

Arabian Wine by Gregory Feeley
Upper Montclair, NJ: Temporary Culture, 2005; \$50 hardcover;
197 pp.
Reviewed by Tom La Farge

A book called *Arabian Wine* ought to be a paradox, since Arabs are forbidden to drink wine, and this one is. Like a good paradox it resolves on two levels. "Arabian wine" is coffee (so not literal "wine"); but more interestingly the book is about the sort of stepping out of yourself, whether into vision or intoxication, that the Arabs themselves, and even more the Persians, celebrated in their poetry. The first effect of paradox is surprise: this makes no sense. Much as we like things to make sense, we also like that shock. The monstrous object presented us by paradox jolts us awake, like coffee. That is the effect of Gregory Feeley's book: this is different! As different as the first sip of coffee in a world where workmen ordinarily drink wine on their break.

Difference is a value in writing only when accompanied by discipline. We want to be taken into vision, not intoxication, to have our senses sharpened and not dulled, and this book succeeds in doing that. *Arabian Wine* is tightly focused and meticulously timed to unfold at its end, with the inevitability of a good play, an explosion of vision and a vision of

explosion. Feeley's writing is as elegant in its construction as in its sentences, yet wears its artfulness with studied negligence and hides its meticulous research. His book fully deserves the very handsome hardcover launch that Henry Wessells' Temporary Culture Press has given it. The reader of a story whose protagonist spends time handling beautiful old books deserves to handle a beautiful new book, whose designer has shown the same care and taste as its author. Among many other touches I was particularly delighted by the printer's device in the form of a coffee bean that separates narrative sections. At fifty dollars *Arabian Wine* is not cheap; but it will no doubt come out in paperback before long. In the meantime collectors will snatch at this example of fine bookmaking.

Arabian Wine is set in Venice in 1609, eight years after Giambattista Della Porta hypothesized the harnessing of steam, six years after Pope Paul V lifted the threat of Interdict (blanket excommunication) from Venice, and one year before Galileo announced the invention of the telescope and then left his post at Padua (in the Veneto) to return to the more permissive atmosphere of Florence. All these events are referred to; so is Paolo Sarpi's suggestion that blood circulates in the body. (Fra Sarpi is credited with persuading Paul V to lift the Interdict.) The dawn, then, of experimental

science and the first conceiving of discoveries that would change the way people saw the world, both macrocosm and microcosm; but also, in Venice, a time of decadence. The energy that had ventured, buying and selling, through the Eastern Mediterranean, beset by tempests and pirates – that energy, pumped from the strong heart of the Republic and orbiting the fixed center of the Rialto, was being withdrawn from circulation. Instead it was invested in the stale certainties of power, its commodities now not silks and spices but whispers and denunciations, as Venice made itself the utopia of secret policemen and envious neighbors. *Arabian Wine* does not refer to the end met by another visionary, one who proposed multiple worlds with multiple histories, Giordano Bruno, burned for heresy in Rome in 1600; it doesn't have to. Galileo nearly met the same fate, and Sarpi was attacked in an alley, stabbed and left for dead.

In this context two very likeable young men, Matteo Benvenuto and Gaspare Treviso, try to do something different. Matteo, younger son in a family of traders, wants to import and sell coffee, "Arabian wine," which he first drank in Alexandria. Gaspare, whose grandparents were converted Jews, works in the bronze foundries of the Arsenal, where Venice's fleet is built and fitted out. His vision is Della Porta's, the harnessing of

steam, but to a humble enough use: the pumping out of basements in this city built upon a lagoon. He enlists Matteo, who can read Arabic well enough to research developments in Ottoman science. Both men want to do their city some good. Neither project seems world-changing; no more does the conjunction of steam and coffee in the accidental near-invention of the espresso machine, early in the book. One does not sense the stake and pyre looming. But the paradoxical attention paid to two minor visions finds its resolution in the larger vision of energies rescued from waste and stagnation; of energy put, heroically, back into circulation.

Like a paradox *Arabian Wine* hovers between two generic ways of making sense. Is this a historical novel? No, for the events it describes never happened. Coffee had to wait a century before it was drunk in White's London coffee-house, and steam the same century for Newcomen's engine. Is it alternative history? The events it describes are not brought to completion; the world is not changed. Matteo and Gaspare spectacularly fail and their visions come to nothing but vision itself.

Alternative histories usually imagine history taking a different track from the one we know. In Geoffroy-Chateau's *Napoléon ou la conquête du monde* (Paris, 1836), Napoleon does not fail at Moscow but goes on to capture St. Petersburg and the

Czar, then conquers England and unites first Europe, then the world, ruling until 1832. Or the South wins the Civil War, as in Ward Moore's in *Bring the Jubilee* (1952). The standard alternative vision evokes a radically changed present; in Moore's case a world in the 1920s and 30s filled with such delightful contrafactuals as Mexico City renamed Leesburg; as France governed by Napoleon VI; as Carl Jung, Chief of the Swiss Police, extending Lombroso's study of criminal types. The speculation "What if the South had almost won the Civil War?" leaves the writer in a cramped space, since the South did almost win the Civil War. Then what's left to imagine is history turning on a dime, when for want of a nail the shoe was lost, for want of a shoe the horse was lost, and the rider was Meade or Grant.

