

belles lettres

A LITERARY REVIEW



Washington
University in St. Louis

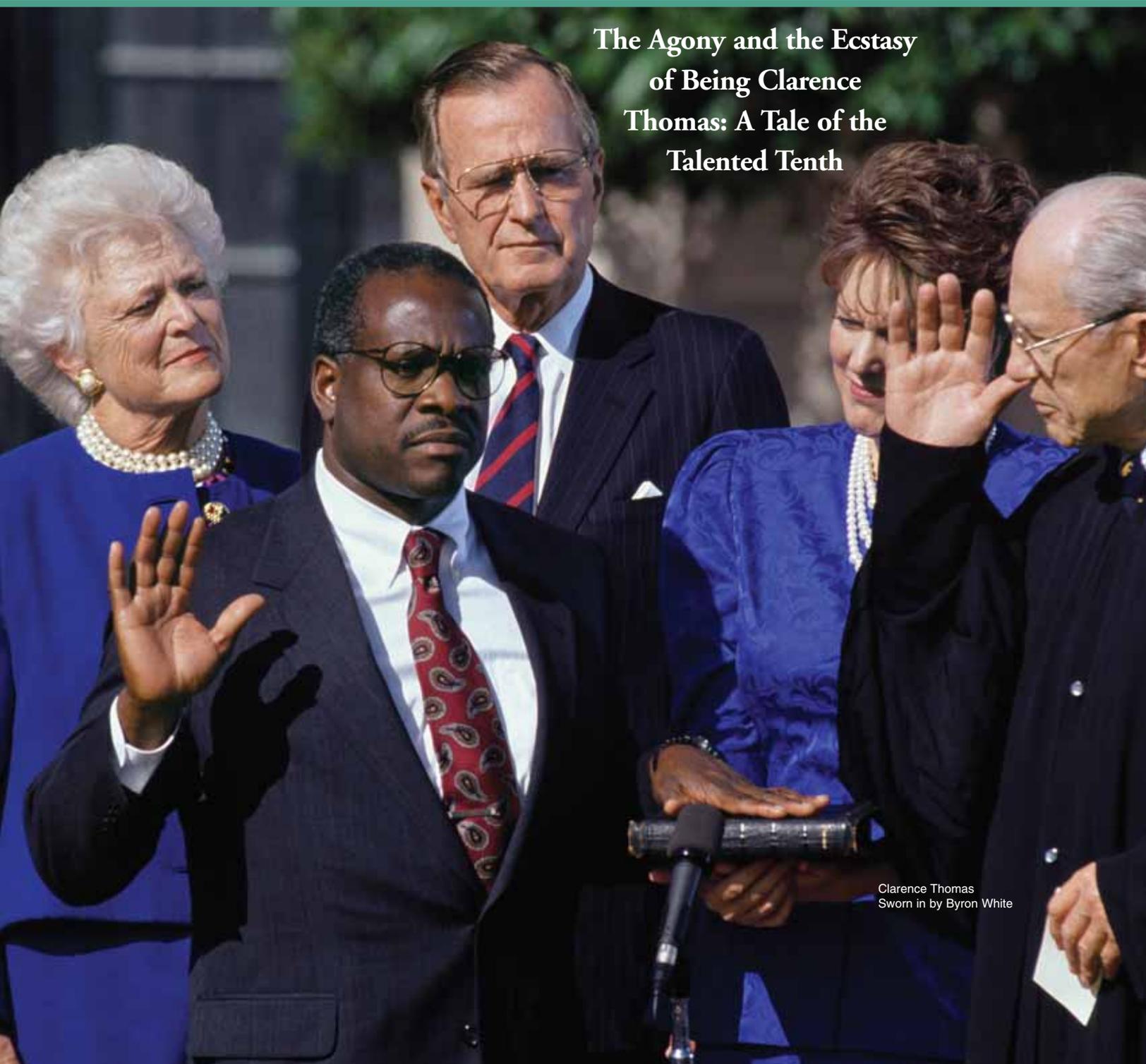
ARTS & SCIENCES

September/December 2007
Vol. VIII No. 1

Published by The
Center for the Humanities

*Dedicated to Letters and Humanistic
Research and Their Presence in Public Life*

The Agony and the Ecstasy
of Being Clarence
Thomas: A Tale of the
Talented Tenth



Clarence Thomas
Sworn in by Byron White

Director's Notes



Professor Gerald Early

I apologize for the delay in issuing the fall issue of *Belles Lettres*, which was supposed to have been published in September. One reason for the delay was the publication of Clarence Thomas's autobiography, *My Grandfather's Son*, in October. Because WU Law Professor Chris Bracey had written a review for this issue of *Supreme Discomfort: The Divided Soul of Clarence Thomas*, the new major biography of the Supreme Court justice that came out a few months ago, I felt it was absolutely imperative to have a review of Thomas's autobiography appear in these pages as well. It would not serve our readers or the subject of

Thomas himself to have a review of Thomas's autobiography appear in another issue. It was impossible to get Chris to do the review of the Thomas autobiography in time for our fall publication, even with this delay; so, as always befalls an editor short of emergency help, I chose to do it myself, though not nearly as well as Chris would have done it. But we do have Chris's utterly superb piece on *Supreme Discomfort*, which together with the review of the autobiography constitutes a rich consideration of the life and career of one of the most divisive, yet extraordinarily successful, black public figures in American history. I think middle class black male professionals of Thomas's generation (such as I) might see in Thomas something we recognize as sympathetic and even heroic and also something abhorrent and disappointing. But all of what we see in Thomas—the horror and the glory—is surreally familiar, as if we were looking at ourselves in a funhouse mirror, the distortion no less real for being a distortion, for we have come to see ourselves, in our honest moments, as some image of disproportion. Perhaps Thomas is the crass, social climbing, sexual harassing, pornography-loving opportunist that many believe him to be. Perhaps he is a victim of a smear campaign by white and black liberals and leftist ideologues who have made the black conservative in America something strangely equivalent to being a Nazi collaborator, which is his claim. In either case, there is a sense that Thomas lives an anguished version of the American Dream that could only exist in quite the way it does for a black male who has a unique anger against both blacks and whites for the humiliating racial paternalism and the embittered racial solidarity that have shaped his life. His bent complexity is our own.

In addition, we have WUSTL Professor of History Iver Bernstein on the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, WUSTL Professor of History Howard Brick on the career of historian Richard Hofstadter, WUSTL Professor of English Bob Milder on American Transcendentalism, and WUSTL Associate Professor of Russian Max Okenfuss on Khrushchev's diplomacy of brinkmanship. We also feature work by WUSTL Professor of Chinese Literature Bob Hegel, and WUSTL Ph.D. in English Jason Vest.

In our next issue, we will have, among other essays, Wayne Zade on famed literary jazz singer Nancy Harrow, Michael McCambridge on Chuck Berry, and Mary Jean Cowell on choreographer Jerome Robbins.

Dying can't be all that difficult, up to now everyone has managed to do it.
—Norman Mailer

Inside this Issue:

Director's Notes	2
Justice in Exile	3
Clarence Thomas: Parvenu Prince of a Divided Kingdom	7
Lincoln, Douglass, and the Transformation of America	11
Hofstadter and American Intellectual History	16
Transcendentalism Lite	21
On the Brink: Khrushchev's Foreign Policy	24
Defining Manhood in Chinese Literature	26
Monster Mash: The Night <i>Frankenstein</i> Was Born	29
The Great Pretender or the Price of Visibility	32

Apology from the Editor:

In our spring issue of *Belles Lettres*, in his review of Brad Snyder's *A Well-Paid Slave: Curt Flood's Fight for Free Agency*, Joe Pollack mentions that Snyder provided no support for his description of how Cardinals PR man Jim Toomey sounded on the phone when he informed Flood that he had been traded. Mr. Snyder informed us that annotation is provided for this in the published book. Unfortunately, Mr. Pollack was using for his review the bound galleys, where annotations frequently are not supplied or are impossible to find because there are no footnote citations in the text itself. It is standard practice in book reviewing for the editor to check all quotations or assertions about annotations against the actual published book and not rely simply on the bound galleys. I fell down on the job here and am guilty of not doing the due diligence expected of an editor. I apologize both to Mr. Snyder and to Mr. Pollack for lack of editorial vigilance. I apologize to our readers as well, who have every right to expect high standards of editorial workmanship in all of the publications of the Center for the Humanities. Such a lapse will not happen again.

Gerald Early

Justice in Exile

Review of Kevin Merida and Michael Fletcher, *Supreme Discomfort: The Divided Soul of Clarence Thomas* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 320 pages with photographs, notes, bibliography, and index

A profound sadness permeates *Supreme Discomfort*, Merida and Fletcher's unauthorized biography of Clarence Thomas, the nation's second black Supreme Court justice. It is not the sort of artificial sadness constructed by savvy authors seeking to solicit sympathy for their subject. Indeed, Merida and Fletcher remain fair to critical of Thomas throughout this remarkably engaging and accessible book. Rather, it is an authentic sadness, sourced from Thomas's relentless struggle to master and assert his essential humanity, to reconcile his troubled racial identity with his conservative philosophy, and to cope with internal wounds sustained by a lifetime of exile from large segments of both black and white society. Merida and Fletcher's account of Thomas's conflicted and controversial journey is not unlike a chance encounter with a lonely street musician whose haunting, broken melody can be plausibly interpreted as both a celebration and cautionary tale about life's choices and possibilities.

Based on interviews of Thomas's family members, friends, colleagues, former clerks, fellow conservative justice Antonin Scalia, and even former president George H. W. Bush, who named Thomas to the Court, *Supreme Discomfort* reveals Justice Thomas as a lesson in striking and occasionally choreographed contradiction. He is a man who claims to have risen from boyhood poverty, but there is ample evidence to suggest that Thomas enjoyed, by and large, a middle class upbringing. He is an avowed opponent of affirmative action, but his life is, in some ways, one of affirmative action's greatest and most unapologetic success stories. He is a dyed-in-the-wool ideological conservative, yet his political roots lie in the black radical consciousness of late 1960s and early 1970s campus politics. He is a man who is critical of black elites and identifies strongly with everyday black people, but whose politics have left him largely estranged from the black community and a virtual outsider in his

own family. He is a man known to be boisterous and outspoken among his peers, especially black conservatives, but remains conspicuously silent and disengaged on the bench. He counsels blacks to forgive past racial transgressions and simply move on with their lives, but he is known to hold deep personal grudges against those who personally disappoint him.

In this probing biography, expanded from the authors' 2002 profile of Justice Thomas in the *Washington Post Magazine*, Merida and Fletcher have done an admirable job of presenting and dissecting these contradictions. Yet the real value in this

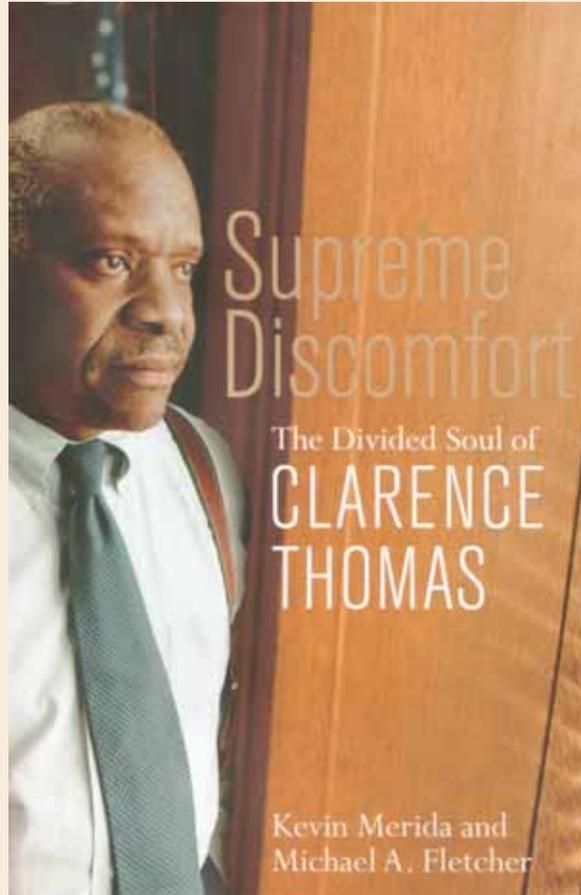
book lies in the ability of the authors to brush conventional views and understandings of Thomas against the grain. The reader is left with the very real sense that there is a great deal more to Justice Thomas than is projected in the media. *Supreme Discomfort* breathes new life into the caricatured and disfigured image of Justice Thomas. But in so doing, it reveals him to be a sad, conflicted, and lonely iconoclast—an emblematic figure worthy of our curiosity and attention, and perhaps even our sympathy.

A Supreme Beneficiary of Race Preferences

One of the great virtues of *Supreme Discomfort* is that it serves to debunk much of the prevailing mythology surrounding Clarence Thomas. In 2003, Justice Thomas wrote a scathing dissenting opinion in a case in which the majority of the Court voted to uphold the use of race in law school admissions at the University of Michigan. Justice Thomas chastised the Court for allowing the state (here, the public university) to “discriminate” by taking

race into account when deciding who should be admitted. Invoking Frederick Douglass, Justice Thomas counseled the university to “do nothing”—to cease their meddling and allow the students to rise or fall based upon their own merit. Justice Thomas went on to note how affirmative action stigmatizes minority beneficiaries of affirmative action, inflames white hostility, and undermines the credibility and achievements of racial minorities, regardless of whether they actually received any benefit under the policy. In his view, affirmative action proved catastrophic to the life chances of racial minorities.

The dissent was classic Clarence Thomas opposition to affirmative action measures—the same oppositional stance that he



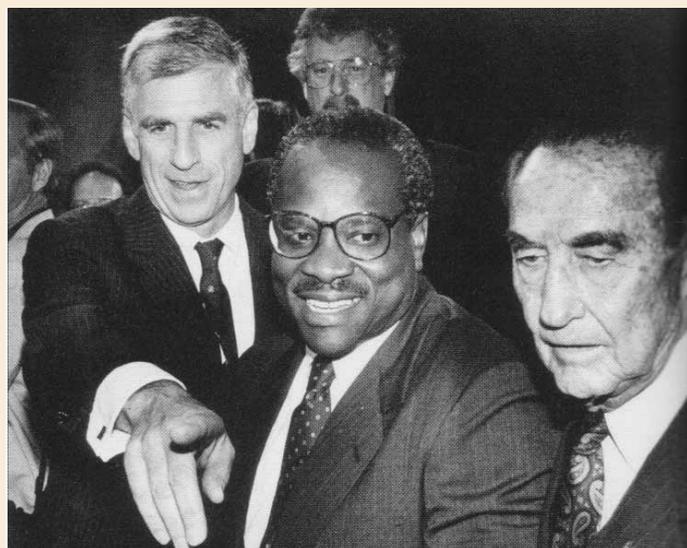
One of the great virtues of Supreme Discomfort is that it serves to debunk much of the prevailing mythology surrounding Clarence Thomas.

had taken for much of his adult life. For many readers of the opinion, Thomas's position was consistent with his upbringing. After all, Thomas had, in the words of Justice Scalia, risen from *nothing*. He was a self-made man, proof that blacks could succeed without affirmative action.

Or was he? Merida and Fletcher painstakingly point out that Thomas's "Horatio Alger mystique" is arguably misplaced. Indeed, the authors suggest that, at every critical step along his career arc, it was clear that Thomas received some benefit because of his race:

- In the wake of the King assassination, Holy Cross instituted a new scholarship program in honor of the slain civil rights leader. When Thomas applied to transfer from Immaculate Conception seminary to Holy Cross, he received one of these new minority-earmarked scholarships, as well as a loan and a university job that, when combined, would cover much of his university expenses (102–3).
- When Thomas applied to and was accepted at Yale Law School, affirmative action in student admissions had been an accepted practice. Approximately 10 percent of the entering class at Yale Law School was reserved for minorities. Yale officials have neither confirmed nor denied whether Thomas would have been admitted without affirmative action—a fact, the authors note, that "still galls [Thomas] more than three decades later" (122).
- John C. "Jack" Danforth gave Thomas his first job upon graduating from Yale. Danforth, heir to the Ralston Purina fortune, was then serving as the Republican attorney general for the state of Missouri. As a Yale graduate, Danforth took

Contrary to Thomas's claims to have elevated himself by his bootstraps, so to speak, it seems all too clear that a great deal of his success came about because of rather than in spite of his race.



Senators John C. Danforth (left) and Strom Thurmond with Thomas, before the start of the tumultuous confirmation hearings, September 10, 1991.

(Harry Naltchayan, the *Washington Post*)

the liberty of contacting Guido Calabresi, one of his former law professors, to assist him in hiring promising recruits. According to Calabresi, "Danforth wanted somebody who was bright, preferably an African American" (133). Calabresi recommended Thomas, who later accepted Danforth's offer to join his office in Jefferson City, Missouri.

- When Danforth won election to the U.S. Senate in 1976, Thomas obtained his second job following graduation on the legal staff of Monsanto, a chemical company headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri. Danforth had recommended Thomas to Monsanto general counsel Ned J. Putzell Jr., who was looking to hire an African American lawyer. According to Putzell, "I set about looking for a female and a black lawyer, and I ended up hiring both" (145).
- After a short stint as a legislative aide with his mentor Jack Danforth, Thomas garnered the attention of Edwin Meese III, who led Reagan's transition team following the 1980 presidential election. Thomas attended a conference of leading black conservatives at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco shortly after the election and spoke candidly about his views on problems facing black and other minority communities. Meese, who spoke at the conference, vowed that the administration would seek to hire qualified blacks for administrative posts. Shortly thereafter, Thomas accepted an offer from the administration to work as assistant secretary for civil rights in the Department of Education (151–52).
- Within twelve months of taking the job at the Department of Education, Thomas was asked to chair the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). There was no suggestion that Thomas was tapped for this job because of his race—at least not initially. However, following confirmation for his second term as EEOC chairman, William Bradford Reynolds, then serving as the Justice Department's assistant attorney general for civil rights, toasted Thomas at a celebratory reception as the "epitome of the right kind of affirmative action working the right way" (162).
- With Justice Thurgood Marshall's health failing, the Reagan administration began to look for a conservative African American to appoint to the federal appellate bench, which the authors correctly note "is seen as a training ground for the Supreme Court" (167). According to Reynolds, "Clarence was first discussed as a circuit court candidate when he was over at EEOC. And at that time, certainly a number of us who were involved identified him as a wonderful candidate for the Supreme Court." Reynolds then added, "I think everybody recognized that it would be next to impossible to name a nominee to the seat who wasn't black" (167). When George H. W. Bush was elected president in 1988, Thomas was put on a short list of judicial candidates. In 1989, Thomas received the nomination and eventual confirmation to the federal appellate court for the District of Columbia.

- Two years later, when Marshall announced his impending retirement from the bench, Thomas received President Bush's nomination for the Supreme Court. Bush publicly denied that Thomas's race played a role in his selection, stating emphatically that "the fact that he is black and a minority had nothing to do with this in the sense that he is the best qualified at this time. . . . I don't feel he's a quota" (172). Brad Reynolds, however, saw things differently. "The politics of the situation," according to Reynolds, demanded that the administration "get the best-qualified person who is black whom we can put in that seat" (170).

Contrary to Thomas's claims to have elevated himself by his bootstraps, so to speak, it seems all too clear that a great deal of his success came about because of rather than in spite of his race. Although the authors skillfully highlight this contradiction, they nevertheless leave the reader wanting when it comes to the ultimate question: namely, how does Justice Thomas reconcile his own status of affirmative action beneficiary with his public denunciation of affirmative action?

Rather than answer this question directly, the authors unsatisfactorily suggest that this contradiction informs Thomas's psychic doubts about his personal accomplishments and limits the depth of his personal interactions with persons who might press him on this issue.

The more telling point, however, is that this deep contradiction lies at the heart of who Clarence Thomas is. He is a man for whom race has been a defining element of his identity, both personally and professionally, despite his best efforts to transcend his own race. James Baldwin once wrote in *Everybody's Protest Novel*, "We take our shape... within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth, and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed." This seems particularly true of Thomas, who, in many ways, remains sadly betrayed if not captured by the very thing he opposes.

Betrayal

A palpable sense of betrayal permeates other aspects of Clarence Thomas's life as well. A young Clarence Thomas enrolled at Immaculate Conception Seminary in August 1967—one of four African Americans—eager to join the priesthood. Yet a sense of betrayal would send him into a secular life within the year. The defining moment occurred on April 4, 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. Thomas recounts, "While walking into the dormitory, someone watching TV yelled that Dr. Martin Luther King has been shot. A fellow white seminarian who was walking up the stairs in front of me, upon hearing this, and without knowing I was behind him, replied after he heard that Dr. King had been shot, 'That's good; I hope the SOB dies.'" Thomas withdrew from Conception at the end of the semester, enraged by the racism of his fellow seminarians, scornful of the empty promises of integration, and disillusioned with his faith. This defining moment of betrayal would prefigure

Thomas's skepticism toward liberal solutions to race problems and strengthen his embrace of conservative political philosophy.

But the greatest string of betrayals occurred as Thomas ascended to the Supreme Court. Thurgood Marshall set the tone during a packed news conference when he announced his resignation from the bench. When asked whether the president should nominate an African American as his replacement, Marshall responded that Bush should not use race as a cover to put the "wrong Negro" on the Court. Marshall added, "My dad told me way back that there is no difference between a white snake and a black snake.... They'll both bite." As the authors note, many regarded Marshall's comment as "an unmistakable reference to Thomas, who at that point, had already been touted as a leading candidate to fill the vacancy" (173).

