
Spare Change

Gail Albert: *Matters of Chance*; G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York.

Marguerite Yourcenar: *A Coin in Nine Hands*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

Lina Wertmüller: *The Head of Alvisé*; William Morrow; New York.

Extended Outlooks; Edited by Jane Cooper, Gwen Head, Adelaide Morris, Marcia Southwick; Collier Books; New York.

by Betsy Clarke

Fiction today at once promises more than it delivers and yet delivers a mumbo jumbo that is more than the reader seeks. Each of these four volumes suffers from that syndrome to some degree. The publishers seem anxious to attribute all manner of wisdom and grand philosophy to these books, which at best merely purvey some simple truths about the human condition. At worst, though, they nearly self-destruct under the strain of attempting to propound questionable profundities.

Gail Albert's first novel, in which the narrator is dying of cancer, is a typical case in point. The idea is promising enough. An impecunious woman from a Brooklyn Jewish ghetto marries well and juggles a tenured university position, a husband, and two adorable children from a co-op overlooking Central Park. Cancer strikes. Add to this some of life's ironies—her father's gambling that brought the family both hope and despair, her brother's death that saved her father's life—and the author is on her way to a successful portrayal of some of the larger universal forces with which we all joust: accident, fate, doom. Unfortunately, Ms. Albert is not content to

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pursue themes of even this magnitude. Instead, she dogs subplots and pointless detail which diffuse the power of her narrative. Perhaps terrified that, in the end, her work will not say anything, she throws in marital problems, pet rodents, undisciplined plants, scientific experiments, in-laws, and all manner of trivia which have not been given needed textual support. In addition, she has snubbed a major element of terminal-illness fiction, suspense, by giving her heroine 10 years to live.

Albert is also prone to occasional rash statements that sound like something out of Bill Moyers. "I've attained the American Dream and it's come near to

element of risk.

A *Coin in Nine Hands*, Marguerite Yourcenar's novel of 1934 that is now revised and reissued, has many virtues, not the least of which is its excellent structure. Set in Rome during Mussolini's reign, the story moves its focus from one character to another with the passage of a 10-lira silver piece, sometimes randomly, sometimes in payment, sometimes to absolve an obligation. Intriguingly, though, this convention, rather than symbolizing the community of strangers, underlines a contrary observation, for the individuals connected by the coin are actually more closely related

"[Yourcenar's] novel takes an emphatic, anti-Fascist political stance."

—*The New Republic*

killing me," the protagonist confesses early in the novel. And yet the point of the next 200-odd pages is to discover the nature of the entity that forced these terrible consequences upon her. Accident? Psychological conflict over abandoning her religious youth? Act of God? Perhaps she breathed asbestos as a child.

Judging from the author's picture and biographical information on the novel's dustcover, it is possible that this book is more autobiographical than a healthy work of fiction dares to be. Accuracy is a must, of course, but fiction thrives on imagination. The author is simply too fascinated by the heroine, her habits and feelings, to probe the larger issue of where one particular set of circumstances fits into the universal scheme of things. Clearly, Ms. Albert worked hard on the novel, and occasionally, midst the inevitable renditions of hair-combing and dog-walking, a few sentences of cogent analysis burst forth. *Matters of Chance* is, in fact, more a disappointing novel than a bad one. Perhaps with her next effort, the author will take a few paces back from her creation and, while pondering the role of chance, add to her work an

in other ways.

As for Yourcenar's lyricism, "outstanding" describes it inadequately. The author is able to probe human emotion and thought with prose that is powerful, yet simple and brief. She observes her characters with a now-sardonic, now-sympathetic eye. Of an abandoned husband, she remarks, "he missed, not the wife he lost, but the mistress she had never been to him." And an elderly painter traveling in Rome near excavations is "unsympathetic to these labors which devastated a near past for the profit of a more distant one"; he "looked into space a few yards and a few centuries below ours." Unfortunately, injected into her marvelous recountings of human failings, hopes, and strengths is a political theme that she renders less effectively. Yourcenar claims in the Afterword that *A Coin in Nine Hands* is a novel that "confront[s] the hollow reality behind the bloated facade of Fascism," but this statement seems to be a mostly baseless boast. Yes, there is political oppression depicted, such as the deportation and death of the dissident Carlo Stevo. An assassination attempt against Mussolini is

also dramatized. Fascism, however, is never confronted, or even examined, in any broad, aggressive manner. "Mentioned" would more accurately describe its treatment. Perhaps this aspect of the novel only seems timid because of today's literary climate in which almost every writer claims to be making a grand political exposé. The numerous contemporary authors who dwell on Hitler and Mussolini are becoming irksome: where are courageous novelists who are willing to confront the totalitarianism that threatens us today?

