length. The author proposes "a consciously postcritical or postmodern reintegration of mythic, fictional, and historical elements in the Bible so as to allow the character of God to stand forth more clearly from the work of which he is the protagonist." Miles, a former Jesuit now on the editorial board of the *Los Angeles Times*, treats God as if he were a figure like Hamlet: it is his action and inaction, presence and absence, silence and speech that drive the Biblical narrative.

The God on Miles's couch is explicitly not the God of faith. This is a God of literary life, not ordinary life, let alone eternal life. He is profliigate with personalities—more faces than Eve, fewer than Sybil—and you can read his ups and downs in the chapter headings: "creator," "destroyer," "creator/destroyer" (God's conflicted), "liberator," "lawgiver," "liege," "executioner," "wife" (yes), "counselor," "fiend," "sleeper." Indeed, God is something of an existential basket case who needs to define himself entirely through interaction with his creatures.

He's powerful enough in the beginning to create the universe, but he's also at a child's stage of emotional devel-



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opment, with neither a past nor a social life, unlike those lucky Greek gods on Olympus. He labors toward emotional maturity, unaware of his own intentions until humankind helps him discover them. Miles locates the climax of his tale in the Book of Job, where God is finally so flummoxed by his dealings with Job, the human being who forces him to confront his inner demon ("a dragon goddess of destruction"), that he falls silent for the rest of the Bible. He doesn't grow old so much as simply subside.

Miles does his best to keep aloft the balloon of his conceit, but it begins to lose air before the official landing. You hear the hiss when he resorts to filler such as "God sometimes becomes a part of the landscape rather than one of the *dramatis personae* because his character has stabilized for a while." Read instead: "The Bible is in the way of my theory." In the end, there's no getting around all those disparate books that make up the Book, composed by many hands for different purposes over hundreds of years and arranged in a couple of final orders—of which only one, the Hebrew, serves Miles's reading.

"The unity of the Bible," Miles insists, "was not imposed by clever editing after the fact. It rests ultimately on the singularity of the Bible's protagonist, the One God, the *monos theos* of monotheism." Nevertheless, the absence of a final authorial hand, such as shaped the received *Iliad* or put Hamlet through his paces, may leave a theorizing critic as winded as his readers. The Lord awaits his Boswell still, but he's found a Joyce Brothers and a Cleanth Brooks in the meantime.

**JOHN DEWEY AND THE HIGH TIDE OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM.** By Alan Ryan. Norton. 416 pp. \$30

Philosophy once mattered in America, or at least one philosopher did. John Dewey was 92 years old when he died in 1952, and for more than 60 of those years he found an attentive and responsive audience not just among his fellow academics—he was associated with Columbia University from 1905 until his death, in the philosophy depart-

ment and as a member of the education faculty—but among the larger public. This was an extraordinary achievement for a philosopher, the more so for one such as Dewey, who was not an easy or engaging writer and whose beliefs, if fully understood, might not have been expected to win wide acceptance among Americans. Born in Burlington, Vermont, and raised a Congregationalist, he lost his faith in his early twenties. But he continued throughout his life to use the language of religion—of "faith" and "belief" in democracy, the common man, and education—to argue for a worldview that was squarely at odds with religion and decisively rejected the supernatural.

Dewey called his mature philosophy "experimentalism" (the graceless word says a lot about the foursquare philosopher). "What he meant," writes Ryan, a professor of politics at Princeton University, in this splendid new contribution to the ongoing reappraisal of Dewey's thought, "was that the truth, or more broadly the value, of any belief or statement about the world is to be measured in experience. He was insistent that a thoroughgoing naturalism was the only intellectually respectable philosophy, the only approach to life, education, ethics, and politics that offered a hope of progress."

Above all, Dewey wanted the world to be governed by "intelligent action." The words were meant to suggest an agenda of informed—by science especially—and energetic purpose. And he wanted to make the scientific attitude consistent with religious, artistic, and ethical attitudes, as part of a process of trying to understand and bring order to the world.