Thomas would later feel betrayed by the NAACP in the months leading up to his confirmation. Thomas met privately with the NAACP in order to allay criticisms that he was out of touch with the needs of black Americans. Following a productive exchange with Thomas, NAACP board members conceded that Thomas was impressive. According to Hazel Dukes, an influential board member who initiated the meeting, Thomas had "confirmed his 'blackness' and seemed to remember 'where he came from'" (176). One month later, after Bush had announced Thomas as his choice, the NAACP

announced its formal opposition to Thomas, noting in a press release that Thomas "fails to demonstrate a respect or commitment to the enforcement of federal laws protecting civil rights and individual liberties" (176).

Thomas undoubtedly felt betrayed by Anita Hill, a fellow Yale graduate and former coworker at the Department of Education and the EEOC who accused Thomas of sexually harassing her on the job. The allegations—replete with explicit details about Thomas boasting of his own sexual prowess and penis size, crass references to pubic hair, and repeated sexual overtures—proved devastating to Thomas's credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the public. But as Merida and Fletcher highlight, Hill's betrayal opened the floodgates of inquiry into Thomas's history of using coarse language, telling raunchy jokes, engaging in sexual banter, and viewing of graphic adult videos. Particularly noteworthy was the discovery that Thomas, while chairman of the EEOC, had rented adult videos from Graffiti, a local sex shop in Washington's Dupont Circle. According to the authors: "It was there that Fred Cooke, the former D.C. corporation counsel, saw him at the checkout line during the late 1980s with a copy of *The Adventures of Bad Mama Jama*, a triple X-rated flick featuring the sexual exploits of a hugely overweight black woman with abnormally large breasts." Despite pressure from Hill supporters to come forward, Cooke ultimately elected to remain silent and allow Thomas's nomination to rise or fall on the merits. The story of Thomas and *The Adventures of Bad Mama Jama* made its rounds through Washington social networks but never received the full attention of the Hill-Thomas hearing participants. Soon thereafter, past acquaintances, familiar

Thomas undoubtedly felt betrayed by Anita Hill, a fellow Yale graduate and former coworker at the Department of Education and the EEOC who accused Thomas of sexually harassing her on the job.

with the ex-seminarian's sordid tastes and past transgressions, would come forward with statements that lent credibility to Hill's allegations.

The sense of betrayal extended to his alma mater as well. Thomas was extremely disappointed by the lack of support he received from Yale Law School. The dean of the law school had not publicly backed Thomas's nomination before the Anita Hill allegations, and when asked about the veracity of Hill's allegations, he claimed that both were telling the truth, as each saw it. Yale Law School proudly displays the portraits of five former students and faculty members who went on to serve on the Supreme Court. Thomas's portrait is conspicuously absent because he has steadfastly refused to have his portrait hung at the law school. Unlike other members of the Supreme Court, who regularly visit their alma maters, Thomas has never returned to Yale during all his years on the bench, and he continues to devalue the importance of the education he received at Yale.

But his greatest disappointment with Yale was a personal one, directed at Drew S. Days III, a Yale faculty member who formally opposed Thomas's nomination. The authors note that the "justice retains a special animus for Days," reporting on the comments of a white visitor to Justice Thomas, who "was surprised to hear Thomas characterize Days as another of those light-skinned blacks who look down on blacks like him and can never accept them as equals" (136). This was the sort of criticism that Thomas would often hurl against a great many of his classmates at Yale, including William T. Coleman IV—the son of a prosperous lawyer and, later, the first black secretary of transportation—who Thomas once described to a fellow student with blue collar roots as "not like us."

This string of betrayals and disappointments helps explain why Thomas remains so publicly guarded, particularly among blacks and liberals. His life of exile as a lonely iconoclast is not simply a matter of personal choice, as many of his critics maintain, but rather a complex result of politics, personal preference, and psychological necessity.

The Struggling Race-Escape Artist

In *Supreme Discomfort*, we are left with an image of Thomas as a man in relentless and lonely pursuit of racial and ideological freedom. His personal and professional odyssey, undoubtedly enabled by the contingent adoration of conservative whites, has left him powerfully conflicted. Detested by many members of the black community, and not entirely comfortable among whites, Justice Thomas has charted his own uneasy course to success. The young, sensitive boy—ashamed of his "Negroid features" and Geechee/Gullah accent (61)—has grown into a man who attempts to escape race through a thorough embrace of neoconservative ideas. At the same time, this struggling race-escape artist strategically embraces racial identity when it suits his purposes—referring to his confirmation hearing as a high-tech lynching (191), or by explaining his silence on the bench as a coping mechanism sourced from his self-conscious upbringing as a sixteen-year-old black kid transferred to an all-white school (315).

The conflicting and confounding positions assumed by Thomas provide an important window into the tragic and absurd interplay of race and success in American life. In *Supreme Discomfort*, we see Thomas struggle to command and master the impact of race upon his own life: to confine it to some areas and amplify it in others. But as Merida and Fletcher's book makes clear, Thomas's racial identity, like the concept of race itself, proves slippery, protean, and prone to manipulation. He refuses to fit neatly within any predetermined category of racial identity. In the absence of some professed racial allegiance, it is no wonder that he resides at the periphery of both black and white society. Yet it is in this sphere of racial isolation—the ultimate source of his sadness—that Clarence Thomas has discovered success. And like a chance encounter with a lonely street musician who plays a haunting, broken melody, it is difficult to judge whether Thomas should be the object of our praise, indifference, or pity.

Christopher Alan Bracey is Professor of Law at the School of Law, Washington University in St. Louis

Clarence Thomas

Parvenu Prince of a Divided Kingdom

Review of Clarence Thomas, *My Grandfather's Son: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 289 pages, no index, photos

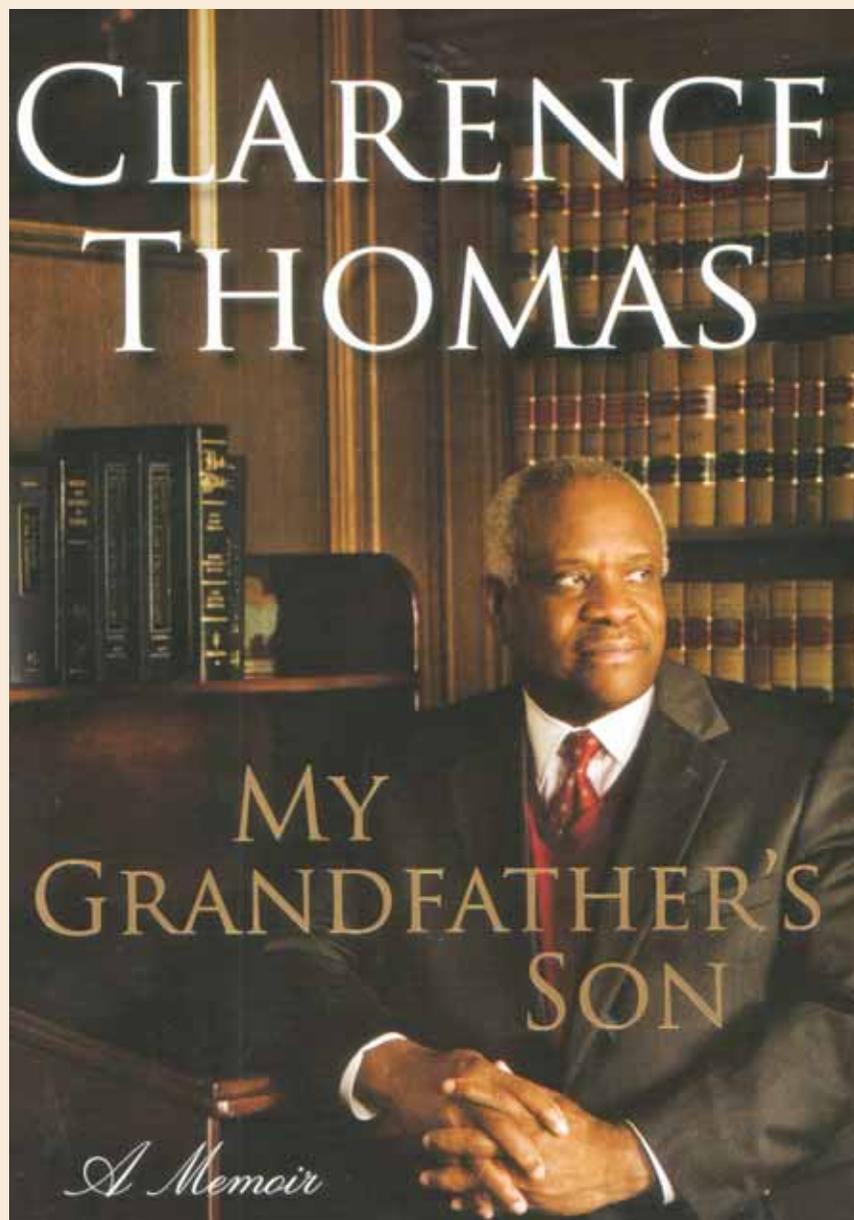
Clarence Thomas is one of the most remarkable Americans of his age. Nay, in some respects, he defines aspects of the post-civil rights movement era in the United States better than any other person, an era characterized by a tragicomic form of racial fear and loathing, where, to paraphrase the French, the more that things seem wickedly and irreparably fractured, the more they seem grotesquely and dementedly united. It is hard to know whether to laugh or to cry over the fact that American schools are nearly as segregated now as they were before the 1954 Brown decision, that African Americans still perform worse on standardized tests than any other group, that they receive the worse health care, and that they crowd the prisons in record numbers. Yet, without doubt, life for African Americans is far better than it was before, say, World War II. There is a sort of twisted humor in this realization that the dark is not as dark as it used to be but a long way from being light.

Admittedly, though, Thomas's feelings about his status as an extraordinary man in this strange age may be decidedly ambivalent. He is known, in liberal circles, as a sexual harasser and a mediocre legal mind who should not have been confirmed for the Supreme Court, while in white conservative circles (and in his own

mind), he is a victim of a concerted campaign ("a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves," as he famously called it at his confirmation hearing) by white liberals and black civil rights leaders to destroy him for being an ideologically independent (or incorrect) black man. In a sense, as an African-American man, he finds himself trapped by a historical mythology: he is either a perpetrator or a sacrificial lamb, a walking pathology or an ennobling sentimentality.

In his autobiography, *My Grandfather's Son*, Thomas himself seems well aware of these alternatives as, during his account of his confirmation ordeal, he refers to two different but, in this instance, complementary fictional works about race. First, he

speaks of Richard Wright's classic 1940 novel, *Native Son*: "What had happened to Bigger Thomas, I knew, could happen to any black man, including me" (245). It is hard to know what Thomas meant here about what happened to Bigger Thomas could happen to him: Bigger, the main character of *Native Son*, accidentally murders a rich white girl, chops up her body, and stuffs it in a furnace. While he is trying to escape being captured for that crime, he rapes and murders his black girlfriend, Bessie. Bigger eventually is hunted down, tried, and executed, but his punishment, however he is viewed and treated by the racist society in which he lives, was for crimes he *actually committed*. Bigger Thomas was not falsely accused of anything, as Clarence Thomas claimed he was at his confirmation hearing. Perhaps Thomas meant that Bigger was a construction, a creation of



the society in which he lived, a monstrosity that could only express his humanity ultimately as something monstrous, which, indeed, was Bigger's tragedy, that he accepted the definition of himself that a racist society placed on him. This formulation has some relevance to Clarence Thomas's confirmation experience in the sense that his enemies attempted to create a monstrosity, a caricature of him. But there is a big difference with Thomas. He never internalized his enemy's definition of him. Also, the attempt to make a monster of him failed since, in the end, he was confirmed, although he felt, and rightly so, his reputation had been permanently damaged. But he was not destroyed by his politically constructed pathologies as Bigger Thomas was. His version of his humanity won out in the U.S. Senate (barely) and with the public at large, which tended to side with him during the confirmation and immediately after, although the nation was deeply divided over whether Thomas should be on the Supreme Court and over Anita Hill's accusations of sexual harassment.

A few pages later, Thomas refers to Bigger again as he writes about the impact of Anita Hill's testimony: "After a lifetime of struggle and achievement, I'd been thrust back into Bigger Thomas's world, a dark, cramped hell devoid of hope" (251).

This self-dramatization seems a bit strange as Bigger was an ignorant, uneducated black boy who lived with his brother, mother, and sister in dire poverty in Southside Chicago about fifty years before Thomas's ordeal. On the other hand, Clarence Thomas was a federal judge at the time he was nominated for the Supreme Court, had a law degree from Yale, had a white wife with professional credentials and social status, and certainly did not live in anything like a ghetto, nor would he have been reduced to poverty or unemployment had his confirmation failed. He would have simply remained a federal judge, a job not without its social and political perks. But perhaps Thomas was in something like a delirium at this point in the proceedings in seeing such a lurid vision of class and racial victimization in his bourgeois circumstances. In Thomas's mind at this point, race trumped everything. It was the sole reason for his public humiliation, and he was right to think that way. His hysteria about his victimization can be excused by the sheer surreal enormity of what was happening to him.

So, on the one hand, he identified himself with probably the most famous black criminal in all of American fiction. On the other hand, he mentioned Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, about a black man, Tom Robinson, who is falsely accused of raping a white woman and who is defended by a small-town southern lawyer named Atticus Finch. "I had lived my whole life knowing that Tom's fate might be mine" (269). Thomas mentions lynching a few times in the written statements he read during the confirmation hearing; indeed, he skillfully exploited the idea that he was a sort of lynching victim as a way to manipulate both the guilt and the sense of political expediency of the white men who sat in judgment of him. In the contest between him and Anita Hill as to who was the greater victim (he who endured racial insults or she who endured sexual insults),

and it was indeed a bizarre public battle of poor little Talented Tenth kids about the slings and arrows of middle class blackness, he won at least a temporary victory, perhaps because he was being judged by men, not women. Thomas continued to manipulate the guilt of his white readers in this reference to Tom Robinson in his autobiography. If Bigger Thomas was the quintessential black criminal of twentieth-century American fiction, Tom Robinson is close to being the paragon black male victim: handicapped, a hard worker, a responsible father, and totally resistant to the clumsy sexual blandishments of poor dirty white women who are probably being diddled by their fathers.

"The mob I now faced carried no ropes or guns. Its weapons were smooth-tongued lies spoken into microphones and printed on the front pages of American's newspapers" (269). The references to *Native Son* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (both novels have lengthy trial sequences) are signs of a man with a highly developed sense of his own self-mythology as an African American, a highly complicated sense of his own racial self-consciousness. But what the references make clear, with striking irony, is that at the moment when Clarence Thomas is about to become one of America's most noted success stories, about to become the most celebrated of insiders by joining the Supreme Court, he constructs himself, through these literary references, as an outsider; for that is exactly what the black criminal and the black victim are: culturally constructed outsiders destroyed by a ritualized spasm of racial cleansing, which is what lynching was as a form of political exorcism. Thomas didn't major in English literature at Holy Cross for nothing!

In Thomas's mind at this point in his ordeal, race trumped everything. It was the sole reason for his public humiliation, and he was right to think that way.

My Grandfather's Son is ostensibly Clarence Thomas's Horatio Alger story, how he climbed from modest circumstances in Pinpoint, Georgia, the offspring of a teenage mother and an absentee father, to become a Yale graduate, a high-placed government official, a federal and then a Supreme Court judge. But what it really is is the story of a generation of black baby boomers who became cultural parvenus. I am a member of this generation, starting as an undergraduate in 1970, the same time that Thomas started law school, a member of the early cohorts of affirmative action babies, the Talented Tenth, as W. E. B. Du Bois called the black intellectual and professional class, sprung up in the wake of Martin Luther King's campaigns, NAACP lawsuits, urban race riots, and the theatrical anguish and political aspiration (or threat) of Black Power. Much of what Thomas writes about these years and how he felt at the time is very familiar: the allure of Black Power and the postures of rage as histrionic political and psychological protest; the academic struggles of poorly prepared black students trying to survive at high-powered white universities (the vast majority of black kids who entered with my class at Penn did not graduate in four, five, or six years, not ever; I was staggered to learn that so few did); the Black Student Union meetings, the separate black dorms, the calls for solidarity and Black Studies as a way of coping and compensating; the intense anxiety about entering the white professional world and the sense of inadequacy one felt about one's credentials, watered down by the stigma of preferential treatment that many whites felt that you received, although they weren't as

watered down as Thomas would have you believe. (So many black kids during my years at Penn received such bad grades that the preferential treatment surely ended, in effect, once you were admitted. Believe me, no professors were grading on a special curve to help black students!) On the whole, your presence made about as much of a difference to the rich, privileged kids at the university as a handful of gnats makes to a large herd of buffalo. (So much for the wonders of diversity!) Thomas describes the details of this experience vividly, with telling accuracy, and even with moments of poignancy. One did feel a bit like a guinea pig in those days and a bit like a gatecrasher. But there was a sense of adventure, opportunity, and freedom in the whole process of integration that, despite its moments of utter mortification, disparagement, and even futility, made the endurance of it worth the effort, at least for me. One was partly driven by the energy of the upstart trying to show up the privileged. Besides, there is something unseemly about whining about bad times at white universities when, on the whole, you were treated decently enough (lots of old black people were jealous of my generation's breaks and advantages) and if you showed any special talent, you were treated as if you were a rare Ming vase or an Arabian thoroughbred among a bunch of plowhorses. That this transformation in our society occurred at the same time as a generation of African Americans was going through the standard throes of young adult angst might make those of us who were there somewhat untrustworthy witnesses of the change, so jumbled are our emotions about it.

Thomas's falling out with his maternal grandfather, the man who reared him and his brother, Myers, as he rightly reflected, symbolized the generational strife of the period, where the youngsters rebelled against their elders in no uncertain terms and with a clear lack of respect, spurred on by the arrogance of a pseudointellectual bravado. And there is certainly a political orthodoxy among African Americans that tends to be liberal, coupled with a tinge of racial militancy and the obligation of racial uplift. Such an orthodoxy is hardly surprising, though scarcely less painfully dogmatic in light of that fact, as any minority tries very hard to enforce a sense of uniformity and commitment among its members if only to ensure its survival and the integrity of its identity. Nor is it surprising that apostates and heretics are ostracized and condemned. One sees examples of this, for instances, with musical performers who have generated a following by creating a certain style; if the performers decide to alter their style in order to broaden their audience or widen their artistic possibilities, they are almost always harshly con-

demned by their fans as "sellouts" or "traitors." What happens in art happens also in politics, where the stakes are higher.

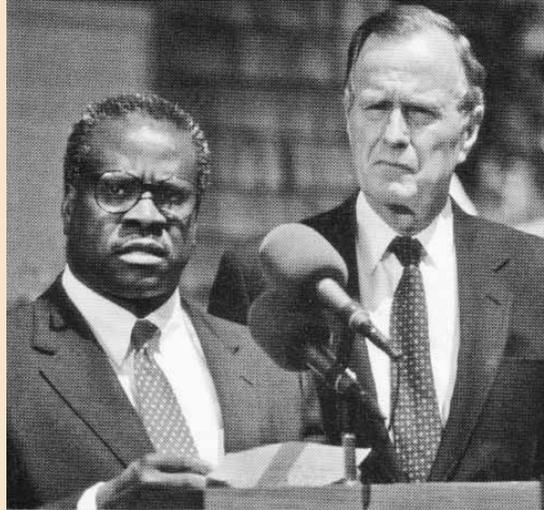
What is remarkable about Thomas's tale is that, alas, in the end, as a writer and a thinker he does so little with his material. Somehow (he seems to think inevitably), the hypocrisies of the left led him to a conservative drift that finally culminated with the vicious attacks the left leveled at him during his confirmation hearing, which sealed his commitment to conservatism.

(His mother vowed at book's end to never vote for a Democrat again.) Methodically, he ties conservatism to some sort of realism based on the political maturity of genuine *experience* (not *theory*, the cloudcuckooland of liberals and the left): his conservatism brought him back to his grandfather's strict, Booker T. Washington-type views of thrift, hard work, and the like, the pieties of American civic morality and success. But there is embedded in Thomas's political vision a lack of perspective, a lack of distance and detachment, a lack of maturity, if you will. He so personalizes everything that one cannot help but feel that the book was written simply to settle scores, which, if this is true, means that Thomas wrote a book that was beneath him as the accomplished and important person he is. Clearly, the book at times seems

as if Thomas has done nothing more than project his own discomforts upon the world and chooses, as a result, to define the world in the light of them. His anger at the intolerance of black political orthodoxy is understandable, particularly in the way black leaders have permitted Thomas to be attacked by white liberals that they would never have permitted to happen to any other black as prominent as Thomas is; yet Thomas's lack of perspective about it seems shortsighted. The injuries and slights gall him as the taunts and insults we endure from our peers when we are children, but they do not inform him.

So, this rampant personalizing begs the questions, What is experience and why is it necessarily, according to Thomas, superior to theory, and is it possible for human beings to have and understand experience without theories about what experience is supposed to mean or even why experience exists? To denounce theory as a valid or necessary mental exercise through which to understand and assess experience is itself a theoretical proposition that, understood within the current American political context of liberal versus conservative, seems fatuously tendentious. No one can take such a claim seriously, and least of all an appellate judge.

And why is it so wrong for black people to want help from the federal government, as Thomas and other black conservatives claim. Where else would they get it? And are we to believe that



Kennebunkport, July 1, 1991. President Bush had just announced my nomination to the Supreme Court. The clicking of cameras sounded like rain on the tin roof of Daddy's farmhouse in Georgia.

