

## COMMENDABLES

### Of Isms and Idolatry

***The Economic System of Free Enterprise: Its Judeo-Christian Values and Philosophical Concepts***; Edited by Paul C. Goelz; St. Mary's University Press; San Antonio, TX.

During their relatively short but incredibly bloody existence as a world historical force, Marxists have murdered millions of men, women, and children, largely without regret. Many Marxists, however, are having some second thoughts about the initial "killing" Marxism announced, that of God. Not that they have regained any faith in the transcendent God of Scripture. Hardly. But for propaganda purposes in the pervasively religious West, leftists have decided it would be tactfully useful to *appear* to worship God, while actually creating the utopian idol of a deified Militant Socialist. Fortunately, some intelligent Christians have little difficulty resisting this inept perfidy. *The Economic System of Free Enterprise*, which includes essays by



Gerald R. Ford, Michael Novak, and Irving Kristol, provides solid arguments for the view that Judeo-Christian values are far more compatible with economic

freedom than leftist dogma. Indeed, though the contributors sometimes defend "capitalism," the term "free enterprise" used in the collection's title is probably wiser. The ideological use of the word *capitalism*, after all, began with Marx, who was convinced that all aspects of life must be subsumed beneath one materialistic *ism* or another. To the degree that free enterprise becomes truly an *ism* in those Marxian terms, it is religiously indefensible. The religious strength of free-market theory is, then, precisely in its humility: it does not pretend to explain or govern all of human existence in economic terms, as do the various strands of Marxism. Mamon may win idolatrous followers in the free market, but it must do so without the sanctimonious robes of modern ideology. (BC) □

### Frankly Speaking

**Martyn Burke: *The Commissar's Report***; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

This book is supposed to be funny, risible, or downright hilarious. The subject is the U.S. during the Cold War as seen by a Soviet diplomatic minion who became enamored of "Enemy Number One" through his furtive readings of his party bigwig father's contraband copies of *Life*. Actually, the contents of the book are rather bleak because the author, no doubt by accident, makes some very telling observations about Americans: the intel-

lectuals' desire to be duped ("I began pitching revolution in such a way that it seemed the ideal thing to fill the void, giving their existence some purpose after all. It was like selling water to camels.") and the general public's tendency toward self-flagellation (e.g., speaking of the immediate post-McCarthy period, the narrator notes, "We murdered millions under Stalin; they throw a dozen or so in jail for a year and let a few scoundrels loose on the country. Yet *they* feel guilty. We don't."). The truth that manages to emerge in *The Commissar's Report* is, indeed, quite sad. □

### A Book of Warnings

**General Sir John Hackett: *The Profession of Arms***; Macmillan; New York.

Among the most troubling military advantages that the Soviet Union holds over the United States is one not assessed by counting tanks or measuring weapon technology. The Soviet

soldier, sailor, or airman generally enjoys much higher social prestige than does his American counterpart, who is too often



viewed as a near-barbarian unfit for polite company or intelligent conversation. Unfortunately, such a disparity in public prestige could translate into a decisive difference in battlefield morale.

General Sir John Hackett traces contemporary America's "lack of sympathy . . . towards its armed forces" to the "grave disservice" done the army by the media in Vietnam. This seems undeniable. But whatever the reasons for the current lack of respect for American military men, such respect must somehow be restored. For, as Hackett's history of professional soldiers makes clear, societies that do not support and appreciate their military often end up under the heel of societies that do. □

## IN FOCUS

### Of Careers, Criminals, and Creative Writers

**Theodore Dreiser: *An Amateur Laborer***; University of Pennsylvania Press; Philadelphia.

**Nelson Algren: *The Devil's Stocking***; Arbor House; New York.

By the time the average American child has reached adolescence, he has been asked hun-

dreds of times by solicitous relatives and politely curious strangers, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" Though this almost ritualized query is typically part of an adult's awkward efforts to make small talk with a child, its ubiquity has profound implications. First, such a question presupposes the

marvelous occupational freedom that America affords the young. However, the implicit assumption that career choice determines what a child will *be*, not merely *do*, suggests that in modern America one's job has a problematic and troubling ontological dimension.