The Head of Alvis, the first novel of controversial film director Lina Wertmüller (of *Seven Beauties* and *The Seduction of Mimi* fame), is another sort of novel altogether. This account of the rogue Sammy Silverman's crusade against perfection in the person of Alvis, a Nobel Prize winner and accomplished surgeon, diplomat, poet, and husband, is vulgar, crude, tasteless, over-punctuated—and hilarious. The dust jacket, which makes the book sound like *Moby Dick* ("hate confronting love, evil confronting good, death confronting life") does the author a disservice. For *The Head of Alvis* is 100 hundred percent fun and fantasy, and farfetched fantasy at that. The novel's chief attribute is that it sees its first purpose as entertainment. Sadly, a reader must turn to a film director to bring to fiction what is now found only in other media: action, dialogue, suspense. Wertmüller's characters are vivid, her adjectives sharp, her similes pointed. In a tale based loosely on the Salome story, Jewish boys Sammy and Alvis escape from Treblinka, zoom across Europe, and are adopted by nice families in the United States. Sammy has Alvis's perfect judgment, good will, and cleverness to thank for his survival, but the homely and incompetent youth covers his trail and proceeds to forget about Alvis, whose many attributes only highlight Sammy's deficiencies of character and talent. Forty years later, after Sammy has established himself as the successful, wealthy author of trashy mystery thrillers

(he writes one a month), he comes upon Alvis, who under a pseudonym has bested Sammy once more with his book *Man Could Be Beautiful*. The volume was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and sold a million copies. Deflated again by his old companion, Sammy sets out to find the flaws beneath his rival's perfect demeanor, and, for good measure, to steal his wife. Failing at those pursuits, he accepts Alvis's nature as genuine and proceeds to plot murder. "I know what kind of hate—pure hate—perfection inspires," he declares.

Throughout this wonderfully madcap adventure, Wertmüller makes us examine the makeup of human character, what we value in it, and why. And so, when she concludes her novel with the classic Hollywood ending—good triumphing over evil—a reader accepts the outcome with mixed emotions.

The editors of *Extended Outlooks* claim that this collection of mostly poetry is based on "RESPECT FOR DIFFERENCE," by which they mean that it encompasses "academic women, Black and Third World women, lesbian women, politically committed women . . ." In other words, all of the contributors are liberal Democrats. Surprisingly, it is not as bad as a reader has every reason to fear. Take away the inevitable sex and revolution poetry, and there is still quite a bit left. Included in this volume are works by Maxine Kumin, Margaret Atwood, Maxine Hong Kingston, Marge

Piercy, and Adrienne Rich, but, as is often the case with anthologies, both the very best and the very worst contributions are made by unknowns.

Certainly there is too much revisionism and ideology in the authors' treatments of Laura Riding, Ethel Rosenberg, and others. And a poet named Michelle Cliff cannot resist asserting that "They are killing black/children in Atlanta," which only proves that some poets either do not care about the facts or do not know them. *They?* In the biographical sketches supplied by each author, Grace Paley felt the need to describe herself as an "enemy of the government's war on poor countries, poor people, people of deep color, and all women" when a simple date of birth would have sufficed. Nevertheless, most of the contributors show every sign of being normal. Notable are the talents of Barbara Anderson, Becky Birtha, Constance Carrier, Jane Kenyon, Marlene Leamon, Lisel Mueller, and Joan Swift, but there are hundreds of entries, many of which are well done.

Still, one hopes that in the next such project, a real respect for difference will appear. After all, black, politically active academic and lesbian women are not the ones publishers are turning away these days. Their message blares through our culture, and no one is mistaking what it is. More interesting would be a volume in which the politics, race, and sexual orientation of the contributors were unknown and the artists' creations stood by themselves as works of art. □

In the Mail

Barbarians and Romans: The Birth Struggle of Europe, A.D. 400-700 by Justine Davis Randers-Pehrson; University of Oklahoma Press; Norman, OK. The Barbarians wanted to crush the Romans, right? Wrong, insists the author in a thorough and lively text—they were just clumsy.

Freedom, Society and the State: An Investigation into the Possibility of Society without Government by David Osterfeld; University Press of America; Washington, DC. Anarchy revisited.