Thomas's falling out with his maternal grandfather, the man who reared him and his brother, Myers, as he rightly reflected, symbolized the generational strife of the period.

during the entire history of this republic white people have never been helped by the government? Perhaps the government has helped in the wrong way at times, but that does not mean it cannot help at all. But for Thomas, government help is always an offer of welfare and that is always a personal affront, as he famously related to reporter Juan Williams in 1980 with the highly publicized story of his sister.

In short, the lack of anything but personal reaction in this book simplifies and reduces the power of the experiences he is trying to convey and particularly the conclusions he draws from them. I suppose that is why the book gives the impression of a man who is isolated in some fundamental way not only from both blacks and whites (as Professor Bracey points out, he does not seem comfortable with either group) but from himself, as he seems fascinated solely with his inner contradictions and how he thinks he has resolved them by achieving “frankness” and “honesty.”

So, we march through Thomas’s story, well known to most Americans—the years in Pinpoint, the Catholic school education, the failed attempt at the priesthood, the Holy Cross of radicalism and the Yale years of liberalism, the loss of religious faith, the job with State Attorney General Jack Danforth, the few years with Monsanto, the bad first marriage (it is unclear why his first marriage failed unless he was simply sexually bored; he admits that his wife herself did nothing to precipitate this), the drinking and the debts, the years in the Reagan administration with the Department of Education and the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) and the denunciations by liberals and blacks, the federal judgeship, the agony of the confirmation hearing (and the restoration of religious faith; nothing returns us to God and Christ quite like adversity), and finally the Supreme Court. There is a great deal here worthy of a reader’s time and attention about aspects of the world that the civil

rights movement wrought, but there could have and should have been a great deal more from a man of Thomas’s abilities and Thomas’s intense self-consciousness. In the parlance of the kids today, he lacks irony.

He so personalizes everything that one cannot help but feel that the book was written simply to settle scores.

Some might feel that this book is a bit disingenuous, particularly in his accounts of how he did not profit from affirmative action. As Professor Bracey argues, Thomas seems a perfect exemplar of it; he did not refuse the

appointment to the Supreme Court for fear of stigma, although most of the public assumed he was an “affirmative action” pick to replace African American Thurgood Marshall. His account of the confirmation hearing and his relationship with Anita Hill seem not as forthright as they should be. But if that is the case, the book is balanced by a great deal of gut-level, clear-eyed honesty about the fact that in our efforts to eradicate racism we have, in our liberalism, in some potent ways, simply reinscribed its mysticism and allure, as we are, in fact, more fixated on the inscrutability of difference than we ever were and utter more nonsense about it.

The person Thomas reminds me of most is the famed entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. (1925–90), the sole black member of the Frank Sinatra’s Rat Pack, who wrote two autobiographies with, like Thomas’s book, equal mixes of honesty and self-justification. Davis, too, was a man who seemed defined by his obvious contradictions and by his inability to ever be truly a part of the black world he despised but needed or the white world he so desperately craved. He wanted acceptance from both but could not get it from either. But Davis was a perfect emblem of the hypocrisy, shame, sacrifice, and magnificently ironic triumph of racial integration in America. So is Clarence Thomas. So are we all, we affirmative action babies. God Bless Us, Every One.

Gerald Early is Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and Director of the Center for the Humanities.

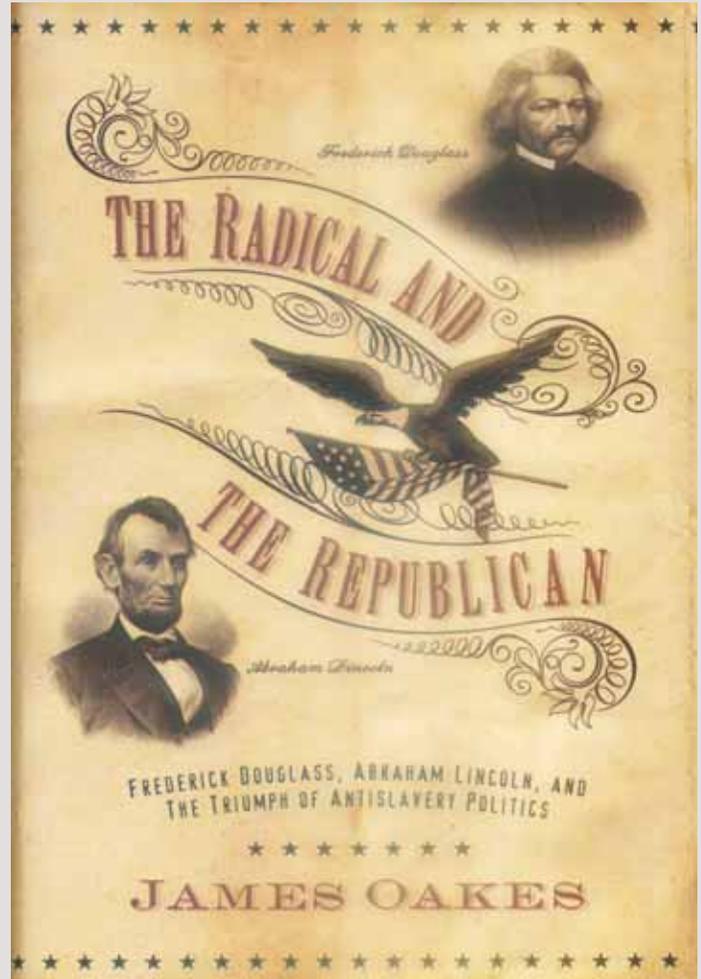
Lincoln, Douglass, and the Transformation of America

Review of James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 326 pages with notes and index

Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln met just three times. On August 10, 1863, Douglass sought out Lincoln at the White House (Lincoln was an especially accessible president in an era when the presidency was not yet “imperial”). The backdrop for the meeting was the administration’s recent decision to deploy black troops. While the wisdom of this bold move was soon confirmed by those soldiers’ brave fighting at Port Hudson, Milliken’s Bend, and Fort Wagner, many Northern whites nonetheless continued to oppose the measure. As with many civil rights breakthroughs, it was one thing to inaugurate a new policy and quite another to consolidate it as institutional and societal practice. Douglass began by thanking Lincoln for his Order of Retaliation, intended to halt Confederates’ abuse of black prisoners of war, and then took up the matters of equal pay and promotions for black men in uniform. Expanding on criticisms he had made publicly, Douglass suggested Lincoln had been slow or reluctant to act. The president defended himself at length, insisting that “the country needed talking up to”—public opinion had to be readied for such revolutionary changes. If not convinced by all Lincoln’s answers, Douglass found himself disarmed by the president’s “transparent countenance” and struck by the man’s fundamental decency. Douglass was especially impressed by Lincoln’s insistence that as president he had never “contradicted” or “retreated from” a position, once taken.

Significantly, their second meeting, on August 25, 1864, was at Lincoln’s invitation. Now the context was the approaching presidential election: the Democratic Party opposition was launching a full assault on Lincoln’s policy of insisting on black emancipation as a condition for restoring the Union. The very fact of Douglass’s earlier visit to the White House had become fodder for the campaign, with Democrats attacking the meeting as evidence that the Republicans endorsed “miscegenation,” a mixing of the races in politics and society that they contended would lead to interracial sexual liaisons, the ultimate annihilation of the white race, and the destruction of the nation. So Lincoln’s insistence on reaching out to Douglass at this crucial moment, with the fate of the war, emancipation, and his presidency in doubt, had great symbolic force—the president was signaling that he would not back away from his policy of black freedom and would go so far as to seek the counsel of a black man. Their conversation was twice interrupted by an aide reminding Lincoln that the governor of Connecticut had arrived to see him. “Tell Governor Buckingham to wait,” the president said. “I wish to have a long talk with my friend Douglass.”

The towering Lincoln spotted him across the room and insisted on receiving him: “Here comes my friend Douglass,” Lincoln announced to the room.



And, indeed, Douglass and Lincoln emerged from this second meeting as political allies and even fond friends. Never again would Douglass publicly lambaste Lincoln. From here on Douglass would remain firmly loyal to the Republican Party. When Douglass showed up at the White House reception following Lincoln’s inauguration on March 4, 1865, and was stopped by guards at the door on account of the color of his skin, the towering Lincoln spotted him across the room and insisted on receiving him: “Here comes my friend Douglass,” Lincoln announced to the room, “there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours.” It meant a great deal, indeed, when Douglass, who, perhaps along with William Pitt the Elder and Lincoln himself, might be considered among the most eloquent public speakers of the modern anglophone world, remarked to the president about the second inaugural address, “that was a sacred effort.” A little over a month later, Lincoln was dead, and

Douglass's eulogies would stand as monuments of both his political and personal regard for his ally and friend.

These few encounters and the short-lived friendship that grew out of them might seem, at first impression, to be a slender premise for a book. But James Oakes has reconstructed a rich conversation, broadly and variously conceived, between the two men: the actual conversation, which began when Douglass first took note of Lincoln in a speech in August 1858, and the conversation between their often divergent outlooks and commitments, which Oakes uses to yield new insights into both figures as well as into the inner workings of what might be called the third protagonist of the book, American democracy.

Oakes rightly notes how remarkable it was that these two figures came together at all. Even though, by 1858, they had come to share the view that slavery was a great moral evil that would destroy the nation if left unchecked, there remained a considerable gulf between them: they inhabited two very different wings of the sprawling mansion of American political culture. Lincoln was a white antislavery politician, at all times attuned to the need for compromise within the world of constitutionally defined law and party politics. He was deeply suspicious of abolitionists whose vision of romantic reform and loyalty to "higher law" might wreck the fragile political coalitions he believed were the only way to hold together the democratic majorities that could win elections, control the national government, and win the military and political victories that would end slavery. Douglass, an African American and former slave, entered public life as a radical abolitionist reformer, not a politician—the white Jacksonian world of political office-holding and voting was hardly open to him. Like Lincoln, Douglass hated slavery, but he carried with him a former slave's lifelong hatred of slaveholders and a radical's willingness to flirt with apocalyptic violence to jump-start society's movement toward revolutionary ends. As Oakes shows, on the eve of the Civil War, it took a titanic civil war and a complex process of education on both sides to bring Lincoln "the Republican" and Douglass "the Radical" together.

Especially fascinating is the way Oakes uses each figure as a foil to elicit new perspectives on the other. He finds much of the drama of his story in tracing the long process by which Douglass came to appreciate how power is gained and exercised in the world of American party politics. As part of that process, Douglass came to appreciate Lincoln, a master of that world. We tend not to think of the "making" of Frederick Douglass as a *political* education—historians have paid more attention to his emergence as self-made romantic hero, as a race leader, and as a hopeful millennialist who would struggle to keep the memory of the first civil rights movement of the Civil War and Reconstruction era alive. But Oakes makes clear that Douglass was interested in politics early on. The teenage Frederick, still a slave, joined the "East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society" when he was hired out by his master in that city. (Hiring out was

a kind of contracting out of slaves that was especially common in the urbanizing and industrializing areas of the Upper South, where slavery was slowly dying as a system of agricultural labor. While hardly more benign as a form of slavery, it occasionally allowed enslaved people to mingle with free blacks, share information, educate themselves, and even gain a toehold claim to participation in the cultural life of the city.) A fellow member of the "Society" would years later remind Douglass that "in a Debate one night you told me you never meant to stop until you got into the United States Senate." That Douglass yearned for political life and harbored such ambitions even in slavery suggests that the subject of the political education and political culture of American slaves represents a barely studied historical problem of the first order.

Such political ambitions also provide a key to the trajectory of Douglass's career. From Oakes's perspective, the fugitive Douglass's decade of tutelage by moral reformer William Lloyd Garrison becomes a "Garrisonian detour" because it delayed his entry onto the political scene. (Garrison abhorred both party politics and the Constitution because he believed them corrupted by the sin of slavery.) Oakes wonders whether if Douglass had ended up in upstate New York or Ohio (where Liberty Party politics were strong) in the early 1840s instead of Garrison's Massachusetts, he would not have moved toward his ultimate involvement in antislavery politics much sooner. As it was, Douglass jettisoned Garrison's patronage in the late forties, started his own political newspaper (*The North Star*), and endorsed the Free Soil Party, which he saw as the most promising vehicle for an antislavery majority. Still, Douglass's increasing engagement with party politics was a maddeningly complex affair, since he hated slavery as much as he yearned for political power and insisted (here, remaining true to his Garrisonian antecedents) that getting rid of the system of racial caste that made Northern free blacks quasi-slaves must be part of the agenda of a new antislavery party.

Consequently, "instability" characterized Douglass's relationship with the Republican Party. He understood that an antislavery Republican majority could wrench the national government from the grip of the "slave power" but was also convinced that the Republicans' cry "was raised, not for the extension of liberty to the black man, but for the protection of the liberty of the white."¹ Many Northern whites applauded the Republican Party demand for the restriction of slavery to the South as a way of keeping blacks out of the West and preserving that region for their own white labor. Still more deplored the Southern slaveocracy's use of physical intimidation and violence to crush whites' freedom to speak out against slavery, and rallied to the Republicans, especially after the mob destruction of the free-soil town of Lawrence, Kansas, and the brutal beating of Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts at his congressional desk after he delivered an antislavery speech in 1856. Mindful of such potent Republican appeals to "white liberty," Douglass and other black activists pointed to the referendum on black suffrage in New York state in 1860 as an indication of where most

As Oakes shows, on the eve of the Civil War, it took a titanic civil war and a complex process of education on both sides to bring Lincoln "the Republican" and Douglass "the Radical" together.

Republicans' true commitments lay: on that Election Day, New York Republicans resoundingly supported Lincoln and just as overwhelmingly abandoned their own party's black suffrage amendment in the face of Democratic race-baiting. Oakes dubs Douglass's curious response to this ambiguous situation "strategic separatism": Douglass declared that while he would "sincerely hope" that Republicans took the national election in 1860, he himself would vote for the Radical Abolitionist candidate for president, even though that tiny party had no realistic chance. Seeing Lincoln's candidacy in 1860 as emblematic of the Republicans' compromises with both slavery and racism, Douglass confided to a friend: "I cannot support Lincoln."

Oakes illuminates what he calls Lincoln's "strategic racism," in a sense, a counterpart to Douglass's "strategic separatism." Historians have long puzzled over Lincoln's speech at Charleston, Illinois, delivered in the context of the famous Lincoln– [Stephen A.] Douglas senatorial debates of 1858. Answering a query as to whether he desired "a perfect equality between the negroes and white people," the candidate Lincoln replied:

I will say then that I am not, nor have ever been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races [applause]—that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

Elaborating on the matter of how much superiority whites could assume, Lincoln remarked, "I do not understand that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave I must necessarily want her for a wife. [Cheers and laughter.] My understanding is that I can just let her alone."²²

Scholars have wrung their hands over Lincoln's irruption of racism at Charleston and then cheered the fact that as president, Lincoln displayed his trademark capacity for growth, moving by the end of the war toward a more forthright acceptance of black civil equality and even a willingness to entertain limited black suffrage. Oakes's notion of Lincoln's "strategic racism" allows for a more subtle interpretation: that Lincoln was willing strategically to defer to the prevalent racial prejudices of whites to get the issue of race off the table and focus entirely on the matter of slavery, which he understood (correctly, in the end) to be the only issue that would lead to Republicans winning elections and seizing control of Congress and the White House. "We don't have to

like what Lincoln did," Oakes observes, "but it worked, whether we like it or not." It was clear that Frederick Douglass reviled such tactics, hence his reluctant, arms-length support of the Republicans in 1860. It was also clear that Lincoln's views on race, when he was not trying to table the issue as a political distraction, were far more complex. Oakes acquits Lincoln of racist demagoguery (Lincoln was appalled by Stephen Douglas's joke that "in all contests between the negro and the white man, he was for the white man, but that in all questions between the negro and the crocodile he was for the negro") but does not hesitate to convict him of what was at times a "calculated cynicism." Frederick Douglass would have agreed.

It is hard not to wonder about both the advantages *and* the distorting effects of hindsight when talking about the history of the Civil War. Certainly, as Oakes concedes, he has a stake in the outcome of this history, finding it frustrating that it took so long for the two men to join hands: "Lincoln and Douglass, seen together, reveal what can happen in American democracy when progressive reformers and savvy politicians make common cause." But the political and emotional centers of gravity of the book seem, at least to this reader, to rest more with Lincoln than with Douglass. The most dramatic story told by Oakes is how Lincoln unfolded his deep understanding of the processes of American political democracy. "The only way to oppose slavery *seriously*," Oakes writes of Lincoln's perspective, "was to build an antislavery coalition, organize it into a mass political party, and take control of the state" (italics are mine). And, in the end, Lincoln was right. Strategic racism and conservatism in 1858 and in 1862 (when Lincoln nodded toward racists and Border States Unionists as part of a process of preparing public opinion for the Emancipation Proclamation) were effective ways—likely the only ways—to accommodate Northern whites to the revolutionary changes needed to win the war and end slavery. Lincoln's perspective, in this regard, is also Oakes's, and in Oakes's view, it was to Douglass's great credit that he came to appreciate Lincoln's political genius, so defined.

But the effect of this somewhat teleological approach—where the reader comes to feel as if Lincoln's outlook embodies the "serious" deeper realities and purposes of American political democracy—is to flatten out the political world in which Frederick Douglass lived and maneuvered and to impose the certainties of 1865 on a more fluid earlier history. In the year 1848, Frederick Douglass (or Lincoln, for that matter) could hardly have known that the processes of democratic party politics and law would end slavery in the context of an unimaginably bloody civil war. Douglass and most transatlantic reformers, black and white, looked to the British emancipation of 1833–38 as the model for future abolitions of slavery. In that emancipation, the ability of charismatic moral reformers to mobilize public opinion was all important. The example of martyrs such as the British

Seeing Lincoln's candidacy in 1860 as emblematic of the Republicans' compromises with both slavery and racism, Douglass confided to a friend: "I cannot support Lincoln."

It is hard not to wonder about both the advantages and the distorting effects of hindsight when talking about the history of the Civil War.

missionary John Smith in the Demerara (now known as Guyana) slave uprising of 1823 and the gripping testimony of persecuted missionaries such as Henry Bleby and William Knibb before the British people in the wake of the 1831 Jamaican slave rebellion effected a sea change in public attitudes that, in turn, pressured parliament into the world historical act of immediate emancipation. Of course, American conditions were different, as Douglass understood: slavery was not thousands of miles offshore, as in the case of the British West Indies, and American slaveowners were powerfully entrenched in the political institutions of the American federal union—the political parties, Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court. Slaveowners' property rights, under the laws of the states, were protected by the Constitution. But Douglass's vision of the sort of transforming moral pressure that reformers could bring to the project of emancipation remained plausibly grounded in this transatlantic historical experience.

Further, while the reformer Douglass did not have to attend to the constraints of democratic parties and majorities, as did the political candidate and elected official Lincoln, Douglass had his own constituencies and constraints that were shaped in the fluid world of mid-nineteenth-century democratic nationalism, to which Oakes pays only passing attention. Douglass did not only declare his independence from Garrison and allegiance to political antislavery in 1847–48, he also proclaimed his membership in a remarkable new political construct, a new collectivity that he consecrated in a speech to a heavily but not exclusively black audience in Rochester, New York, on subject of the European Revolutions of 1848, delivered on the anniversary of West Indies Emancipation:

I have stood on each side of Mason and Dixon's line; I have endured the frightful horrors of slavery, and have enjoyed the blessings of freedom. I can enter fully into the sorrows of the bondsman and the blessings of freemen. I am one of yourselves, enduring daily the proscription and confronting the tide of malignant prejudice by which the free colored man of the North is continually and universally opposed.³

In this Whitmanesque passage, a new political “we” was being constructed out of the “I” and “you,” a “colored people” that included both the fugitive Douglass, his sisters still stranded in Southern slavery, as well as sympathetic whites; a people with a “destiny,” cognizant of New World emancipationist precedents of the West Indies and Haiti but also on a par with the great peoples of the European 1848; a people Douglass saw capable of rationally governing itself, moving history, and creating republics in its own image.⁴

For Douglass, Martin Delany, and a host of other black activists of the American 1848 (by which I mean the long era of the Civil War and Reconstruction), this black peoplehood was a constant source of inspiration and debate, a kind of “north star” always present in political discussions. The challenge of the age was how (and, at times, whether) to reconcile this black people-in-the-making with American nationality. Particularly after the

passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Douglass and others asked whether the destiny of this colored people be best served by their remaining in the United States or by voluntary emigration to Canada, West Africa, or Haiti; would it be furthered by self-help and respectable uplift, apocalyptic violence or antislavery politics; could the story of black freedom and community in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* serve as a basis for a new narrative of black peoplehood, or did Stowe's tale have to be radically amended, as it was by Delany, Frank J. Webb, Harriet Jacobs, and a host of black writers?

Oakes gives us fleeting glimpses of this black political world, which registered so prominently in Douglass's political consciousness. He juxtaposes two Boston meetings celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863—one at the Music Hall featuring Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and a concert performance of Handel's *Messiah*, and the other at nearby Tremont Temple, at which Douglass, William Wells Brown, William C. Nell, and Wendell Phillips spoke, hymns were shouted, and the evening culminated in a procession to black abolitionist minister Leonard Grimes's Twelfth Baptist Church. “It was as if the Tremont Temple and the Music Hall occupied parallel universes,” Oakes tellingly observes, “a mile away but a world apart.” The world of the black abolitionists of the Tremont Temple celebration was, at least in part, a latter-day embodiment of the imagined black American republic that Douglass was calling into being on West Indies Emancipation Day, 1848. In the end, Oakes's book would have been more richly realized if it had set Douglass's conversation with Lincoln in the broadest context of this negotiation between two different but intertwined versions of democratic nationalism, one distinctively African American and more cosmopolitan, the other Northern and more tightly wedded to the instrumentalities of the emerging Northern nation-state. Certainly such an approach would have given fuller breadth and depth to Douglass's political world and commitments. From this point of view, it is worth wondering whether the winning of the allegiance of Douglass and of the African American people, more generally, to the Lincoln administration, the Republican Party, and the Northern nation-state was a central triumph—perhaps the central triumph—of the war. Certainly the addition of 180,000 African American troops to the ranks of the Northern military played a crucial role in bringing about victory on the battlefield. But Lincoln and the Republican government also needed to engage the hearts and minds of Douglass and the nascent “colored people” he represented.