Not everyone was persuaded. Ryan notes that Dewey has always had two kinds of readers. One group, in which Ryan situates himself, "has seen him as trying to unite the religious conviction that the world is a meaningful unity with a secular 20th-century faith in the scientific analysis of both nature and humanity." The second group takes him for "an aggressive rationalist, someone who expects 'science' to drive out faith, and a contributor to the 20th century's

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obsession with rational social management."

Dewey was out of favor with his fellow philosophers when he died, for his approach was regarded as old-fashioned. Now he is being read again by philosophers and political theorists who worry about the state of contemporary liberal democracy and speak of a new communitarianism. Ryan's respectful but not reverent book is, in fact, the third major work on the philosopher to appear in recent years. The others, which Ryan acknowledges and praises even while observing that "their" Dewey is often not "his," are Robert Westbrook's *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991), "a distinguished intellectual biography," and Steven Rockefeller's *John Dewey* (1991), "truer to Dewey's philosophical and religious concerns."

Taking readers through 100 years of American intellectual life, Ryan locates Dewey's politics at the heart of the 20th century's attempt to articulate a "new liberalism" that allows for individual freedom even as it acknowledges the regulatory role of the state in working to improve the life of the national community. In this, Ryan's position is orthodox and at odds with Westbrook's, who portrays a more radical, socialist inclination in Dewey. Ryan's British background allows him to see Dewey as more than simply an American figure—to recognize how he was influenced by British philosophers and to place him in a larger world context, as a "modern" and a "North American."

Dewey's religious views leave Ryan, like many before him, a bit baffled. He complains that "Dewey wants the social value of religious belief without being willing to pay the epistemological price for it." Yet he acknowledges as well that Dewey was "a visionary of the here and now" who could "infuse" the present with "a kind of transcendent glow" that overcame the vagueness of his message and won widespread conviction. Ryan's book should help the man he calls "the century's most influential preacher of a creed for liberals, reformers, schoolteachers, and democrats" find an attentive new audience.

## Science & Technology

**FIRE IN THE MIND:** Science, Faith, and the Search for Order. By George Johnson. Knopf. 357 pp. \$27.50

"There are few places on earth that so many people have claimed as holy and where so many people see the world in different ways." *New York Times* science writer George Johnson is speaking of the desert and mountains surrounding Santa Fe, New Mexico. A rich mix of peoples make their home here, from descendants of the native Anasazi, who left behind their puzzling runes scratched into the rocks, to the Hermanos Penitentes, a Catholic brotherhood whose members regularly perform a rite of self-flagellation in order to recall the sufferings of Christ. Both groups were profoundly influenced by Coronado's Spanish legions, and later by *Yanqui* expansionists sweeping down from the north.

The land remains a magnet. At Trinity Site, 150 miles to the south, scientists detonated the world's first nuclear device; at the nearby Santa Fe Institute, Big Thinkers still ponder the Big Questions, including whether the universe is governed by some underlying order.

Johnson observes that the people from these different cultures, sciences, philosophies, and religions all share common ground. He cannot help wondering whether they might, in some larger sense, share Common Ground as well. Could there be strands hidden within their varied tenets that, when woven together, might yield a tapestry explaining the origins of the universe? Johnson is adept at adding the proper touches of local color and telling detail, but his task proves elusive. Time and again he follows strands to the end only to find them circling back to where he began. Thus, he describes experiments occurring at the "edge of chaos" and remarks that "science, the art of compressing data, turns its gaze back on itself and finds, surprise, that the very ability to gather and compress data is fundamental. . . . Driven to spin our gossamer webs, we can't help but put ourselves, the spiders, at the very center."

Indeed, says Johnson, humanity is "bequeathed by nature with this marvelous drive to find order," and this desire sometimes leads us

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to see patterns that may not be there. When the mysteries overwhelm our weak minds, our religions invoke a Great Designer, and the age-old struggle by scientists and spiritualists to explain the unexplainable continues.

Yet what else can we do but seek and question? Science, after all, has looked into the future and seen our eventual doom, if not by fire then by ice. Eternally hopeful nonetheless, we launch probes into space beyond the reaches of our most powerful telescopes and send as our emissary Johann Sebastian Bach on a compact disc. But for Johnson, "expecting galactic neighbors to recognize our signals as signals" may be the ultimate exercise in wishful thinking. In the end, he can do little more than offer up a kind of prayer to the pursuit of knowledge, even if all we are constructing are "Towers of Babel that reach higher and higher above the plains."

