belles lettres

A LITERARY REVIEW

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on Moby-Dick

Erin McGlothlin
on Louis Menard

Rafia Zafar
on the Harlem Renaissance

Henry Schvey
on Tennessee Williams

and Joe Pollack
Remembered

James Wertsch, Henry Berger, and Jamie Spencer
on the Decline of American and Western Power
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Mr. Mitt Goes to Washington (Maybe)

Review of
Michael Kranish and Scott Helman, The Real Romney (HarperCollins, 2012), 401 pages including photos, endnotes and index
R. B. Scott, Mitt Romney: An Inside Look at the Man and His Politics (Lyons Press, 2012), 245 pages including bibliography and index

1. Not the End of the World

Back in May 2012, a small-town college president told me he thought Mitt Romney was much improved over the presidential candidate he was in 2008. To him, Romney looked more poised, more relaxed, more assured, more articulate. He also thought there was more general enthusiasm among Republicans for Romney than there had been for John McCain and there was a more thorough network of ground or grassroots organizations in place to get out the vote. He did not say all of this to say that Romney would win—I was not even sure if this college president was, indeed, a Republican, although he was certainly knowledgeable of Republican politics in more than a casual way. This was only to say that he thought Romney would be a stronger candidate than McCain. Perhaps he will be, but a lot of things must go right for Romney to win, more than must go right for Barack Obama.

To prevail, Romney will have to be not only a smart and capable man, which he clearly is, but a lucky man, which, to this point in his life, he has been as well. This time he will have to be lucky enough not to have his opponent define him as Ted Kennedy, the charismatic, legendary, historic Democrat, against whom Romney ran for the Senate in 1994, did so successfully as the Mormon racist, the heartless Bain Capital carpetbagger, the gentrified suburbanite who had no sympathy for ordinary people. As Michael Kranish and Scott Helman point out in The Real Romney, “It wasn’t just the [Kennedy] attacks that did Romney in, though, and he knew it. He had failed to make a compelling enough case for himself, failed in crafting a narrative of his character and convictions that could move voters.” In going up against Obama, Romney faces a politician who is just as charismatic, skilled, historic and larger-than-life as Kennedy was. And who is using many of the same attacks. Romney lost to Kennedy by 17 points, 58 percent to 41 percent. He can find some cold solace in the fact that if he loses to Obama, it will be nowhere near as lopsided as that.

There are, to be sure, disadvantages in running against an incumbent, as Romney surely knows, especially an incumbent as powerful, with such formidable weapons of self-promotion at his disposal, as a sitting president, but there is at least this one advantage that seems to have roused some segments of the Republican base: the re-election of Obama would mean the end of the world, that is, the end of America, as we have known it or as it should properly be known. End of the world, apocalypse sentiments can really motivate voters. Romney will need to motivate greatly voters who have any inkling toward him to have any hope of winning. (Obama himself is trying to use the same tactic against Romney and not without some success: Romney is the end of a reformed world and the return of George W. Bush. As former Republican congressman and current chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities Jim Leach astutely noted at a recent symposium at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Republicans would still have control of the White House if Bush had not been seen as such a stunning failure by so many people, and so undermined his party’s own ideological positions. Obama would be a fool not to remind people constantly why he was elected: to be the complete un-Bush or anti-Bush.) Do not underestimate Romney’s ability to motivate Obama’s opposition; he was, after all, not an over-achieving Mormon kid with a sense of destiny stamped upon his brow for nothing. He looks more than a little like his successful father, George Romney, and he has the inner-directed zeal of a legacy kid on the make.

Romney wishes to sell himself this time, much more clearly than in 2008, as Mr. Economic Fix-It, but he might consider not losing a grip on the jeremiad about the end of the world being nigh with Obama’s re-election. No candidate in American
history can ever say he or she lost an election because he or she was too ardent in forecasting the end, too passionate about America’s salvation history. To paraphrase one of America’s notoriously successful politicians, George Wallace, Romney oughtn’t to let Obama out-apocalypse him, if he really wants to win, as he ardently does. (There is some question in conservative circles about how much McCain really wanted to win, not wanting to go down in history as the white candidate who stopped a credible black candidate from becoming president, is how the story goes.)

How much America’s racial politics will have to do with the upcoming election is anyone’s guess, but it certainly might be easier for certain segments of the conservative world to think that Obama’s being black, being the particular sort of black person he is (after all, only a small number of whites hate ALL black people)—a leader of the liberal managerial elite that communist-turned-conservative James Burnham once wrote about so presciently—may have more than a little to do with this election being all about the end of America. After all, if the president’s partisans thought back in 2008 that Obama’s election was a new beginning in America, it makes a sort of symmetrical ideological sense for the president’s opponents to think his election was the forecast of the end and his re-election seals the deal. For liberals and the left, a black makes a good savior (ask Harriet Beecher Stowe), especially a cool black who possesses what we are told is unfathomable intelligence; for conservatives, a black can make a good devil (ask Thomas Dixon), their collective dysfunction, their peculiar and persistent lack of competence, being the scourge of America and the burden of whites. For almost no political faction in America is a black a person, exactly. For liberals, the African American’s victimization is a form of political romanticism; for the conservatives, this victimization is a form of psychological inadequacy. I am obviously caricaturing here for the purposes of satire, but blacks—theirs vices and virtues—have been symbolic for so long that their lives as simply nondescript, run-of-the-mill people always seem to resonate as something not quite real or not quite there. Black people always constitute a form of drama in the United States. With this election, the drama hums along at the audible level of semi-hysteria, as some will vote for Obama because he is black (something Obama will certainly not discourage as he embodies “the change” that represents profound progress for many); and some will vote for Romney because he is white (something he will try subtly to encourage as he possesses what we are told is unfathomable intelligence); for conservatives, a black can make a good devil (ask Thomas Dixon), their collective dysfunction, their peculiar and persistent lack of competence, being the scourge of America and the burden of whites. For almost no political faction in America is a black a person, exactly. For liberals, the African American’s victimization is a form of political romanticism; for the conservatives, this victimization is a form of psychological inadequacy. I am obviously caricaturing here for the purposes of satire, but blacks—theirs vices and virtues—have been symbolic for so long that their lives as simply nondescript, run-of-the-mill people always seem to resonate as something not quite real or not quite there. Black people always constitute a form of drama in the United States. With this election, the drama hums along at the audible level of semi-hysteria, as some will vote for Obama because he is black (something Obama will certainly not discourage as he embodies “the change” that represents profound progress for many); and some will vote for Romney because he is white (something he will try subtly to encourage as he knows that many despise the claims of “the change” that has been thrust upon them). For liberals, if Obama loses, racial progress in America will be set back twenty-five years, and, if he wins, we can—as Americans—continue our uncertain, but morally compelling, walk down the superhighway to a racialized post-racial wholeness. For conservatives, if he loses, it is a sign that we have awakened from the delusion of Obama as America’s grand racial bargain, and, if he wins, then we continue to consign ourselves to the social distortions of affirmative action. Fortunately, the fates rarely give us such stark alternatives in reality. And as I was taught as a boy in church, this is a “world without end.” So, we muddle on, better than we think, with whatever “devil” or “saint” we know. That is, unless we are convinced that this election is another American race war fought by other means.

2. Who is Mitt Romney?

Leave it to Mitt Romney to shoot himself in the foot with a gun he doesn’t own.

—Boston Globe columnist Joan Vennochi making fun of Romney’s exaggerated claims of lifetime NRA membership and of being a hunter of “varmints” (2008)

Much of what Romney did to save [Bain & Company] was never made public. But in the end the breaks on loans, the layoffs, financial concessions from partners, and other measures helped [the company] save enough money to stay afloat and eventually thrive again. It was the very definition of the kind of “turnaround” for which Romney would claim expertise. Given the embarrassing circumstances of how the company nearly failed, the story of the rescue of Bain & Company has not fit neatly into Romney’s campaign narrative. But it was one of his most impressive displays of executive talent and toughness; in some ways, it was his finest hour at Bain.


It was remarked in 2008, and continues to be, that Barack Obama ran on his biography, his life narrative, which, considering that his résumé of tangible political accomplishments was very thin, may have been the only thing he had on which to run, in the end. That is to say, he did not have much choice but to sell himself as a symbol and a promise, as a transformation, as it were. But all politicians, especially those running for the presidency, must sell their life stories to the public in some measure, or the mythology of their lives. Mitt Romney is no different from Obama in this respect, although he has been, to this point, less capable of doing it as well as Obama did and far more difﬁdent. As Romney’s 2008 campaign team put it, he must deal with “the problem of the three M’s: Mormon, millionaire and Massachusetts.” One might add a fourth M to that: Michigan, the state where his father, George, served as governor and where Romney was first introduced to the aspiration and agony of running for president.

Romney has already exceeded his father’s drive to become president by being nominated by his party. George, a successful congressional speechwriter and automobile executive, was elected governor of Michigan in 1962, when Romney was fifteen years old, an impressionable age. In 1964, George refused to endorse GOP presidential nominee Barry Goldwater, senator from Arizona, because, among other things, the party considerably weakened the civil rights plank of its platform (although the platform promised “full implementation and faithful execution” of the 1964 Civil Rights Act even though Goldwater had voted against it). George Romney had put himself at war with the right-wing conservative element of the GOP (Goldwater never forgave Nelson Rockefeller, Bill Scranton, George Romney, and the other moderates who opposed him); George paid the price for this in 1968 when he decided to run for the nomination. The right wing would rather have had a Martian or Satan for the nominee. George was ultimately undone when he admitted on a Detroit news program that
he “had the greatest brainwashing that anybody can get” by the
generals and the diplomatic corps when he visited in Vietnam and,
thus, originally supported American intervention in the war there.
He came to realize that he was mistaken and now opposed the war.
His enemies ate George alive over the “brainwashing” comment.
(He singlehandedly and inadvertently revived the word “brain-
washing” from the days of the Korean War.) His opponents
crowed, if old George could be buffaled by our generals and dip-
lomats, if he couldn’t decode their flapdoodle and doublespeak,
how could he confront Soviet leaders and other enemies of
America? George Romney, along with Charles Percy, Rockefeller,
John Lindsay (who would switch parties), Richard Schweiker,
Jacob Javits, Scranton, Cliftord Case and Mark Hatfield, among
others, constituted a strong liberal wing of the Republican Party
back in the 1960s. None of the liberal Republicans who tried
would succeed in getting his party’s presidential nomination.

Mitt Romney was close to his father, frequently campaigning
with him, even offering him advice, “sharing his father’s front-row
seat on government as an intern in the governor’s office,” write
Kranish and Helman. Surely, Romney learned “early lessons in
how a Republican could win in a Democratic state.” But he would
never be as blunt or outspoken as George. This made him much
more vulnerable than his father ever was to charges of being an
opportunist, a political chameleon who changes whenever it is con-
venient. To acknowledge that Romney is in fact an opportunist
is hardly as revelatory or even as damning as his opponents may
think it is. That mere fact alone does not mean that he is a bad
politician, a bad policy maker, or a bad leader. The opportunism
points to a larger issue about identity. Who is Mitt Romney? The
title The Real Romney, to some, suggests that perhaps Romney is
simply hollow and blank at the core. But I tend to think the book
is suggesting just the opposite: that Romney is dense at the core, a
swirl of contradictions trying to make themselves coherent through
the semi-rapture of his earthly ambition and his deep religious
sense of himself. I shall say more about Mormonism in a moment.

It should come as no surprise that the conservative base of the
Republican Party today would be a bit skeptical of Romney, if only
because of his liberal father. During the primary season of the 2012
campaign, the conservatives seemed to be looking for anyone but
Romney, who was called in some quarters, rather tactlessly, “the
white Obama.” It was not, of course, just because of his father
that Romney was not trusted by the Right, but those on the Right
with long memories remembered how his father opposed them.
There were more recent reasons. Romney, while governor of
Massachusetts, supported legalized abortion, created the bipartisan
Romneycare on which Obamacare was based in part, and was
supportive of gay rights. The Romney who is running for president
opposes abortion, will repeal Obamacare (although he confessed he
liked parts of the bill) and does not support gay marriage. The Real
Romney points out how Romney’s views shifted while he was gov-
ernor, as his term neared its end, and he decided he would run for
the 2008 Republican presidential nomination. “Romney would
make a series of shifts—in some cases wholesale reversals of past
positions, in others significant changes in emphasis…It was a
sweeping recalibration that erased any doubt that he had set his
sights on a bigger prize than Massachusetts. What made that
possible was partly his gift for salesmanship.” Romney has always
been able to sell his changes with the zeal of the fresh convert.