For all of Lincoln's success in converting Douglass to a faith in American political democracy, Douglass had the last word, if for no other reason than he outlived his friend. Oakes caps off his case for the “triumph of antislavery politics” with a discussion of Douglass's extraordinary eulogy to Lincoln in his 1876 dedication of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington, D.C. The statue, which depicted a standing Lincoln holding the Emancipation Proclamation alongside a kneeling slave, was purchased over a decade by small donations from Southern freedmen and women, many of them black veterans. Douglass began in the vein of “strategic separatism,” excoriating his listeners (which included President Ulysses S. Grant and other political leaders) by distinguishing a “we” of black Americans from the “you” of his mostly

white audience and reviewing how Lincoln had taxed blacks' patience until the last years of the war, serving "preeminently" as "the white man's President, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men." Then, Douglass tacked in a rather different direction, indicting slaveowners who had attacked Lincoln for "making the war an abolition war" and men like himself, the radicals who had assailed Lincoln for "not making the war an abolition war." In the end, Douglass celebrated Lincoln the anti-slavery politician, who when measured "by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, was swift, zealous, radical and determined." Paying his friend the highest tribute, Douglass concluded that Lincoln "knew the American people better than they knew themselves, and his truth was based on that knowledge." Here, in this embrace of Lincoln the politician, one might say, was the final conversion of Douglass from radical outsider to Republican statesman. But at perhaps a deeper level, it was not a speech about Lincoln so much as about America—about the challenge of reunifying America that loomed after the Civil War and the role that Douglass and the nameless black men and women who contributed to the monument would play in that project. The speech's polyphonic movement from African Americans' skepticism of Lincoln, through a host of other viewpoints, valid but

Here, in this embrace of Lincoln the politician, one might say, was the final conversion of Douglass from radical outsider to Republican statesman.

limited in their truths, to the profounder knowledge of the American people in all of their multiplicity that Lincoln possessed, was itself an act of national reunification. And it was all important that the speech was launched from the rhetorical starting point of the experience of Douglass and African Americans as outsiders. The use of such a sly black imagination to conjure up a new and daringly pluralistic version of America at a time when reunion of any kind was being accomplished at the *expense* of blacks was hardly a simple act of political incorporation.

Iver Bernstein is Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis.

¹ Quoted in Nat Brandt and Yanna Kroyt Brandt, *In the Shadow of the Civil War: Passmore Williamson and the Rescue of Jane Johnson* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 42.

² Roy Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3:145–46.

³ "The Revolution of 1848," speech at West India Emancipation celebration, Rochester, New York, August 1, 1848, in Phillip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 104–5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 148–49; "The Destiny of Colored Americans," *The North Star*, November 16, 1849.

Hofstadter and American Intellectual History

Review of David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 320 pages with notes, bibliographic essay and index

It is not unusual for acquaintances to ask, once I tell them I work in the field of American intellectual history, “Was there any?” This mocking view of anti-intellectual Americans, long held by Europe’s cultured classes, turns up among our own cultured classes with surprising frequency, and it comes in several varieties—from conservative calls for a return to classical learning and civic virtue to liberal exasperation with Republican Right traditionalism. For different reasons, many historians also look askance at my field: surely, they say, the study of ideas for their own sake and of thinkers on their own terms was debunked long ago as a narrow—nay, “elitist”—pursuit that is indifferent to the rich context of social forces, cultural milieus, modes of power, and institutional networks that construct experience for ordinary folks. Yet fifty years ago, intellectual history was considered a premium specialty in the discipline, and one of its practitioners, Richard Hofstadter (1916–70) of Columbia University—twice a Pulitzer Prize winner—was one of the best known historians in this country and abroad, a figure who epitomized the admired role of what we have since come to call “public intellectual.” Given the widespread press attention that David S. Brown’s intellectual biography received when it was published last year, we might very well consider Hofstadter to have been the emblematic American historian of his era.¹

To be sure, Hofstadter’s approach to intellectual history was not of the “high church” variety, the sort that meticulously parses great books to determine, say, how Machiavelli influenced seventeenth-century English political theory or the differences in John Dewey’s and William James’s constructions of pragmatism. He was inclined to address more generic mentalities, such as the vogue of Social Darwinism in the industrializing United States, the popular sensibility of the agrarian movement called Populism, or the American compulsion to sniff out conspiracies against the health of the republic (the dark threat allegedly posed by monopoly and aristocracy, by “Popery,” or by communism), which he memorably named “the paranoid style.”² Interested above all in prevalent political ideas, from his land-

mark *American Political Tradition* (1948) to his last finished book, *The Idea of a Party System* (1969), Hofstadter strove to fashion a style of historical work that attended to the pressing concerns of political discourse in his own time, searched the country’s past for the traditions and traits that bore on current dilemmas, and proudly bore the role of “critic” in addressing American life past and present.³

Yet while Hofstadter hardly shied away from bringing historical judgment to bear on contemporary controversies, he also demanded respect for the integrity and disinterestedness of scholarship and expertise, and he sought to guard academia from popular passions—those fueling the red-baiting, McCarthyite Right in the 1950s as well as those of the student left in the late 1960s. In doing so, he frankly expressed skepticism of the virtues of popular democracy, American egalitarianism, and ubiquitous demands for “relevance” and “practical” knowledge, all of which intruded on the autonomy of academic institutions and the free vocation of intellectuals. Widely acknowledged as a liberal of the Cold War era, apparently wedded to the New Deal status quo after World War II, and at least generally supportive of U.S. policy “containing” world communism, Hofstadter was wary of any “extremism,” solicitous of social order, and sympathetic to the demands and quandaries of political leadership. This disposition, “conservative” in some respects, won Hofstadter many critics and opponents among the next generation of academic humanists. Even while he affirmed the intellectual’s public role and political responsibility, his successors, inspired by the black freedom struggle and anti-Vietnam War movement to imbue their scholarship with the spirit of protest, fashioned a different, more agonistic, model of the intellectual *engagé*.

The persistent fascination of Hofstadter’s work stems in part from its close match with the first period of the postwar era. From the mid 1940s to his early death from leukemia at age fifty-four in 1970, he produced twelve major volumes (authored, co-authored, or edited). His youthful political education laid the basis for this remarkable career. Born in Buffalo, New York, to a Jewish furrier and a Lutheran mother, Hofstadter came of age in the 1930s and engaged in the left-wing student associations and antiwar spirit of that time before joining, briefly, the Communist Party while he was a graduate student at



Columbia University. His membership did not last long, due to disagreements with the party over the Moscow trials and the approaching war in Europe, as well as his sense that party life showed no respect for independence of mind. Yet he remained an independent radical through the 1940s, friend of the dissenting sociologist C. Wright Mills first at the University of Maryland, where both held their first academic jobs, and later at Columbia University, where Hofstadter returned as the occupant of a coveted position in the new field of American intellectual history in 1948. He wrote *The American Political Tradition* from a distinctly left-wing point of view, and while Mills held out as an intellectual rebel (becoming an icon for the New Left generation), Hofstadter's work after 1949–50 revealed a steadily growing reconciliation with the American order. He experienced multiple and successive disenchantments—from CP leadership, from radical hopes that labor struggles would spark social change, from the historical conventions of those “Progressive” writers like Charles A. Beard who first inspired him as a young man, and then, in a general trepidation aroused by the mass movements fueling both communism and Nazism, from any conviction that popular, “democratic” sentiments could be presumed just or emancipatory. By 1949, he had written to sociologist Daniel Bell of his new interest in the conservative principles of Edmund Burke: “The conception of some kind of good society above and beyond ruling groups is very likely a utopian fiction,” he said, and he appreciated the restraint of popular passions promised by continuity in political order and wise leadership.⁴

Hofstadter's melancholy was more than political. His early marriage to the talented young journalist Felice Swados ended with her death from cancer in 1945, leaving a young son in the care of Hofstadter's in-laws until he remarried and established a new family home on New York's Upper West Side near Columbia. While intensely devoted to the university, he also remained apart from it, due to personal reserve and a kind of iron work discipline that both shielded him from campus demands and preserved a certain delicate emotional balance in his life. He could be remote, reading his mail during conferences with his graduate students, as well as entertaining—especially with his mimicry of public figures such as Franklin Roosevelt, who was never really a personal hero to Hofstadter. Writing was the center of his professional life, and in that he was able to express with grace, vigor, and an unassuming gravity a set of well-considered judgments on the largest questions of U.S. history. Several of David Brown's sources, however, also saw Hofstadter flee sharp controversy elsewhere, whether from cowardice (not denied by Hofstadter himself) that kept him from playing the rebel or from a meticulous sense of accuracy and balance that denied full-throated partisanship.⁵

Still, Hofstadter was not really timid, nor irresolute or indifferent to political causes. He joined other historians at Martin Luther King Jr.'s August 1963 March on Washington and at the 1965 Selma, Alabama, march for voting rights, opposed the Vietnam War, and endorsed the idea of freeing the university from compromising affiliations with military research. He also accepted the charge of delivering the keynote address at the most contentious commencement exercise ever held at Columbia University, just weeks after the student strike of 1968 ended in a rain of billy clubs. Mourning the campus disruption as “a

disaster whose precise dimensions it is impossible to state,” he sought to rebut young radicals and defend the idea of the university as a place rightly protected from fractious political conflict. As he did so, three hundred members of the audience stood and walked out. By this point, despite his agreement with protesters on particulars (he even made a contribution to the defense fund of Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver, deeming it likely that Cleaver had suffered police harassment), he came to regard young leftists as simple-minded, moralistic, ruthless, and destructive.⁶

As historian, Hofstadter is best known for *The Age of Reform* (1955) and his sharp criticism therein of Gilded Age Populism as a backward-looking force wedded to a romantic, outmoded “agrarian myth” (setting the common farmer at the heart of American republican virtue), a movement infused with fantasies of an elite conspiracy by bankers against the commonweal and tainted by anti-Semitism and xenophobia. To some old friends who considered Populism a step in the long effort to democratize American life, this was renegacy.⁷ Within a few more years, Hofstadter was identified as a leader—along with writers such as Louis Hartz and Daniel Boorstin—of “consensus history”: a new approach that emphasized elements of ideological homogeneity and long-term stability and continuity in the nation's history and downplayed the significance of conflict, particularly as the old Progressive-era historiography defined it (i.e., between the forward-looking forces of popular democracy and the conservative drag of wealthy “interests”).⁸ In light of the paranoid style's popular appeal, the practice of American democracy was just as likely to give vent to the dark side of American life. Finally, with his roundhouse kick at egalitarian instincts, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), Hofstadter made himself a defender of “modern” American society—a complex socio-economic order maintained by an enlightened welfare state and regulatory bureaucracy, an order that required expert guidance and rightly kept direct democratic participation at bay.⁹ Or so it seemed. In the years after Hofstadter's death, he would be taxed bitterly by the 1970s historian of Populism, Lawrence Goodwyn, whose vindication of the farmers' alliances of the 1880s and the People's Party as a genuinely radical, egalitarian movement crushed by concentrated corporate wealth carried much of contemporary historical opinion with it. His own student Christopher Lasch came to judge Hofstadter as a shill for elite modernization and a proponent of the kind of ugly arrogance H. L. Mencken had shown in his contempt for the American “booboisie.”¹⁰

David S. Brown is too much enthralled by Hofstadter's writing (rightly so) to settle for such an unflattering and tendentious portrait, and he offers a helpful corrective. The new postwar view of the American past that Hofstadter helped shape and promote, Brown argues, signaled the emergence of a new generation of historians whose origins and affiliations lay in the immigrant, urban experience. They took the profession far afield from the midwestern, small-town, and Anglo-Saxon milieu that still marked even the innovators of the “Progressive school”—Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932) and his “frontier thesis” on the origins of American democracy; Charles A. Beard (1874–1948) and his “economic interpretation” of history as well as his late isolationism; and Vernon L. Parrington (1871–1929), whose simple counterposition of

democratic and aristocratic interests defined the “main currents in American thought.”¹¹ In Brown’s reading, Hofstadter “enlisted the past to reveal the failings of a time-worn political tradition and by inference highlight the promise of what he believed was a more humane, cosmopolitan, and pluralistic postwar liberalism. Anglo-Saxonism and agrarianism were out. Ethnic diversity and modernity were in.” As opposed to the “older Jeffersonianism” (rural, individualistic, inward-looking), Hofstadter became a partisan of a “modern Rooseveltian state that prized secularism, cooperation, and cosmopolitanism.”¹² Given this cohort’s roots in ethnic, urban America, Brown suggests, the new look of postwar historical research emphasized the significance of ethnicity and “status,” rather than “economic” or “class” issues, in the course of American history. Moreover, Hofstadter’s bias made him an adherent, and jealous guardian, of a postwar (cold war) liberalism that, despite Hofstadter’s better instincts (evident in his affirmation of racial equality and critique of the Vietnam War), committed him to the defense of elite governance, moderate political consensus, and arrogant power that fostered grand misadventures (Vietnam) and alienated popular sympathy from liberalism itself.¹³ When that happened, Brown suggests, Hofstadter’s moment had passed.

There’s a good deal of insight in this view, though Brown’s emphasis on urban, ethnic culture and generational succession construes the matter too narrowly. The strong theme of Hofstadter’s work, like that of Louis Hartz, was not so much ideological constancy in American life—i.e., the cherished recipe for political compromise that guarded against the sharp confrontations that tore European societies apart in ideological warfare. Rather, both these postwar writers highlighted what I would call the disenchantment of American life in the mid-twentieth century: the keen sense they had of having witnessed a watershed in U.S. development, signaled by the Depression, the New Deal, and World War II, that once and for all shattered Americans’ mainstream faith in the centrality of *laissez-faire* individualism and unalloyed market economics; in Christian moralism as the fount of self-reliance, private rectitude, and public virtue; and in that style of national self-regard that positioned American life apart from the world at large and the dynamics and strains of other modern societies. The secret of this new literature, contrary to a common misreading, was not a reinvigoration of “American exceptionalism” (in its freedom from European ideologies) but rather the insistence that exceptionalism had come to an end and that Americans needed finally to face the demands of their time without illusions. “Ultimately,” Hartz wrote in 1955, “for all of the magical chemistry of American liberal society, we are dealing with social materials common to the Western world.”¹⁴ And more, Hartz cited a striking “similarity between the problem of America and Western Europe in the realm of self-analysis.” Both sensed themselves to be shielded from their “common [world] environment,” whether by “European hegemony” or “American isolation.” But “when the big wide world rushes in on America and Europe, not to speak of their rushing in on each other, is not this happy arrogance fated by a similar logic to end in both cases?”¹⁵

Recent work by contemporary historians in fact keeps returning, silently, to Hofstadter’s themes.

Likewise, Hofstadter wrote that “the breakdown of political and military isolation entails a breakdown of intellectual isolationism.” Where “in earlier days...it had been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one”—that self-satisfied trust in the American republic as a unique repository of moral good—the world-opening of the mid-twentieth century set the country on unfamiliar terrain. He intended no simple salute to World War II interventionism or knee-jerk embrace of the cold war. There had “taken root in the world,” he wrote, “the belief that life can be made better, that colonial peoples can free themselves as the Americans did, that poverty and oppression do not have to be endured, that backward countries can become industrialized and enjoy a high standard of living, that the pursuit of happiness is everybody’s business.” However much this statement continued to idealize the American example and voice confidence in the hopes of “modernization,” Hofstadter qualified it with one salient caveat: that “this emulation [of the ‘developed’ countries] has become tinted with ideologies we do not recognize and has brought consequences we never anticipated. The American example of activism [to promote social change] has been imitated: what we call the American way of life has not.”¹⁶ With that note disabusing Americans of their exemplary role, Hofstadter urged them to acknowledge current realities, though like Hartz he regretted that American culture and politics came all too ill-equipped to face the world that came “rushing in.”

Hofstadter’s complex posture was rooted ultimately in a radical, roughly Marxist attitude germinated in the 1930s that recognized capitalist development as the keynote of American national growth and saw the imperatives of social structure having a greater impact on events than the individual motives of good or bad men (as Parrington would have it, motives taking the form of either democratic idealism or crass greed and its associated will to power).¹⁷ In fact, Hofstadter’s notorious critique of Populism had not begun with his conservatizing drift of 1949–50 but was evident already in the acid portrait of William Jennings Bryan in his left-leaning text, *The American Political Tradition*. He showed no disregard for the hardships and grievances of poor farmers or their demands for social equity, but he insisted that their panacea of easy money, or “free silver,” evoked merely the resentments of the lower middle class and remained irrelevant to the increasingly evident class struggles of industrial life.¹⁸ Hofstadter’s *Age of Reform* went further, arguing in effect that lower-middle class resentments once tied to the Populists’ democratic egalitarianism could very well morph into a crabbed reactionary mood akin to fascist mass movements (and hence, in Hofstadter’s mind, reveal McCarthyism as a kind of latter-day, right-wing Populism). This too was already common coin in the old left’s distaste for Depression-era demagogues Huey Long and Charles Coughlin, and to my mind it still bears a substantial degree of truth.¹⁹ Recent work by contemporary historians in fact keeps returning, silently, to Hofstadter’s themes. The reactionary drift of post-Populist discontent appears dramatically, for instance, in Nancy MacLean’s compelling portrait of the Second Klan in the 1920s, driven by man-in-the-middle discontents to affirm a racially hierarchical American republicanism.²⁰ And while such quasi-fascist movements never assumed genuinely mass proportions here, the

mood has never disappeared. Hofstadter's concern over those backlash currents in American life capable of donning the mantle of "populist" and "anti-elitist" sentiments has regained significance with the recrudescence of fundamentalist right from the 1980s on.

Undoubtedly, Hofstadter's political biases shifted from the 1940s, when his Marxist-inflected critique of Progressive historiography called for a *break* from the old consensus in private property rights, laissez-faire, and the moralism of self-reliance, to the 1960s, when he responded to the vitriol of the Goldwater right by appealing for respect due to the moderate political "consensus" of the liberal welfare state.²¹ Here, he praised the capacity to hold political dispute within the bounds of agreed rules of the game (which he preferred to call "comity" rather than "consensus"). It would be mistaken, however, to assume that this bias reflected a standpat conviction in the goodness of given social relations. Like other reform-friendly intellectuals of his time whom I would call "social liberals," Hofstadter had not dispensed utterly with mild social-democratic impulses derived from the 1930s and 1940s. Writing in 1964 on the apparent demise of the "trust problem" so widely debated in the era of Populism and Progressivism, Hofstadter intended not "to suggest that the old problem of market power is on the verge of being solved." Indeed, the American economy was "extremely concentrated" and governed by "a managerial class of immense social and political as well as market power" whose authority on the one hand was insufficiently restrained and on the other showed no capacity to address the persistence of "widespread poverty." "Our greatest domestic danger," he continued—bypassing the problem of populist resentment—lay in "our failure to render certain humane, healing, humanly productive, and restorative social services that are not comprehended at all in the ethos of competition. At its best, big business will not perform such services. At its worst, it can sustain a class of men who will prevent them from being performed."²² More than an endorsement of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, Hofstadter's remarks went beyond anything Johnson would have said about the structural impediments to addressing poverty or the upper-class sources of resistance to attempts at social change.

Moreover, when Hofstadter assailed the "paranoid style" in American politics, most evident on the right (though not missing from the left, as indicated by some dissenters' fondness for Kennedy assassination conspiracies), he did not blame it entirely on the "democratic" or leveling "egalitarianism" of American life. Rather, he found its sources in an affluent constituency insistent on laissez-faire dogmas, *combined with* an evangelical current among lower status groups. From this potent alliance of forces seeking restoration of old ways came the priority of "status politics—issues of religion, morals, personal style, and culture," in other words, what we have come to call since the 1970s "social issues."²³ When Hofstadter first unveiled his argument that Progressive reformers were motivated by a "status anxiety" occasioned by their fear that rampant capitalist development would endanger the prestige and influence that the nineteenth century's "old families" claimed as exemplars of virtue, he meant not—as his more liberal or left-wing critics suggest—to diminish the significance of "economic" issues in the politics of reform but rather to cast the leading Progressives (no less than the Populists before them) as backward-looking advocates of moral uplift who did their best to ignore the salient economic issues of capitalist development. Moreover, his recognition that "status issues"

remained alive in the "paranoid" right of the 1960s remains telling as we reflect on the current "revolt against modernity" (half-hearted and hypocritical as it is) that has driven the religious right of our own time. His argument that "status anxiety" afflicted not only "old families" fearing decline but also those lower middle-class circles enjoying a sudden, disorienting rise in prosperity says something too about those well-appointed conservative megachurches springing up in the newest sprawl suburbs.