**SCIENCE AND THE FOUNDING FATHERS:** Science in the Political Thought of Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, and Madison. *By I. Bernard Cohen.* Norton. 368 pp. \$25

Not since Theodore Roosevelt, who gave a biology lecture at Oxford University, has there been a U.S. president with a serious claim to competence in experimental science. What a change from the intellectual temperament of the first presidents, for whom science was an integral part of their lives. They were, after all, men of the 18th century, and, in the Age of Reason, reason found no higher expression than in science. As Cohen, a professor emeritus of the history of science at Harvard University, shows, "the sciences served as a font of analogies and metaphors as well as a means of transferring to the realms of political discourse some reflections of the value system of the sciences."

Cohen fills his book with entertaining anecdotes about the Founding Fathers' scientific doings. James Madison made detailed measurements of the organs of the female weasel (the mole too), and Thomas Jefferson published the data in his *Notes on the State of*

*Virginia* (1787) to refute the view of a French naturalist who had declared that all plant and animal life would degenerate in the inferior natural conditions of the New World.

Cohen tellingly points the science toward the politics. In America, the rational, empirical, and apparently successful methods of the one inspired the practical optimism of the other. In 1786, Benjamin Franklin justified the new country's halting political progress by arguing that "we are, I think, in the right Road of Improvement, for we are making Experiments."

But Jefferson and Franklin held their duty to politics above scientific inquiry. When Franklin abandoned his own experiments to respond to public crises, he wrote, "Had Newton been Pilot but of a single common Ship, the finest of his discoveries would scarce have excused or atoned for his abandoning the Helm one hour in Time of Danger"—particularly, Franklin added, "if she had carried the Fate of the Commonwealth."

In his *Principia* (1687), Isaac Newton proclaimed the three laws of motion to be self-evident truths, though previously they had been evident to no one. Jefferson admired Newton and hung his portrait at Monticello. When he wrote in the Declaration of Independence that certain "Truths" were "self-evident," we can hear the echo, and perhaps surmise that he too was referring to hypotheses—human equality and unalienable rights—of which many were unpersuaded.

Cohen argues that Jefferson invoked Newton's authority only *by analogy*, and that neither he nor Franklin believed there were exact scientific laws for society as there were for the natural world. He refutes Woodrow Wilson's assertion that the Constitution should be interpreted as a reflection of Newtonian principles about forces in balance that produce some perfect adjustment. Rather, he says, "science in general and the Newtonian philosophy in particular served to provide acceptable metaphors for discussion or argument." But Americans are fortunate that the nation's Founders went to school on such metaphors.

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# POETRY

## GEORGE STARBUCK

*Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht*

Once upon a time, there was a poetry entrepreneur-cum-anthologist named Oscar Williams who was the maker and breaker of the budding careers of young poets by dint of his powers to include or exclude them from his *Little Treasury* series of American or Modern Poetry collections. To be included was to be noticed by the major book publishers and in due course to find one's way to a published volume of one's own. To be denied that recognition was bad enough, but to be "dropped," to have Oscar's Oscar contemptuously taken away, was like being consigned to a special poetic oblivion. This terrible fate befell the brilliantly gifted George Starbuck, whose bravura technique probably has no match among English-language poets of this century.

It was not for any incompetence that he was dismissed from Williams's pantheon. It was instead because of what Williams belatedly discovered in a Starbuck poem that he had included in a previous anthology. The poem was called "A Tapestry For Bayeux," and it was about intricate naval operations during World War II. Composed, dauntingly, in dactylic monometer (three syllables to a line, with the accent always on the first), the poem consisted of a dozen 13-line stanzas and had a needlework complexity even at first or second reading.

The wrath of the anthologist was provoked when someone eventually showed him that, along with its other complications, Starbuck's poem was an acrostic, with the initial letters of the first 78 of its 156 lines spelling out:

Oscar Williams fills a need but a Monkey Ward catalog is softer  
and gives you something to read.

