

vented a lightning rod: eroticism.”

In distinguishing eroticism and love, Paz begins with the story of Eros and Psyche from Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (or *Metamorphoses*). Eros, a cruel divinity, falls in love with a mortal, Psyche, who returns his love. The figure of Psyche is a Platonic echo, but as Paz observes, “an unexpected transformation of Platonism.” No mere object of contemplation on some ladder that leads to the idea of love or beauty, love here becomes a love story: Eros falls in love not only with a sensual mortal, but with her soul. This story, Paz believes, anticipates the distinction between love and eroticism 1,000 years later in Provence, and it is this vision that leads to our modern view of love. He makes numerous distinctions, for example, between love as Plato understood it (“a solitary adventure”), love as the East understands it within the context of its religions, and love as it is experienced among the moderns.

For the West, at least since the advent of courtly love in Provence, the image of love can be reduced to three elements: *exclusivity*, or love for only one person; *attraction*, or one's fate freely accepted; the *person*, who is a soul and a body. These elements are interrelated, interdependent, and not infrequently war among themselves. In an erotic relationship, the partner may appropriately be called an object, and the object or partner is simply interchangeable with another. Love is for one person, and this personhood is complex. In order for the attraction to be freely accepted, the loved one must be free to reciprocate. A thousand years after *The Golden Ass* the status of women had changed, and two of the circumstances that influenced this change were Christianity (which endowed women with a dignity unknown in paganism) and the Germanic heritage (wherein women were freer than in the Roman one).

But personhood was profoundly dependent upon the proposition that human beings have souls. When one loved a body one loved a soul, but a soul incarnated within a body. This notion of personhood derives from Greek philosophy, and from Christianity. Paz claims that our era's rejection of the soul “has been the principal reason for the political disasters of the 20th century and of the general debasement of our civilization.”

As recent science has virtually been forced to become philosophical, it has

taken up the old problem of the relation of the mind to the body. Paz is optimistic about the possibilities—especially for the new science of the mind—since many of the current models are not merely mechanistic ones. But he believes that we are urgently in need of a Kant to perform a critique of scientific reason, which would allow “the dialogue between science, philosophy, and poetry [to] be the prelude to the reconstitution of the unity of culture. The prelude, as well, of the resurrection of the human person, who has been the cornerstone and wellspring of our civilization.”

William Mills is a novelist and poet whose latest work of fiction is Properties of Blood.

Hard Lives, Hard Times

by Gregory McNamee

**The Last Ranch: A Colorado
Community and the Coming Desert**

by Sam Bingham
New York: Pantheon;
384 pp., \$27.50



The life of country people, the Kentucky poet-farmer Wendell Berry has observed, is marked by a surprising complexity. To be successful it requires deep knowledge of the land, of the seasons in their time, of plants and animals—to say nothing of markets, freight costs, and federal regulations. Plant early, and risk late frost; plant late, and risk summer flooding. Calve early, and risk the high mortality rate winter brings; calve late, and risk the infectious diseases the warm air carries. Make the wrong guesses and face foreclosure, battle the elements and hope for the best: each day brings a new challenge to the farmer, the rancher, the orchardkeeper.

For the country people who populate Sam Bingham's *The Last Ranch*, the complexities are constant, even in the quiet times. “The learning,” he writes, “all seems so simple in the middle of winter. You get good stock. Train a sheepdog. Lay off the coyotes. Lay the hay in this new way. Your land improves. Your margin improves. A few new tech-

niques and you gain a stride or two. . . . You learn to beat the system. But of course, this is only February, agricultural dreamtime, when everything seems possible, predictable, and even mechanical. Inevitably the season will turn.” Turn it will, to summers of beleaguered herds, unpredictable rains, the occasional twister, and always the vagaries of the beef market; one complicated matter unfolding into another.

Bingham's ranchers dwell in the high desert off the Gun Sight Road in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, gypsum and snow country. Theirs is not good land. The soil in the northern section of the valley is coarse, sandy, hostile to cultivation; heavily ranched since the 1840's, it is now all but denuded of native vegetation. “The rich mix of grass species that had flourished in Saguache County at the turn of the century had changed,” Bingham writes. “Artesian wells that once shot 20 feet in the air now required pumping. Chico brush grew where old-timers once grew hay, and here and there bare alkali ground outcropped as hard as cement.” The southern section of the valley is no better, but there industrialized agriculture has made a stand against the ever-encroaching desert; the area is the site of one of the world's heaviest concentrations of center-pivot sprinklers, irrigating thousands of quarter-mile circles of potatoes, carrots, lettuce, alfalfa, and malting barley, pumping fossilized water millions of years old to bring profit for yet another season.

But overgrazing and exotic agriculture have ruined the land; land that is marginal to begin with, and that will not easily recover from the hard use humans have put it to. In Bingham's account the condition of the San Luis Valley is scarcely different from that of drought-stricken Africa. The African drylands, now a theater of famine, make news where ours do not because, he suggests, American media coverage of purely agricultural issues is so poor and because other sources of income—the occasional oil royalties, light industry, various kinds of federal welfare, and always the beckoning cities just over the horizon—keep the people of San Luis from starving.