Doubtless, he learned his ability to sell from his years at Bain when
it was necessary to sell makeover management visions to his clients.
But he also learned it from his faith, his Mormonism, his sense of
himself as destined to be a leader and, thus, to believe truly any-
thing he professes to believe at any given moment. It is a way to
inspire himself and to give himself the illusion of moral fixity while
accommodating the reality of political flexibility. It is a way to lie
without lying. Or to change without growing. Romney the phony
is all too potent a charge. Romney the meretricious, risk averse, flip
flopper! But his enemies should know better than think him an ele-
vated version of a hack Republican. Romney is the best GOP
candidate since Reagan.
To those of us outside the faith, the Mormon Church seems monolithic, especially when one considers the role it played in successfully supporting California’s Proposition 8, which opposed gay marriage. But there are liberal Mormons, a good many. One of Romney’s fiercest political foes is Democrat Harry Reid, a Mormon. Former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman, a moderate Republican, is another enemy and a Mormon, who has disliked Romney since 1999, when Romney dropped into Utah to save (nearly singlehandedly, according to Romney himself) the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, after it was discovered that Mormon movers and shakers were spreading the money around to buy IOC officials not wisely but too well. (It was a typical practice for how venues hoped to win their Olympic bids. If anyone was corrupt in this scenario, it was the IOC, not the Salt Lake City Olympic Committee.) Leaving Bain and going to Salt Lake City revitalized or, more accurately put, re-enhanced, Romney’s strong connection with the Mormon Church. He did not quite know how to use his Mormon connections in his 1994 fight against Kennedy. But by the time he returned to Massachusetts as the hero of the Olympics in order to run for governor, he did not shy away anymore from having Mormons around him in his run for public office. And if the expression of his faith has revealed him at times as being self-righteous, priggish and doctrinaire, it also revealed Romney at his most human and empathetic: his enormous charitable works and gestures of aid that he has kept private; his moments of religious doubt, public humiliation, and near death as a young man during his mission work in France; his deep sense of family and genealogy. And since Mormonism has never been a wholly accepted faith by mainstream Christianity, tinged as it has been with the notorious drama of its history, Romney combines the sense of being insular as a member of a faith that has been the subject of persecution with the perspective of being a bit of an outsider, the other, despite all of his upper-class bona fides: prep school, Harvard JD and MBA, successful venture capitalist, successful politician. ( Doubtless, he is secretly amused that liberal and some conservatives are still searching for his coven of wives, just as some of his enemies, as a result of the dog-on-the-car-roof incident seek to cast him as the white Michael Vick. The Real Romney does not support the allegation that Seamus died as a result of the trip.) As fellow Mormon R. B. Scott has written, Romney derives his entire idea of leadership from his Mormonism: “As a Mormon, he was taught early that the goal of leadership is to inspire others to lead. Both at home and at church, he learned leaders need to be accountable for the tasks they are assigned…The summary of the approach reads like this: Individual leadership is essential; while each person is accountable, all failures are owned by the team; there is no such thing as ‘not my job’ or ‘not my problem’; and finally, approach life, and any assignment you undertake, with the zeal and determination of a missionary.” Perhaps being Mormon, he adds something to our understanding of diversity. Romney, in a more mysterious way than Obama, is and is not one of us.

Romney has his share of flaws, and they may be his undoing in his pursuit of the presidency. Or Obama may simply be too skilled a politician, too clever an incumbent, too self-possessed in his belief in being a prophet, to be beaten. But Romney also has his share of admirable qualities, including formidable intelligence, an ability to learn from his mistakes and an unshakable determination, and who is to say that these may not carry the day for him. And who is to say, if Romney does, indeed, carry the day, that America may not profit well by it. Who can say?

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1. The Mormons did not permit black men to enter their priesthood until 1978. But George and Mitt Romney had always been in favor of normalizing the status of blacks in the religion. In fact, George’s strong civil rights advocacy back in the 1960s when he was governor of Michigan and secretary of HUD under Nixon garnered him much criticism from conservative Mormons. “Mitt” Romney later described the reversal [on Mormon racial policy] as “one of the most emotional and happy days of my life.” He said he had been driving near his home when he learned the news. “I heard it on the radio and I pulled over and literally wept,” Romney once recalled. Michael Kranish and Scott Helman, The Real Romney (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

2. “[Romney’s] inability to empathize with common folk had long been his hoary hoodoo. His father had warned him about it. As a Mormon stake president, he was kind if often impatient and patronizing with members who did not measure up or were beneath him in rank and in intellectual and spiritual prowess.” R. B. Scott, Mitt Romney: An Inside Look at the Man and his Politics (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2012).

3. Leech spoke at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on Sunday, October 7, 2012, as the keynote speaker of a program called “Stewarding America.” His main address was on what he felt was the catastrophic Citizens United Supreme Court decision.

4. In one particular way, both Obama and Romney are alike: neither likes to work the legislative halls to cajole or flatter or arm-twist legislators to pass laws. “Many other moves to reform state government required legislative support, and there [Governor] Romney often faltered. That was partly because he showed little interest in the lawmakers themselves. He and his brainy, idealistic staff seemed too often blind to the fact that sweeping reforms, even if they made great sense in a white paper, counted for nothing unless the spadework had been done to cultivate legislative support. Romney, never a backslapper, invested little in building such ties—or even getting to know the players.” Kranish and Helman, The Real Romney. This description of Romney as executive fits Obama almost exactly.

5. Lenore Romney, Mitt’s mother, who ran for the Senate in 1970, favored scolding her son when he had tried to pressure Carrel Hilton Sheldon into bringing her sixth pregnancy to term even though there was a strong possibility it would kill her, and doctors advised her to have an abortion. When confronted, Romney claimed he could not remember the incident, a common response when he is questioned about distasteful things he may have done, such as the incident of forcibly cutting the long hair of a fellow prep school student back in his youth. To be sure, even if the various allegations of this sort were undeniably true, they would not remotely disqualify Romney from being president. They do, however, speak to a complexity of character, an occasional rigidity that speaks again to his inability to relate to ordinary people well.

6. “The overall picture that emerges from those who worked with and observed [Romney] in Salt Lake City is of a man focused on the task with laserlike intensity. To some, that was an inspiring thing. His many admirers viewed him as ethically pristine, amiable, and self-effacing. But he developed another image among a group of dissenters: as petty, vindictive, and self-aggrandizing. Romney was also dismissive of the few trustees who aggressively questioned his practices.” Kranish and Helman, The Real Romney. Romney provides his own account of the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics in Mitt Romney, Turnaround: Crisis, Leadership, and the Olympic Games, with Timothy Robinson (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004).

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continued from p. 5
Both Obamas are keenly aware of the underserved. Few First Ladies bother to speak at a high school commencement, preferring crowds of thousands at universities. Mrs. Obama addressed the Anacostia High School, in a tough neighborhood in the District where the low graduation rate had turned around. She spoke of the importance of perseverance. “Maybe you feel like your destiny was written the day you were born and you ought to just rein in your hopes and scale back your dreams. But if any of you are thinking that way, I’m here to tell you, stop it,” said the Harvard Law School and Princeton graduate who had grown up in a blue-collar family on the Southside of Chicago.

The Obamas would sit on the Truman Balcony at night and talk. Health care reform was their baby, their shared mission. When his then-chief of staff Rahm Emanuel tried to get him to limit health care changes, the president said, “I can’t leave 32 million people uninsured.” He was willing to spend his political capital on this issue. Mrs. Obama believed that being true to yourself is more important than winning. Their joint vision for real change sustained them, nourished them and united them.

As the president’s sister, Maya Soetoro, said, Michelle Obama stood by in rough times “when [Obama] was in need of some forward propulsion.” The losses of the 2010 midterm elections seemed, in good measure, the result of strong opposition to what is popularly referred as “Obamacare,” legislation that passed both houses of Congress in November and December 2009 and restructured the American health care system. While he expended his political energy on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, she worked on childhood obesity in her Let’s Move! and better nutrition campaigns. Preventive care was something she knew about, having worked at the University of Chicago Medical Center. She coordinated her obesity fight with the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Education. She brought aboard Walmart, food manufacturers, pediatricians and grocery chains. Mrs. Obama saw to it that the federal nutrition bill passed.
Congress, affecting some 31 million children who ate lunch in their public schools’ cafeterias.

Obama achieved in the Affordable Care Act what Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton could not: universal health care. He expanded the social safety net. He had been elected on a wave of hope and achieved much, but lost control of his story. He has enacted what Kantor calls “an extraordinary amount” of reform, including the stimulus bill of 2009 with its middle-class tax cuts, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, financial regulation, student loan reform, credit card reform, the naming of two women to the U.S. Supreme Court and repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.

Conciliatory by nature, Obama seemed naive about Congress. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell told Republican lawmakers that “the key to relevance was voting together against Obama’s agenda.” Last summer, Obama and House Speaker John Boehner agreed to a plan that would shrink federal spending, revise the tax code, raise taxes on the wealthy, and change Medicare and Social Security. But the Tea Party and some of the other House Republicans said they opposed any tax hikes.

Kantor makes both Obamas understandable, starting with Michelle’s campaign remark: “For the first time… I’m proud of my country.” She was talking about the excitement generated by her husband’s campaign on hope. Their new home, a palace of 132 rooms, was called the Executive Mansion until Teddy Roosevelt invited Booker T. Washington to dinner there in 1901. After that outcry, it was renamed the White House. The building’s racial history was, as Kantor writes, “baked into its very bricks” made by slaves. Being the first African American president has brought Obama some disrespect, as Kantor illustrates: U.S. Representative Joe Wilson [R-S.C.] yelled, “You lie!” during Obama’s 2009 address to Congress. Bill O’Reilly interrupted the president during an interview. The “Take Back Our Country” rally is overtly racial. A New York Times/CBS News poll in April 2010 of the Tea Party noted that when asked why they didn’t like Barack Obama, few could give a reason. Both Obamas, Kantor notes, have followed the rule of Michelle’s father, Fraser Robinson, about being dignified and not complaining of unfair treatment.

Mrs. Obama’s gift to their marriage was creating stability. She was giving a man whose father abandoned him and whose mother lived halfway around the world, the family life she had grown up with. He became the hands-on coach of Sasha’s basketball team, creating clinics for them. As his personal aide Reggie Love put them through the drills, the president lined up with the little girls and did the moves. He became the father he never had.

2. The Obamas Then

People had expected great things from the president’s father, Barack Hussein Obama Sr., Firstbrook writes in The Obamas: The Untold Story of an African Family. Brilliant and charismatic, he was trained to be among the educated elite to run Kenya after its independence from Great Britain. Instead, his nickname became “Mr. Double Double” for ordering two double shots of Johnny Walker Black Label. Having left his son when he was a toddler, he visited him only once, when Barack Jr. was ten. He did not live to see him graduate from Columbia University and Harvard Law.

Barack Obama Sr. came from the Luo, a tribe that dominates the professions in Kenya, producing the scholars, physicians, lawyers and engineers. The cradle of the Luo lies in Sudan, overlooking the White Nile. Their oral tradition tells how, seven centuries ago, for an unknown reason, they began a dangerous mass migration lasting “more than a dozen generations” south to Kenya and Tanzania. Peter Firstbrook gives more genealogy than most Americans want but that Brits love. By the eighteenth century, the Luo had organized themselves into a tribe with fealty to one leader, Owiny the Great. As many WASP American presidents descend from English royalty, so President Obama descends from African aristocracy.

By the late nineteenth century the Luo had completed their Great Migration with an early Obama establishing his family on the Winam Gulf in Kenya. Their pastoral life ended soon after. Within a decade, the Europeans began penetrating the interior of Africa with their railroads and telegraphs. Imperialists carved up the continent without regard to ethnicity, language, even natural boundaries. The Luo around Winam Gulf fell to British rule. The British treated the Kenyans like slaves. They forced the Africans to build roads and farms for the settlers so that they could pay the new hut tax the British imposed on their homes. This was a double hardship on a people used to a non-cash economy. By the turn of the century, the Luo had been pacified into loyal British subjects.

The president’s grandfather, Onyango Obama, was the last of the generation of Luo raised in a tribal society and the first generation to have a missionary education and to be baptized. Onyango was renowned for his intelligence, curiosity and adventurous spirit. People admired his honesty and openness. An imposing figure, six feet tall, he was also adored by the ladies. Because he was literate in English and Swahili, the British hired him as a translator. He fought for the British in both world wars, as did many African men. As one African said to Firstbrook, “War was a suitable job for a warrior…It showed we were men.” Fighting and dying alongside their masters, Africans now saw “War was a suitable job for a warrior…It showed we were men.” Fighting and dying alongside their masters, Africans now saw...
became known as a reliable servant in the household of Baron
Delamere, leader of the decadent Happy Valley set, a group of
well-to-do British colonialists known for their drug-taking and
wife-swapping.

By the age of forty, Hussein was wealthy by Luo standards
but had neither wife nor heirs. Driving his car one day, he saw
a tall, beautiful sixteen-year-old girl named Akumu walking to
market with a basket on her head. He abducted her in his car.
When arrested by the local leaders, he paid a bride price of thirty-
five cattle to her father. Their first son, Barack Hussein Obama,
was born in 1936. Hussein forced the Christian girl to convert to
Islam, taking the name Habiba. She bucked her husband’s discipline. He beat her and threatened to kill her, digging her grave.
She fled. He took four more wives, all Muslim.