For all the charm of such a tour de force, simple considerations of length prevent its presentation here. Nor is there room for a double-dactylic poem 124 lines long; nor for a book-length poem entitled "Talkin' B.A. Blues; the Life and a Couple of Deaths of Ed Teashack; or How I Discovered B.U., Met God, and Became an International Figure"; nor for the remarkable "The Sad Ballad of the Fifteen Consecutive Rhymes"; nor for a poem called "The Staunch Maid and the Extraterrestrial Trekkie," subtitled "*hommages à Julia Child*." This last begins, "Stand back stand back, Thou blob of jelly./ Do not attack/ A maid so true./ I didn't pack/ My Schiaparelli/ To hit the sack/ With a thang like you," and continues four stanzas later, "You shall not lack/ For mortadelle./ You shall not lack/ For pâte-à-choux./ You shall have aq-/ Uavit quenelle/ Mit sukiyak-/ I au fondue." There are 14 stanzas in all, observing the same rhyme scheme and form throughout.

Starbuck's work is not confined to high jinks and hilarity. He has writ-

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ten some of the most mordant comments on society's flaws and international blunders to be found in contemporary poetry. Of these, "Just a Little Old Song" is a powerful indictment of southern gentility, while "Of Late" seems to me, after many years of reading very bad poems of moral outrage on the topic, certainly the best poem to be written by an American about the Vietnam conflict.

Nevertheless, it is for the astonishing fertility of his wit; his easy traffic with vernacular parlance, regional speech, and idiomatic and demotic melting-pot American; his effortless technique in such forms as the ballade, the clerihew, and the double-dactyl; and his general cheerfulness and lively intelligence that Starbuck is to be read, and is likely to be remembered.

**H**is *Who's Who* entry tells us that Starbuck was born June 15, 1931, in Columbus, Ohio, studied at the California Institute of Technology (his early aptitudes were in science and mathematics), Berkeley, Chicago, and Harvard. He spent two years in the armed forces and a year at the American Academy in Rome, has been married three times, and is the father of five children.

One catches glimpses of the man himself in the memoirs, letters, and photographs of New England literary life in the late 1950s and afterward. For example, there is a celebrated photograph of Robert Frost at Bread Loaf in 1959, resting against a huge boulder in the midst of a mown field and holding forth to a reverent group of aspiring young poets, including Starbuck and Anne Sexton, crouched on the ground before him.

For a few years, Starbuck, while working as an editor at Houghton Mifflin, was also a student in Robert Lowell's poet's workshop at Boston University; his fellow students included Sexton and Sylvia Plath. The strenuous demands of those classes would be followed by the three younger poets' ritual postmortem and "unwinding" over martinis at the Ritz. Anne Sexton would usually drive them there, and she would daringly park in the hotel's loading zone with the breezy assurance that "it's all right because we're here to get loaded." In the course of time, Starbuck himself became a member of the English Department at BU, and his lively presence in the literary life of Boston is affectionately recorded by Peter Davison in *The Fading Smile* (1994).

The phrase *light verse* is often employed dismissively or contemptuously, though in our more private and honest moments we usually confess to an admiration for poets whose gifts are of this kind. Some of the very best light verse has been written by the likes of Howard Nemerov, X. J. Kennedy, Kenneth Koch, Howard Moss, Helen Bevington, Phyllis McGinley, Morris Bishop, Ogden Nash, and W. H. Auden, not to mention Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, and Noel Coward, or, for that matter, Byron, Thomas Hood, and Thomas Hardy. Once you begin seriously to compose a list of admirable writers of light verse, you find yourself rounding all sorts of unexpected turns, and coming upon, for example, A. E. Housman. George Starbuck should certainly be numbered among that remarkable company.

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## What Works

(An admired *ko-an* of the Zen Buddhists goes as follows: *There is a live goose in a bottle. How does one remove the goose without hurting it or damaging the bottle?* An admired answer is: *Behold, I have done it!* John Holmes's poem "Poetry Defined" settled the matter thus, in its last lines:

I put it in with my words.  
I took it out the same way.  
And what worked with these  
Can work with any words I say.)

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I had a lovely bottle, bottle-blue  
in color with a heavy bottle-shape.  
It filled my kitchen table (window too)  
as round, as fine, as dusty as a grape,  
but not as edible.