Challenging the "revolt against modernity," Hofstadter allied himself with defenders of modern art, relaxed sexual mores, intellectual independence (sometimes sensed and expressed as "alienation"), and cultural criticism.²⁴ His suspicion of what he often called "populistic democracy" stemmed from the critical theory of "mass society" cultivated from the 1920s through 1950s—the fear of authoritarianism deemed characteristic of the atomistic "mass man," setting conditions in which the "intellectual" stood perhaps as the last guardian of independence and critical acuity. His aversion to "the mass" led him to miss "a responsible elite" in American politics, which might resist demagoguery like Joseph McCarthy's that too frequently gripped the society.²⁵ Yet it is unclear whether Hofstadter believed that those passions he feared were products of genuine popular desire or emerged in campaigns invented by other, concerted social and political forces and carried out "*in the name of the people*."²⁶ And whatever "responsible elite" Hofstadter wished for, there is little evidence in his writings that he was prepared to hail the superiority of any particular ruling class or social group in the American past.²⁷

At points, Hofstadter tried to make it clear that his skepticism of "populistic democracy" stemmed not from an "aristocratic," antidemocratic animus: "if our democratic aspirations are defined in such realistic and defensible terms as to admit of excellence," he wrote, most of his worries would "lose their force." And if this view fixed him as a proponent of "meritocracy" over "democracy" (as if the latter welcomes widespread access to position by individuals lacking qualifications), Hofstadter's notion of meritocracy was a generous one. In an era before the affirmative action controversy stirred so many misguided disputes over "standards," he firmly stated his doubt that scientific measures such as the IQ test really determined ability and claimed that "special attention...given to underprivileged children" often raised IQ scores and rendered children once deemed "nearly retarded" ready to attend college.²⁸ On the other hand, the understanding that common people might carry, besides legitimate grievances with inequitable or oppressive social conditions, various ill-informed resentments against scapegoats has been recognized on the left at least since the German Marxist August Bebel called anti-Semitism the "socialism of fools." It is unclear why Hofstadter's discovery of such fevers among the Populists (and those he considered their descendants) should mark him as a "conservative" writer hostile to democracy as such.²⁹

Hofstadter's work stands apart from American history writing today. His was almost wholly devoted to the political doings of white men, with scant mention of women, workers, or African Americans—not to speak of American Indians and Latinos—as historical actors. Still, he sought repeatedly to puncture American national grandiosity and complacency by citing the extermination of native peoples, the centrality of the issue of slavery and the persistence of racial inequality, the periodic outbursts of violent industrial conflict, the vulgar masculinist

posturing of our politicians, and the mishandling of foreign relations due to a combination of naïveté and bravado—all rightly understood as blots on the nation's *amour-propre*.³⁰ As he approached the description and analysis of popular sensibility, furthermore, he examined ideology and mentality in social contexts in ways that anticipated what are currently called studies in “political culture.” His many critics in the succeeding generation of *engagé* intellectuals are right to see in Hofstadter's stance a substantial measure of comfort with, perhaps complacent faith in, welfare-state liberalism of the Cold War era, which they, rightly, would not share. By the 1950s, Hofstadter had surrendered the role of “radical” for that of “critic,” a status that “floated” in modern society in several senses (including some desire on Hofstadter's part to flee sharp conflict and confrontations).³¹ Yet we could do much worse in seeking admirable representatives of a historiographic heritage. At a time when the strange interaction of economic discontents and social resentments yield weird political furies (namely, the Kansas anti-Darwinians or the mass outrage over immigrant “amnesty”), and the nation finds itself so patently ignorant of, and displaced in, the world at large (while still brandishing blunt power), Brown's intellectual biography of Richard Hofstadter proves especially opportune.

Howard Brick is Professor of History and American Culture Studies at Washington University in St Louis.

Notes

¹ David S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 50.

² Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860–1915* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1945); Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1955); Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

³ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition, and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Knopf, 1948); Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780–1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

⁴ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 1–95; Susan Stout Baker, *Radical Beginnings: Richard Hofstadter and the 1930s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985); Richard Gillam, “Richard Hofstadter, C. Wright Mills and ‘The Critical Ideal,’” *American Scholar* 47 (Winter 1977–78): 69–85; Daniel Geary, *The Power and the Intellect: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming); Hofstadter, letter to Daniel Bell, 31 March 1949, quoted in Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 157.

⁵ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 42–44.

⁶ Hofstadter, quoted in Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 171; Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 184, 218–19.

⁷ Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 76.

⁸ John Higham, “The Cult of the ‘American Consensus’: Homogenizing Our History,” *Commentary* 27 (February 1949): 94, 100.

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

¹⁰ Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991); Casey Blake and Christopher Phelps, “History as Social Criticism: Conversations with

Christopher Lasch,” *Journal of American History* (March 1994), 1337, quoted in Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 55.

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington* (New York: Knopf, 1968).

¹² Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, xiv, xxiii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁴ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁶ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 43–44.

¹⁷ Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 244.

¹⁸ In 1968, Hofstadter explicitly stated that whatever version of “consensus” historiography was evident in *The American Political Tradition*, it “had its sources in the Marxism of the 1930s.” Hofstadter, *Progressive Historians*, 451, 452n.

¹⁹ For an example of 1930s Marxist antecedents of the critique of “Populism” and its latter-day manifestations, see for instance Meyer Shapiro, “Populist Realism,” *Partisan Review* (January 1938): 36–37, a sharp critique of the cultural nationalist painter Thomas Hart Benton, and Daniel Bell, “The Grass Roots of American Jew Hatred,” *Jewish Frontier* (June 1944): 15–20, when Bell still wrote within a social-democratic orbit. The chief challenge to the old left denigration of Long and Coughlin is Alan Brinkley's *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

²⁰ Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1967), 103.

²² *Ibid.*, 236–37.

²³ *Ibid.*, 81, 77. On his judgment that “business [stood] in the vanguard of anti-intellectualism in our culture,” see *Anti-Intellectualism*, 237. His basic outline of the components of the New Right of the postwar era was a good start for understanding the right that assumed power under Reagan and became even bolder and brasher under George W. Bush: “rich men...still militant against the social reforms of the New Deal; isolationist groups and militant nationalists; Catholic fundamentalists, ready for the first time to unite with their former persecutors on the issue of ‘Godless Communism’; and Southern reactionaries newly animated by the fight over desegregation” (*Anti-Intellectualism*, 134). Qualify that description with the injection of blunderbuss, unilateralist foreign adventures (which reflect a go-it-alone aggressiveness that was long a more or less silent partner of “isolationism”), and the further “southernization” of the national political culture that came with white working class resentment of government-sponsored racial liberalism (busing, affirmative action), and one begins to grasp the constellation of today's mutation of the postwar New Right. On the rise of the New Right, in the 1960s and its burgeoning in the 1980s, see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁴ On the right's obsessive fear of sexuality, see Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 119n.

²⁵ Hofstadter, *Paranoid Style*, 65.

²⁶ Hofstadter, quoted in Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 86.

²⁷ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 149

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 47, 351.

²⁹ For a recent vindication of Hofstadter's location of anti-Semitism and xenophobia in the Populist milieu, see Jeffrey Ostler, “The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism,” *Agricultural History* 69 (1995): 1–27.

³⁰ His critique of Frederick Jackson Turner, in his late book *The Progressive Historians*, anticipated most of the themes trumpeted twenty years later in Patricia Limerick's broadside against the old “frontier thesis” in Western history, *The Legacy of Conquest*. See *Progressive Historians*, 147.

³¹ Hofstadter was deeply influenced by Karl Mannheim, whose *Ideology and Utopia*, (trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936]) defined “free-floating” intellectuals as a distinctive group in modern society. See Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 92. On the significance in American postwar debate of the role and responsibilities of intellectuals, see Brick, *Age of Contradiction*, 23, 30–33.

Transcendentalism Lite

Review of

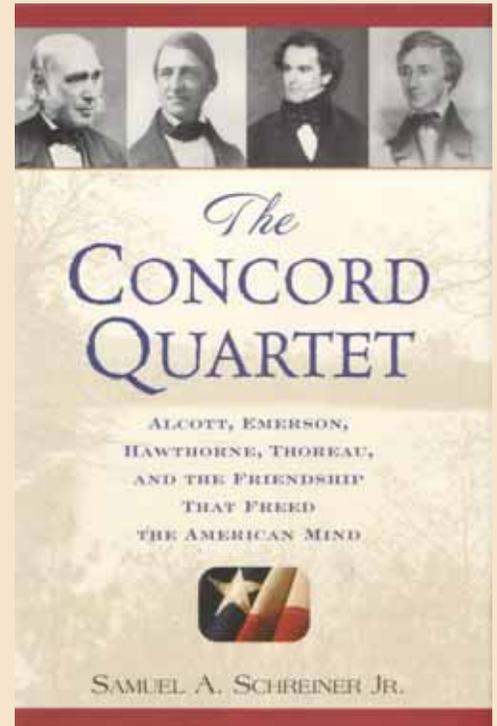
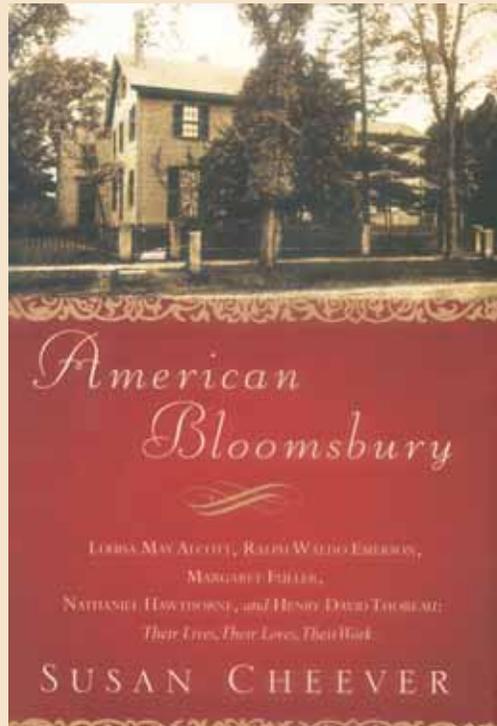
Susan Cheever, *American Bloomsbury*.
New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006.
241 pages with photographs

Samuel A. Schreiner Jr., *The Concord Quartet: Alcott, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and the Friendship that Freed the American Mind*. New York: John Wiley, 2006. 246 pages with photographs, bibliography, and index.

The most felicitous thing about Susan Cheever's *American Bloomsbury* is its title. Cheever's subject is the constellation of writers and thinkers centered in Concord, Massachusetts, in the quarter century before the Civil War—Ralph Waldo Emerson, who settled in Concord with his second wife, Lidian, in 1835; Henry David Thoreau, a native Concordian deeply suspicious of his neighbors, as they were of him, who eventually came to regard the town as “the most estimable place in the universe”; philosopher and sometime educator Amos Bronson Alcott and his talented daughter Louisa May, who lived precariously in Concord between various adventures and misadventures elsewhere; Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne, who spent their early married years (1842–45) in an old parsonage across town built by Emerson's grandfather, and who returned to make their home in Concord in 1852 and 1860–64; and Margaret Fuller, herself not a resident of Concord but a friend of Emerson and the Hawthornes and a frequent visitor in the late 1830s and early 1840s until her life took her elsewhere. A peripheral but by no means inconsequential figure was John Brown, who came to Concord in the 1850s to preach abolition and raise funds for a secret project that would turn out to presage and help precipitate the Civil War.

A pastoral town of some 2,000 inhabitants fifteen miles west of Boston and connected to it in 1844 by the railroad, Concord, thanks largely to Emerson, came to be the hub of ante-bellum intellectual life far more than conservative Boston or bustling, rowdy New York. But an American Bloomsbury? The notion seems oxymoronic. Concord was provincial, ingenuous, upright and, in its rarefied fashion, signally democratic and American; Bloomsbury was quintessentially English, urban and urbane, upper-middle class in background, modernist in bent, and, for most of its members, polymorphously perverse in bed.

“Bloomsbury,” of course, was the network of friends—emerging writers, painters, and intellectuals—who gathered in an unfashionable section of London near the British Museum in the years just before and after World War I. The group originated



with the children of Victorian man of letters Leslie Stephen—Thoby, Vanessa, Virginia, and Adrian, who rented a house in Bloomsbury after Leslie's death—and Thoby's Cambridge University classmates Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Clive Bell, and John Maynard Keynes, among others; later figures would include art critic Roger Fry, whose 1910 exhibition “Manet and the Post Impressionists” brought modernism to England, painter Duncan Grant, and novelist E. M. Forster. Virginia would marry Leonard Woolf, a Jewish political intellectual; Vanessa, Clive Bell, a chronic philanderer. Among the others, Strachey was openly homosexual, Grant primarily homosexual, Forster secretly homosexual, and Keynes and Adrian Stephen homosexual in youth. Vanessa would have affairs with Roger Fry (briefly) and Duncan Grant (lifelong), who fathered Vanessa's child Angelica, who went on to marry one of her father's former lovers, David Garnett. With Bloomsbury, the plot nearly always thickens. Setting out to live bravely and honestly, Bloomsburyans sometimes found themselves enmeshed, like Melville's young idealist Pierre, in “unique follies and sins,” though seldom disastrously. Between their various liaisons, they also produced a substantial body of important work: Virginia's novels and essays; Vanessa's and Duncan's painting; Leonard Woolf's studies in history, economics, and politics, along with five volumes of autobiography; and Maynard Keynes's revolutionary contributions to economic theory and practical management of the British economy during World War II.

What links Concord and Bloomsbury is, first of all, their origin in generational revolt. Like the youth of the later 1960s, both groups were in deep reaction against the world their parents had made. “When in the grim, grey, rainy January days of 1901 Queen

Victoria lay dying,” Leonard Woolf later reminisced, “we already felt that we were living in an age of incipient revolt and that we ourselves were mortally involved in this revolt.” The revolt was “against the social, political, religious, moral, intellectual, and artistic institutions” of the past and on behalf of a new idea of civilization as free, rational, humane, and dedicated to “truth and beauty. It was all immensely exhilarating.” Save for the allusion to Queen Victoria and 1901, the words could as easily have been Emerson’s on the morning atmosphere of the American 1830s and ’40s (“The ancient manners were giving way . . . There was a new consciousness”) or Charles Reich’s from his 1970 *The Greening of America* on the bell-bottomed counter-culturists who seemed about to overhaul corporate society (“There is a revolution coming. It will not be like revolutions of the past. . . . Its ultimate creation will be a new and enduring wholeness and beauty At the heart of everything is what we shall call a change of consciousness”).

Concord and Bloomsbury were intellectual and artistic movements; they were social reform movements; and they were collections of people with the emotional and sexual entanglements of people anywhere, refracted through the mores of time and place. This last invokes what Raymond Carver called “the human noise,” and because ideas emerge from and have reference to particular environments—“If you speak of the age,” Emerson remarked, “you mean your own platoon of people”—such noise, sensitively registered, belongs as properly to a vital and complete account of any movement as do its intellectual and artistic achievements. The deepest concern of both groups was with how to live, which necessarily included how to love, though as New Englanders inheriting the old Puritan austerities, few of the Concordians (Margaret Fuller was a partial exception) could give erotic love its unsublimated due, even in the privacy of journals or letters.

Readers interested in the Concord group might profitably begin with Harmon Smith’s well-researched and eminently readable *My Friend, My Friend* (1999) (on the Emerson/Thoreau relationship, with side trips into other figures) or Philip McFarland’s *Hawthorne in Concord*. Better yet, they might sample the lively and amusing primary writings—the Concord sections of Hawthorne’s *American Notebooks*, for example, or Margaret Fuller’s 1842 journal, written during a five-week stay with the Emersons. They should avoid Susan Cheever’s *American Bloomsbury*. Louisa May Alcott has become respectable reading for adults, especially in her novel *Moods* (1864), whose heroine is positioned in a love triangle with suitors modeled upon Emerson and Thoreau; but *American Bloomsbury* belongs securely where Alcott used to be, in the section labeled “Young Adult.” Intellectually, its brief synopses of Emerson’s, Thoreau’s, and Fuller’s ideas are measurably below those found in any good anthology, and its discussion of Concord reformism, aside from a peeking-through-the-fingers account of John Brown and his sons brutally dispatching five Southern sympathizers in Kansas, amounts largely to a quirks ‘n’ quacks litany of eccentricities and ineptitudes (to be fair, Bronson Alcott was fertile in both; a more impractical man never lived).

Cheever’s strong suit, comparatively, is personal relations and her aim is a praiseworthy one: to move freely among her characters in order to show events from a variety of perspectives. In *Bloomsbury: A House of Lions* (1979), Leon Edel had attempted something of the same sort—a group biography of nine intercon-

nected Bloomsburyans—but Edel was an accomplished biographer who could write without oversimplification for an intelligent general audience. Cheever cannot, nor does her publisher seem to have asked for sophistication or checked for factual accuracy. Mistakes abound. Two pages into the book we are told that in 1842 the Emersons lost their nine-year-old-son (Waldo died of scarlet fever at five); on the same page it is implied that Melville visited Hawthorne in Concord during Sophia’s absence (the visit took place in Lenox, at the far end of the state; except for his brief but intense friendship with Hawthorne, Melville had no personal relationship with anyone in Cheever’s group).

One reads *American Bloomsbury* with the kind of anticipation that used to be reserved for the dentist’s chair, waiting for the next twinge of pain. A knowledgeable graduate student could have corrected most of the errors in Cheever’s book, but Simon & Schuster seems to have been more concerned with marketability at Barnes & Noble. One imagines Cheever receiving a steady flow of emails from her editor: “Remember, Susan, sex sells!” Lacking the smoking guns strewn everywhere in Bloomsbury, Cheever makes do with undischarged cap pistols—the ambiguously erotic rhetoric of mid nineteenth century correspondence—and a good deal of speculative license, or licentiousness. The chapter “Louisa in Love . . . Henry David Thoreau” has Thoreau rowing the smitten girl on the Concord River; the feelings in *Moods* are projected backward and rendered as biography, notwithstanding that Louisa was all of eight or nine years old at the time. Margaret Fuller, marked “by a total absence of those charms which might have drawn to her bewildering flatteries” (as she described her alter ego, Miranda, in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*), becomes for Cheever the “glamorous” figure Fuller felt she ought to be, a “sexy muse” exchanging “love notes” with Emerson and captivating Hawthorne (“a rat with women”) despite his self-confessed aversion to female plainness and his dislike of aggressively intellectual women of any sort. “What really went on,” Cheever asks, when Fuller roomed near Emerson’s study (Emerson’s bedroom was upstairs) or when Fuller and Hawthorne walked alone late one night. “Was there kissing? Was there sex?” At this point even Cheever bows to cultural probability and concedes that “all these people were high minded prudes, usually too wrapped up in Goethe to be thinking about the carnal aspect of love.” Nonetheless, Cheever has a jealous Emerson forcing the Hawthornes’ eviction from the Old Manse after coming upon Hawthorne and Fuller chatting harmlessly in the woods. (Emerson hadn’t the authority to evict the Hawthornes even if he wanted to, which there is no evidence he did.)

If Cheever’s sensationalism is foolish, so is her deflation of it. The Goethe whom Fuller revered and took to heart counseled a full and passionate immersion in experience that Fuller would happily have enacted in New England if she could, and did enact when she got to Rome. Even in ostensibly muffled Concord, the human noise of Fuller and others was there to hear if Cheever knew how to listen for it. In her 1842 journal, Fuller describes a dinner-table scene at the Emersons, cited in part by Cheever with minimal comment and revealing an almost Bloomsburian erotic convolutedness despite the fact that no bedding is in sight. Fuller:

Yesterday [Lidian] said to me, at dinner, I have not yet been out, will you be my guide for a little walk this afternoon. I said [“] I am engaged to walk with Mr E. but [“] – (I was going to say, I will walk with you first,) when L.

burst into tears. The family were all present, they looked at their plates. Waldo looked on the ground, but soft & serene as ever. I said, "My dear Lidian, certainly I will go with you." "No![" she said ["I do not want you to make any sacrifice, but I do feel perfectly desolate, and forlorn, and I thought if I once got out, the fresh air would do me good, and that with you, I should have courage, but go with Mr E. I will not go [.]"]

I hardly knew what to say, but I insisted on going with her, & then she insisted on going so that I might return in time for my other walk. Waldo said not a word: he retained that sweetness of look, but never offered to do the least thing. I can never admire him enough at such times; he is so true to himself.

The players in this Chekhovian tragicomedy include 1) Fuller herself, who wanted more (or other) than Emerson could give her, knowing "perfectly well," as Lidian did, that her appeal for him was intellectual and lasted only as long as "I could fill up the time with thoughts"; 2) Lidian the neglected wife, long eclipsed by the ghost of Emerson's first wife, Ellen, and now, she felt, by Fuller, who on her part both envied Lidian's role as wife and mother ("nothing could be nobler, nor more consoling than to be his wife") and proudly scorned it; 3) Henry Thoreau, still in his literary apprenticeship and living for a time with the Emersons, chivalrically attached to Lidian and cordially despising Fuller, a feeling amply reciprocated; 4) the young poet Ellery Channing, Thoreau's best friend and sibling rival for Emerson's attention, who was married to Fuller's sister Ellen but openly pined for the lively, intellectual Caroline Sturgis, whom Fuller also in some fashion loved (as she did Sturgis's friends Anna Barker and Samuel Gray Ward, who devastated her by marrying each other) and to whom Emerson wrote paternal/erotic letters whose intentions were probably as baffling to the writer as to the recipient; and 5) Emerson, benign, speechless, and utterly uncomprehending of the meaning and necessity of the histrionic spectacle before him. Bloomsbury itself could hardly offer more of a muddle. The difference between Bloomsbury and Concord is not simply that of erotic indulgence versus restraint. Bloomsbury made a point of trying to understand and sympathetically adjust human relationships, with deference not to rigid principle but to the needs of the parties within the situation at hand; this was central to its notion of being "civilized." Concord, brilliant as it was intellectually, was soul-obsessed, fettered with New England inhibitions, and emotionally often at sea.