During WWII, Hussein served in the British Army in Addis Ababa, India, and Burma. Like African American sol-
diers, the African troops returned home with dreams of freedom and equality. They had been willing to die for their country and thought the British would grant them political equality. Their demands were reasonable: a role in their government, an end to the hut tax and poll tax, and land ownership. When a response to these demands was not forthcoming, many of Luo formed a secret grassroots rebellion, the first African-led political movement.

Jobs were scarce. The violent Mau Mau insurgency led the British to retal-
iate by tearing up identity cards so that the Africans couldn’t get work. The uprising pitted Africans against Africans, rebels against loyalists. The Kikuyu tribe organized a campaign of civil disobedience under Jomo Kenyatta. Hussein was accused of being a Mau Mau and sent to internment camp along with up to 320,000 other Africans including chil-
dren. The daily beatings traumatized the old man. Ultimately, he was cleared of the charges.

Like most Luo, Hussein encouraged education. He scrimped to send his first-born son, Barack, to a top boarding school. (Like most traditional Africans, he did not believe in educating girls; his daughters were illiterate.) Barack Sr. loved school, but left under a scandal. He eloped at age twenty-one with a woman named Kezia.

He was befriended by Tom Mboya, a Luo leader and the treasurer in Kenyatta’s party. A visionary, Mboya prepared for independence by educating an elite cadre of 800 East Africans, all men, in America. Prominent African Americans such as Jackie Robinson, Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte funded his project.

Barack Obama Sr. was one of those chosen for education abroad. As he boarded the plane, his pregnant wife, Kezia, wept.

Barack Obama Sr. did not mention his family to Ann Dunham, whom he met the following year at the University of Hawaii. They married five months later, and six months after that Barack Obama Jr. was born on August 4, 1961. The following summer, Barack Obama Sr. left for Harvard without his wife and child.

He gave up his doctoral program in economics to return, as did many Kenyans abroad, to compete for jobs in the first independent African nation, a republic. (With him went his second American wife.) He found a well-paying position at Kenya Central Bank, but none of his jobs lasted.

Mr. Double Double refused to heed the Luo proverb: Don’t abuse the crocodile when you’re still in the water. He published attacks on President Kenyatta’s administration that marked him as a Luo radical. Relations between the Luo led by Mboya and the Kikuyu headed by Kenyatta continued to deteriorate. Nationalism faded and tribalism returned. Barack Obama Sr.’s protector, Mboya, was assassinated, an act many Kenyans believed Kenyatta had ordered. Barack Obama Sr. criticized Kenyatta, who warned him to back off. He refused and lost his job. As he was coming home from an all-night drinking session, in 1981, his car hit a tree, and he died. No serious dam-
age was found to the tree or to his corpse. His family insisted his death was not accidental.

Firstbrook’s book is important; few Americans know the history of East Africa. Firstbrook provides more information than the general reader wants on tribal naming practices and life rituals. Kantor’s book moves quickly. A superb writer, Kantor offers enough novelistic detail to make the reader feel he or she is there inside the White House listening to the Obamas talk and watching the in-fight-
ing among their staffers. The media report that Michelle Obama was unhappy with parts of the book. As Kantor repeats, both Obamas are sensitive to criticism, an oddity in politics.

Liberal Hegemony: Empire by Any Other Name?

Review of

The jacket cover of John Ikenberry’s newest book, Liberal Leviathan, captures a compelling moment of United States ascendency to global power. It reproduces an original oil canvas by American Childe Hassam, one of the artist’s flag series paintings, depicting a vast array of American flags hanging aloft on a rainy day from the two great ridges of skyscrapers framing the canyon that is Fifth Avenue in New York City, the shimmering flag images reflected onto the wet, puddling streets below. An unapologetic expression of patriotic loyalty and national grandeur, the painting was completed in 1916 during the Wilson administration’s preparedness campaign in the months before the United States entered the Great War in April 1917 on the side of the allied powers. Hassam marked the later event with another, contrasting work entitled Allies Day (May 1917) in which the colors of sixteen countries, including the United States, are displayed, again from buildings along New York’s Fifth Avenue. A symbolic representation of American international engagement, one among equals, when set next to the earlier work suggests an evolution of the nation’s foreign policy from independent and solitary freedom of action to an American alliance with others in a war that President Woodrow Wilson declared must “make the world safe for democracy.”

Wilson envisioned a new global order when the war ended, one based on American liberal capitalist principles and policies that he believed would prevail because of the nation’s growing economic dominance. When this war ends, he told members of Congress in February 1918, “the [world’s] financial leadership will be ours. The industrial primacy will be ours. The commercial advantage will be ours.” A month earlier, on January 8, 1918, Wilson had unveiled his plan, the Fourteen Points, for a new world order, calling it “the program of the world’s peace, our program...the only possible program, as we see it.”

Writing that Wilson’s project, including the formation of the League of Nations, the fourteenth point, provided very little in the way of institutional machinery, Ikenberry describes the president’s program as a “‘thin’ liberal order,” dependent entirely on voluntary compliance to enforce peace, that lacked multi-power agreements for open covenants “openly arrived at” and did not possess the necessary means to remove national economic barriers and unequal trading conditions. Refusing itself to join the League of Nations, the United States was not willing or able to employ its power unilaterally to prevent either a world depression or a second world war. Historians generally agree that even if the United States had become a member of the League, it is doubtful if the depression or the war would have been avoided.

At the end of World War II, however, Ikenberry believes, the United States did succeed in establishing and directing “a western order built around cooperative security, managed open markets, multilateral governance, and American liberal hegemonic leadership.” Initially focused primarily on Europe and facilitated, but not caused, by the Cold War—“the project began before the Cold War and survived to its end”—the scope of the new order evolved and eventually expanded globally, a process Ikenberry argues was powered by “a community of liberal democracies.”

Describing the theoretical foundations and historical development of the new order, Ikenberry prefers a generously benevolent concept of American hegemony. “The United States dominated the order,” he writes, “but the political space created by American domination was organized around partnerships and agreed-upon rules and institutions that facilitated [self-] restraint, commitment, reciprocity and legitimacy.” During the Cold War, the author recounts, this system operated in a bipolar world in which the Soviet Union, Communist Eastern Europe and the People’s Republic of China competed against the United States and its allies. After the Cold War, “America’s international liberal project developed...into a sprawling unipolar global system.” By Ikenberry’s reckoning, the nearly seven-decade-old project has been a smashing success. Now, however, since the administration of George W. Bush, the American-powered world order is in crisis, defined by Ikenberry as “a crisis of authority—a struggle over how liberal order should be governed, not [however] a crisis over the underlying principles of liberal international order...an open and loosely rule-based system.”

The earlier achievements, Ikenberry tells us, occurred because the United States “used its power advantages [military, political and economic] after World War II to reopen the world economy and create an array of political-alliance institutions that provided the foundation for postwar security and the management of economic openness.” America took the lead in founding the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other organizations that have collectively assured international security, stability and prosperity.

Tracing the roots of this liberal system to the early modern Westphalian principles of “state sovereignty, territorial integrity and nonintervention,” Ikenberry further argues that the effectiveness of these arrangements can be attributed to agreed-upon negotiated rules among the participating countries and the willingness of the United States to make concessions to gain the cooperation of its allies and partners in the form of foreign aid (“public goods” in Ikenberry’s words) and security guarantees. “[A]lthough the
a referenced work by Michael Kinzer detailing more than a century of United States interventions to overthrow regimes abroad, Ikenberry passes over numerous such American overt and covert operations, many of which occurred long before the administration of George W. Bush invaded Iraq in 2003 to displace the regime of Saddam Hussein, an action the author roundly condemns.

Ikenberry also exempts East Asia from his liberal multilateral security construct. “In East Asia,” he tells us, “security relations quickly became bilateral because the United States wanted less out of the region,” a curious assertion that goes unexplained, and “because multilateralism would entail more restraints on American freedom of action,” the more likely explanation in the wake of the communist triumph in China in 1949, which denied the United States a potential asset in the region. What the United States wanted out of Asia was stability in the countries bordering or offshore from China to prevent their territorial, economic or ideological absorption by the new regime in Beijing. Japan became central to the strategy.

A June 1952 National Security Council Memorandum (NSC 124/2) approved by President Harry Truman expressed alarm concerning the threat to American proclaimed interests in the area: “A communist Southeast Asia would deprive the West [of] strategic raw materials, exert economic and political pressure on nations allied with the United States and would cause Japan’s eventual accommodation to communism.” Were Japan added to the communist bloc, Secretary of State Dean Acheson also warned, “the Soviets would acquire skilled manpower and industrial potential capable of significantly altering the balance of world power.”2 As historian Robert McMahon has pointed out, Japan required the markers and raw materials of Southeast Asia to fuel its industrial recovery and economic growth. As Japan was the chosen replacement for China in the American Asian order, its continued economic security and alliance were a major reason, often ignored or underrated, for the prolonged United States intervention in Indochina after World War II.3 Policymakers masked that particular intrusive action in Southeast Asia under the alleged protective cover of the regional Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), which the United States and its European allies created in 1954. SEATO goes unmentioned in Ikenberry’s account, perhaps because almost no one outside of foreign policymakers in Washington took seriously the claim that the now-defunct organization conferred international legitimacy on America’s military intervention in the region.

The list of American overt and covert unilateral political, economic and military encroachments in the world since 1945 throws into some doubt Ikenberry’s elaborately constructed model of a “liberal hegemonic order in which rules are negotiated and compliance is ultimately based on consent, not coercion.” Far too often, like Great Britain before it, the United States made the rules of international order but waived the rules for itself when it believed it needed or desired to do so. Ikenberry seemingly escapes this potentially embarrassing conundrum by elastically expanding the provenance of liberal order to include practices usually associated with the exercise of imperial authority.

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Recognizing, as he does, the critical importance of American economic as well as military superiority after World War II (“In 1945, the United States had two-thirds of the world’s gold reserves, three-fourths of its invested capital, half of its shipping vessels and half of its manufacturing capacity”), Ikenberry acknowledges that the IMF and World Bank (institutions that American officials had created) “give the United States and the other leading shareholder states weighted voting rights in their operation and governance” while “America’s commitment to NATO carries with it the power of supreme command over the combined alliance forces—and within the organization, the United States is first among equals.”

Similarly, the author favorably compares the liberal hegemonic order “that in important respects was owned and operated by the United States” with neocolonialism, “an indirect form of rule in which local elites are co-opted into playing a supporting role within the larger hierarchical political order and rewarded with benefits and security protection.” Ikenberry then proceeds to explain that America developed “a wide array of Cold War-era client states with regimes in the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa, often making agreements with specific leaders—the shah of Iran, Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, the Somoza family of Nicaragua, the leaders of South Vietnam among them—to whom the United States made security pledges, offered economic assistance and market access, and in return these client states would host military bases and support the American-led international order.” Imperial powers as recent as the British, French and Soviet empires engaged in analogous practices.

Clearly, the United States wanted to build an international order that would protect and serve American interests. Ikenberry correctly observes that the architects of the postwar liberal order were convinced that “an American hemispheric bloc would not be sufficient; the United States must have security of markets and raw materials [throughout] the entire world.” “Open markets were necessary to sustain postwar economic growth and employment” and, he affirms, “the American guarantee to Europe and Asia provided a national security rationale for Japan and the Western democracies to open their markets.” The same held true for less democratic partners of the United States. The American-constructed global liberal order was essential for the preservation of the nation’s political and economic system. The authors of the famous NSC-68 document in 1950, the blueprint for waging the Cold War, declared that the United States would have been compelled to establish an international order “even if there were no national threat.”

Ikenberry’s linkage of politics, economics and security recalls Robert Gilpin’s study, The Challenge of Global Capitalism: The World Economy in the 21st Century, which the author cites, but even more so it brings to mind the Open Door thesis articulated by the revisionist historian William Appleman Williams more than a half century ago in The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (1959). The difference between Ikenberry and Williams, of course, is that Ikenberry denies that the system, properly organized, is imperial and approves of it. Williams unequivocally identified the United States and the hierarchy it established abroad as an empire from the “get-go” and was sharply critical of it.

Much of Ikenberry’s theoretical construct and historical narrative have been explored in his earlier works. A recognized authority in the field of international affairs, the author holds impressive credentials. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago in 1985, was a member of the Department of State Policy Planning staff during the first George Bush administration in 1991 and 1992, a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1992-1993), a Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (1998-1999) and at the Brookings Institution (1999-2002). Since 2004 he has been the Albert G. Milbank Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University. The producer of numerous articles in Foreign Affairs, published by the Council of Foreign Relations, for which he has worked on several projects, and in other foreign policy journals, Ikenberry unveiled core elements of his international relations narrative in the volume After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars (2001).

