

THE OBSTACLE RACE: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work, by Germaine Greer. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 373 pp., \$25.00.

For love or money

MARINA WARNER

WHEN THE HERO IN Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* goes mad, someone suggests that he should visit the moon, where all things lost on earth end up, for there, amongst the spectacles and coins, Orlando will perhaps recover his wits. Ardent Italophile that she is, Germaine Greer has also paid a visit to this Lost and Found counter in the sky and there she was assailed, it seems, by dozens upon dozens of jostling and whispering wraiths, the lost women painters of the Western tradition.

She found a sister of the brothers van Eyck and the daughters of Paolo Uccello and of Tintoretto. She found crushed wives and neglected mistresses—Gabriele Münter, who was eclipsed by Kandinsky; Marlow Moss, who was overshadowed by Piet Mondrian. She saw the artists who vanished in childbirth, and those like the brilliant Bolognese Elisabetta Sirani, who was only twenty-seven when she died from exhaustion. She has rescued Constance Marie Charpentier from being engulfed by Jacques Louis David, and Judith Leyster, who is usually swallowed up by Frans Hals. She saw, and was deeply affected by, the ghost of Constance Mayer, who after a life's work picturing family idylls, absorbed from her two mentors Prud'hon and Greuze the image of woman as child-victim so completely that she took a razor to her throat.

But Germaine Greer did not find that much work, nor that much great work. *The Obstacle Race* is a stupendous piece of research into the names of female paint-

ers, but it is thin on their oeuvres. The author is the first person to voice the keen disappointment this brings, and to voice it truculently, even ferociously, for she is nothing if not honest. The only female painter in the West who achieved unequivocally great stature was Artemisia Gentileschi (d. 1653?); she was recognized to be good in her day and has not been forgotten since, nor has her work been "lost."

Given this, Greer, in high dudgeon, sets about classifying the different hindrances to women artists. Her basic aesthetic is founded in psychology. "Western art is in large measure neurotic," she concludes, and women are socially conditioned to conform to the dependent and infantile stereotype of the good woman. The full expression of their creativity, or sublimation, is denied them, while the dive down, into distortion and repression of the ego, is rewarded and thus becomes inevitable. She quotes Stella Bowen, who tellingly commented on her love for the writer Ford Madox Ford:

He thought I lacked the will to do it [paint]. That was true but he did not realise that if I had the will to do it at all costs, my life would have been oriented quite differently. I should not have been available to nurse him through the strain of his daily work: to walk and talk with him whenever he wanted, and to stand between him and circumstances. Pursuing an art is not just a matter of finding the time—it is a matter of having a free spirit to bring it on . . .

Greer claims that the cleaving of women to men leads to fatal weaknesses in their work—"Self-censorship, hypocritical modesty, insecurity, girlishness, self-deception . . ."—and argues that even women who were laureated in their own day were only side-show exhibits, overpraised because the phenomenon of the woman artist was considered so surprising.

But though her fearless, spleenful

honesty is admirable, she leans over too far trying to avoid reverse discrimination. There is no need, for instance, to qualify the prices commanded by Louis Moillon (d. 1695) as "flattering." This consummate painter of still lifes possesses exactly that brand of restraint, of lack of affective comment that is in high fashion today among contemporary painters too. But most of all, Greer is ungenerous and unnecessarily depressing because she has chosen to draw the boundaries of her book in a way that gives the work of male artists the advantage, and it is neither specious, nor ludicrously loyal to my sex for me to say so.

She has limited her long study to easel painting of dead artists in the Western world. By so doing, she has chosen to hunt for women in the very socioeconomic and cultural area where, as she herself so eloquently demonstrated in her marvelous *The Female Eunuch*, they are barred. Intellectual, sensual, imaginative, figurative, hot, cold, official, revolutionary, whatever—artists of the twentieth century are women of every range, because the circumstances and expectations of women have changed.

THE PICTURE OF THE PAST need not be so grim either. Mary Granville (d. 1788) was "the most civilised person in the most civilised era of English culture," Greer proclaims, and her "activity was prodigious." It ranged from "the making and sticking of pin cushions, Japan work, pastel portraits, copies of great masters' designs in shell work, lustres, candelabra, cornices and friezes in cut-paper or wood, chenille work . . . upholstery, quilt making, embroidery, cross-stitch carpets, miniature playing card painting, chimney boards . . ." Granville's collection of paper cut-outs of flowers, objects of exceptional beauty and delicacy as well as botanical sureness, were recently displayed at the British Museum. Add to this list the making of furniture, clothes, lace, toys, as well as the working of materials in innumerable ways— weaving, tatting, patching; add the illustration of children's books, receipt books, household books, and a dozen other examples of handiwork—and you have the area in which women were per-

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mitted to express artistic inspiration.