Judeo-Christian thought has usually legitimated various social hierarchies as divinely authorized (or at least divinely permitted) as a means of maintaining order and continuity. But it has also insisted that the standing (or better, the *kneeling*) of the soul before God has no particular relationship to social class or employment. Sainthood was open to mayors, bakers, artists, and blacksmiths alike, and everyone understood that the scriptural admonition to "hold fast our profession" was a warning to all against apostasy and had nothing to do with distinctive career orientation. But in a modern world where no shared religious "profession" unites men, different secular professions, "held fast to" with quasi-religious zeal, sharply divide them. No longer looking at one another as essentially similar cobelievers in a shared creed, men who make their living in different ways have come to regard one another as more fundamentally different than alike.

In particular, those few who make careers as creative writers now often see themselves as a breed wholly apart from and usually much above the rest of the human race. Such an attitude informs Theodore Dreiser's *An Amateur Laborer*, an unfinished account—here published for the first time—of a period in the author's life when depression and illness rendered him unable to write. Seeking to earn a meager living and to recover his health, Dreiser temporarily accepted employment with the New York Central Railroad as a

laborer, first in a carpentry shop, then with a masonry crew. Largely because the typical railroad worker felt no professional aspirations in literature, Dreiser regarded him, as he in turn regarded Dreiser, as a "curiosity," virtually another species, a different type of creature. Dreiser perceived a great "gulf" between himself as a writer and the "barren lot" of other laborers "well fitted to bother with the infinitely common things with which they were laboring."



A rather different authorial attitude is evident in *The Devil's Stocking* by Nelson Algren, another talented writer commonly grouped with Dreiser under the misleading rubric "realist." (The notion, shared by Algren and Dreiser, that reality can be adequately represented without serious regard for the suprasensory and transcendent

is actually the wildest of fantasies.) In his uncritical prepossession with "professionals" of the most unliterary sort imaginable—boxers (Hemingway was an exception, not the rule) and prostitutes—Algren updates and refurbishes the badly tattered myth of the noble savage. But this refurbishing provides no more satisfactory sense of commonality between writer and non-writer than does Dreiser's aloofness. Most readers and writers can feel little real kinship with



those who turn their fists or genitals to profit. Indeed, until authors again learn to use their uncommon gifts to celebrate the dignity and moral stature attainable in every honest walk of life, they must either archly look down upon most of mankind, like Dreiser, or, like Algren, must view the race from the underside. (BC) □

## Word Processors

**William Bronk: *Vectors and Smoothable Curves***; North Point Press; Berkeley, CA.

**Wendell Berry: *Standing by Words***; North Point Press; Berkeley, CA.

**Elizabeth Bishop: *The Collected Prose***; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

**John McPhee: *La Place de la Concorde Suisse***; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

If quantity had a positive effect on quality, then it could be stated

without hesitation that this is the golden age of the essay. After all, only souls lost on desert isles can escape being pelted—by newspapers, newsletters, magazines, journals, TV magazines, and radio broadcasts—with the products of itchy pens; moreover, it's likely that if a modern Crusoe were to discover a corked Perrier bottle washed ashore some languid dawn, it would include something like "Notes Toward an Understanding of the Intersection Between Shipwrecks and Intellectual Currents or Seeing an Uncharted Island on 50 a Day." People tend to imag-

ine that the most vexing form of communication aborning today is the commercial, but that's only because (A) commercials tend to be obnoxious and therefore obvious and (B) commercials are made by a few for the many. Modern essays are often obnoxious but they tend not to be obvious: they are sort of like the atmosphere in, say, Gary, Indiana, which is unpleasantly apparent at first, but which one quickly adapts to since it *is* the environment. This leads to point B: essays are made by many for many—or at least one supposes that they are scribbled with a large audience in mind; the products themselves are regularly so pitiful that it's hard to imagine that they are written with *anyone* in mind. Whereas amateurs once addressed their particular—or peculiar—muse through the medium of poetry, they now go for prose; an essay, being more limited in physical size, is thought to be more readily produced than a novel. Novelists and other professional writers recognize that the proliferating number of magazines constitute a prime income possibility between books, so they, too, add their musings and observations to an already Everest-sized pile of prose.

This is not to state that all the heirs of Montaigne are illegitimate. William Bronk, for example, in addition to being a bona



fide poet, is a fine prose stylist (and his competent sentences have, one suspects, influenced other interesting but similarly little-known writers like Ken-