Closely examining the aftermaths of the Napoleonic Wars, the Great War of 1914-1918 and World War II, Ikenberry determined that the victorious states after those conflicts used institutions and methods to “lock-in” a favorable postwar position and to establish a sufficient ‘strategic restraint’ on their own power, so as to gain the acquiescence of weaker states.” The success of these efforts hinged on the ability of the victors to restrain their own power and bind themselves to long-term commitments. Liberal Leviathan builds on the earlier work and then goes on to address what Ikenberry identifies as the transformation of the liberal international order following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, after which the United States became the solitary great power in the global system, expanding it through new organizational configurations such as the North American Free Trade Agreements (NAFTA), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (APEC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

America’s global reach, however, has been confronted in the twenty-first century by violence and instability from terrorist
groups and individuals operating from failed or weak states (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen make the list), by economic challenges from China and India, and by the decline of American hegemony. Contributing to the latter, according to Ikenberry, was the foreign policy of George W. Bush. The Bush administration responded to the events of 9/11 by adopting a unilateral, pre-emptive strategy—the “Bush Doctrine.” “The United States would be the global leviathan…identifying threats and deploying force worldwide”; it “would have an open-ended license to deploy power and intervene around the world—and would do so with fewer [some would say no] checks and balances.” Even though, for example, the United Nations, members of the European Union (excluding the British), and neighboring countries such as Russia and Turkey disapproved of the Bush war in Iraq, this did not deter the administration from launching the invasion and occupation of the country in 2003. The Bush administration also sharply curtailed American commitments to multilateral agreements, including the Kyoto Treaty seeking to control and reduce global warming, refused to become a member of the International Criminal Court or to endorse the international ban on biological weapons. It unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty as well.

Ikenberry condemns the administration’s ultra-nationalist global order “in which America rules the world but does not abide by rules. This,” he complains, “is, in effect, empire.” One leading official in the Bush administration endorsed that description in 2004, telling New York Times journalist Ron Suskind, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” Ikenberry rejects this view and writes that the Bush Doctrine was “both unsustainable at home and unacceptable abroad.” For these reasons, he concludes, the strategy failed.

There is thus a crisis in the American world order, the author argues, attributable in part to the sins committed by the Bush administration but, he avers, the crisis is not one of power, which the United States overwhelmingly possesses; rather it is a “crisis of authority,” brought on in some measure, he says, by the success of the system in the past and more recently by international challenges such as America rules the world but does not abide by rules. This,” he complains, “is, in effect, empire.” One leading official in the Bush administration endorsed that description in 2004, telling New York Times journalist Ron Suskind, “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.” Ikenberry rejects this view and writes that the Bush Doctrine was “both unsustainable at home and unacceptable abroad.” For these reasons, he concludes, the strategy failed.

More than any other president in the century since Woodrow Wilson was elected to the White House, Obama has asked the question, “How much will this cost?”

Citing the president’s national security strategy outlined in May 2010, in which Obama asserted that “the United States must pursue a rules-based international system that can advance our own interests by serving mutual interests,” Ikenberry points to the administration’s embrace of American alliance partnerships, its repudiation of the Bush Doctrine and the president’s frequent appeals for the United States “to build new partnerships and shape stronger international standards and institutions, providing a larger involvement in them for rising states.” Virtually excerpting a page from Ikenberry’s playbook, Obama told a New York Times reporter in December 2007 (by then the future president was already an announced candidate for the office), “We can and should lead the world…Part of our capacity to lead is linked to our capacity to show restraint.” Obama’s “leading from behind” tactic in foreign policy, in Ikenberry’s judgment, is further evidence of the administration’s renewed “commitment to a multilateral, rule-based order” and a cooperative internationalist profile as manifested in the president’s outreach to the Islamic world, the successful negotiation of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia for reductions in nuclear weapons, the administration’s positive response to the Arab Spring (however delayed), its support for the rebels in Libya, the withdrawal from Iraq and its intention to diminish America’s military engagement in Afghanistan.

All that said, Ikenberry’s optimistic prescription for a continued American-led liberal order, which he believes is not over and is desirable if, like “new wine in old bottles,” it is legitimately reorganized and managed, faces considerable odds. Whether we call it an empire or by some other name, even Ikenberry grants that, despite its considerable military power, the United States no longer commands the political power internationally it once did and is no longer able to be “seen as the indispensable provider of [global] economic stability.” Indeed so, and the financial crisis and world recession are but a consequence of sclerotic domestic policies and international developments years in the making.

Contrary to Ikenberry’s claim that this is just a “crisis of authority…over how the liberal order should be governed,” not a crisis over the underlying principles of liberal international order, defined as an open and loosely rule-based system, “the decline of the centerpiece of this order, the United States and Europe, is all too real. The causes of the current economic malaise—a deeply rooted avaricious consumer capitalist culture, dysfunctional politics and an inequitable economic system (none of these conditions is exceptional to the United States)—have gradually undermined American security and confidence at home and weakened American capabilities abroad, for how long no one knows. President Obama’s inflated political rhetoric in the State of the Union address in January 2012 (“America is back!”) notwithstanding, one could argue that his “leading from behind” policies indicate a Niebuhrian understanding that the United

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States can no longer be (and cannot afford to be) the global “Empire of Liberty” it has repeatedly tried to be.

More than any other president in the century since Woodrow Wilson was elected to the White House, Obama has asked the question, “How much will this cost?” America, he has argued, cannot afford to do everything and, moreover, should not try to do so. The president’s withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, his Pacific Rim strategic reorientation, the administration’s efforts to sharply reduce American reliance on Middle East oil, and the nuclear weapons reduction treaty with Russia are examples of this thinking. At the same time, as David Sanger’s new book, Confront and Conceal: Obama’s Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power, demonstrates, Obama has shown an increasing willingness to act unilaterally with force and where he believes American interests and security are at stake. The president has, moreover, chosen to do so by using technologies (drones and cyber weapons) that will hopefully avoid lengthy, costly and unpopular wars and ground troop occupations. “They are the perfect tools for an age of austerity… and often more precise.” They are also actions going considerably beyond even Ikenberry’s elastic boundaries of an open, rule-based order in which state sovereignty and the rule of law are the norm and “part of the deep operating logic of the [liberal] order.”

Andrew Preston has it just about right when he describes Obama as more the disciple of the Christian realist Reinhold Niebuhr than he ever was a follower of the Christian pacifist Martin Luther King. Knowing that, one can then perhaps understand why Obama has been perfectly willing to ignore, even flout, Ikenberry’s painstakingly constructed model of a multilateral, rules-based international order. The president’s personally authorized assassination of targeted, labeled terrorists, including a United States citizen, most often by drone attacks (some of which have killed civilians) in countries with which the United States is not at war (Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan), and the use of cyber attacks and economic sanctions against Iran in what amounts to an undeclared war are two unilateral actions initially undertaken by the Bush administration but far more extensively deployed by the current White House occupant.

Justified in the name of defending national security, these apparently successful operations demonstrate that even in decline the United States can wield substantial military clout, bypassing or ignoring rules, even those it originates. To be fair, these particular actions were not fully revealed before Liberal Leviathan was published, but Ikenberry does not much deal with the issue of how the United States is “to find ways to legitimate the use of its power” which, as even the Obama administration has made clear, it will unilaterally execute even at the expense of the sovereignty of other countries, civilian casualties and national and international judicial permissibility. Exercising power to dominate, as Ikenberry reminds us, does not confer legitimacy to rule. Neither does empire, no matter how liberal the Leviathan allegedly may be.

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Review of 

A book like this (well, more properly a doorstop like this) comes at a propitious time. It brings into sharp focus, and at great and scholarly length, the historic cultural and martial traditions and resources of “the East.” That’s good timing if only on a purely topical basis as we Westerners now see China exercising a growing financial authority over us decadent, ill-disciplined “barbarians.” (That was their term for all foreigners; it has an ancient pedigree.) What drove Ian Morris to undertake this massive study of what he calls “the patterns of history” (and not just the Orient)? Well, “one of the reasons why people care about why the West rules is that they want to know whether, how long and in what ways this will continue—that is, what will happen next?” (Spoiler alert. He cannot “say” what that “next” will look like. His last chapter, though, offers a spectrum of scenarios, some literally mind-blowing.)

A graduate of Cambridge University and professor of classics and history at Stanford, Morris has discerned what seems a useful and unexceptionable set of criteria for assessing what he calls the degree of “social development” in the large swath and procession of civilizations he examines. He introduces us to those gauges at some length but is considerate enough not to repeat them obsessively. He has world enough and time to do so, as he scrutinizes three millennia of social, bureaucratic, military (lots of that) and intellectual history (a bit more sparse). His survey actually begins far earlier, reviewing “the evolution and dispersal of modern humans over the planet” and “[tracing] the formation and growth of the original Eastern and Western cores after the Ice Age.”

The criteria are four. First is “energy capture” (a society’s ability to get food energy from plants, transportation energy from wind and sun, explosive energy from explosives), then—two, three, and four—urbanism, information processing and “the capacity to make war.” These make sense as rough guides to a civilization’s vibrancy, though the “but why?” side of me has to wonder about using such external measurements for a state’s achievements and character. Sure, Morris gives a lucid rationale for why he chose a people’s biggest city as his urbanism criterion, but a city’s dimensions raise for me all sorts of intriguing additional issues. Is it big because it holds a wide array of specialized endeavors and therefore reflects a sensible, well-ordered state with carefully considered social, military and service priorities? Is it big because it houses at its center a caste of priestly elite who sanctify that existence and extent? If so, what does that elite’s role say about the society’s values and priorities, both religious and bureaucratic: the comparative importance of theology and management? No, for Morris, it is size that matters most.

His vaster time frame provides one considerable advantage: it helps puncture the sense of Western superiority that many of us (I plead guilty) grew up with and may be loath to let go of. Indeed, for me, W. S. Gilbert’s phrase “modified rapture” may seem a fairer description of my response—grateful for a liberation from that older and merely partial worldview, paired with a sense of loss at that deprivation. Even Morris admits to some surprise at his own discovery of “how strong the parallels were between the supposed unique Western experience and the history of other parts of the world, above all the great civilizations of China, India and Iran.” By showing the remarkable advances that in fact first
arose in the East, or arose there as forcefully as here, Morris requires of us some humility. I knew the Chinese had invented gunpowder long before the West but had no idea they also came up with both the wheelbarrow and the printing press. His essential and rather sour take (he terms it “the Morris theorem”) on the vast canvas of human achievement he surveys (both East and West) is that the rise of major civilizations can, almost always, be traced to “lazy, greedy, frightened people looking for easier, more profitable and safer ways to do things.”

Such a stance raises questions, not surprisingly, about the putative role of so-called “great men.” For him, great men don’t hack it, ultimately, as shapers of history. They may modify or arrest temporarily its basic flow, but that larger flow is what ultimately rules. As he repeats at key moments, the secret to history is “maps, not chaps.” Geography trumps the individual efforts of even the most remarkable, imaginative or merely powerful political or military leaders. (True to his motto, he posts a liberal supply of those visual aids—maps, graphs and charts—throughout his 750-plus pages, living testimony to that admirable British pedagogical stress on geography.)

Like most folks, I imagine, whenever I pick up a rich and weighty book, whether a Dickens novel or a history of the planet, I employ all sorts of markings to keep track of the many and various ideas, themes, observations simmering in its pages. For Morris, I soon began scribbling the red letter “n” to represent something “new”—something I had not known before. Since maybe a third of what Morris was telling me was about the Far East, my margins soon developed a severe case of measles. All those red “n’s” forced me to admit the very real lacunae in what I had always fondly considered a sound and far-reaching education. So out of consideration to that admirable British pedagogical stress on geography.

“I also knew of the Medieval Warm Period, but Morris gives more specific details: “atmospheric pressure increased over the landmass, weakening the westerlies blowing off the Atlantic into Europe and the monsoons blowing off the Indian Ocean into southern Asia.” So, temperatures up: the Vikings could, as we all know, sail to and settle Greenland. But also, rainfall down: so in the Middle East, Shiite Fatamids split from Baghdad and “conquered Egypt, where they built a great new city at Cairo.” Climate change thus causes major migrations of peoples and faiths, and it builds big cities.

New religious and philosophical insights? Yes. Around 500 BCE Confucius and Dao in China joined the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosophy, halfway around the world, in a first, though disconnected, wave of intellectual evolution. Within eight centuries came the simultaneous growth of Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism. I had never grasped that each represented a creative reaction to challenging social and cultural conditions. Each faith “offered something for everyone in this troubled age…new kinds of salvation to more people than their first wave predecessors.” He notes further that “Neither [man] belonged to a chosen people; they had come to save everyone.” Christ’s band of Jewish companions would surely have objected to that description, but in the long run Morris is right.

His analytical review offers an invaluable perspective that is consistent with his more objective, and thus rather dismissive, take on religion itself. For both the Christ and the Buddha, he notes, we have no verifiable words spoken by either leader, only recollected anecdotes and reported sayings. The Westar Institute (aka the Jesus Seminar), an international association of Biblical scholars, has argued that barely one-sixth of Christ’s sayings, as recorded in the New Testament, are accurately ascribed. Fact is, both men got co-opted (and elevated to divine status) by subsequent followers, their eloquent pens at the ready. That same posthumous fate awaited Muhammad, a genuine “great man” though his “warrior” status promoted a far more rapid spread of his faith. (For a brilliant and exhaustive analysis of Islam’s rise and especially of the role of Arabic pens in defining that faith, the recently published In the Shadow of the Sword, by Tom Holland, repays careful study.)
Other founders and earlier faith cultures come in for similarly irreverent, or at least marginal, treatment. Morris’s account of a recent archaeological dispute, for example, raises the possibility that the remarkable achievements of the Hebrew “United Monarchy” in the 10th century BCE (under King Solomon and King David) are in fact an “invention dreamed up by Israelites centuries later.” The evidence for this is that no dig has yet uncovered specific remnants of that glorious era. A conference presenter who argued that “pots usually dated to the 10th century are in fact made in the 9th” evoked such outrage that “he had to hire a bodyguard.” A people’s need for a regal past can continue to infect the truly scientific spirit three millennia later. Morris leans to the “true believers” side of the dispute, but the incident reminds us of the political issues that can arise over so seemingly prosaic a matter as pottery fragments and frustrate anthropologists’ commitment to scientific disinterest.