Home from Exile: An Approach to Post-Existentialist Philosophizing by Denis Hickey; University Press of America; Washington, DC. A hefty text that concludes: "The man who is condemned to be free is also condemned to insatiability. Man the religious animal is forever condemned to be religious." The reader is condemned to over 450 pages.

Mismanaging War & Morals

William H. McNeill: *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000*; University of Chicago Press; Chicago.

James F. Childress: *Moral Responsibility in Conflicts: Essays on Non-violence, War, and Conscience*; Louisiana State University Press; Baton Rouge.

by Thomas Fleming

War, as much as peace, is among the arts and blessings of civilization. On this point Hobbes was mistaken. The state of nature may be a state of unrelenting violence, but it is not a state of war, which is a purposive action, an exercise in restraint. As Hobbes's friend, Sir William Davenant, expressed it: "To conquer tumult, nature's sodain force, war, art's deliberate strength, was first devis'd; cruel to those whose rage has no remorse, least civil pow'r should be by throngs surpris'd." The right to make war has always been counted among the attributes of sovereignty. Among the more civilized peoples, this power over life and death is extended to include such private affairs as are elsewhere regulated by duels, feuds, and assassinations. Even libertarians generally concede the state's exclusive power to make war, although they typically refuse it the coercive power to conscript citizens.

The exact nature and extent of the state's war-making powers have been debated for centuries. Draft registration, arms reduction, nuclear disarmament, and similar topical issues are footnotes to the text of the more general discussion. Unfortunately, debate on the issues usually proceeds no further than an exchange of insults and misinformation, because neither hawks nor doves ever think about such abstruse subjects as the nature of sovereignty. In a pair of

recent but quite different works, two aspects of the state's war-making powers are considered: its power over the wealth of its people and over the life and "conscience" of its citizens.

William H. McNeill, in *The Pursuit of Power*, does not attempt to elucidate either of these two principles of statecraft, but he does discuss, with considerable insight and erudition, the relation between political economy and military technology. His subtitle, "Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000," indicates the scope of the work. Any such synthesis necessarily relies on secondary sources and is inevitably filled with mistakes in scholarship and judgment. McNeill's is no exception. The work is nonetheless valuable, if only for its interpretation of the role of free markets in the advancement of military arts.

Rulers, so McNeill argues, inevitably desire stability and, therefore, control over arms production and distribution. Even before the development of such economic ideologies as mercantilism and socialism, governments made fitful efforts to control the means of production, usually with unlucky results. Of course the idea of a controlled or "command" economy cannot develop without the contrasting—and logically prior—idea of the free market. Neither idea seems to have occurred—despite McNeill's claims to the contrary—to the ancients. McNeill's own model—the Chinese from 1000 to 1400—seems to prove the point: it was the flourishing of free-market production and trade which led the authorities to impose constraints.

If McNeill's assessment is correct, then China underwent a great leap forward in the technology and production of strategic materials and weapons, largely as a result of free competition among iron smelters, arms makers, and merchants. Their efforts "set humankind off on a thousand year exploration of what could be accomplished by relying on prices and personal or small group . . .

perception of private advantage as a way of orchestrating behavior on a mass scale." Iron production rose sharply and before 1300 the Chinese excelled in the manufacture of crossbows and guns. In the early 15th century Ming Emperors could boast a fleet of 3,800 ships, the largest of which was five times the size of Vasco da Gama's flagship. Everything Chinese was on a greater scale than that of the later Portuguese, who duplicated the Chinese exploits in the Indian Ocean. And yet, by the time the Europeans arrived on the scene, the Chinese overseas trade was stagnant, iron production a fraction of former years, and the government unable to defend its interests against the foreigners. Why—or more precisely *how*—did it come about? McNeill believes it was the Chinese hostility to trade which caused the decline. Confucianist bureaucrats did their best to stifle "immoral profits." Successful businesses were faced with confiscatory taxation or with the risk of absorption into a state monopoly. Eventually, laws were passed to forbid international trade and the navy was abandoned.

The Chinese achievements were equaled and then surpassed by the city-states of Italy and later by the nation-states of Europe. Invariably, free markets led to technical advances which led to higher profits and greater power. It took some time for rulers to realize the advantages of laissez-faire: e.g., Phillip II of Spain, who, despite the constant supply of precious metals from the New World, found it increasingly necessary to go into debt to support his adventures in the Netherlands. The results of his financial tinkering were catastrophic. High taxes caused an exodus of merchants and producers from the Spanish Netherlands into Holland, and the King's failure to pay his bills on time—including four actual repudiations of debt—meant that in the future he had to borrow at much higher interest rates. By 1600 40 per-