Reading my friend  
John Holmes's poem "Poetry Defined;  
or a Short Course in Goose-Bottling by Mind-  
Over-Matter," I smiled: I saw an end  
to certain problems. Yes, a goose would serve.

Laying out axe and pot, steeling my nerve,  
"Doggone, I've put this goose in this-here bottle,"  
I said. And it worked: there she was—a beaut! all  
white and afraid. Now:

"There she is!" I cried.  
*Thunk* went the fatted shoulders. Well, she tried.  
"There she is!" *Thunk*. "THERE she is!"  
What the heck,  
they came out, goose and bottle, neck and neck  
each time. Seizing the pot-lid, *Thwack!* My eyes  
buzzed as the blue-green bits like sizzling flies  
diamond-drilled them. Oh, if words could show them:  
fires, flares, rockets, the works! *There* was a poem!  
(spent like a wish, of course, after one use)  
but here, Kind Reader, here is our bruised goose.

## Stockholm

Rabindranath Tagore  
Made flowers bloom where there were none before.  
"It's my green thumb," he said, "and with my tan thumb  
I do stuff like the Indian National Anthem."

## Working Habits

Federico García Lorca  
used to uncork a  
bottle or two of wine  
whenever the *duende* dwindled for a line.

James Joyce  
would have preferred a choice  
of brandies in decanters made by Tiffany's,  
but rotgut was the shortcut to epiphanies.

The Later Henry James  
bet shots of rum against himself in games  
of how much can we pyramid upon a  
given *donné*.

Little Dylan Thomas  
didn't keep his promise  
to stay out of Milk Wood.  
He tried to drown the fact as best he could.

Anna Akhmatova  
Eyed the last shot of a  
Pre-war *cognac de champagne*.  
"So much for you, little brandy. *Do svidanya*."

T. S. Eliot  
used to belly it  
up to the nearest bar,  
then make for a correlative objective in his car.

Proust  
used  
to  
too.

## Said

Agatha Christie to  
E. Phillips Oppenheim,  
"Who is this Hemingway,  
Who is this Proust?"

Who is this Vladimir  
Whatchamacallum, this  
Neopostrealist  
Rabble?" she grouched.

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## Of Late

"Stephen Smith, University of Iowa sophomore, burned  
what he said was his draft card"  
and Norman Morrison, Quaker, of Baltimore Maryland,  
burned what he said was himself.  
You, Robert McNamara, burned what you said was a concen-  
tration  
of the Enemy Aggressor.  
No news medium troubled to put it in quotes.

And Norman Morrison, Quaker, of Baltimore Maryland,  
burned what he said was himself.  
He said it with simple materials such as would be found in  
your kitchen.  
In your office you were informed.  
Reporters got cracking frantically on the mental disturbance  
angle.  
So far nothing turns up.

Norman Morrison, Quaker, of Baltimore Maryland, burned,  
and while burning, screamed.  
No tip-off. No release.  
Nothing to quote, to manage to put in quotes.  
Pity the unaccustomed hesitance of the newspaper editorialists.  
Pity the press photographers, not called.

Norman Morrison, Quaker, of Baltimore Maryland, burned  
and was burned and said  
all that there is to say in that language.  
Twice what is said in yours.  
It is a strange sect, Mr. McNamara, under advice to try  
the whole of a thought in silence, and to oneself.

## Said

J. Alfred Prufrock to  
Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,  
"What ever happened to  
Senlin, ought-nine?"

"One with the passion for  
Orientalia?"  
"Rather." "Lost track of him."  
"Pity." "Design."

## Twigs

*for Lore Segal*

Ludwig van Beethoven  
Slept often and ate often,  
Combed seldom and cared less,  
Causing his friends considerable distress.

Baron von Richthofen  
Urped often and hicked often.  
His friends knew what to do.  
They would sneak up behind him and go Boo.

Michelangelo  
Could not be his Mummsy's daddy, so  
He had to become Italy's  
Praxiteles.



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## Translations from the English

(for Arthur Freeman)

### *Pigfoot (with Aces Under) Passes*

The heat's on the hooker.  
Drop's on the lam.  
Cops got Booker.  
Who give a damn?

The Kid's been had  
But not me yet.  
Dad's in his pad.  
No sweat.