Incidentally, I witnessed a parallel debate at last November’s Westar Institute Conference. It concerned Moses (a figure Morris barely mentions). Some scholars there proposed that this great foundational figure was in truth an historical construct. So was the Exodus he supposedly inspired and guided. That genuinely shocking insight helped me appreciate all over again that the fewer historical facts we can verify, the more respect we should reserve for the Bible’s wondrous narrative of national pilgrimage and establishment. It reaffirms the power of fiction to create religious piety and deepen religious faith. (See my book *Fictional Religion: Keeping The New Testament New*, 2011)

That same spirit of unsentimental objectivity allows Morris to move to other, more secular Western heroes we’ve been raised to revere. Columbus, it turns out, was quite simply a “bungling idiot…who underestimat[ed] the distance around the globe and refus[ed] to believe he had the numbers wrong.” And Vasco De Gama? “A nobody, chosen in the expectation he would fail.” Well, now—we all know, don’t we, that China had no comparable mariners? Wrong again. There was a certain Zheng He who in 1421 set sail with 300 boats and nearly 30,000 men, plowing the Indian Ocean as far as Mogadishu in a successful quest for tribute. A brave and driven Oriental mariner.

Morris introduced me to another remarkable man, Zhu Xi, a twelfth-century philosopher. No sea-going explorer he. Rather, this reflective stay-at-home re-fashioned Confucian thought for a Chinese society that was growing increasingly introspective. “Let us now set our minds on honoring our virtuous natures…Let us every day [see] whether we have been remiss in anything about our studies.” Ah yes, study, read books and, hmm, even write reviews. The perfect life.

Morris is also good at articulating remarkable parallels both between and within eras. He notes that the Chinese Qin and the Western Roman empires evolved similar (and similarly successful) violent tendencies starting in the 4th century BCE. He points out as well the rise of brilliant Sunni thinkers in Baghdad around 1100 and shows a similar phenomenon of creative, synthesizing thought by Thomas Aquinas a century later, as he sought to fuse Aristotelian logic and analysis with received Christian doctrine.

Then, in a single paragraph he covers the nineteenth-century liberal philosophical tradition, voiced most eloquently by (my father’s and my particular hero) John Stuart Mill, and recounts its many and varied effects. That libertarian philosophy, for one thing, helped inspire the end of slavery, but before long it helped accomplish far more: “employers increasingly compromised with workers and after 1870 most countries legalized trade unions and socialistic parties, granted universal male suffrage, and provided free compulsory primary education. As wages rose, some governments offered savings plans for retirement, public health programs and unemployment insurance. In return workers agreed to national service…” Being forced to consider more history in less time drives Morris to brilliant concision.

I grant that Morris has done a splendid job of identifying and assessing successive kingdoms’ and empires’ dimensions and achievements—geographical, technological and even digestive; but I am not sure he has captured their heart and soul. Here, I likewise grant, I may not be carping about Morris’s achievement so much as imagining the book I’d like to write.

Mere professors of English literature should hesitate to pick nits with so erudite a man—an historian, anthropologist, archeologist, amateur ecologist and archaeo-botanist, as well as a classicist and political scientist. Morris is a genuine, twenty-first-century homo universale. Still, I do wish he had found a way to include in those four criteria of his something like artistic achievement. I guess one might consider literature as a form of “information processing” but that seems to me a disservice to the purposes and genius of that particular humanistic enterprise.

He mentions, as he should, Thucydides and Herodotus as his celebrated historian forebears. But I would also love to have seen an examination of what it says about a culture that encourages and values the writing of history. The arrival of the Clio Muse suggests that people had reached a sufficient peak of self-confidence and willingness to analyze and assess the past and thereby extrapolate the future. Clearly the Hebrew Bible springs from similar impulses, though its purposes are more purely theological.

And speaking of religion, Morris does a splendid job of identifying the dates and basic tenets of the major faiths, but I would find it fascinating to hear his theories on what it was in the cultures of the times that made the various faiths appear and take root. Is there a larger spirit working throughout history? Or rather, as he puts it, does each era “get the thought it needs” and that’s all there is to it? I find it particularly fascinating to consider the role of the Roman Empire as an active agent in the spread of Christianity. Morris shares my appreciation of the Monty Python film *Life of Brian* (1979) and its hilarious paean to “what the Roman Empire has ever done for us.” I have to go further and wonder whether it was the efficiency of the Empire’s road building that allowed precisely the sort of rapid exchange of ideas, including religious doctrines, that would energize that new faith’s spread. And it was those very roads that Paul traveled in his tireless proselytizing efforts. Wasn’t the Pentecost, that multilingual Upper Room portrayed in “The Acts of the Apostles,” a tribute to

*continued on p. 18*
the Empire’s vast reach, inclusive and cohesive culture, and speed of communication?

Similarly on literature and the arts: I find it significant that of the three Shakespeare plays Morris mentions, and only briefly, two are history plays, *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar*. (*Hamlet* is the third.) He does devote a page to Daniel Defoe, and later to John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Yet these two writers are in fact shrewd sociologists in both spirit and focus. It seems to me that the arts can also do invaluable service as indices to and reflections of an era’s historical and cultural conditions. There is, for instance, a lovely moment in Act I of Mozart’s *Magic Flute* when a Turkish (or Moorish) villain is turned from lust for the lovely Pamina into a harmless dancing creature enchanted by Papageno’s magic bells. In that instant, Mozart celebrates the success of European culture (via the arts it has evolved) in resisting the threat of Ottoman Islam. The opera’s 1791 premiere was held in Vienna, the site of a series of repeated Ottoman attacks over three centuries. Only in 1686 was European success assured. That moment in the opera is a remarkably eloquent and concise artistic and historical specimen.

I would also take time to investigate why the increasingly modern 19th century produced men like the brothers Grimm, who devoted their lives to the study and preservation of ancient folk tales. Richard Wagner appeared soon thereafter, committing his artistic and nationalistic vision to turning similar folk myths into cosmic statements about the challenges and ultimate fate of our species. Literary and even operatic phenomena speak volumes about the culture and concerns of the eras that produced them.

Similarly, Morris makes a brilliant observation about a major Mesopotamian contribution to societal success by “inventing management, meetings and memoranda,” and he also shows the vital role of such a managerial class throughout Chinese history. I would have him look at the opening chapters of Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, which paint a brilliant portrait of contemporary England (1855). Dickens’s account of the sedentary and inefficient Circumlocution Office dramatizes what can happen to a once-valuable governmental institution when it becomes its own *raison d’etre*—a most un-civil service. (William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” does the same thing, with characteristic miniature brilliance in his account of modern small-town bureaucracy infiltrating the sleepy post-Civil War South.) At the very least, great literature holds a mirror up to historical phenomena and then integrates them into a brilliant canvas of human emotion. It can create an evolving drama of an individual, a society and a nation.

Morris turns in his final chapter to an attempt to imagine the future: whither is the world, both East and West, tending? He contemplates a wide range of as-yet-unrealized scenarios. At one end lies utter disaster, due to the threats posed by uncontrolled military capabilities and goals, or air pollution and climate change. (Here he offers some not-very-original but always sensible suggestions: a more effective world government; steps to control carbon emissions.) At the other end beckon a variety of astonishing futuristic developments: the ending of the very notions of East and West, or the ability “to upload actual human minds onto machines…We will transcend biology.” “Mind-blowing” indeed.

Morris offers no final choice (he’s an historian, not a clairvoyant), but he does place what might happen into the vast context of the past that he has adumbrated so masterfully: “The closing of the steppe highway, and the opening of the oceans ended realities that had constrained Old World development for two thousand years, and the industrial revolution of course made mockery of all that had gone before.”

We can only imagine (indeed, maybe we cannot) what mockeries await us, our children and our grandchildren.

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The West, The Rest, and Ideas of Order


While living in Moscow for various periods in the 1970s, I became a big fan of Soviet humor. A one-liner about the press, for example, groused about the government newspaper Izvestia (“News”) and the Communist Party paper Pravda (“Truth”) and went: “In the News there is no truth, and in the Truth there is no news.” I took this to be a comment about the failure to live up to Western standards of press freedom, and I sometimes caught myself thinking, “If only they had access to the International Herald Tribune they could get the news (and truth?) they’re so hungry for.”

Even at the time, I realized that this was a very American viewpoint, and reading Charles Kupchan’s No One’s World provides a reminder why. More generally, it provides a reminder of how American views will have to learn to co-exist in an ever-more crowded field of global powers, especially those in Asia. As in Fareed Zakaria’s account of the “post-American world,” Kupchan’s focus is not so much the decline of the West as the “rise of the rest” and the resulting multiple modernities and geopolitical realities it entails. He questions a host of assumptions that have become all too comfortable for Western readers—such as the idea that people everywhere give top priority to unfettered access to information as part of a larger agenda of democratic self-governance.

Often lurking in the background of an American perspective in these discussions is the idea that the United States has a special role to play as a beacon of liberty and democracy for others. Commentators sometimes see this as part of “American cultural DNA” and trace it back to Puritan John Winthrop’s “City upon a Hill” sermon in 1630. Kupchan notes that such views are increasingly less welcome in today’s global context, where the blind pursuit of a universal-rights agenda can be not only unproductive but “undermines the West’s influence among emerging powers.” He goes on to observe that even friends like Brazil and India sometimes consider “the West’s obsession with democracy promotion as little more than an unwanted meddling in the affairs of others.”

The author lays the groundwork for his argument by emphasizing the unique historical trajectory of Western Europe and the United States. This trajectory was shaped by forces that include a fragmented political landscape and the Reformation in Europe, a combination that had no real counterpart elsewhere. He argues that the evolution of political cultures in other places has followed distinct paths with outcomes that are not only different, but stable; China, for example, is a place where “communal autocracy is poised to be a durable alternative to liberal democracy.” And his ideas about “paternal autocracy” in Russia suggest that my reading of preferences there may have been as misguided during the Cold War as it is today.

So does this leave us adrift in a sea of multiculturalism and anarchy, with no principles for understanding, let alone managing, “the coming global turn”? Kupchan doesn’t think so, and it is here that his argument becomes especially interesting and nuanced. He eschews a rigid freedom agenda for the West, warning against a single-minded focus on universal rights as a standard of accountability. Instead, he argues for “responsible governance,” which amounts to the more neutral standard of providing basic safety and dignity for a country’s own population and avoiding threats to others. This requires subtlety and sound judgment, but cases such as NATO’s approach in Libya suggest that it is already coming into play.

In making the case for responsible governance, however, Kupchan occasionally appears to contradict himself by claiming that American-sounding views on freedom and universal rights continue to have an important role to play in the coming global turn. This runs the risk of sounding like an attempt to have one’s cake and eat it, too. Kupchan tries to make it all fit together, but I think additional conceptual tools are needed at this point to thread this needle. And this brings me back to the city upon a hill, an idea that can help us understand how the ideals of continued on p. 20
responsible governance and American visions about freedom may—or may not—co-exist.

The city upon a hill idea is a protean story or narrative template that is routinely harnessed in American political culture to make sense of events, both past and present. It has served for centuries to bind the American political community together, just as other narratives do in other societies. However, this narrative template is a double-edged sword: it can be a story about a beacon of hope and light for others to follow voluntarily, but it can also be a story that justifies United States efforts to impose—forcibly, if necessary—its ideas and political system on others. The former use of this story line can be called the “exemplarist” reading, and the latter the “enforcer” interpretation.

The struggle between these two uses of this story line took on special significance during the Cold War. In his 1952 book *The Irony of American History*, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr reflected on how the U.S. had moved from being a fledgling experiment and beacon of democracy to being a global power that had the capacity to threaten those who did not agree to follow its dictates. This transition in national imagination was allowed—indeed sometimes encouraged—by a move from an exemplarist to an enforcer interpretation of the city upon a hill narrative.

As I discovered during my time in Cold War Moscow, these competing readings can play out in surprising ways. For example, virtually all my acquaintances, including those who were jaded critics of their own system and admirers of the United States, took it as simple fact that President Truman’s decision to use atomic weapons in 1945 had nothing to do with ending hostilities in Japan; instead, the obvious motive was to intimidate the Soviet Union in the postwar world. This was specifically not a matter of Marxist-Leninist theory in their view; most had rejected that theory out of hand. Instead it was an example of how good intentions and an inspiring national narrative could yield the actions of an enforcer rather than an exemplarist. Of course their account of “what really happened” is surprising, if not offensive, for many Americans, who would object that a country that is a model of freedom could hardly be capable of such motives. But just as the irony of a well-meaning nation brandishing weapons of mass destruction was at the core of Niebuhr’s reflections, it was not lost on my Soviet friends. This is a view that continues to prevail today, reflecting its Russian, rather than Soviet Marxist, nature.