All of these are outside the chosen scope of *The Obstacle Race*. It does not even reproduce one of Mary Granville's paper mosaics, presumably because they belong more to the world of botany than to fine art. Pin cushions and Peter Rabbit are obviously not sublime works of the imagination, but they are, in their humble perfection, the works of the female imagination when it struggles with the obstacles Greer so feelingly recounts. There is no "female" art, just as there is no "female" mind, but there is the complex of allowable female pursuits. Greer is of course alive to this terrible restriction, and comments for instance that the reason there are many powerful female portrait painters, like Sofonisba Anguissola and Madame Vigée Le Brun, is "precisely because portrait painting did not imply any unbecoming breadth of experience."

The Obstacle Race would be a very different book, of course, if it were about rafts, and it would be open to charges of relevancy. But even within its limits, it eaves tantalizingly vague the two great issues that frustrated the ambitions of female easel painters. The first is money. Greer sees love as a greater goad, or oad, but buried in the text are constant instances where the need for money seems to have made women work. The real enemy of female artistry is the sexual division of labor—not because children soften the brain or weaken the will

or any such nonsense, but because each child represents so many man-hours per day, and in the status quo obtaining in Europe until just the other day, no man could understand why he should work to enable the women in his life to work for themselves rather than for him. *The Obstacle Race* is filled with examples of women who take up the brush when a man disappears. Jeanne Marie Buseau exhibited only after her husband Boucher had died; the same for Sonia Delaunay. Greer sees this as proof of talents smothered to protect the male ego. A part may be; the rest is the economics of widowhood. Contrary to the author's lively sympathies, Angelica Kauffman and Vigée Le Brun were probably helped to paint by their philandering husbands' expensive tastes and shameless exploitation of their wives' fortunes.

IT ISN'T JUST THAT WOMEN, especially creative women, love a brute: A fancy boy can also be an incentive to earn. Again, Greer often demonstrates a link between the cost of materials and female exclusion from the fine arts. It was not only technical training that was closed to women (unless their fathers or brothers were artists), but the means with which to buy canvas and paint. So we find Mary Peale to be one of the few female artists established in Stuart England, where women were preeminent and even dangerously influential, and we also find her the recip-

ient, along with Anthony Van Dyck, of £500 worth of ultramarine from King Charles I. It is no accident, in these exceptional circumstances, that she should continue with easel painting and not pin cushions. The advent of watercolors on the market, cheap, portable, and practical, opened a universe for women artists. But although Greer uses a quotation—a negative quotation—from Lady Waterford, one of the most successful of the new breed of enthusiastic amateur, Greer does not discuss her work.

The distance of women from the control of money (even if they were heiresses) is crucial to the understanding of why women were able to write, but not to paint, and certainly not to paint "big" pictures. £400 a year and a room of one's own were essential, in Virginia Woolf's view, for the practice of literature; double that, and you still have not the basic needs of an artist. But there is another reason, and it too is connected with the question of where power lies. Art is a language, and until recently it was an openly didactic language, which was in the control of the authorities and served their interests. Greer's characterization of the artist as a neurotic, even psychotic rebel, reflects a recent and transitional phenomenon.

From the monks and nuns in the scriptoria of the middle ages, who ravish us now with their sensuous images of the Christian universe, to the official portraits of Titian, the artist deciphered in beautiful images the dominating social ethic. I cannot develop this theme in this space, but women did not in general have access to this language of instruction and of power. It was not their appointed role to interpret the cosmos; rather, they formed part of the material being interpreted. Their duties were the subject matter of art, from the affirmed transcendence of the Virgin Mary to the ambivalent celebration of the erotic nude.

Iconography had its own precise borders, and it was male country. Greer intimates this here and there: Artemisia Gentileschi is as powerful as she is because she, uniquely, had the Promethean courage to steal this language for herself and even outdo men in the savage depiction of female activity in the world, as in her gory "Judith and Holofernes." But the Pre-Raphaelites in England, one of the few art movements to permit their iconic language to women, are scorchingly dismissed by Greer for their "deliberately limited scope." This is a debatable judgment on their



formal style, and certainly a glib one as to their iconography.

The Obstacle Race's strength, its patient exhumation of living ghosts, is chiefly undone by its construction. It is a series of loosely overlapping essays, sometimes general, as in the discussion of scale, sometimes tightly focused, as in the impassioned pages about Artemisia. The names of the lost painters are in among these passages, but unless you know them beforehand, which by definition you can't, you cannot look them up in the index. It would have served Greer's far-ranging research more effectively if a sequence of polemical essays had been followed by a dictionary of painters, arranged chronologically and subdivided by sphere of competence and/or place of work. As it is, her valuable reference contents are almost unusable. □

THE MAN WHO KEPT THE SECRETS,
by Thomas Powers. Knopf, 393 pp.,
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No footprints

ROBERT L. BOROSAGE

HELMS, RICHARD MCGARRAH, born, 1913; B.A., Williams College; secret intelligence operative in World War II; thirty years in the CIA, director, 1966-73; indicted for perjury, 1977; copped a plea to a lesser charge, 1977; testified before the Senate as a respected expert on secrecy, autumn, 1979.