Scenes such as Fuller describes are more than curiosities of local color. Emerson's letters to Sturgis, for example, would figure prominently in his essay "Friendship," a sublimated discussion of erotic love. Thoreau's relationship to Emerson—"a tragedy in more than five acts," Thoreau called it—expresses itself in the posture of unbeholdenness he adopts in *Walden*, in which Emerson, on whose land he squatted and whose patronage accounted for most of his non agricultural earnings in the Walden years, is alluded to only anonymously as one of those mentors from whom he learned nothing. Most dramatically, there is Fuller herself, an agonized figure caught between her would-be independence of mind and soul and the necessity of continence (a theme in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*) forced upon her as an unmarried and probably unmarriageable woman in a sexually unforgiving New England world. On the subject of her then-virginity, Cheever

quotes a poignant confession of Fuller's—"With the intellect I always have [.] always shall overcome, but that is not half of the work. The life, the life Oh my God! Shall the life never be sweet?"

Cheever's treatment of this and other themes occurs in short, poorly organized, and ill-arranged chapters that trivialize their material by supposing an audience unwilling or unable to deal with its complexities. Group biographies like Cheever's ought to be written, and written well, if only to remind us that literature is the work of *persons* and grows out of textured lives ruled strongly by private urgencies even as they unfold within the gestalt of a public culture. One of the best recent efforts at group biography is Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), on the origins of Pragmatism in Chauncey Wright, Charles Saunders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Though rarely a work of original scholarship, Menand's book is deeply informed by scholarship and is a fascinating excursion not only into its main subject but into strange and unexpected marginalia that Menand explores with lucidity, elegance, and wit.

Samuel A. Schreiner's *The Concord Quartet* is not on the order of Menand's work, but save for its grandiose sub-title—*Alcott, Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and the Friendship that Freed the American Mind*—it is a lively, well-crafted book that provides a useful context for readers acquainted with the writers' work but not their milieu and a comfortable entry point for those who barely know the writers at all. Like Cheever, Schreiner is a journalist with several books to his credit, but unlike her he has done his homework and his editors have been wise enough not to ask him to compete with the *National Enquirer*. Schreiner has a fine eye for the telling anecdote and makes excellent use of letters and journals as well as passages from the published writings, weaving his story together gracefully and within the larger political context of antebellum America's slouching toward Armageddon. There may be too much of Alcott here—even Emerson called him a "tedious archangel"—but Schreiner at least takes Alcott seriously, or as seriously as one can take an astral-vegetarian who would eat only vegetables that grew upward. Without missing the humor and humanity in his subjects, Schreiner never patronizes them or patronizes his readers.

If *Concord Quartet* never quite makes music, it is not simply because its four players don't harmonize—Hawthorne was almost pathologically shy; Alcott lived in Cloudland; and Emerson and Thoreau combined an impossibly high ideal of friendship with a social unease that made actual friendship nearly unattainable—but also because Schreiner avoids both the subtly psychological and the intellectual. We never learn *which* friendship "freed the American mind," and *how*, and whether, indeed, the American mind was or ever has been "freed," not to mention freed from what. Though rarefied individuals themselves, what the Transcendentalists sought above all was an intellectual elevation of common Americans that would narrow and ideally close the gap between high culture, low culture, and no culture at all. A book like Schreiner's is an effort in that direction, but its achievement is limited by what commercial publishing seems to regard as a mental ceiling for any work directed toward a general audience. One thinks again of Menand's *Metaphysical Club*—a *great* read in addition to its other virtues—and imagines a comparable *Transcendental Club*.

Robert Milder is Professor of English at Washington University in St. Louis.

On the Brink: Khrushchev's Foreign Policy

Review of Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 670 pages with notes, index, and illustrations

In July 1958, at the height of the cold war, I had completed an intensive six-month Russian language course at the old Army Language School in Monterey, California, where my instructors were, I learned during the Hungarian Uprising in November 1956, virulent anti-Soviet Russian émigrés. Two years later I sat in a barbed-wire compound, an isolated listening post on the moors of Midlothian, Scotland, headset on, and reel-to-reel tape recorder running. Like other young airmen in a vast arc around the Soviet Union, my chief mission was to eavesdrop on the communications of the Soviet Air Force, and especially their heavy bombers.

On one particular afternoon—dusk would already have fallen two time zones east in Eurasia—our shift notified our sergeant and analysts that not only had Soviet heavy bomber traffic been exceptionally busy that day but surprisingly all of our target aircraft were on exposed staging bases around the periphery of the USSR: none had returned to their more secure, interior home fields, farther from their cold-war targets. A short time later my shift ended. As I left the compound, it was being locked down: no one not on that assigned shift could enter the workplace, guards were increased, live ammunition was issued. In security conditions of maximum alert, no one dared speak about his work off base. For the next three days, in the paranoid atmosphere of “loose lips sink ships,” as far as I knew World War Three was beginning: the Soviet Air Force was poised to strike, and worldwide American and allied forces had gone on full alert, our base was locked down, and no one could say a word.

I knew something dramatic, even important was happening, but what? Around the globe in Washington (and unknown to

me until I read Fursenko and Naftali's new book), Yuri Gvozdev, an undercover Soviet military intelligence officer, was instructed to “send a clear message directly to the White House.” Indeed he had urgently arranged a luncheon meeting with a journalist close to Vice President Richard Nixon. His message: “War is close.... If [there is] war...Russia will...attack the United States directly.” The source of this ominous warning was Nikita Khrushchev,

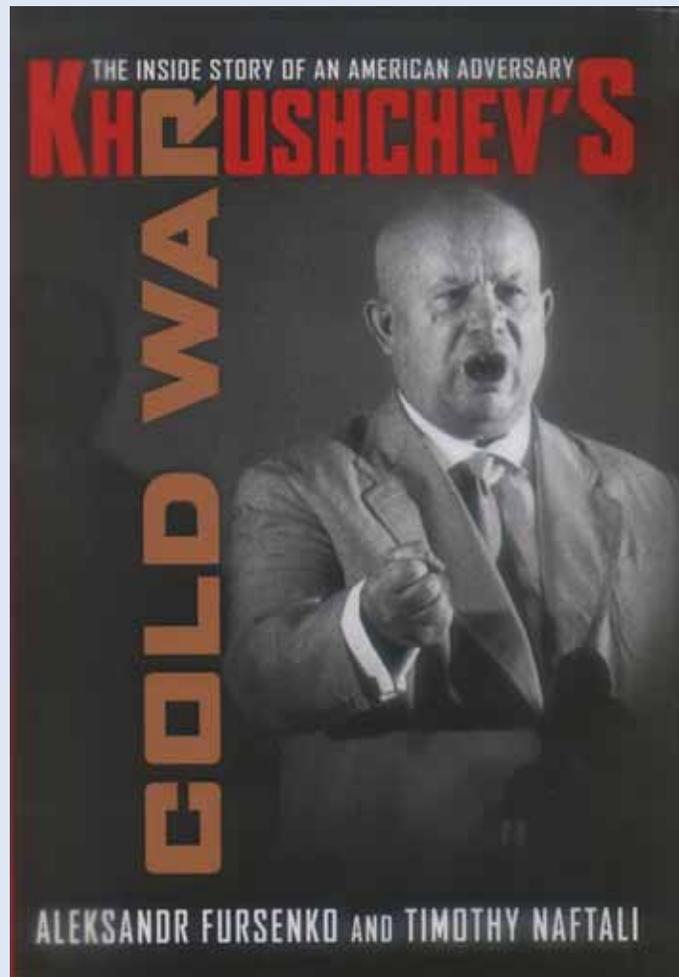
who was fully aware of the risks in the situation. In Moscow he explained to a visitor, Egypt's President Nasser, “We are now involved in a game that is being played at a very high speed, and in which everyone has to act quickly, without being able to judge what the other players are going to do.”

Movement toward this dangerous moment—the world on the brink of total war—in fact, had been blithely initiated at 5:30 a.m. on July 14, when a group of army officers entered the royal palace in Baghdad, executed Iraq's royal family, and declared a republic with a neutralist foreign policy, ending the monarchy's alliance with Great Britain. The British demanded American military action, rightfully seeing in the coup not only the sinister hand of Khrushchev himself but a major challenge to their influence in the Middle East.

Khrushchev was no bumbling fool¹ and had indeed been actively spreading Soviet influence throughout the Middle East for three years. Still, the Iraqi coup came as an unexpected surprise

to the Kremlin. The coup's leader, Brigadier General Qasim, was virtually unknown in Moscow, where leaders could only speculate whether or not he was even a communist. Nevertheless, Khrushchev was elated with this seemingly fortuitous revolt. “Can we imagine a Baghdad Pact without Baghdad?” Khrushchev mused. “This consideration alone,” he added, “is enough to give [John Foster] Dulles a nervous breakdown.”

With this direct challenge to the American and Western interests in the oil-rich Middle East, President Eisenhower hastily dispatched the Sixth Fleet and the marines to Lebanon. The



British, recognizing that the Iraqi revolution could signal the “virtual end of the British Empire in the Middle East,” proposed to invade Iraq themselves with American support, to send their forces into Jordan, and even to remove Nasser. In London, Moscow, and Washington, leaders assumed they had no alternative to military action. When American intelligence detected provocative Soviet military exercises in Bulgaria, Ike conceded to his secretary of state, “We are really at war.”

Fortunately, at the last moment, informal communication links were established—the direct hotline between Moscow and Washington was years in the future—and the worldwide alert, for both American and Soviet forces, expired.

Khrushchev was no bumbling fool and had indeed been actively spreading Soviet influence throughout the Middle East for three years.

Back in Scotland a week later I saw pictures in *Life* magazine of Marines being offered ice cream cones on Beirut’s beaches, and I sensed that there was some connection between the unprecedented behavior of Soviet bombers I had helped monitor a week earlier and the Marines’ amphibious assault. The “need to know” culture of our monitoring station, however, prevented me from asking what had occurred and our officers from telling.

Providing a definitive glimpse into the Kremlin during these days—during the Suez crisis, several Berlin crises, and the Cuban missile crisis—are historians Fursenko and Naftali. The former is a well known Russian historian and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. His American colleague is at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs. In 1997, working with documents released from former Soviet archives in the mid 1990s, they published the frightening “*One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964*.” But a casual remark in Khrushchev’s dictated memoirs had alerted them to the fact that the real inside story of his years in power could be found only in still secret “minutes and the protocols of [Party and government] meetings.” These materials from the Soviet presidential archive became accessible to scholars only in 2003.

The USSR’s diplomatic history has long been known. The protocols and stenographic reports reveal what Khrushchev shared aloud with his colleagues, who backed and who opposed him, and sometimes, how close the world came to war. They revise the Cuban crisis: for example, it has long been assumed that President Kennedy’s offer to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey clinched the diplomatic settlement. Newly available notes reveal, however, that Khrushchev had already made his decision to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba before Robert Kennedy conveyed the offer to dismantle the American threat. In the end, Kennedy thought he had given up outmoded missiles the United States really didn’t need; Khrushchev was convinced he had gained a concession from the Americans they didn’t need to offer.

Soviet presidential papers reveal that the Berlin crisis Khrushchev sparked in 1958 had its origins in a routine

Presidium session: only in retrospect was it “one of the most important Kremlin meetings of his era.” His spontaneous speech, which proposed abandoning the Potsdam agreements at the end of WWII and therefore renouncing the entire basis of European stability since 1945, was entirely of his own invention, having been preceded by no diplomatic, and no military planning. Unmentioned at the time, uncited in his *Memoirs*,² was Khrushchev’s definitive “meniscus” speech four years later on June 8, 1962, during the next Berlin crisis. In it he advocated a conscious, ongoing policy of provoking permanent international tension. It would “deter the Americans from taking advantage of the Soviet bloc while they remained ahead in the superpower rivalry.” Previously unknown, this speech to a rump meeting of the Presidium, probably contains the clearest theoretical rationale for Khrushchev’s threatening Soviet cold-war behavior.

Reporting another Cold-War episode, the authors of this book are the first scholars to see the actual interrogation of Francis Gary Powers, whose U-2 spy plane was shot down over Sverdlovsk on May Day, 1960. Such are but a few of the numerous diplomatic revelations found in the most secret papers of Khrushchev’s government and here skillfully integrated into a tense, dense, and detailed narrative by Fursenko and Naftali.

What role did electronic surveillance, practiced by both sides, play in these perilous times? The mountains of intelligence we gathered undoubtedly affected strategic planning and identified targets, and intercepted weather reports allowed SAC daily to map incursions that were never unleashed. But here the only recorded moment when world leaders actually utilized intelligence from the vast electronic spying enterprise was the interception of transmissions from Soviet ships in route to Cuba. The sources of those messages were correctly identified, but they could not be deciphered.

Max J. Okenfuss is Associate Professor in the Department of History, Washington University in St. Louis and American Editor of Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas.

¹ The standard biography, *Khrushchev*, is by William Taubman (New York: Free Press, 2003). A shorter introduction is his recent “The Khrushchev Period,” in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 3, *The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 268–91. Among a vast literature, still useful for its more sympathetic view of Khrushchev’s domestic reform program, is Martin McCauley, *Khrushchev and Khrushchevism* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987). On Khrushchev as the forerunner to Gorbachev and *perestroika*, see the discussion in Theodore Taranovski, ed., *Reform in Modern Russian History: Progress or Cycle?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 319–91.

² Nikita Khrushchev and Sergei Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev: Reformer, 1945–1964* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

Defining Manhood in Chinese Literature

Review of Martin W. Huang, *Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 284 pages with glossary, bibliography, and index

Martin Huang is Professor of Chinese in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at University of California, Irvine. His other published monographs are *Literati and Self-Re/Presentation: Autobiographical Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995); and *Desire and Fictional Narrative in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001). He is currently completing a fourth, on friendship, inspired by a comparative literature course he once had with a Washington University mentor, the late Professor William H. Matheson. Huang also edited the collection of essays *Snake's Legs: Sequels, Continuations, Rewritings, and Chinese Fiction* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004) and has published important essays in the major journals of his field.

What is masculinity, after all the debate in recent years about gender identity? What were the “masculinities” of late imperial China? As Martin Huang notes, “Masculinity is a prescriptive concept about what a man should be rather than a descriptive notion of what a man actually is. It is a man’s ideal of himself or the ideal of man shared in a particular group of men” (185). Not surprisingly, when we explore the richly varied textual traditions of China, many different prescriptions appear, and some are radically different from others.

Here Martin Huang concentrates on “late imperial China,” the Ming and Qing periods, specifically 1368 to 1644 and 1644 to 1911, but more generally from about 1500 to about 1900. This period has drawn the attention of scholars from all disciplines of late because of its enormous wealth of textual resources in Chinese-held collections and abroad. Many are interested in it as the final stage of pure “traditional Chinese culture” before the rapid influx of new ideas and institutions, often via Japan, as China suffered successive political, military, and cultural defeats at the hands of Western powers. But in fact China had experienced other periods of intense cultural exchange (through the introduction of Buddhism, second through seventh centuries; the cosmopolitan Tang, eighth and ninth centuries; and when part of the far-flung Mongol empire, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. And under the imperial rule of a Central Asian people, the Manchus, Qing period Han Chinese intellectuals had engaged in a period of soul-searching about cultural and moral issues probably unrivaled before then in East Asia.

In this, his third monograph since completing his doctorate at Washington University in 1991, Huang explores various presentations of how masculinity should be manifested in essays written—and actions taken—by major thinkers before and after the cataclysmic change of dynasties in the seventeenth century. But as a student of literature, he devotes most of his analyses to novels of the Ming and Qing, texts in which various models of manhood are embodied and critiqued. Huang’s range of reading

is remarkable; he moves with grace and confidence from popular texts written to guide young men to becoming responsible householders through intense philosophical debates to major novels to obscure works that reveal their authors’ struggles with this troubling social definition. His choice of texts is imaginative and highly productive; his observations are illuminating and likely to inspire further research and writing. His findings are not simple or easily generalized.

As in every society, masculinity was defined in contrast to what was not man: “woman,” as an abstraction or as a prescriptive category, and the castrato (eunuchs having served as palace guards for more than two thousand years by the time of the Qing). Since the early Han (early centuries bce), the concepts of *yin* and *yang* had juxtaposed complementary opposites; *yang* was “masculine” in contrast to *yin*. But each living entity, each human situation, has aspects of both; *yang* is active compared to the passive *yin*, and these aspects frequently change in position of dominance. Huang’s study begins with the crisis caused by the fall of the Ming court. How could a great *Chinese* dynasty fall to the military forces of northerners who enjoyed little of the material culture or traditions of China? Why had China’s generals and statesmen allowed the Ming state to become so weak that it virtually collapsed before the enemy, leaving its emperor to slay his own daughter and urge his wife to suicide before hanging himself in desperation? What happened to the moral superiority of Chinese traditions? Should all loyal ministers have died in the fighting or, failing that, committed suicide? How could a “true man” justify even surviving, much less facing his friends and family, under those circumstances? Should men have been more active, less reflective—more martial, less literary? Was men’s self-indulgence in cultural pursuits, their concern with aesthetics and literature, a major cause of that political disaster? Clearly these were questions of the utmost importance; survivors and their descendants wrote responses to them for many decades afterward. Reflections on the Ming fall appeared not only in essays; fiction allegorized that calamity by restaging it in many guises.

Huang looks, as did those writers, back to earlier periods of Chinese history for inspiration and models of what masculinity entails. Early philosophers presented influential definitions of the characteristics appropriate for an active man. They include self-discipline, moral integrity, resourcefulness, courage—and the insight that comes from learning. But how much should one be independent, and to what degree should one devote his energies to serving a political leader? Huang brings up one of the most vexed situations in China’s past, the dilemma of the historian Sima Qian (d. ca. 90 bce). As an advisor to a very active and irascible emperor, Wu of the Han, Sima Qian had stood up for a defeated general who had not committed suicide, but who had surrendered in order to serve his lord another day. The emperor was outraged by Sima’s position and ordered him executed. But in accordance with a practice that was then allowed but seldom chosen, Sima Qian elected to be castrated instead, so that he could live to complete his father’s life’s work, a universal history. Castration was an unthinkable humiliation: not only did it

involve choosing mutilation of one's body, the gift from one's parents, it also guaranteed that the family line could not be carried on. On both counts, this was an unpardonable sin against his family. Yet Sima Qian defended his choice as a *filial* act, that of ensuring the immortality of his father's—and his own—work, and his family name, and in a famous letter to an acquaintance he begged his readers for understanding. Huang writes: "In other words, the removal of his genitals, the bodily signifier of his masculinity, paradoxically served only to enhance his manhood.... Sima Qian claimed that by virtue of this seemingly unfilial act, he was in fact accomplishing the greatest filial act—bringing honor to his ancestors by completing the unfinished work of his father. This was the ultimate act of masculinity" (23). Not surprisingly, Sima Qian's history is filled with portraits of problematic "masculine" figures whose resolution, courage, and foolhardiness brought ruin for themselves and others. In his commentaries he insisted that a brave man need not commit suicide to vindicate his honor. And, by implication, one need not share his ruler's definitions of appropriate behavior for men.

The historian's self-sacrifice provoked innumerable reconsiderations through the years. Might political service by definition be emasculating—since ministers served in a subservient, *yin*, position to the *yang* authority of the emperor? Since time immemorial, the analogy of the relationship between husband and wife and emperor and official was contemplated and debated. Female chastity was always prized: the ideal (but not necessarily the practice, even among the elite) was that a woman had only one husband, to whom she was faithful to death. Histories dutifully record the names of women who, when threatened with rape—especially during invasion and conquest—chose suicide over violation. Did ministers owe their lives to their lords in the same way? Were women the embodiments of virtue in society, because they had the courage to commit suicide while their men tried to rationalize avoiding the same fate? These questions were of central importance in the second half of the seventeenth century, as those who went into retirement criticized their fellows who took office under the new dynasty—and both mourned those who were martyrs for the fallen Ming.