Such episodes provide a reminder of the power of national narratives to shape worldviews in surprising and ironic ways—and in ways that are not entirely under the control of the group whose story it is. The vagaries of such interpretation lurk in the background of Kupchan’s argument, and they provide a means for negotiating some of the contradictions between claims about stable, competing modernities, on the one hand, and the continuing relevance of America as a city upon a hill, on the other. In particular, they remind us that attempts to act responsibly and in the interests of others can be interpreted in quite different ways. It is also worth noting that, while it may be satisfying to chalk these different interpretations up to simple hostility or brainwashing, it is usually misleading, sometimes dangerously so.

The tension between a world of competing modernities and one calling for a special role for American values actually reflects a larger debate among contemporary analysts, all trying to have their say in a time of great anxiety over the future. At one extreme there are those who assert the world needs American ideals of liberty and democracy more than ever in the coming global turn, and on the other are those who reject these ideals, calling instead for them to be replaced by those of another civilization’s values or by multiple modernities. Kupchan tries to find a middle way to understand the coming global turn, and it is ironic that in order to address this very contemporary issue we may need to turn to archaic forms of human thought in the form of collective narratives.

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What Are the Humanities and Should They Be Saved?

Review of Louis Menand, The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University (W.W. Norton, 2010), 174 pages including index

In The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University, Louis Menand joins the ranks of other well-known humanities scholars (Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Fish and E.D. Hirsch, among others) who have recently tackled the subject of the current state of the liberal arts education. However, instead of framing liberal education in general and the humanities in particular as being in crisis because Americans are abandoning the traditional pillars of higher education in favor of a model that focuses exclusively on economic and technological outcomes, Menand offers an assessment that is less alarmist about the future role of the humanities at the American university. He states, “The humanities disciplines may go through a period of reorganization, but they aren’t likely to become extinct.” Further, he advises his audience to draw comfort from the idea that American higher education will need to undergo some measure of transformation in order to respond effectively to current and future social, political, economic and technological changes, as only a failed system is not built for change. At the same time, however, Menand chooses not to address these forces outside academia as agents responsible for the decline of the liberal arts education, preferring instead to focus exclusively on the institution of the university itself through a historical analysis of its development and transformation since the nineteenth century.

As his title indicates, both reform and resistance to reform are features that have accompanied the rise of the American university, so the current pressures to change and debates about the nature of the changes are not only far from anomalous or unprecedented in the history of higher education but also fully in keeping with its institutional development. As Menand makes clear, the notion of the liberal-arts-based education that is often held up as the ideal in current defenses of the humanities is not a timeless essence, but rather the product of a particular historical moment that developed in large response to pressures both internal and external: “Within the history of higher education, the Cold War university was the anomaly, and what are criticized as deviations and diffusions in the present system are largely reactions against that earlier dispensation. People may admire the old dispensation, or feel some nostalgia for it, but it was fundamentally untenable.” In other words, Menand’s project endeavors to historicize that which is often characterized inside and outside academia as existing outside history as a sort of transcendental value.

In this series of four essays, three of which have their origins as the Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia (and, in the character of their public appeal, still carry the faint traces of that unique genre, the lecture series by the prominent public intellectual), Menand examines the history of undergraduate and graduate education in the liberal arts and sciences through the transformation of the American university into a fully modern institution. However, rather than reconstructing this history in a systematic or linear way, he organizes his investigation as a set of responses to four specific questions, each of which provides a distinct perspective that illuminates particular aspects of that history. These four questions get to the core of current public and institutional perception of the place of the liberal arts in higher education: “Why is it so hard to institute a general education curriculum? Why did the humanities disciplines undergo a crisis of...
plays in perpetuating this uniformity: “[I]s there a code, which
entrants are required to demonstrate for admission to the profes-
sion? Does the profession select for attitudes about how the
academic system works, about standards for performance, even
about personal matter and appearance?” He suggests one answer
to these questions in the transformation and current state of doc-
toral education in the liberal arts: “It may be that increased time
to degree, combined with the weakening job market for liberal
arts PhDs, is what is responsible for squeezing the profession into
a single ideological box.” In other words, according to Menand,
on account of the extreme difficulty of earning a PhD and
obtaining a tenure-track (or even full-time, non-tenure-track)
position, only those students who identify with the prevalent
values of the professoriate will be interested in assuming the
great risk involved in endeavoring to join its ranks. In this way,
the profession increasingly “self-select[s]” for the like-minded:
“The academic profession in some areas is not reproducing itself
so much as cloning itself. If it were easier and cheaper to get in
and out of the doctoral motel, the disciplines would have a
chance to get oxygenated by people who are much less invested
in their paradigms.”

These are harsh words of indictment of the active role that
the liberal arts disciplines and even humanities faculty play in
their own apparent crisis (a sense of doom that Menand for the
most part does not share). A humanist himself, Menand does
not sugarcoat the situation for his colleagues, nor does he overly
accuse the liberal arts professoriate of effecting its own decline,
for he recognizes that the ways in which the American university
has developed historically have to some extent limited the present
options for response to the current situation. At the same time,
however, he urges us not to let this history keep us trapped in a
mode of resistance instead of one of reform.

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Why review an issue of a literary quarterly? One answer would assert to read little known, never-reprinted if not-ever-printed, writings by novelist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Editors Glenda Carpio and Werner Sollors, both members of the departments of English and African American Studies at Harvard University, have bestowed upon us twenty-first-century readers the marvelous gift of rarely seen Hurston texts, setting us to the task of contextualizing these “new” stories about Harlem within the continuum of the works for which she is so well known. A different answer would state that this volume functions as a valuable anthology reasessing critical beliefs about the Harlem Renaissance and its literary descendants. Any collection would be called impressive that includes rising scholars like Ernest Mitchell II, established European scholars Udo Hebel, marquee novelists like Ishmael Reed and Jamaica Kincaid, and well-known American academics such as Kenneth Warren and Daphne Brooks—among others who have also contributed compelling essays.

Let me turn first to the headline material, the five stories by Hurston along with two previously unpublished private letters. Editors Carpio and Sollors, joined by M. Genevieve West, make a case for the significance of the fiction on the grounds that it will dramatically reshape the common conception of Hurston as a notable recorder of southern black and Caribbean life. The rediscovered stories are set in Harlem, a city with which many associate Hurston due to her education at Barnard and Columbia and her fellow-travelling with the Harlem Renaissance set, yet it is a setting and part of her life, Carpio and Sollors note, that received “precious little space in her autobiography” if any at all in the novels for which she is best known. They point out as well that the Harlem scenes about which Hurston wrote were, for the most part, recastings of her younger self, a persona not “so completely identified with Eatonville.” Despite their obvious significance for understanding the trajectory of Hurston’s career, two of the stories—three are written in mock-biblical verse—tell the tale of one “Caroline, her philandering husband, and the axe.” These stories—“The Book of Harlem,” “Monkey Junk,” “The Country in the Woman” and “She Rock”—rewrite the Harlem folklore of credulous Southern migrants and calculating Shebas; as Genevieve West points out, the Southern couple gone to the North is a story Hurston returned to several times. Perhaps the most notable, then, is the tale “The Back Room,” which relates the story of a member of the talented tenth who pushes aside a suitor too many times—showing Hurston’s debts to then better-known authors such as Edith Wharton and Oscar Wilde. The brittle conversations of New York’s Café au Lait society are not ones we expect to encounter in Hurston’s fictional world.

Somewhat more likely to fit into the picture of the Hurston we know now is the one revealed in the newly published letters to Dr. Robert Redfield, a noted folklorist, and Mr. Alan Lomax, a fellow collector of vernacular music and story (and son of musicologist John Lomax). Discovered years ago by a scholar of the Modernist Chicago School, CCNY English Professor Carla Cappetti, the letters are here reprinted for the first time, providing us additional insight into the woman Cappetti affectionately calls “the mud-slinging word warrior.” In the letter to Redfield, Hurston, never reluctant to toot her own horn—“I am getting lots of material here in Jamaica”—also does not hesitate to vaunt herself above others, e.g. anthropologists Melville Herskovits and Katherine Dunham, two scholars whose work might be considered close to her own. Lomax, with whom Hurston was initially allied but who later was seen to be helping himself to the fruits of her labor, feels the corrosion of Hurston’s ire: “So now you know why I went out of my way to have nothing to do with you…That and your personal untidiness was one of the city-wide scandals.” To read the letters back to back, with their overlapping cast of characters, is quite a feast of academic gossip. While the stories do shed some new light on a little-explored part of Hurston’s early life, the letters support the complicated and often contrary heroine found in Carla Kaplan’s Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters (2002).
This trove of Hurstoniana is hard to beat. Yet the editors nicely conjoin that part of the volume, the annotated and introduced literary discoveries, with a second, a series of critical essays on Hurston, Wright and the Renaissance, and a third collecting contemporary assessments. (A fourth section collects a bouquet of book reviews—but one should not, in my opinion at least, review a review.) These essays respond to issues generated by the rediscovery of the Hurston materials, first in a section taking up the weighty matter of what constituted the Harlem Renaissance to begin with, and who “belonged” in that cultural flowering, and then in another charting “New Directions and Challenges.” Each cluster includes scholars from the United States and abroad, which enables the volume to avoid the isolationism of many critical volumes on North American writers.

Daphne Brooks begins the second section re-assessing the Renaissance with a provocative reading of Hurston’s oeuvre through sound, bringing together the anthropologist with her contemporary Ethel Waters so that we can more fully understand the ways that the “sonic Zora” contextualized and deepened her research by her incorporation of performance. Ernest J. Mitchell II contributes a timely reminder of what the Renaissance was and was not. An analysis of the impression that a Mexican journey made on German artist Winold Reiss, known for his beautifully rendered drawings of Hurston and others, could have increased its impact by including translations of Reiss’s Mexican journals (the quotations are included here only in German, tantalizing readers without knowledge of that language). Stephan Kuhl’s essay examining the influence of social psychiatrist Fredric Wertham on Richard Wright and his novel Savage Holiday (1954) argues that the often-dismissed book has more complexity than many critics admit; yet placing a discussion of a mid-1950s work of Wright within this section perhaps pushes the boundaries of “the Harlem Renaissance” a bit far. This cluster nevertheless should get scholars mulling over the productive ways we might expand and make more complex discussions of this crucial era.

The third section offers the most speculative readings, in the sense that the essays often depart from definitions of African American literature as a tradition having commonly shared subtexts, tropes and styles. George Hutchinson’s analysis of competing strands of internationalism in African American studies makes a worthy contribution to debates over how global African Americans—during the Harlem Renaissance, before, or after—were. Whether writing about McKay’s Banjo or a special issue of Callaloo on Afro-Mestizaje, Hutchinson considers the paradoxical simultaneity of “American-ness,” “blackness” and internationalism. Jeffrey Ferguson’s against-the-grain reading of the blues vis-à-vis the African American literary tradition, whether in the 1920s or in “post racial” works, makes a strong argument for that practice’s complex and contradictory valences; Ferguson’s suggestion that the classic blues both do not, and do, suggest modalities of cultural resistance in a stubbornly racialized, and class-bound, United States is one to take seriously. Birgit M. Bauridl’s essay on Staceyann Chin and contemporary performance poetry’s escape from a singular idea of blackness, and George Blaustein’s meditation on Paul Beatty, the Berlin Wall and the so-called end of race (and even “American” as well), bring into the volume assessments of today’s writers; their articles juxtapose two directions for writing by Black Americans—and by no means limit the possibilities to that pair. Novelist Ishmael Reed offers a lively memoir about his own education as an African American author, musing on what has and has not come about since his student days, while Kenneth W. Warren, author of the already much-commented-upon study What Was African American Literature? offers a few more thoughts on his provocative claims. All of the contributions in this third section propose ways of thinking about African American literature that depart, sometimes quite challengingly, from long-held and comfortable habits about the interpretation and role of African American authors. I find these offerings refreshing and arguable simultaneously, making for an invigorating assortment of complementary and dissenting views.

So back to that opening question—why write a review of a periodical? Certainly, the tripartite nature of this special issue of Amerikastudien/American Studies does not offer the unified argument of a classic academic monograph. Its assortment of riches—from the offered trove of rediscovered Hurston writings to reassessments of the Renaissance and African American literature itself—presents ample rewards to the reader. If not immediately apparent on first reading, the volume implies that what we know about African American literature and its criticism remains, like the creative writers themselves, in flux and unpredictable. “New Texts, New Approaches, New Challenges” delivers on each of those implicit advertisements, giving its readers plenty of encouragement to join in the on-going assessment of what is African American literature.