In his monograph on "uchronie," *Le détroit de Behring* (Paris: P.O.L., 1986), Emmanuel Carrère lists the reasons for thinking about alternative history. Some of them are questions you'd expect. What determines human history? Is it no more than the sum of the chain of causes men can trace? Does it have a direction, and if so, who has the job of making us obey it, and can it be turned? (12; my paraphrase). But then he asks, "De quoi se composent nos regrets?" What are our regrets made of? It's a great question. Regret is a strong, maybe the

strongest motive for imagining history otherwise than as it happened. Regret's word is always "might have been," and when we imagine the South victorious, or Napoleon, or the Axis, I think we're missing something that might have been. That something need not be the explicit content of the alternative situation. Geoffroy, whom Carrère summarizes (18-26), plainly did wish for a world united and kicked into shape by the Emperor, at whose death two stars go nova in Orion's belt. But Moore did not wish for an America divided between southern imperialists and northern racists eager to ship blacks to Liberia and Sierra Leone. Dick did not wish for an America divided between Japanese and Nazi German control. The note of regret that surfaces in *Bring the Jubilee* and *The Man in the High Castle* summons up the image of a world unlike mid-twentieth century America in that it's disrupted. What's missed is the chance for adventure – the chance to prove oneself a hero by taking effective action against visible antagonists – that characterizes all fantasy.

If that's true, then in *Arabian Wine* Gregory Feeley raises the bar for alternative history. Matteo and Gaspare change nothing in Venice. Their field of action, initially quite free, constricts around them as the story goes on and finally locks them. Their antagonists remain masked far beyond their striking

range, and the two are completely disabled from effective action.

That matters, but not for the usual reason of inducing regret. Here I am drinking very good Costa Rican coffee while I write this, and if I'd been writing it two months ago, I'd have been listening to the radiator bang in this steam-heated room. The fact that I need not regret coffee and steam, that they reached me anyway, makes more poignant the failure of Matteo and Gaspare, to whom, if they'd really lived and carried out their projects, I'd be as indebted as to Edison or the genius who invented ATMs. What I have to regret, then, is simply the thwarting of two innovators. They attract not merely our affection but our respect, since we know their thinking is correct, and they show their will is strong; yet they're brought to an impasse.

That forces me to confront the story's central, generative paradox: the dissonance of its tone and its matter. *Arabian Wine*, judged purely on the basis of the story it tells, ought to be a dark book. Matteo in particular is invalidated, cancelled out of Venice and almost out of life. His career moves in the arc of tragedy from an initial low point to a concluding catastrophe. We hear of the first when he recalls his voyage to Alexandria. The coffee he drank there was given him as a

medicine, to pull him from a torpor induced by seasickness so disabling that it ends his role in the family business, since traders must accompany their cargoes. Then, having survived with coffee's help the nearly fatal return to Venice, he learns that his wife has died in childbirth, and the child also has died. Matteo, through no fault of his own, is cancelled out of every major relation: as husband, as father, and (family and business being coterminous) as son. All he has to reinvent himself with is coffee.

The second, near the book's end, runs him afoul of the authorities and imprisons him. The lightless cell, timeless, underground, is a type of the grave, and here Matteo touches the zero point, from which he climbs only a little way, to witness his rejection by both the authorities and the populace of the city he sought to serve.

And yet he never loses himself, and the book keeps a tonality I have to call Mozartian in its power to deliver the dark vision of the minor key against a ground of gaiety. The fable of cancellation exists paradoxically within an fable of justification. Matteo, even in defeat, does not forswear the qualities that make him not just loveable but heroic: his courage, his trader's smarts, his modesty mixed with healthy self-assurance, his willingness to work; his openness to other

cultures, including the Arabic, then as now the Antagonist. Matteo is persistent but not stubborn, willing to negotiate but a hard bargainer. He stands up for himself and talks back to the people we all should talk back to, whom he offends less by what he says than by being consistently smarter, funnier, and better mannered than they are.

"I have already seen the vigilance of the Arsenal security," said Matteo. It was intended as a kind of compliment, but the foreman frowned.

"The Arsenal cannot be used to protect every secret in the city," he retorted.

"Indeed no," Matteo agreed. "The Senate's faith in the Arsenal's ability to guard our work shall surely, like their original commission, prove justified." Just to remind the fellow whom he was dealing with.

"We are the Arsenal, the *Arx Senatus*," the foreman warned. "Our guardianship is a sacred trust which the Fortress of the Senate shall ever hold true."

