
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-



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-