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Tennessee Williams’ headstone at Calvary Cemetery bears this simple inscription:

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS
1911-1983
POET
PLAYWRIGHT
“The violets in the mountains
Have broken the rocks!”
Camino Real

The notion that one of America’s greatest playwrights might be conceived of as a poet first, and only secondly as a playwright, seems surprising and counterintuitive. However, it is the argument of William Jay Smith’s short, powerful memoir, My Friend Tom, that this is exactly as it should be: Williams’ great contribution to American letters rests above all in the brilliance of his poetry.

A great deal is known about the life and work of Tennessee Williams. Indeed, perhaps too much. Not only was he arguably America’s greatest playwright, he was (and still remains) our most controversial. Plays such as The Glass Menagerie (1944) and A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) have acquired iconic status befitting true classics—Streetcar, for example, became the first American play ever to be performed at the storied Comedie-Francaise, the French institution begun by royal edict in 1680. Nevertheless, Williams’ reputation is still the subject of much scholarly and critical debate. What, for example, of the later plays written during his self-described “Stoned Age” in the sixties and seventies? It is still possible to dismiss much of Williams’ later work as uneven, impossible to stage and filled with self-indulgent symbolism. Many have seen these plays as the product of a gifted mind run amuck, a perfectly pitched theatrical sensibility eviscerated by alcohol and Seconal, and there has been no shortage of recrimination against his self-destructive genius. But Smith’s new memoir implicitly calls this view into question.

Some seventy-five years after their first meeting at Washington University in St. Louis in 1935, poet William Jay Smith describes his new memoir, My Friend Tom, as a work “not long, but long in the making.” A distinguished poet, man of letters and memoirist, Smith served as adviser to the Library of Congress from 1968-1972 (the position now known as Poet Laureate of the United States). He became one of Thomas Lanier (Tom) Williams’ earliest friends at Washington University when Williams was a senior and Smith a freshman. Together with fellow Washington University student Clark Mills McBurney, the three friends created a “Poetry Factory” that met in the cool basement of Williams’ home during the sweltering heat of St. Louis summers, both stoking the young playwright’s creative energies during those difficult years, and inculcating literary habits and tastes that would last a lifetime.

The great contribution of Smith’s memoir is not in dredging up new facts about Williams’ life; rather it is the book’s insistence on viewing his entire oeuvre through the lens of poetic achievement. Its thesis, that “Tennessee Williams was first and foremost a poet,” allows us to reexamine the author’s work in a way that feels fresh. Smith’s memoir is loosely structured around various meetings over the years, many of which feature productions of the plays that Smith attended together with his friend. The memoir takes us on a remarkable journey in which we meet a shy, innocent boy who might suddenly break out in a strange cackling laugh. We follow him through years of astonishing success with Menagerie and Streetcar, on into the playwright’s descent into mental illness, drug addiction and death. Through it all, however, Smith remains the loyal and clear-sighted observer who charts his friend’s course with compassion and respect for his poetic brilliance, rather than regret for an immense talent wasted.

Thomas Lanier Williams was born in rural Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911; the move of his father, Cornelius, to St. Louis to take a management position in the International Shoe Company (then the largest shoe manufacturer in the world) was traumatic for young Tom and his older sister Rose. Once the Williams children arrived in the Midwest in 1918, they felt lonely and uprooted. St. Louis was then literally polluted by coal dust and smoke (“St. Pollution,” Williams called it), and both its pace and lifestyle were radically different from what the children had been used to in Clarksdale, where their grandfather, the Rev. Walter Dakin, was rector. The boy’s Southern accent
and strange manners were ridiculed in St. Louis, and he was constantly reminded that his and his sister’s privileged station as grandchildren of the town rector was no longer theirs. For the rest of his life, he recalled those early years in Mississippi “as the happiest in his life.” Smith reminds us that the Williams family moved nine times during their first dozen years in St. Louis, and it was this sense of personal oppression and psychic disorientation that are so beautifully evoked in his first great success, _The Glass Menagerie_. Later in life, Smith quotes Tom as remarking of this early work, “It is the saddest play I have ever written. It is full of pain. It is painful for me to see it.” Despite the pain he felt in St. Louis—for Smith, it remained “imaginatively, his residence” for the rest of Williams’ life. And it was from these roots that Williams managed to forge a kind of lyric poetry built on his very isolation and unhappiness. As Arthur Miller later observed of his contemporary:

> It is usually forgotten what a revolution his first great success meant to the New York theater. _The Glass Menagerie_ in one stroke lifted lyricism to its highest level in our theater’s history...What was new in Tennessee Williams was his rhapsodic insistence that form serve his utterance rather than dominating and cramping it.

Of course, it was only after he left both Washington University and St. Louis and moved to New Orleans in 1939 that Williams came of age, artistically, emotionally and sexually. As Smith describes it, “For most of his three years at the university, Tom was troubled by the problem of sexual identity, his homoerotic impulses countered by a strong sensual response to girls, who were constantly in his company. He had come to the borderline of a new terrain of love but would be unable to cross it for years.” Nevertheless, those years of feeling outcast brought forth the material that he would mine for the rest of his life, regardless of where he or his characters were geographically situated.

Smith’s memoir details their friendship, which lasted from 1935 until Williams’ death in 1983, and is less concerned with breaking new biographical ground than illuminating the essence of his friend’s poetic genius. More than any other book about Williams, Smith’s memoir insists on the lyric poet buried at the heart of the dramatist. He analyzes several of Williams’ relatively unknown lyric poems, revealing their delicacy and elegance. A stunning example is the opening stanza of the poem “Valediction,” which summons up the memory of his sister Rose:

> She went with morning on her lips down an inscrutable dark way and we who witnessed her eclipse have found no word to say.

This same figure is hauntingly described by Smith in the book’s preface: “I carry with me the vision of the lonely lovely forever-lost sister Rose drifting in from the shadows, her shrill persecuted voice ruffling the air and rippling her beaded blouse.”

Smith persuasively argues for a revaluation of Williams’ genius in poetic terms. For example, he convincingly quotes the stage directions from the final scene of Williams’ first full-length play, _Candles to the Sun_, as “pure poetry”:

> Winter has broken up and it is now one of those clear, tenuous mornings in early spring. A thin, clear sunlight, pale as lemon-water comes through the windowpanes of the cabin which is now barer and cleaner-looking than usual in this strange light.

Arguing that Williams is a poet above all else, Smith’s memoir makes the compelling case that Williams’ _entire oeuvre—_ lyrics, short stories and plays—are all of a piece. In so doing, _My Friend Tom_ offers a remarkable contribution to the criticism of the playwright. Conceived essentially as poems, even lesser-known works such as the ill-fated “Ghost Play” _Clothes for a Summer Hotel_ (Williams’ last new work to appear on Broadway) merit renewed consideration. The early poem “Beanstalk Country” begins with the words:

> You know how the mad come into a room, too boldly, their eyes exploding on the air like roses, their entrances from space we never entered.

When we compare this poem to the late work, we become aware of the fact that Williams’ poetic sensibility transcends familiar Aristotelian questions of plot, structure and even character for the stage. As Clark Mills, his old friend and mentor from those earliest “Poetry Factory” days, described him:

> I don’t know of any other American playwright, living or dead, who has it...He seemed to “hear” a voice as much as he heard the words. And I think when you hear the voice like that, you are in the realm of poetry.

Thanks to William Jay Smith’s memoir, _My Friend Tom_, we are now unlikely to think of Williams as anything less than America’s foremost poet of the stage.

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A Wicked Book of Unbelief

Review of
Nathaniel Philbrick, Why Read Moby-Dick? (Viking-Penguin, 2011), 131 pages, including bibliography

I have written a wicked book, and feel spotless as the lamb.

— Herman Melville to Nathaniel Hawthorne, November 1851

Sherlock Holmes has taught us that how we look at something, what we are looking for, will directly affect what we actually see. Not everyone, we have learned, reads a crime scene, the wide world or an artwork in the same way. “I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look…And I, you, and he, and we, ye, and they, are all bats.” So chants Pip, the young cabin boy of the whaleship Pequod, after days adrift in the isolation of the sea. Again and again Pip repeats this mantra of his madness, a stern injunction from Herman Melville to combat our blindness by seeking ever the little lower layer, both of life and the ambitious masterwork with which he has explored it.

Most readers likely reverence one or two books above all others, books that have perhaps offered direction or beamed some light into the universal darkness. For me, there has been Thoreau’s Walden and William James’s Essays on Pragmatism. For Nathaniel Philbrick, nourishment has come from Herman Melville’s masterful anatomy of human existence, his sprawling encyclopedia of a novel, Moby-Dick, or, The Whale (1851). Philbrick grew up loving the sea, so much so that in 1986 he settled on the island of Nantucket, once a center for the country’s lucrative whaling industry. He received the Roosevelt Naval History Prize for Sea of Glory: America’s Voyage of Discovery, The U. S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842 (2003), and his Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War (2006), was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in history. In 2000, In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex, his account of a whale’s attack on the whaleship Essex—an actual event that Melville drew on for Moby-Dick—won the National Book Award.

That Philbrick should value and wish to celebrate America’s greatest novel of the sea would seem to fit naturally with such lifelong enthusiasm. But he has set himself the even more challenging task of persuading us that we too should celebrate, that we too should engage this leviathan of a text by following its lurching plot and sharing its deep dives of philosophical speculation. “Moby-Dick may be well known,” Philbrick concedes, “but of the handful of novels considered American classics, such as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and The Great Gatsby, it is the most reluctantly read. It is too long and maddeningly digressive.”

With this entertaining short study, Philbrick sets out to answer for the reluctant readers among us the most basic question of all, Why should we read Moby-Dick? Why should we look and then look again to see what Melville has to tell us about ourselves and our troubled world?

Literary scholar Harry Levin once quipped that studies of Moby-Dick have come to replace whaling as the principal industry of New England. Philbrick knows this as well as anyone, but his slender volume of appreciation makes no claims to scholarly or professional innovation. He simply uses what is known about Melville and his novel to help those who set sail across its pages grasp what is unusual, memorable and ultimately both timely and exhilarating about it. “The book is a repository not only of American history and culture,” Philbrick insists, “but also of the essentials of Western literature. It has a voice that is one of the most nuanced in all of literature: at once confiding, funny, and oracular.” It is, we might add, extraordinarily ambitious, and it astounds its dedicated readers by reaching the lofty goals it sets for itself. For like Walden, Leaves of Grass and Emerson’s essays, Moby-Dick is a secular scripture; it is indeed “oracular” and a “gospel” for this century, as Philbrick says, “the one book that deserves to be called our American bible.”

Most readers likely know something of Melville’s novel, and a great number have begun it, recognizing its narrator’s early “Call me Ishmael” and the obsessive vengeance Captain Ahab directs at Moby-Dick, the great white whale that during an earlier hunt had destroyed his leg. But not many who feel called to open this large volume join the chosen few who reach the Epilogue, with its relevant, haunting epigraph from Job, “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.”

It is this very large group of frustrated readers that Nathaniel Philbrick addresses in Why Read Moby-Dick? He grants that it is very easy to lose patience with Melville’s “dangerously digressive, sometimes bombastic novel.” It’s “a mighty, messy book,” but nevertheless it has “a wonderful slapdash quality…[with] chapters of biology, history, art criticism, you name it, sometimes at seeming random.” In sum, “Moby-Dick is a true epic, embodying almost every powerful American archetype as it interweaves creation myths, revenge narratives, folktales, and the conflicting impulses to create and to destroy, all played out across the globe’s vast oceanic

continued on p. 28
stage.” Philbrick estimates he has read the novel a dozen times; judging from this book-length vade mecum, his enthusiasm and respect for Melville’s achievement continue to grow, and he is determined to share his deepening insight and that enthusiasm with his contemporary reader. He will settle for nothing less than our commitment to embark with the Pequod and remain on board till the journey ends and we are left like Ishmael, bobbing alone on our own sea of uncertain being.

Voyaging with Philbrick is a notably pleasant experience for he follows an irresistible recipe for an entertaining book: Select a challenging subject, one that has puzzled readers for 150 years. Find someone who loves the material, appreciates it, has lived intimately with it most of his life. Ask why he loves it, what he can tell us to help us see what he sees and feel what he feels, then package his response in a beautiful, readable volume. For this is indeed a handsome book to hold in one’s hand—I frequently paused before the need to deface it with a light pencil mark of note taking. Though small in size, Why Read Moby-Dick has been lavishly produced. At 127 pages of text with widely spaced lines and several blank leaves, it might more accurately be considered a lengthy essay; its thick, rough-edged paper recalls valuable manuscripts of earlier times; the rich black boards and wide red binding bring to mind expensive giftbooks of Melville’s own nineteenth century. With its embossed covers and decorated chapter headings, the whole makes one of the handsomest volumes I have ever seen.

The beauty of the physical book should not distract us from the seriousness of its contents, however. Philbrick knows Moby-Dick well and plumbs its philosophical depths with persuasive authority. Like Melville, he offers us deceptively brief chapters, twenty-eight of them, but like those in the novel, each offers a carefully thought-through insight, not only into Melville and his masterwork but into the life of our time as well as his. Philbrick reads Moby-Dick as a mirror of its age and a window on our own by drawing on Melville’s biography, the evolving agnostic sensibility of the nineteenth century, and the nation’s history—especially the tensions that led to the Civil War and linger so painfully into our present.