The career of Richard Helms is used in this finely crafted study to retell the history of the CIA itself. The book has an autumnal air: The spring salad days of the CIA, the heated months of revelation and condemnation have passed to a new season, a time of transition. No significant new information germinates in these pages. No passion inspires them other than a desire to compile and to explain. Powers writes well and expertly summarizes the material on the CIA that has already been published.

Of the book's protagonist Richard Helms, surprisingly little is offered. Powers repeatedly describes Helms as the man about whom no anecdotes are

told. So the author is left with an enigma: Helms is the consummate bureaucrat who has difficulty making bureaucratic decisions; Helms is the man who doesn't leave footprints but whose name is linked with virtually every major CIA abuse revealed by his successors. He is the skeptic about covert action operations who made his career in the Directorate of Plans; he is a man of reputed honor and integrity, yet one who trimmed intelligence assessments to fit presidential moods, who violated his own agency's charter in league with the Nixon-Kissinger assault on domestic dissent, who lied under oath repeatedly to the same senators who thought him honorable. He is the competent, tight-lipped administrator, the "good soldier," the bureaucrat who learned to go along in order to get along, yet he ended up in the dock taking the fall for decades of CIA abuse. Powers spent hours with the man, canvassed his friends and associates, and uncovered precious few keys to his character and personality.

So Powers provides, instead of the story of Richard Helms, a history of the CIA in the form of criminal sociology. He seeks to explain the environment that produced the "dismal list of crime, blunder, embarrassment and failure" that is the CIA's public record.

Powers concludes that covert foreign-intelligence bureaucracies presume an environment of confrontation, of permanent conflict. Accordingly, they flourish in imperial or tyrannical regimes, which must constantly seek to impose order upon unwilling and too often unruly subjects. The CIA is no exception: It prospered with the postwar American imperium. It was founded on permanent conflict with opponents to that order. Its assignment was to gather intelligence, make intelligence assessments, and serve as the President's secret weapon for policing what Dean liked to call "back alleys" of the world.

POWERS DISCUSSES THE first two missions in passing. He accepts a bit too much of his subject's faith in the value of spies; he is rather too respectful of the CIA's much ballyhooed, seldom evidenced record for good intelligence assessment; he is far too caught up in the labyrinthian absurdities of the spy vs. spy counterintelligence fantasies. But he provides a good survey of the public record, places many of the criticisms in context, and ultimately admits the madness of James Angleton, counterintelligence chief extraordinaire, who remained convinced

that the Sino-Soviet dispute was simply a tactical ploy designed to get the West to lower its defenses.

But these are byways in Powers' study. His primary territory is the now familiar terrain of the CIA's covert actions abroad, for covert action was where the money went, where the adventurers gathered, where the action was—and where the CIA was happiest in executing the orders of its presidential masters. Many of the names are now familiar: Frank Wisner, Desmond Fitzgerald, Richard Bissell, Mike Burke, Tracy Barnes, Kim Roosevelt. Powers catches the essential spirit of the covert operators well:

All were gregarious, intrigued by possibilities, liked to do things, had three bright ideas a day, shared the optimism of stock market plungers, and were convinced that every problem had its handle and that the CIA could find a way to reach it. . . . The adventurers thought of the world as infinitely pliable; they thought they could do anything with funds and a broad okay from the top. . . . [the were] ebullient men confident they could work America's will with bright ideas, suits, cases of money, or a few more turns of the screw.

Their activities were basic violation of avowed U.S. principles: They concentrated largely on rigging elections, subverting free associations, bribing elite and staging paramilitary operations. Their sense of legitimacy came from presidential orders and from the ideological catechism of the Cold War: The Free World (always capitalized) was in struggle with the ultimately evil Communist Tyranny. Any weapon in the struggle ultimately served the cause of freedom. The elements of the faith were always a good remove from the real world. (The Soviet Union, however reprehensible internally, was and is only a semideveloped country, initially devastated by World War II and now surrounded by hostile or unreliable Communist states.) But fervent belief need not be grounded in reality so long as promises purposefulness and salvation.

So the CIA set off on its dreary history of foolishness and crime. Its task was to carry out those activities U.S. leaders did not want to reveal to the American people, which were deemed necessary for maintenance of an imperial regime or otherwise satisfied the whim of American Presidents. The CIA's history is the secret history of the Cold War, much of it still obscured to this day, a history vastly different from what Powers calls the "child's history of the world" that we were led to believe.

Of course, the secrecy was far from

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