"You think the word's origin is Latin?" asked Matteo in surprise. "I had assumed it derived from *Dar as-Sina'a*, Arabic for 'House of Construction.'"

The foreman looked as though he had been struck.

The foreman acts like a Pentagon flunky, whose pious mouthings one does better not to correct with philological considerations, especially when these show a knowledge of the enemy's language. The foreman demonstrates the medieval reliance on authorities and on false etymologies hallowed by tradition, while Matteo stands here as champion for the new paradigm, the early modern scientific pragmatism of Galileo – or of Isaac Casaubon, who used the tools of textual scholarship to demonstrate that a mystical text of hoary antiquity, the

Hermetica attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, had been written in the Christian era and faked in many parts by the Christians themselves.

Matteo's brashness doesn't make him popular, but it does give the reader some encouragement. Still, there's much more to Matteo than attitude. What certifies him as a hero is his dream: he has a heart's desire and, though he never attains it, he never surrenders it. Desirers imagine, sometimes fetishize the object that should satisfy them. For Matteo that object is coffee and especially the bush it grows on, which would make him, by cultivating it, not just the translator but the author of coffee in Europe. On a visit to the garden planted by Alpini, once physician to the Venetian consul in Egypt, Matteo thinks he sees one.

Walking among the exotic species growing in the garden, Matteo had experienced a moment of violent disequilibrium; he had turned a corner and felt as though he had stepped into a fairy tale, for there in front of him was the bush, like a pot of gold the young hero finally discovers. Matteo had taken two steps forward before doubt invaded him, and lifted one branch to spread its leaves against his palm before certainly formed that this was not the caofa bush he had seen illustrated in *De Plant-is Aegypti*, but rather a different shrub, superficially similar, that he had passed along the roads outside Alexandria. Like a gorgeous illustration suddenly torn away to leave one staring at the page of type behind it, Matteo's dream of discovering his heart's desire in the field just beyond his gate, a dream he had never entertained until it seemed abruptly reality, was no longer there. (64-5)

This disappointment prepares another final thwarting of desire, one so fully imagined that it simply glows with morbid light. But all that has failed is the object. Matteo's dream, his capacity for desiring, never dies. He never withdraws his spirit, his high spirits, from circulation.

And circulation, movement, change, as Feeley establishes by his skillful deployment of visions, are what really lie behind the fixed image of the caofa bush. As one sign of this, Matteo in his voyages around Venice frequently looks at the effect of sunlight in water:

Water splashes against stone at every homeward turning, a seemingly friendly sound whose familiarity disguises its jeers. Wavering fingers of light and shadow ripple upon buildings' facades, so that even those who keep to the walkways may know that the sea – however bracketed by canals and swathed by a lagoon – never rests. What type of knowledge can be apprehended not by learning, but only through exposure to time and the world's elements, like a weathering rock? (17)

This beautifully cadenced passage reveals a sensibility as fine as Virginia Woolf's *Jacob*, and the question with which it closes lays out the education Matteo must receive. But he has already become aware that the sea is not something that can be tamed and contained. It circulates as it will and shatters other fixities in its constant movement: "The Sun hung just above the lagoon's wavering reflection, which fragmented and reformed in the vagrant breeze that accompanied sunrise" (86). Here Matteo

begins and ends with the Sun, but it's the fragmenting and reforming that represents what he wishes for his city, stated on the same page:

... [B]ut it was true, Venice was ossifying like the deposits that encrust hulls and chains, hardening like an old man's joints. Matteo knew the malady and realized moreover the avenues to cure, for *Venice should be more like steam* and expand to press against every surface it touched; indeed in its ability to force its way into openings and run the shortest routes, *Venice should be like money*, flowing instantly where value could be found and drying up where it has withered. And where money finds opportunity and nourishes it, the fruits will quicken the wits of others, even those whom they reach from far away: for Venice lives by water and wind, which carry the essence of its wealth: Matteo could not say it aloud, but yes, *Venice should be like caofa*. (86; italics in original)

Coffee is an opener of the spirit:

Lying back on his pillow, Matteo imagined the fragrance of caofa ascending through the caverns of his sinuses, each wisp slipping through keyholes and causing thick doors to swing open. Spaces expanded, light filled every recess, and the aroma spoke – more immediately than words – of potentialities not yet experienced yet somehow recognized, realms bracing enough to call forth a greater self. Sex drains the loins as wine feeds the blood, but caofa opens the mind to the vibrancy of the world beyond, where a man strides free in the brightening tones of dawn, remembered even as reason and the body compose themselves for sleep.

Brew me another pot of Costa Rican! We may have lost the adventure that Matteo and Gaspare ought to have had; We may regret the noninvention of the alternative Venice in which they could have realized their dreams. But we're left with a vision

of a struggle we can believe in, the effort to imagine a greater self in a world as narrow as any we'll ever live in.