“He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other,” Melville’s friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, observed. He “will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief.” Melville never did attain the rest Hawthorne envisioned. His entire life’s work reflects his search for the peace of confident faith that was becoming increasingly rare as the nineteenth century wore on. Like the unfortunate young Pip, Melville continued to look and then look again, hoping always to penetrate what he called the pasteboard mask of appearances to discover what—if anything—lay on the other side. His contemporary, Matthew Arnold, the British cultural critic and poet, also turned to the vast depths and endless motion of the ocean to suggest “the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of the Sea of Faith. In “Dover Beach” (1867), Arnold captures the desolation felt by an ever-more-modern world when the assurances of traditional religion have come to seem no longer sufficient. “The world,” Arnold wrote, noting the optimistic vision of his Romantic predecessors,

To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

The tone and the vision recall many of the darker moments of Moby-Dick. In “The Mast-Head” chapter Ishmael imagines a “romantic, melancholy, absent-minded” young man. “There you stand, a hundred feet above the silent decks,…lost in the infinite series of the sea…The tranced ship indolently rolls; the drowsy trade winds blow; everything resolves you into languor.” This is the “ALL feeling” Melville condemned as a weakness in the thinking of his contemporaries, the romantic Transcendentalists. For, “while this sleep, this dream is on ye,” Ishmael cautions, simply “move your hand or foot an inch,” and “at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that
transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!” As the novel draws to a close, Arnold’s “confused alarms of struggle and flight” can be heard sounding through the final chapters as all save Ishmael are destroyed by the malignant fury of the white whale.

For Philbrick, the cultural and philosophical chaos both writers portray was realized in the American Civil War; he senses foreboding on many of Melville’s pages.

Ishmael’s transformation [in embracing Ahab’s obsessive quest for revenge] echoes what was happening to the northern portion of the United States when Melville was working on *Moby-Dick*… New England gentlemen who had once viewed the South from the safety of their own mastheads had finally been drawn into slavery’s pernicious vortex. What to do? Nothing of course. As Starbuck discovers, simply being a good guy with a positive worldview is not enough to stop a force of nature like Ahab, who feeds on the fears and hatreds in us all. “My soul is more than matched,” Starbuck laments, “she’s over-manned; and by a madman!” Just like Starbuck, America’s leaders in the 1850s looked at one another with vacant, deer-in-the-headlights stares as the United States, a great and noble country crippled by a lie, slowly but inevitably sailed toward its cataclysmic encounter with the source of its discontents.

Racial strife, impending war, the challenges for a writer “pulled hither and thither by circumstances,” as Melville wrote to Hawthorne in June of 1851, all played their part in the writing of his novel. “The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man ought always to compose—that, I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me.” But it was not dollars alone that plagued Melville. Like Arnold, he sensed the tectonic shift in the philosophical assumptions of his age, and he felt driven to record and explore them. “What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the other way, I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches.”

It has become commonplace to note that during the nineteenth century new historical approaches to the world’s religions and increasing skepticism bred by science led to what is often called the secularization of sacred scriptures. And accompanying this loss of faith in the divine authorization of holy texts came a new reverence for secular works now seen as similarly useful guides to life—perhaps, as later theologians have suggested—even part of the divine plan for the instruction of mankind on this earth. Viewed through this lens, Ishmael becomes a modern Everyman searching for meaning—or belief, as Hawthorne said of Melville. The Pequod is embarked on a pilgrim’s progress of physical danger and moral temptation, a challenging exercise for crew and reader alike that holds out the promise of significant intellectual and spiritual growth. For Ishmael, “Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.” For Philbrick, “This redemptive mixture of skepticism and hope, this genial stoicism in the face of a short, ridiculous, and irrational life, is why I read *Moby-Dick.*” We too, he demonstrates convincingly, can find nourishment for our souls by joining the Pequod in pursuing the many-layered meanings of the white whale.

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Onward Marxist Soldier:
Remembering George Rawick

Review of
David Roediger, ed., with Martin Smith, Listening to Revolt: The Selected Writings of George Rawick (Charles H. Kerr, 2010), 194 pages including footnotes and index

There’s no way to separate George Rawick, the teacher, scholar, writer and activist, from George Rawick, my dear friend from kindergarten in Brooklyn in the 1930s to his death in a St. Louis hospital in 1990. We were very close, living in the same neighborhood, going through much of grade school and all of high school together, spending many days and evenings watching baseball at Ebbets Field, basketball and track at Madison Square Garden. In high school, we dated girls who lived in the same apartment house, often double-dated with them, saw lots of World War II movies. In 1948, after my freshman year at the University of Missouri, I hitchhiked to Oberlin, Ohio, and waited for George to finish finals so we could use the same mode of transportation back home. We got to Philadelphia, surviving a minor accident on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and rode the train the rest of the way.

After college, as we went off into different fields, we corresponded, saw each other at coincidental visits to New York, or Chicago, or Detroit, where I met Diane Luchtan, his wife and later the mother of his children. She had been his student.

I continued to hear from George, receiving postcards, articles, marked-up magazines, journals, phone calls in those not-so-long-ago pre-internet days. He’d always been a radical, a Trotskyite, a fighter for the downtrodden. It made him unwelcome in many academic circles, shortened his stays at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Chicago, where he earned advanced degrees. He worked at community colleges in Detroit, lived and taught in England, became close to the late C. L. R. James, probably the best-ever writer about the sport of cricket and a fighter for racial justice. James, a Trinidadian who had been witness to the mostly forgotten sharecropper labor unrest in the Missouri Bootheel in the ’30s and to strikes among autoworkers during the same decade, later was deported to England during the height of the power of Sen. Joseph McCarthy.

But in another bit of the commonality that involved George and me, James married a friend and high school classmate of ours. As Selma James, she founded the English International Wages for Housework Campaign and has been a radical feminist in England for a half-century. Coincidentally, she was in the United States last month, lecturing in a half-dozen cities and on tour for her new book, Sex, Race and Class—The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings 1952-2011.

Anyway, George Rawick moved to St. Louis in the mid-’60s. His marriage had ended; his two sons, Jules and Che, followed him here a few years later. He came here to join the sociology department at Washington University, but
several years later, the university abolished the department after
considerable infighting among its faculty. George then taught at
the University of Missouri-St. Louis and at a Webster College
program at Scott Air Force Base. He would tell me he preferred
the students at the latter two campuses because they were less
privileged but more interesting and interested in their world.

George joined my daughters, my wife and me for lunch
most Saturdays in the Central West End neighborhood where
he lived, and we talked two or three times a week. His health
started to fail in the ’70s—complications from diabetes, but he
never was a truly healthy person, even as a child, when mastoid-
itis was a recurring problem.

But he kept writing. He began his life’s work, 41 volumes
of WPA-collected slave narratives under the general title The
American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, preceded by the 1972
From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community,
an introduction. Several chapters from that book are included
in David Roediger’s compilation, which is part biography, part
appreciation by George’s friends, colleagues and students, part
illustration of Rawick’s own writing and thinking.

George found slave narratives everywhere, traveling a lot,
inspecting dusty file rooms in state office buildings throughout
the Midwest and South. He opened a lot of Pandora’s boxes,
called a Trotskyite, a Communist, a rabble-rouser, all of
which he probably was at one period in his life. Students loved
him because he respected them as he challenged them.

When he was in a nursing home in north St. Louis County,
I somehow found a woman who lived in the area and was willing
to visit him three or four days a week to read him the newspapers,
magazines, letters and other things that interested him. After he
died, she asked if she could attend, and speak, at a memorial ser-
vice I arranged. She was a woman of middle age, educated a little
beyond high school. But she held a group of intellectuals spell-
bound when she referred to herself as “George’s last student,” and
went on to talk about how he questioned her, explained things,
even lectured her, but actually awakened her to the world beyond
her suburban St. Louis community. It was the finest tribute he
received.

Roediger, professor of history and African American stud-
ies at the University of Illinois, also relates one of my favorite
Rawick stories. It seems that after he moved to St. Louis,
optes on his telephone line late at night led him to wonder if
the FBI or some other federal agency was tapping the line.
His test method was simple: He stopped paying his phone
bill. The noises remained, but his phone calls were free for
many years.

Rawick was big on late-night calls to friends and collabora-
ators; he would discuss new theories, new books, even (to me,
anyway) a new sexual adventure led by an otherwise-anonymous
young woman.

He often was contentious in disputes with colleagues.
A lengthy disagreement with Irving Howe and Howe’s long-
time attacks on him were a matter of great pain, but Rawick
did not suffer fools gladly, and he saw many people as fools.
Roediger shows Rawick’s tendency to disagree in several reprints
of articles from Radical America and from Dissent, the latter a
publication where he worked for many years. “The Historical
Roots of Black Liberation,” written in 1968, and “Working
Class Self-Activity,” a year later, are interesting views of a pair
of subjects, and “The American Student: A Profile,” from the
initial issue of Dissent in 1954, “highlights Rawick’s grasp of
the contradictions in 1950s student culture and offers an apt
prediction of radicalism to come,” as Roediger points out.

A perceptive man, Roediger sees that, despite his wisdom
and the scope of his knowledge, George Rawick was a man
of many contradictions. I knew George from his childhood,
spending as many evenings with his family as he did with
mine, and he certainly was.

Roediger’s excellent book bears witness.

The late Joe Pollack was a writer, film and theater critic, and
member of the Advisory Board of the Center for the Humanities
at Washington University in St. Louis.
St. Louis’ Legendary Critic: Joe Pollack’s 60-Year Career

Joe Pollack, St. Louis’s best-known and often-feared critic of theater, movies, restaurants, wine and journalism, was still pounding out columns and reviews up to the age of 81 when his heart couldn’t keep up with his workaholic lifestyle.

He died March 9, 2012, of an apparent heart attack at his home in Clayton. “My dear Joe has left us, far more quietly than was his usual style,” said his wife, Ann Lemons Pollack, to readers of their St. Louis Eats and Drinks web site.

Pollack was on the Advisory Board for The Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis.

He was known mainly because of his twenty-three-year career at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. His obit in the paper said a good word from him in a review could fill a restaurant or theater and a bad review was something to be feared. When he entered a restaurant, sometimes under an assumed name, word quickly spread: “Joe Pollack is here.”

He would not take a free meal and once refused to accept an envelope full of cash sent to his home by a restaurant owner who wanted a favorable review. Joe never again went to that restaurant, his wife said.

Pollack retired from the Post in 1995 but continued doing reviews for a number of media outlets, including television, KWMU radio, St. Louis Magazine, the St. Louis Journalism Review (now the Gateway Journalism Review) and Belles Lettres: A Literary Review of the Center for the Humanities. He and his wife wrote books about food.

He made his living with words and loved writing. “Give me a deadline, and I’ll get it done,” he would say, even if the deadline was in ten minutes. He liked to quote his mentor, media critic A.J. Liebling, as saying: “I can write faster than any man who can write better, and can write better than any man who can write faster.”

Pollack was known for his considerable ego and big waistline. He would quip: “I’m in shape for what I like to do best.”

He said he fell in love with the theater as a kid in Brooklyn, N.Y. He hoped to become a shortstop for the Dodgers, but when he got to the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri, at age 16, he decided on becoming a sportswriter. In a placement test speech at Mizzou, he criticized the baseball Cardinals and their announcer, Harry Caray. The young critic was assigned to a remedial speech course. He was a sportswriter for the old St. Louis Globe-Democrat from 1955-61 and was public relations director for the football Cardinals from 1961-72. When the team left St. Louis, he came to the Post-Dispatch. He worked his way into eating out and going to movies, the theater and musical events, all for the newspaper.

A memorial service for Pollack was held at the Repertory Theatre at which speakers from various venues of his work life praised him with anecdotes. Charles Taylor, an attorney and friend of the Pollacks, said Joe charted the course for getting the word to the public about quality offerings at the area’s theaters, restaurants and movies. “The region owes him gratitude for his enrichment of it,” Taylor said.

He was a stickler for the truth and didn’t hedge even when his opinions might hurt. Steven Woolf, artistic director of the Repertory Theatre, said, “He loved the theater and everybody in it. He was a curmudgeon from time to time...when he retired from the Post we all gave him a send off. Joe loved the theater as much as anyone I know. He just wanted us to get it right.”

Pollack would say: “A splendid performance sends me floating...an awful one causes me to walk slowly, stooped over, encased in a cobweb of gloom.” As for wine, he said: “Drinking wine is a great adventure.”

For six years Pollack was president of the St. Louis Newspaper Guild. “Some younger reporters thought he was a little gruff,” said Jeff Gordon, now the guild president. “But he would be out there fighting for us,” on contracts and other union matters.

In January, at a guild dinner, Pollack was given an award for his career achievements. Post columnist Bill McClellan announced the award, along with his recollection of when he came to the paper and couldn’t believe a critic could be one of its star writers. But Joe Pollack was.

Roy Malone retired as a St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter and then became editor of the St. Louis Journalism Review.