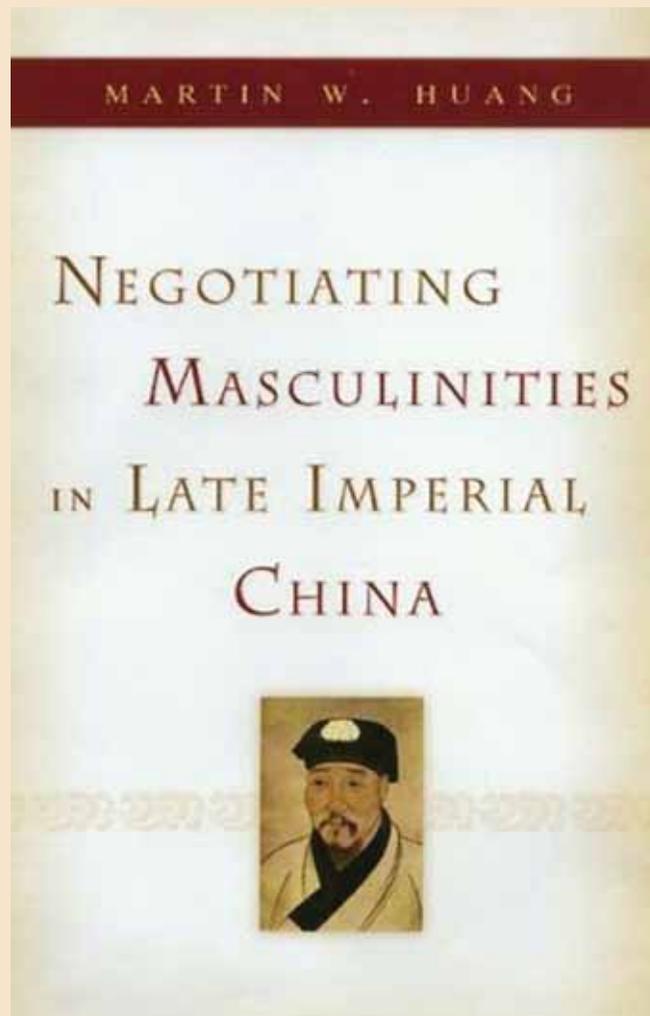
Some of the writers most prominent in this debate have been well studied elsewhere; Huang's study serves to place them in a larger context. His contribution lies in a powerful exploration of

the life of one man and its many ramifications. This was Xu Wei (1521–93), a talented man from a broken and troubled family who, like so many others, aspired to a high position but was never more than the assistant to people in powerful offices. Huang explores Xu's experience to see how a "disenfranchised Ming literatus tried to come to terms with his problematic manhood and the specific masculinizing strategies he employed in negotiating his gender identity" (53). That is, having failed to achieve office, he did not fulfill the "masculine" duty to make something of himself and bring glory on his family. Worse yet, when his superior was cashiered during a power struggle, he

found himself on the other side, while one of his fellow secretaries committed suicide to protest the treatment of their patron. Driven to a frenzy, Xu Wei tried deafening himself with an awl and emasculating himself by smashing his testicles with a hammer, perhaps in a mismanaged suicide attempt of his own. Was this his way to act heroic, to justify his manhood? Or was it an acknowledgment of his political—and moral—emasculating? Later he killed his wife after he became convinced that she was having an adulterous affair, an action condoned by law (but only when she was caught in the act). Perhaps this was Xu's way to try to reassert his male position, at least in the home. Throughout his career he wrote a number of well-known plays that dealt with assertions of one's authentic self, and with women who disguised themselves as men in order to serve higher goals and to demonstrate their true talents. One of his heroines was Mulan—but Xu's story was certainly not what the Disney movie was later to present. To him, as to Sima Qian, gender was performed, not a matter of body

parts, and honor and integrity had little to do with gender designations.

Chapters 5 through 8 of Huang's study are devoted to representations of masculinity in Ming and Qing novels. The primary characters in these texts include generals, rulers (bandit chiefs and emperors), administrators and advisors, great lovers, and ruffians. In the more complex novels, those receiving the more extensive readings here, male figures often embody more than one of these roles and regularly problematize such characteristics as valor, literary ability, sensitivity to others, and devotion to duty, to friends, or to family. Implicit in these characterizations are questions of what really constitutes a man: is it properly intellectual ability, physical prowess, or a combination of both? Is being a good lover



the product of physical attributes or artistic sensitivities? What constitutes “heroism,” and what role might revenge play in asserting one’s honor as a man? Does the overdevelopment of one characteristic cripple a man in other areas and thereby compromise his “masculinity”? What Huang finds, repeatedly, is that these attributes, even the definitions of masculinity themselves, are not so simple when one reads these texts carefully. Clearly China’s novelists realized their complexity.

One issue that recurs in novels of romance is cross-dressing and the similarity in beauty of men and women. China’s literary tradition is replete with poems written by men in the voice of women. These compositions allowed their writers to express the feelings they imagined women might have; not surprisingly, many of their personae were women longing for their men to return. But there has been a steady current in such poetry of allegory: in what ways is the male poet like the woman of the poem? In her steadfast devotion to her lord? In her helplessness when being manipulated by others? In her inability to make any difference in the world? In her feelings of loss and betrayal? Recent studies of poetry by women in late imperial China reveal that many women wrote indistinguishably from their male counterparts, expressing similar concerns in comparable diction. In romantic novels of late imperial China, the male lovers are regularly described as being effeminate and thus desirable to both men and women in their physical beauty. In some novels this attractiveness is a sign of elite status and careful education.

After about 1800 the heroes in Chinese novels are less likely to be effeminate in actions, even if they are in appearance. Masculinity seems to be demonstrated by military prowess, in strategy and in the use of weapons, even as earlier conventions of fiction came to be subverted or parodied. Fiction of this period was also more likely to be autobiographical than previously, Huang demonstrates. Not that one’s experiences would be simply retold unchanged; novelists of the middle Qing frequently attributed their ideal capacities to their heroes as if to claim these exaggerated successes for themselves. Wen Suchen, the protagonist of China’s longest novel, *Yesou puyan* (Humble Words of an Old Rustic), is a “hero” (*yingxiong*) in all terms: he is a sagely military strategist, a learned scholar, a capable physician, and a remarkable lover. Yet his accomplishments are regularly undercut by his mother, who can always find elements of self-interest in each apparently selfless act. In this way the older woman becomes the embodiment of virtue in contrast to her son, who can never quite achieve the level of self-discipline she expects. This produces a noteworthy tension between morality and heroism, and between self-reflection and activism, that is never fully resolved in later writings. The novel does not question Confucian values, however. Instead, one of the hero’s friends

In romantic novels of late imperial China, the male lovers are regularly described as being effeminate and thus desirable to both men and women in their physical beauty

serves as a Confucian missionary to Europe, where he converts former Christians by the thousands. But despite this optimism, a contemporary work allegorizes the threat of opium that would be realized several decades later, with the military defeats of the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century and the spread of addiction thereafter.

Huang’s final chapter summarizes a number of didactic texts of the period, guides that prescribe behavior beneficial to the patrilineal family. They inform the reader how to be the exemplary son, grandson, and brother. Interestingly, most such texts warn against taking any advice from one’s wife. As a member of a different lineage, a woman’s loyalties may not be wholly the same as her husband’s, and one should be on guard against them. Clearly a man is to rely on his brothers in all important family matters. The second greatest danger to the family, these texts assert, is friends. If one becomes too devoted to his male friends, he is likely to lose sight of the needs of his patriline, these books assert. Many of these writers opined that it would be better to keep boys sheltered until they reach sufficient age to be self-reliant, based on years of careful study. This might help them develop an ability to endure and to accommodate all that life hands them. The young man’s greatest concern should be apprehension over whether any of his words or deeds might be detrimental to the family as a whole.

Martin Huang concludes his study with his own reflections on how traditional conceptions of masculinity have played out in more modern times. He focuses on Liang Qichao (1873–1929), a constitutional monarchist whose “revolutionary” ideas occasioned his exile in Japan during the last years of the Qing empire and a highly influential journalist in the early decades of the twentieth century. He and his contemporaries called on their fellow countrymen to develop the fighting spirit of ancient times (still alive in the bushido of Japan) and to throw off their effeminate weakness in response to the Manchu overlords and to Western incursions. To do so, physical education and military training for young men were key elements in China’s modernization process. To Liang and his successors, including Mao Zedong and the current leadership in Beijing, China had to assert its masculinity to ever regain its proper place in the world.

Throughout his study, Huang avoids essentializing China’s male writers of this period as any more or less “masculine” than those of previous periods and, by implication, those of other cultures and times. Instead, he asserts, “it would be more fruitful to explore what was unique about the ways in which late imperial Chinese men articulated their gender awareness or how they came to terms with the perceived challenges to their manhood” (201). This was his goal and precisely what he achieved.

Robert E. Hegel is Liselotte Dieckmann Professor of Comparative Literature and Professor of Chinese in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages and Literatures at Washington University in St. Louis.

Monster Mash:

The Night *Frankenstein* Was Born

Review of Dorothy Hoobler and Thomas Hoobler, *The Monsters: Mary Shelley and the Curse of Frankenstein* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006), 384 pages with index, bibliography, notes, and black and white images

Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler's *The Monsters: Mary Shelley and the Curse of Frankenstein*, as befits its breathless title, is a gripping biography of one of the most celebrated moments in nineteenth-century British literary history: the party hosted by George Gordon, Lord Byron, on the shores of Lake Geneva during the evening of June 16, 1816, at which Byron challenged his four guests—Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Percy's lover (and future wife) Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Mary's cousin Claire Clairmont, and Byron's personal physician, Dr. John Polidori—to compose the most harrowing original ghost story that they could imagine. That evening, as the Hooblers recount in precise detail, became the inspiration for an influential, albeit little-known Gothic text—Polidori's 1819 book *The Vampyre*—and one of the most important novels ever written in English, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus* (published in different editions in 1818, 1823, and 1831).

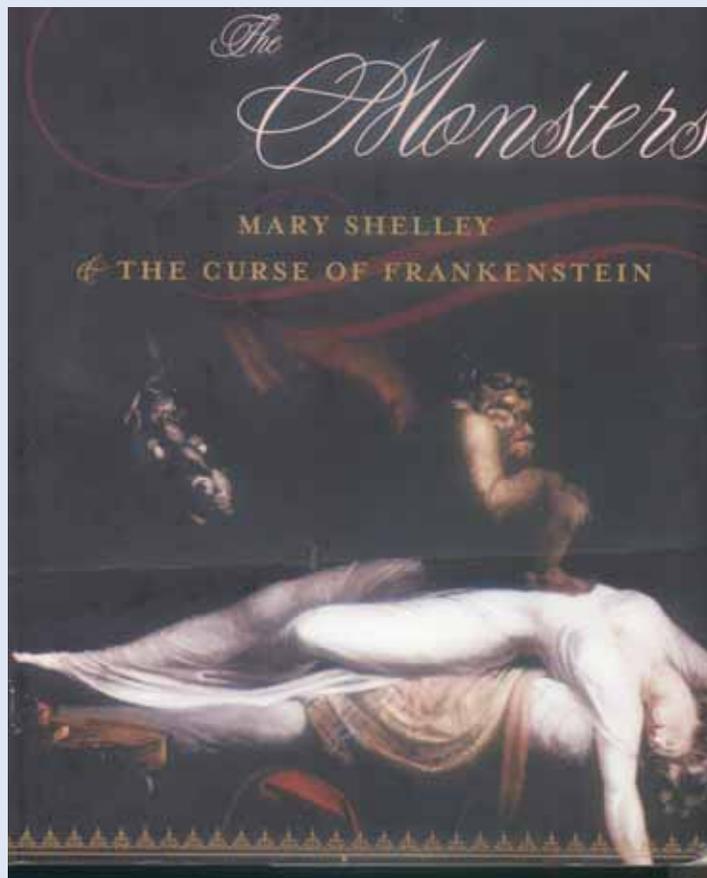
Frankenstein has become an indispensable text for cultural scholars, science fiction aficionados, literature professors, and, more generally, people in search of a good read. This development is one that Mary Shelley may not have predicted upon completing her famous book in May 1817, but the author, according to the Hooblers, would undoubtedly have welcomed the fascination that her creation has aroused. *Frankenstein*, apart from being one of the most assigned novels in high school and college literature courses, has inspired dozens of films, hundreds of imitators, and writers too numerous to mention. The novel's impact is now so profound that counting the number of science fiction texts—to say nothing of other genres—influenced by *Frankenstein* would take more time than any single person could profitably devote to

this task. Tallying *Frankenstein's* effect on larger social, cultural, and political issues—especially the book's influence on how Europeans, Americans, and people in other parts of the world conceive of science's practical effects, ethical ambiguities, and social utility—is, at this point, impossible. Mary Shelley's novel has become a touchstone of contemporary world culture, so much so that its title has become synonymous with scientific arrogance and overreach.

The Hooblers are particularly good at tracing the intellectual, moral, political, and personal influences that allowed *Frankenstein's* nineteen-year-old author to compose such a compelling novel. Their attention to the quotidian details of

Mary Shelley's life, as well as the intellectual turbulence that she experienced growing up as the daughter of two famous radicals (William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft), reveals a woman whose considerable intelligence was marred by the cold regard of her distant father, who withheld his affection despite his commitment to Mary's formal education, and by the memory of her deceased mother, who died eleven days after Mary's birth of an infection that resulted from a doctor using unsanitary equipment to remove an occluded placenta. The Hooblers discuss Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's written work with admirable analytical skill, even as they demonstrate just how unlikely a pairing these two people were. Godwin, it seems, lived the life of the mind until he met Wollstonecraft, who, despite arguing for friendship rather

than passion between the sexes in 1792's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, had endured a tempestuous infatuation (and eventual love affair) with the artist Henry Fuseli that ended when Fuseli withdrew his attention to marry one of the models depicted in his paintings. Godwin's virtually sexless existence ended when he met Wollstonecraft, whose courage took her to live in Paris in 1792 (during the French Revolution's Reign of Terror), whose daughter Fanny was born in 1793 (fathered by the American businessman and writer Gilbert Imlay), and whose despair upon



discovering that Imlay had taken a new mistress not long after Fanny's birth pushed her to attempt suicide (by taking a massive amount of laudanum). Godwin's experience of the world had not been as eventful as Wollstonecraft's (he once described himself as "bold and adventurous in opinions, not in life" [26]), but the 1793 publication of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*

The Hooblers are particularly good at tracing the intellectual, moral, political, and personal influences that allowed Frankenstein's nineteen-year-old author to compose such a compelling novel.

made him an overnight literary sensation in England. Godwin, among the many outré beliefs that he espoused during an era of England's national life that the Hooblers

modestly describe as conservative, considered marriage to be a form of slavery, so it may be surprising to the casual reader that he and Wollstonecraft ever formalized their union.

The Hooblers demystify the contradictory impulses, ideas, and insights that characterized Godwin and Wollstonecraft's life together; that influenced the complicated personalities of Godwin, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron; and that magnified the effect of these people on Mary Shelley. *The Monsters* derives its title not so much from Mary Shelley's literary creature as from the shoddy treatment that she received from the significant men in her life. The book amounts to an extended intellectual biography of Mary Shelley by way of Wollstonecraft, Godwin, Percy, and Byron, an expansiveness that, while commendable in its breadth, also leads the authors to endorse a questionable theory about Mary Shelley's development: that she, like Victor Frankenstein's creature, was as much an assemblage of parts as she was a whole person. In the Hooblers' telling of this tale, Mary Shelley becomes a woman formed, fashioned, or forged by the alternating devotion and inattention of her father,

Byron's status as an unrepentant womanizer is well known, while Percy's low regard for monogamy becomes evident to anyone who studies his poetry and his letters.

by the sexual openness of her lover (and eventual husband), and, to a lesser extent, by the friendship of the era's most notorious rake.

Mary becomes an object of admiration and pity, while Godwin, Percy, and Byron emerge as egomaniacal narcissists of the first order. Godwin's and Percy's frequently brusque behavior toward Mary comes to feel so oppressive that the reader wonders how she survived it, while Byron's deplorable treatment of Mary's cousin, Claire Clairmont, with whom Byron had a daughter named Allegra, verges on criminal negligence.

Byron's status as an unrepentant womanizer is well known, while Percy's low regard for monogamy becomes evident to anyone who studies his poetry and his letters. Godwin's emotional coldness may be a revelation to readers of *The Monsters* who know the man more as Mary Shelley's father than as the author of the novel *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), but perhaps the most powerful messages of the Hooblers' book are that all three men were bastards, that Mary Shelley futilely desired unconditional love and support from them, and that she was forced to endure their fickle temperaments. Had these themes been *The Monsters's* only attempts at diagnosing Mary's intellectual and emotional development, it would have offered a well-researched and sympathetic portrait of the woman's life. The Hooblers, after all, do not defame Godwin, Percy, or Byron by chronicling each man's personal deficiencies, or by acknowledging the difficulties that Mary's complicated relationship with each man entailed. The fact that Godwin and Percy endorsed notions of female equality even while treating Mary as something less than equal makes the Hooblers' understated denunciations of both men fair, if sententious. Byron, who considered women little more than objects for his sexual pleasure, treated Mary with comparative dignity and restraint throughout their friendship. This irony cannot compensate for Byron's shabby regard for Claire Clairmont (or for his other lovers), but it demonstrates that even so tarnished a figure (in the Hooblers' eyes, at least) as Byron—the man whom Lady Caroline Lamb once termed "mad, bad, and dangerous to know"—has redeeming qualities.

The Monsters, however, is not content with showing readers the intricacies, complications, and paradoxes of Mary Shelley's life, or of the people who were major contributors to her literary sensibilities. It instead advances an astounding claim about the relationship between the tragic creature whom Victor Frankenstein constructs in Shelley's famous novel and the author's own identity: "To young Mary Godwin, a motherless child, a heartbroken girl whose persona was molded and stitched together by men of cold and selfish genius, such an unloved being was found not just on the pages of her book, but in the mirror" (322). This assertion, in tone as much as content, is so fatuous, so brazen, and so wholly unbelievable that the reader can scarcely believe that the Hooblers propose it. The authors, however, seem genuine in their belief that Mary Shelley, as a result of an intermittently difficult childhood and an unconventional marriage, was born to write a novel about a protagonist who, in his anger and remorse at being actively despised by human society, conveniently embodies the contradictory impulses and identities of his author's patchwork persona.

This idea, perhaps fascinating as an exercise in speculative psychotherapy, nonetheless exemplifies the worst tendencies of psychobiography, that genre of literary criticism that attempts to read an author's work into her life, and vice versa. While a novelist's personal circumstances can (and do) affect her fiction, the connection that the Hooblers draw between Mary Shelley's private life and *Frankenstein's* central character challenges even the most sympathetic reader's patience. The Hooblers' proof for their fanciful assertion is nothing more than repeated observations that

Frankenstein contains events, images, and symbols so reminiscent of Mary's life that Victor Frankenstein's creature becomes a fictional projection of his author's hidden fears and anxieties.

The problem here is not the Hooblers' literary analysis of *Frankenstein*, which occupies two full chapters of *The Monsters* and is among the best criticism of the novel that I have ever read. These chapters are a singularly impressive achievement, combining admirable attentiveness to textual detail with cogent analysis of Mary's life to demonstrate how intellectually thrilling the book's composition must have been.

The Hooblers nimbly traverse the many scientific, historical, religious, and socio-economic ideas that Mary brings together in her novel to provide an expert close reading of *Frankenstein's* major themes and symbols. They also correctly note that the novel's concentric narration offers a type of realism that was in vogue during the nineteenth century (*Frankenstein* is a story within a story within a story, in which Arctic explorer Robert Walton writes letters to his sister Margaret that narrate his encounter with Victor Frankenstein, followed by Victor reporting to Walton how his (Victor's) discovery of the principle of regenerating life leads him to construct a creature from dead body parts, followed by the creature narrating his own autobiography in an extended *bildungsroman*).

The problem with *The Monsters* is, quite simply, that the Hooblers pursue their specious notion about Mary Shelley's fragmentary identity so assiduously that they overlook her tremendous authorial talent and personal strength. The Hooblers pronounce *Frankenstein* a work of genius but treat its author as little more than a collage of negative masculine influences whose identity is, in the end, a puzzle that can only be pieced together by recounting Godwin's, Percy's, and Byron's perfidies. While Mary was unquestionably affected by the powerful personalities of all three men, she also existed apart from them. The Hooblers wisely observe how much suffering Mary experienced as a result of her

relationships with Godwin, Percy, and Byron, but they go astray in portraying these men as more significant to her literary accomplishments than she is. Mary Shelley, whose mother was one of the most important early English feminist authors, becomes a satellite to Godwin, Percy, and Byron in far too many passages of *The Monsters*, receding from view in a book ostensibly devoted to her authorial gifts. This result is particularly unfortunate for an otherwise carefully researched and argued biography that emphasizes Mary's unique contribution to English literature.

Godwin, Percy, and Byron, of course, were important parts of Mary's life, but the Hooblers exaggerate each man's role to substantiate a fallacious analogy between *Frankenstein's* protagonist and Shelley herself. If the reader can ignore this comparison,

The Monsters becomes an engaging biography

of the night that gave birth to one of England's most enduring novels. The Hooblers' book is not only written with verve, wit, and style but also captures the intellectual vitality, existential curiosity, and erotic energy of that evening in much the same manner as Ken Russell's gonzo 1986 film *Gothic*. The Hooblers pay more attention to the historical record than Russell's movie, but they sacrifice none of its lively—and occasionally surreal—drama. *The Monsters* is a fascinating addition to Frankenstein scholarship that, because of its flaws, will not surpass Emily W. Sunstein's masterful biography, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (1989), or Chris Baldick's skillful monograph, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (1988), to become a classic text in this ever-growing field of study. The Hooblers' book, however, should survive for decades to entertain, to provoke, and, inevitably, to upset Mary Shelley's many admirers.

Jason Vest is Assistant Professor of English in the University of Guam's Division of English and Applied Linguistics.

While Mary was unquestionably affected by the powerful personalities of all three men, she also existed apart from them.

The Great Pretender or the Price of Visibility

Review of Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 657 pages with index and photos

Part I: "Somebody's Knocking on My Door"

Ralph Ellison was both blessed and cursed by the publication of his famous novel, *Invisible Man*, in 1952. Its critical and commercial success made Ellison the most celebrated and respected black writer in history until the emergence of Toni Morrison as a major figure in the late 1970s with *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Alice Walker with *The Color Purple* (1982) in the early 1980s, but the weight of *Invisible Man's* reputation made it virtually impossible for Ellison to write another. That novel became, in effect, an effort that Ellison felt he had to live up in a subsequent work (he had to write something at least as good as a book that was considered one of the best American novels of the twentieth century) and something that he had to live down (he desperately did not want to be a one-book novelist, a fluke, an accident). Surely, he has survived as a one-novel novelist much as Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), has. But he was insecure about it, an insecurity compounded by his race, which made his sense of achievement all the more precarious. For nearly forty years, Ellison tried, by fits and starts, to write a second novel and did not succeed, a signal failure that he tried to compensate for by becoming something like a larger-than-life man of letters and cultural critic. At this, he did succeed, and he became the first black writer to become an important, if frequently merely symbolic, member of the white American literary establishment.