### *Margaret Are You Drug*

Cool it Mag.  
Sure it's a drag  
With all that green flaked out.  
Next thing you know they'll be changing the color of  
bread.

But look, Chick,  
Why panic?  
Sevnyeighty years, we'll all be dead.

Roll with it, Kid.  
I did.  
Give it the old benefit of the doubt.

I mean leaves  
Schmeaves.  
You sure you aint just feeling sorry for yourself?

## Boston

Mr. Paul Verlaine?  
We've come to fix your cleriheew again.  
*No no no no, moi je m'appelle Verlaine.*  
Sure buddy, and I'm Richard Henry Dana.

## Out in the Cold

All day today the seagulls cried.  
All day they cried, if not because of you,  
then not at least because I asked them to.  
I've got enough poor bastards on my side;  
I'm not a Greek, I can be satisfied  
to share a chorus with the shrill sea mew  
without pretending it's an interview  
with souls plucked from the shipwrecked as  
they died.

I've got enough cold company: the guys  
you used to tell me how you used to see  
before I came along and you got wise.  
Where are they now, in what capacity—  
those dear, well-meant, unsatisfactory  
approximations of the eventual me?

## Late Late

Where tomahawks flash in the powwow  
and tommyguns deepen the hubbub  
and panzers patrol, is the horror  
I live without sleep for the love of,

whose A-bombs respond to the tom-tom,  
whose halberds react to the ack-ack,  
while I, as if slugged with a dum dum,  
sit back and sit back and sit back

until the last gunman is drawn on,  
last murderous rustler druv loco,  
last prisoncamp commandant spat at,  
and somehow, and poco a poco,

the bottles are gone from the sixpack,  
sensation is gone from the buttocks,  
Old Glory dissolves into static,  
the box is a box is a box.

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## The Well-Trained English Critic Surveys the American Scene

*"Poetic theory in America is at present in an extremely curious state, resembling that of England during the Barons' Wars rather than that of a healthy democracy or well-run autocracy. It is not even a decent civil war . . ."*

—Thom Gunn in *Yale Review*

Sometimes I feel like a fodderless cannon  
On one of those midwestern courthouse lawns  
Fiercely contested for by boys of ten and  
Topped by a brevet general in bronze.

Hallucination, naturally: no  
Era without its war, and this has its,  
Roundabout somewhere, some imbroglia,  
Even if only run by starts and fits.

Limber me up again, somebody.  
In with the charges! To the touch-hole! Wham!  
Elevate me, ignite me, let one ruddy  
Side or the other taste the thing I am!

This pale palaver, this mish-mash of factions:  
How can you find employment in a war  
Of private sorties and guerrilla actions?  
Maddening! Maddening! It chokes the bore!

Great God why was I tempered of pure  
sheffield  
Unless to belch and fulminate and reek?  
Never in England would I be so stifled.  
Name me the nearest caitiff: let me speak!

## Ballade of the Mislaid Worksheet

(for Bernard Weinberg)

Where are the notes I made last year  
On the flip side of a popcorn package  
Toward my perennial sacrilege  
Upon the Muse: another near-  
Translation of Villon? But where  
Is Harlow? Where is Norma Tallmadge?  
Norma Jean Baker? Norma Shearer?  
What tantalizing curve or cleavage—?  
Water under the bridge.

Back to my dog-eared Dictionnaire.  
Back to my Fowler's *English Usage*.  
But where is Mrs. Average  
American? Remember her—  
Smiling at her discoverer  
The census-man—a Personage  
At last? And Carole Lombard, where  
Is she? And Mrs. Calvin Coolidge?  
Water under the bridge.

Where are the powers I bargain for:  
The Archimedean leverage  
To raise at least my own dead language  
Up? O Edmund Spenser, where  
In the wildern woods of verbiage  
Hath wonèd wended, and whither yore?  
And oomph, and eld, and yesteryear?  
And Bernhardt's voice, and Bernhardt's carriage?  
Water under the bridge.

### *L'envoi*

A thousand scattered cans of footage  
Turning in unison yellower,  
A piece of French Literature,  
And this, a petty pilferage  
On both, are yours awhile, and are  
Water under the bridge.

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