“Ecologically speaking,” Bingham writes, “the semi-arid region along the Rio Grande in the United States has come strongly to resemble the Sahel, in spite of a small rural population, relatively little livestock, private ownership, and

no end of education, technology, and capital." No place in Chad or Niger, he continues, is much more barren than the Rio Puerco Valley west of Albuquerque, which a century ago was covered in grass so high that a mounted rider could not see over it. "In significant ways," he continues, "rural Colorado has more in common with rural Burkina Faso than with Denver, which in turn shares more with Ouagadougou than with the principal town of Saguache County."

The problem is not the San Luis Valley's alone; more than 10 percent of the earth's surface is now desert or dryland vulnerable to desertification. But it must seem to those who live in southern Colorado, where the quality of productive land is rapidly deteriorating, that the possibilities of making a life there are dwindling with every advance of the desert. To combat its spread, San Luis Valley residents are eagerly seeking remedies, even grasping at straws. An especially attractive one is South African ecologist Allan Savory's theory that cattle grazing, no matter in what number, improves the health of rangeland, an argument, Bingham notes, that falls into the "curious category of counterintuitive propositions that contradict all evidence and common sense as the situation appears but might change the situation if you dared apply them." Savory's theory—and Bingham does not do enough to discuss its obvious flaws—makes sense if applied to truly nomadic herds that graze an area, no matter how heavily, and then move on; not to land grazed again and again without being allowed to regenerate fully.

Seek as they may, the people of the San Luis Valley have found no immediate answers to their problems. They are fully aware that their land is fast approaching ruin; as Bingham says, "They knew the range had limits and at the end of the day accepted responsibility for them." By showing their quest for solutions, Bingham does much to exonerate rural people, who are often depicted in the environmental literature as simpletons out for a quick buck no matter what the cost to the land. (To be sure, they seek the work where it comes, riding the waves of the global market as best they can; the last big paycheck for some residents of the San Luis Valley came from Iraq, whose government bought up local wool with which to make uniforms so that its soldiers could go off to the cold mountains to fight Kurdish rebels.)

This is a rare and beautifully written book about hard lives in agriculturally hard times. Bingham shuns the temptation to oversimplify and to offer the too-ready prescriptions of urban people for rural troubles. He instead explains complexities that city dwellers can only begin to guess at, limning the staggering problems that threaten to overwhelm those who produce food in the Sahelian margins of the American Southwest, "where the desert bares its teeth at our fabulous global economy."

Gregory McNamee's most recent book is The Sierra Club Desert Reader.

Brief Mentions

Keeping Together in Time. By William H. McNeill (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 198 pp., \$22.00

Although it may seem useless in an age of computerized war, rhythmic marching was once as revolutionary as the Stealth bomber is in our own day. One of the oldest military practices in recorded history, it was long a crucial aspect of war in both the West and the East. Among the illustrations William H. McNeill offers is a picture of the Stele of the Vultures, a stone carving from the third millennium B.C. which depicts Eannatum of Lagash leading rows of troops in a siege of the city of Umma. Although such tactics grew popular in ancient Mesopotamia and Sumer, and Greek and Roman armies later adopted them, they eventually fell into disuse thanks to the advent of archery, which made it unwise for soldiers to form tight groups. A different kind of close-order drill caught on in the 16th century, thanks to the Dutch general Maurice of Orange. Like Carl J. Richard in *The Founders and the Classics*, McNeill shows us how far the influence of classical authors transcended their time and place. Inspired by the writings of Aelianus and Vegetius, Maurice trained his riflemen to load, aim, and fire their guns in unison, and his pikemen to swing their halberds according to a rhythm. Such tactics were unfamiliar, but lengthy training "made the necessary motions almost automatic and less likely to be disrupted by stress of battle." Under Maurice's command, formations of Dutch arquebusiers and pikemen—fired by the passions arising from

prolonged rhythmic motion—won victories over seasoned Spanish forces who had defeated the French in Italy. The Spanish themselves adopted close-order drill after suffering a defeat at Rocroi in 1643 at the hands of French officers who had studied Maurice's tactics. When Maurice's orders were recorded by the talented engraver Jacob de Cheyn, who produced a book containing, on each page, a simple command and a corresponding picture, Maurice's methods became famous all over Europe, and soon Russian, Italian, and German officers were training their men in close-order drill. Using tactics akin to Maurice's, Chinese armies succeeded in subduing the nomads of the East Asian steppe, thereby "ma[king] China what it is today, the world's only surviving imperial state." Why were these simple tactics so effective wherever they were applied? Among the psychological uses of "keeping together in time," McNeill says, was to whip up furies that made it easier to do difficult and risky things, like engaging enemy troops. (In a chapter on religious sects, McNeill points to the use of mass dances to achieve a state of euphoria.) McNeill does not claim to offer a thorough history of mass rhythmic movement, but only a treatise aimed at inspiring others to study this phenomenon.

—Michael Washburn

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