Because Ellison appeared on the scene in the early 1950s as the civil rights movement was beginning, as racism was being strenuously discredited in respectable and official circles as an intellectual construct and a social and political practice (although not without considerable opposition), he was championed in a way no other black writer had been. In part, the genius of his novel, the brilliance of the writing, had much to do with Ellison's

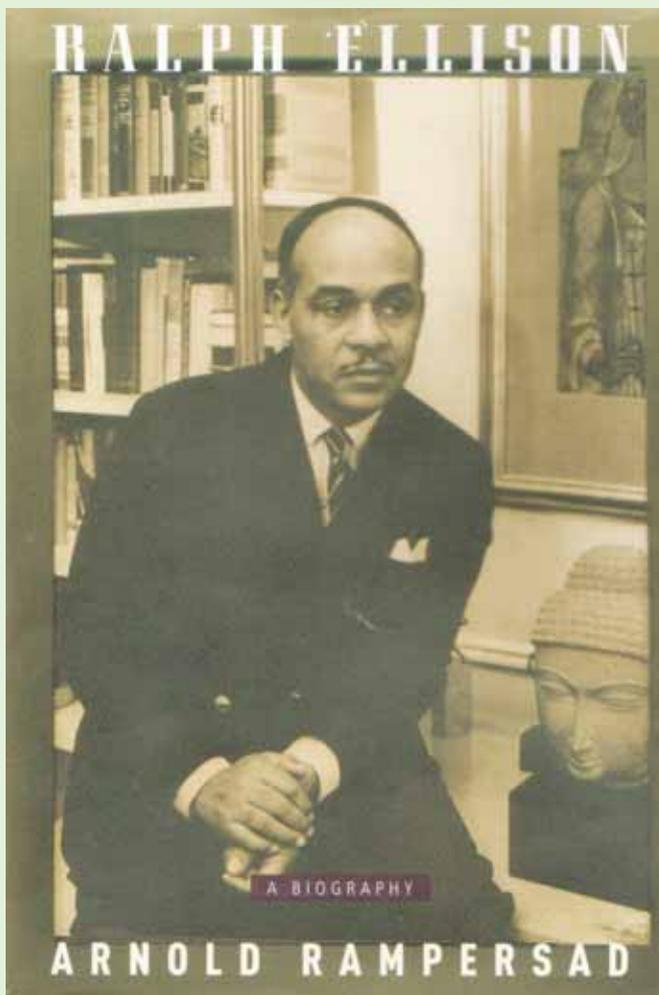
elevation, although there was a patronizing air about it, as if, finally, surprisingly, an African American had written something that the white literary establishment could take seriously as a work of art. According to Ellison's latest biographer, Arnold Rampersad, as Ellison grew older and became accustomed to praise as something that was his due, he tended to bask in his exceptionalism, that he was different from most other black writers. As Toni Morrison said of him, when he ignored her as a new

member of the high-tone Century Association, "My suspicion was that he considered himself an exception. He got to speak for [African Americans] but he did not like to be identified with us" (488). The Great Pretender slays all other claimants to the throne! And in many ways, Ellison, jealous of his status, did just that.

Ellison's love of being the exception was a reflection of his overall temperament, which, in addition to his great novel, played a major role in the position he was to occupy during the 1950s and, especially, during the turbulence days of the 1960s, as, after winning the National Book Award in 1953 for *Invisible Man*, his desire to be part of the white literary establishment was intensified. He felt his association with it was a form of validation and approval, showing he had arrived and dismantled harshly restrictive intellectual barriers built as much on cultural privilege as merit. He had the self-absorbed, social-climbing energy of the parvenu. It meant something to him to be with the so-called best people. In short, he wanted for

himself what the white literary establishment wanted for him. He valued what it valued, and he thought he had to value it in order not to be ghettoized or reduced to being a "mere" black writer. Editor Hiram Hayden described Ellison as carrying "the lonely burden that certain black men of a transitional generation have carried" (453).

Stanford University English professor and acclaimed scholar Arnold Rampersad tells the story of Ralph Ellison, in this definitive new biography, as one of a man who posed in his young adulthood as something like a gatecrasher but who became, in the end, a gatekeeper, perhaps the gatekeeper of gatekeepers, a token who took great pride in the special status being a token granted him, the black who was admitted to high-culture places,



the black who became, to borrow a fitting phrase considering the title of the book that made him a literary star, the spook who sat by the door. The story of this transformation, both apparent and real, from young left-wing literary tyro mouthing Marxist pieties about culture and art to middle-aged, middle-of-the-road liberal professing the wonder-working grandeur of American exceptionalism (which mirrored his own) and democratic pluralism like a stodgy, McCarthy-era English professor is as instructive as it is poignant and troubling.

This transformation cost Ellison as much as it may have given him, and, from a purely material viewpoint, it gave him a great deal. He made money and he had influence in high-brow circles. But as Ellison became more lionized, it became more and more difficult for him to complete his second novel, in part because he may have realized that, as he built his reputation on the stunning achievement of his first book, a mediocre follow-up may have ruined him, exposed him as something of a fake or, something worse, someone who was overrated. As a black man, he was likely to feel precarious about his position in the white world and more sensitive to the idea of being exposed as less talented than he appeared to be. By never producing a second novel, he never had to compete with himself or, on a certain level, face the true measure of himself as a creative writer. Thus, the advent of the second novel became in the literary world something like the Christian Second Coming, the entire myth is in the expectation, not the arrival, and so Ellison's reputation was actually, in some weird way, enhanced by the book that never appeared. Its absence certified his genius. Even the fire that destroyed his Plainsfield, Vermont, country home became part of the myth of the second book as Ellison alleged that it destroyed huge portions of his manuscript. As Rampersad points out, Ellison lost little of his work in the blaze. After Ellison died in 1994, his literary executor, John F. Callahan, hacked through the thicket of words Ellison produced in manuscript to issue a novel in 1999—*Juneteenth*—that probably was better left unpublished. It was bad, but worse, it was dated, out of touch. Besides, at that point, Ellison did not need a second novel. He had achieved unimpeachable literary sainthood.

But by never producing the second novel while he was alive, by never really entering the arena as a practicing novelist who regularly produced novels, Ellison never really fulfilled his potential for whatever genius he may have possessed, and he never really tested himself in the only way a novelist can: by screwing up your imaginative and psychic resources in a merciless marathon by continuing to grind out novels, continually putting one's reputation and worth on the line. Black Arts poet Nikki Giovanni was tactlessly blunt but utterly right in 1971 to criticize Ellison by saying that "as a writer Ellison is so much hot air, because he hasn't had the guts to go on writing" (474). Perhaps another way of looking at Rampersad's biography is to see it as a story of how a man went from being a working writer to become a sort of establishment snob. Certainly Ellison's enemies and critics, and he had his fair share, particularly among the left and among blacks, would see Ellison's story as a tragic trajectory of a man who fell prey to the blandishments and awards of the liberal white world of literature and academia and emasculated himself intellectually with constrained thought-clichés about democracy and diversity that reflected the optimism about race generated

by the containment cold war culture in which he lived. As Rampersad writes, "[Ellison] often gave in perhaps too easily to the demons of success" (484).

On the other hand, there is something enormously courageous about Ellison, who stood his ground against withering attacks from black students in the 1960s, taken by the new black militancy, cries of Black Power, and their own romantic, self-conscious poses as ardent nationalists and revolutionaries. He did not shrink from lecturing at campuses across the country, although he was, on many occasions, heckled and castigated by students who did not feel he was sufficiently "politically correct" for the era, particularly when he refused to talk about current events or American race relations, steadfastly maintaining his right to talk about literature. He was, to himself if no one else, first and foremost an artist, a writer, not a black man, and he insisted that his audience accept him on his terms. (He refused to teach black literature, once Black Studies became the rage, for the same reason.) Rampersad relates an incident at Oberlin College in 1969 where, at a black student caucus, "[one] 'sister,' addressing Ralph directly, curtly dismissed *Invisible Man* because of its harsh portrayal of the ultranationalist Ras the Destroyer. When Ralph would not apologize for the character, she snapped, 'That just proves that you're an Uncle Tom!' Other students were equally disrespectful" (459). In October 1967, at Grinnell College, so unnerved was he when, during an intense argument with a young black man dressed in a black leather jacket and sporting a black beret, he was called an Uncle Tom and a disgrace to his race that after the young man left Ellison broke down and cried on his host's shoulder, saying "I'm not a Tom, I'm not a Tom" (440). This expression of rejection was simply cruel, ignorant, and shockingly anti-intellectual, for which there is no excuse. It is heartbreaking to think a black man who had written a novel of the magnitude of *Invisible Man* could be criticized by immature black students because the book did not advocate a black revolution—at least not in the pedestrian way that these silly students imagined revolution. But the attacks were merely an expression of the students' insecurity. It is sad that they were not observant enough to recognize Ellison's own insecurity, which matched their own, being played out in front of them in his lectures.

Ellison, as well, stood his ground against popular post-World War II race sociology and psychology, which tended to see African Americans as pathological (Myrdal, Moynihan) or as victims needing the purging therapy of rage (Fanon, Price and Cobb). For Ellison, to be black in America was to exhibit an extraordinary form of discipline and cultural innovation. Blacks helped to invent America and part of that invention was creating a way to live fully and humanely in a democratic society that would not permit them to be fully human in it. At times, his truculence and race pride missed valid observations about the self-destructiveness of black behavior (something that Ellison was not completely unaware of, as is evidenced by his essay "Harlem Is Nowhere," written in 1948 but published sixteen years later). After all, how sane could black people be after being brutally subjected to a few hundred years of the insanity of racism? But, on the whole, his skepticism about race social science, putting him at odds with an older generation of black intellectuals like Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, and Charles S. Johnson, was useful,

even prescient, as a great deal of Ellison's criticism has been used by latter-day black intellectuals and even black social scientists themselves in an attempt to rescue blacks from being seen as "the sick people," "the wounded people," or "the problem people" of the society.

In many respects, even more so than James Baldwin, with his fiery, prophetic histrionics and his uneven, sex-soaked novels of redemption (interracial, gender-bending sex will save the republic from its inhuman hypocrisy), Ellison embodied the age of racial integration in the United States. It is hard to imagine how a man who had the markers of race loyalty—he lived in or near Harlem for nearly his entire adult life; was married to a black woman; excessively praised the creativity and power of African American life and culture; was a long-time member of the NAACP and supported government intervention and programs to help the black poor—could become so disliked by at least a significant segment of blacks. (Baldwin was to suffer the same fate of being dismissed when Black Power became the rage but for somewhat different reasons.) This is perhaps something like the story of how black writers of a certain generation found it difficult to crave both a black and a white audience, certainly to satisfy both, to want the rewards and recognition of the white world and still retain the support and approval of their own group.

Part II: "But Can a People...Live and Develop...Simply by *Reacting*?"

Ralph Ellison was born in 1913 in Oklahoma City to Lewis Alfred Ellison, a self-employed ice and coal dealer, and Ida Millsap, a housewife. Ellison was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson because, apparently, although his father was hardly a learned man (he didn't even finish high school), he liked Emerson's poetry or the sound of his name or both. Ellison's father, who had been dishonorably discharged from the army for refusing to obey a direct order, died in 1916 as a result of an accident while delivering ice. The death of the father reduced the family to desperate straits and it survived because Ida worked and from the kindness of strangers. Ellison went to a segregated school but apparently received a strong education, particularly in music. He joined the band as a trumpeter at the Frederick Douglass School, where music education was encouraged as a way to give black children culture as well as, for a gifted few, a livelihood, as music was one of the few professional fields open to African Americans at the time. Ellison also read quite a bit when he was a youngster because his mother brought home cast-off magazines and books

from the white homes where she worked. In addition to being exposed to a classical music regimen at school and black religious music at church, by the time Ellison became a teenager in the latter 1920s, he was, like most young blacks, enamored with jazz, the exciting new music that had revolutionized popular music and popular taste in the United States from the time it was first recorded in 1917. Oklahoma City boasted some important young jazz performers, friends of Ellison, who would go on to become major stars: guitarist Charlie Christian and singer Jimmy Rushing, both of whom Ellison would write major essays about after he became a star writer in the 1950s. Also, Walter Page's Blue Devils, which would eventually morph into Count Basie's "first testament" orchestra of the 1930s, was the territory band that worked out of Oklahoma City and that Ellison listened to frequently in performance, enormously impressed by the professionalism and dedication of the musicians.

There is little doubt that Ellison forged his own aesthetic, operational, and even moral creed from his youthful experience of listening to Oklahoma City jazzmen. The emphasis on the development of craft and technique, the preoccupation with having high, uncompromising standards and achieving unquestioned excellence, the need for being the dedicated professional who was singularly devoted to his art above all else, the intense belief that merit transcended race and politics and that the artist, sacrificial in his singularity was created by "stern discipline" and the crucible of unending challenge by one's peers and one's betters—all of this was the Essential Ellison code of the heroic artist (and almost identical with the views of jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, an Ellison disciple), which he believed for his entire life. It is clearly a further refinement and elaboration of Du Bois's idea of the Talented Tenth, an African American mandarin culture. Ellison's was an elitist ideal. Indeed, his generation

was largely convinced that what African Americans needed were powerful, strongly committed elites that would lead the race by the courage of conviction and example. Elites make communal life possible, not disorganized grassroots, according to this theory. Although Ellison did not grow up in New York, he grew up during the Age of the New Negro, an age of black redefinition, and one of the major ways that black people, or at least a class of black men (gender specificity is crucial here) were choosing to redefine themselves, was through changing the nature of music, how it was played and for what end. Ellison, like Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones), whom he disliked, both disparaged black writers as models for the creative act. The archetype of black creativity was the black male musician, and both men had in common at least their profound love of how the jazz musician



"To Langston [Hughes], the Dream keeper, in sincerity and admiration." April, 23, 1937.

Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

went about his business. Here black men were not reacting or imitating, as they seem to be in literature; they were orchestrating a vision and absorbing influences on their own terms.

By the time Ellison was in high school, although he was not a great musician, he was dedicated and skilled enough to desire a career as a trumpeter but mostly as a composer of serious African American composition. He won a music scholarship in 1933 to study under black composer William Dawson at Tuskegee. Tuskegee was a struggle: he had little money and was constantly struggling to pay his bills, hitting up his mother for the little money she had; he did not like Dawson at all; he did not like Tuskegee, which was strict, confining, and, for the most part, anti-intellectual. (Tuskegee was not the most congenial place to study the humanities.) But it is at Tuskegee that Ellison began to do serious reading: the poetry of Eliot and Pound, novels by Dickens, Joyce, and Hemingway. He found Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* to be especially gripping, as any intellectually inclined young adult would. He studied with the influential English professor Morteza Sprague, to whom he dedicates his 1964 collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*. Ellison also began to take sculpture classes. Finally, he formulated at Tuskegee his antisociology attitude, as he was aghast and appalled by the race sociology courses he took. As Rampersad writes, "[Ellison] found sociology dogmatic and arrogant, a discipline reluctant to accept its limitations and quick to flaunt its vaunted empiricism as Truth" (78). Already, although he was not aware of it, Ellison was moving toward writing and literature and away from music.

Ellison received his second education upon arriving in New York City in 1936, leaving Tuskegee to earn money but never returning as a student. Almost immediately, he met Langston Hughes, who became a good friend, and Alain Locke, philosophy professor at Howard and one of the intellectual midwives of the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1931). Ellison took on a series of odd jobs, including working for psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan and at the A. C. Horn Paint Company (which winds up as an episode in *Invisible Man*). Most important, he met Richard Wright, a rising black leftist intellectual and committed creative writer in 1937, probably the most important friendship of his early days in New York and arguably, outside of Albert Murray, Saul Bellow, and Stanley Edgar Hyman, the most important friendship of his life. Wright, then an editor at *New Challenge*, published Ellison's first piece, a book review. He also published Ellison's first short story, which he encouraged Ellison to write. In the winter of 1937, when he went to Dayton, Ohio, to be with his dying mother, he abandoned music, giving himself over to writing as a vocation, working up several short stories while away from New York. Indeed, Ellison will never do any sort of real job again other than writing until he begins teaching at colleges in the late 1950s, starting with Bard. And the teaching gigs were largely sinecures, lending his name and race to the marquee of some institution that needed both.

Ellison also worked very hard at developing his skills as a literary critic, reading Kenneth Burke and especially falling in love with the novels of Andre Malraux. With the publications of *Shadow and Act* in 1964 and *Going to the Territory* in 1986, his second collection of essays, Ellison established himself as an important literary and cultural critic and theorist, partly in the

realm of jazz studies (where he is revered as a founding father) and partly in African American literature (although with the exception of his essays on Richard Wright, he had little to say about black writing; he ignored most of his black contemporaries). Ellison married twice, the second time to Fanny McConnell, who was essential to his success (she worked while he wrote; she kept order, while he traveled), enduring, despite their problems.

Invisible Man, which took Ellison more than five years to write, was, in part, his repudiation of his leftist past, but it was also his repudiation of all the black literature that had come before in its experimental sweep, its highly sophisticated use of both black and white sources, the majesty of its complexity as a work of art. The novel said clearly that the African American was a modernist creation and a modernist creator of American life. *Invisible Man* was both accessible and layered with interpretative density in a way no other black novel had ever hoped to be, far more organically and technically stitched together than Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and less beholden to and limited by the penny-dreadful or pulp fiction than Wright's *Native Son*.

After *Invisible Man*, Ellison did what many great athletes do after retirement: he lived off his reputation, which grew and grew, in part because of the very black militancy and cultural upheaval of the 1960s that Ellison loathed. By the mid 1960s, *Invisible Man* was voted by critics the best post-World War II American novel. The very black students who hated Ellison, paradoxically, made his acceptance, the long-term construction of his self-mythology, possible, necessary, even vital. The white cultural establishment needed someone of Ellison's gifts and his color to demonstrate his belief in its worth, its legitimacy, its power. It needed his validation in those days as much he needed theirs, and so a marriage between unequals was born that faked a sort of equality where blacks could stop "merely reacting" to their national status of being a problem and whites would stop treating them as if that was all blacks were capable of doing, that is, being a problem. Perhaps that is the story of racial integration in the United States or the story of "race relations" in high culture places.

Rampersad's biography is probably one of the most brilliant ever written of a black writer that so unsparingly yet objectively examines the contradictions that propelled both him and the culture that shaped him. I assume that Rampersad did not much like Ellison as he grew to know him during his research. Ellison would probably have hated this book on many levels. But Ellison would not have wanted a biography that would have been a defense or an apology. He would have found that patronizing, even if he was praised to the hilt. Rampersad assumed the worth of Ellison did not require a justification and so wrote a mature, tough-minded portrait of an uneasy, crabby, insecure, snobbish man, ravaged by racism, white condescension, and the mad demons of his own pride yet strangely unbowed in his intelligence, his charm, his insistence in soldiering on. Ellison would have disliked the book, but I think he would have liked the way Rampersad went about his business.

Gerald Early is Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and Director of the Center for the Humanities.

Announcing

Washington University's Newest Literary Journal



Make a Gift to the Center for the Humanities

Join with other donors and supporters to ensure that the Center for the Humanities can continue to fulfill its mission. Help us continue to make the humanities a part of public life and yours.

Send your check, payable to Washington University, to:

The Center for the Humanities
c/o Shannon MacAvoy Grass
Washington University in St. Louis
Campus Box 1202
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, MO 63130-4899

 **Washington**
University in St. Louis
ARTS & SCIENCES

The Center for the Humanities
Campus Box 1071
Old McMillan Hall, Room S101
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, MO 63130-4899
Phone: (314) 935-5576
e-mail: cenhum@artsci.wustl.edu
<http://cenhum.artsci.wustl.edu>

The Center for the Humanities Advisory Board 2006–2008

Nancy Berg

Associate Professor of
Asian & Near Eastern
Languages & Literatures

Ken Botnick

Associate Professor of Art

Gene Dobbs Bradford

Executive Director of
Jazz St. Louis

Lingchei (Letty) Chen

Associate Professor
of Modern Chinese
Language and Literature

Elizabeth Childs

Associate Professor
and Chair of Department
of Art History and
Archaeology

Mary-Jean Cowell

Associate Professor
of Performing Arts

Michael Kahn

Attorney at Law
Blackwell Sanders Peper
Martin LLP

Chris King

Editorial Director
The St. Louis American
Newspaper

Olivia Lahs-Gonzales

Director
Sheldon Art Galleries

Paula Lupkin

Assistant Professor
of Architecture
Sam Fox School of
Design & Visual Arts

Larry May

Professor of Philosophy

Steven Meyer

Associate Professor of
English

Angela Miller

Professor of Art History
and Archaeology

Dolores Pesce

Professor and Chair of
Department of Music

Joe Pollack

Film and Theater Critic
for KWMU, Writer

Sarah Rivett

Assistant Professor
of English

James Wertsch

Marshall S. Snow Professor
of Arts and Sciences
Director of International
and Area Studies

Ex officio**Edward S. Macias**

Executive Vice Chancellor
and Dean of Arts &
Sciences,
Barbara and David
Thomas Distinguished
Professor in Arts &
Sciences

Zurab Karumidze

Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia
International Fellow

We have reviews, essays, and notes
available only on the Web. Please go
to "Markings" on our Web site at
<http://cenhum.artsci.wustl.edu>.

Our latest online review is of Arthur C.

Brooks's *Who Really Cares: America's*

Charity Divide. New work is posted every few weeks.



MAC
MISSOURI ARTS COUNCIL

**Belles Lettres**

Publisher and Editor:
Gerald Early

Managing Editor:
Jian Leng

**Please address all
correspondence
concerning Belles
Lettres to the Editor.**

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Louis, MO
Permit No. 2535