



tomb. Otto had Apocalypse on his mind, and, considering himself Emperor of the Last Days, he felt the need to pay tribute to the man who had established the Kingdom of Christ in Europe. To Otto, the end of the world, as predicted in the Bible, seemed to be at hand. Nations were at war, and royal courts were rife with corruption. The Holy See was a chaotic and debauched institution, and the population of once-glorious Rome had shriveled to some 50,000 souls. Plague was rampant, and a 30-year-old famine had driven many peasants to cannibalism. The great city of Constantinople had recently been ruled by an ugly, foul-smelling dwarf. Even Charlemagne's royal descendants—Charles the Bald, Charles the Fat, and Charles the Simple—had seemed to presage nothing but inevitable decline. Otto wanted to spruce things up, and so, after opening Charlemagne's tomb, he dressed the great king's 200-year-old corpse in white and ordered that it be given a manicure and a new gold nose. Charlemagne had to look just right for the Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

The Horsemen never came, of course, but Reston, a journalist and author, contends that there was indeed an apocalypse a thousand years ago, and that it came in the form of "a process rather than a cataclysm." Christian Europe early in the 10th century was threatened from all sides: Islamic Spain was ascendant, pagan Vikings were terrorizing the continent,

and ruthless Magyar horsemen were arriving from the east. Yet by the end of the century, these threats had subsided and the borderlands of Europe had been securely Christianized, almost as if by magic. "No more dramatic change can be imagined," Reston argues. "Christianity in 999 A.D. represented civilization and learning and nationhood against the darkness of heathenism, illiteracy, and chaos."

In writing what he calls "a saga of the millennium a thousand years ago," the author paints surprisingly vivid pictures of such figures as Norway's Olaf Trygvesson, Denmark's Svein Forkbeard, England's Ethelred the Unready, Poland's Boleslav the Brave, Spain's Al-Mansor, France's Gerbert of Aurillac, Constantinople's Princess Theophano, and Germany's Otto III. Reston's goal is to tell the story of the "concatenation of [millennial Europe's] dramatic personalities and battles and social forces," and he does so admirably, even if his conclusions seem somewhat suspect at times. (Did the downfall of the Moors in Spain, for example, *really* represent the triumph of "learning" over "illiteracy?" Did the sudden Christianization of the edges of Europe *really* culminate "in peace and tranquility?")

Reston avoids drawing parallels between the end of the last millennium and the end of our own, but it's impossible not to find at least one lesson here. "In considering the millennium," he observes, "people are looking for apocalypse in the wrong place." Those expecting a cataclysm in 2000, in other words, are likely to be disappointed—but the changes we're living through may prove every bit as apocalyptic as those of a thousand years ago.

—Toby Lester

**RECONSTRUCTING AMERICA:  
*The Symbol of America in  
Modern Thought.***

By James W. Ceaser. Yale Univ. Press.  
292 pp. \$30

"Men admired as profound philosophers," Alexander Hamilton observed in *The Federalist*, "have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America—that even dogs cease to bark after having breathed awhile in our atmosphere." Ceaser, a political scientist at the

University of Virginia, traces anti-American thought from those 18th-century philosophers, including the Count de Buffon and Cornelius de Pauw, to the 19th-century French racialist Arthur de Gobineau, the German intellectual Oswald Spengler, and, finally, the post-modern theorists Martin Heidegger, Alexander Kojève, and Jean Baudrillard.

These America haters, Ceaser argues, rely on nonpolitical theories of causation, often fatalistic and biological (though not always racialist) ones, leaving little room for the machinery of democracy. By contrast, traditional political science—exemplified for the author by *The Federalist* and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*—eschews determinism and stresses moral and ethical choices based on the empirical study of politics. The author leaves no doubt where his sympathies lie: "It is time to take [America] back from the literary critics, philosophers, and self-styled postmodern thinkers who have

made the very name 'America' a symbol for that which is grotesque, obscene, monstrous, stultifying, stunted, leveling, deadening, deracinating, deforming, rootless, uncultured, and—always in quotation marks—'free.'"

Gracefully written and provocative as it is, Ceaser's volume falls short of reclaiming America from its critics. The author dismisses critiques of the nation as self-evidently preposterous, undeserving of serious analysis. Instead of refuting anti-American ideas, he disparages their intellectual parentage and moves on. Ceaser also ignores the critical thought of writers such as Richard Weaver and Albert Jay Nock, who do not fit easily into his thesis. Still, it is difficult to dispute his contention that the United States is better served by thinkers who aim to understand its political machinery than by those who deride the nation as a vast, homogenizing Disneyland.

—Solomon L. Wisenberg

## Religion & Philosophy

### CONFESSIONS OF A PHILOSOPHER:

#### *A Journey through Western Philosophy.*

By Bryan Magee. Random House.  
496 pp. \$25.95

"Life . . . hurled fundamental problems of philosophy in my face," the author declares, somewhat melodramatically, in this appealing intellectual autobiography. A former philosophy professor who calls himself "a commentator rather than a player," Magee wants to persuade the educated lay public that philosophical problems deserve our contemplation and that the writings of philosophers, even the "heavy going" ones, merit our attention. This is not Magee's first attempt to stimulate interest in philosophy; he also created two widely admired programs for the British Broadcasting Corporation, *Men of Ideas* and *The Great Philosophers*.

What most interests Magee is the nature of nonscientific knowledge, especially knowledge derived from art. What, he asks, do we learn from art, given that "the creation of, and response to, authen-

tic art are not activities of the conceptualizing intellect?" Drawing on Schopenhauer, Magee argues that art is a kind of "direct experience"—an experience that cannot be put into words—that brings meaning to our lives. Blending the sensibility of the aficionado with that of the philosopher, Magee deems music the most meaningful of the arts: it creates "an alternative world, and one that reveals to us the profoundest metaphysical truths that human beings are capable of articulating or apprehending, though of course we are not capable of apprehending them conceptually."

Magee's ideas about "direct experience" are not completely clear. What is a metaphysical truth that cannot be apprehended conceptually? Moreover, the book's autobiographical elements can be distracting—or, occasionally, banal, as when Magee dwells on the "existential challenge" of his midlife crisis. But at its best, *Confessions of a Philosopher* is a compelling guide to some perennial problems of philosophy.

—Stephen Miller