Review Essay

The Myth of the Civil War

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THE CIVIL WAR. A film by KEN BURNS. *Shown as a PBS television series; also available on nine VHS videocassettes (11 hours). Individual purchases from Time-Life Videos, $180. Institutional price from PBS Videos, $350.*

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE SECOND AMERICAN REVOLUTION. By JAMES M. MCPHERSON. *Oxford University Press. 173 pp. $17.95.*

Ask all our millions, north and south, whether they would vote now (were such a thing possible) to have our war for the Union expunged from history, and the record of a peaceful transition to the present time substituted for that of its marches and battles, and probably hardly a handful of eccentrics would say yes. Those ancestors, those efforts, those memories and legends, are the most ideal part of what we now own together, a sacred spiritual possession worth more than all the blood poured out.

— William James (1910)

Year after year we reap new harvests of Civil War literature, despite the admonition of some historians that the subject has been exhausted. We tell and retell the story of the Civil War, hoping through vicarious participation to gain a better sense of our national identity, vocation, and destiny. In other words, we see the Civil War as an event of mythic significance—the word myth being understood here in its formal and original sense, from the Greek *mythos* or "plot," a narrative rendering that discerns patterns and lessons in the midst of what would otherwise be an incomprehensible and terrifying welter of events. History, no less than legend, can achieve "mythic" stature insofar as it informs and edifies by telling a story that is a meaningful whole.

The Civil War readily lends itself to mythic interpretation. It is a story of great armies and desperate battles, of high stakes and larger-than-life personalities; and it exhibits in bold relief the grandeur of passionate convictions and heroic exertions. In his little book *The Legacy of the Civil War,* Robert Penn Warren has cited "inner drama" as key to the story's appeal. A civil war, he says, is "the prototype of all war, for in the persons of fellow citizens who happen to be the enemy we meet again, with the old ambivalence of love and hate and with all the old guilts, the blood brothers of our childhood. In a civil war . . . all the self-divisions of conflicts within individuals become a series of mirrors in which the plight of the country is reflected, and the self-division of the country a great mirror in which the individual may see imaged his own deep conflicts, not only the conflicts of political loyalties, but those more profoundly personal."

This inner drama is captured most memorably in the vision articulated by Abraham Lincoln and impressed on the mind of the nation through his speeches and writings (especially the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural). Lincoln viewed the war as a process of reckoning by which a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" was forced to confront the enormous contradiction at the heart of its life: the institution of chattel slavery. The war was both a "testing" of the basic American proposition and a visitation of divine justice, punishing both sides in the contest: Southerners for their cruel system of bondage and Northerners for their greed, prideful self-sufficiency, and their complicity in the South's "peculiar institution." Through its suffering and atonement, and its rededication to founding principles—crowned by "a new birth of freedom"—the nation was finally made whole again.

In Lincoln's vision we can see the great universal human themes and archetypes—birth, initiation, trial, death, and rebirth—interpreted in a way that is distinctly Christian (even Judeo-Christian, one might say, given the centrality in Jewish thought of the Exodus event and the cycles of collective chastisement-and-restoration). For a people whose mental habits are conditioned by the Bible, seeing these themes and conflicts enacted in the external world confirms our deepest intuitions and hopes about life and history: that the movement of human existence is toward freedom and equality; that there is judgment on sin (even *in* history); that guilt can be purged through suffering, contrition, and repentance; that self-division can be overcome and reconciliation effected; that God wishes not the death, but rather the reformation, of sinners; that a newness of life in righteousness (despite continuing imperfections) is possible. Lincoln's ability to evoke the "mystic chords of memory" has inspired the production of a vast secondary literature;

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in fact, more books and articles have been published in the English language on America's sixteenth president than on any other person in the history of the world, with the two exceptions of Jesus Christ and William Shakespeare.

So tempting are the archetypal themes and patterns in the Civil War that few narratives on the subject—even if they consciously strive to purge themselves of all "myth," "romance," and "theology"—can avoid mythic language and constructions altogether. As Daniel Aaron, a scholar of American literature, has put it: "From its very beginning, the War seemed designed for literary treatment as if history itself had assiduously collaborated with the would-be writer. He had only to plagiarize from the plot of the authorial Providence who first blocked out the acts and scenes of its cautionary epic, to draw upon the coincidences, portents, climaxes, tragic heroes, and villains of the heavenly scenario."

The question, then, is whether the Civil War, or any other large event, can, in the end, bear the weight of a mythic interpretation once it is scrutinized in a realistic and objective manner. In short, does the poetic imagination, in seeking some larger "meaning," too readily fit the facts to some preconceived pattern, thereby transforming lived realities into symbolic events, creating an edifice of myth in the pejorative sense of the word: a false and tendentious account imbued with a moral significance and coherence that cannot be sustained in the face of all the evidence?

Confronted with the full horror of war, can we, should we, do we really want to say (with William James) that "those ancestors, those efforts, those memories and legends, are the most ideal part of what we now own together, a sacred spiritual possession *worth more than all the blood poured out*"? Given the complexities, ambiguities, and ironies of history, is it really possible to discern in the Civil War a tidy, wholesome moral—or is such meaning and coherence inevitably imposed as a "usable past" for the sake of patriotic aims or psychic satisfactions? Perhaps we simply ought to say, with Herbert Muller, that " 'in the final analysis,' there can be no final analysis."

Tension between the purely objective and the mythic seems to be a permanent feature of all serious Civil War narratives, a point vividly illustrated by Ken Burns' celebrated documentary, *The Civil War*, an eleven-hour, grand-scale epic that was researched with the utmost professionalism and produced with consummate artistic skill. When first shown on the Public Broadcasting System in the fall of last year, it precipitated an avalanche of critical acclaim and popular enthusiasm. Financed by General Motors and the National Endowment for the Humanities, *The Civil War* received by far the largest TV audience of any PBS series ever (39 million), and local PBS stations have been rebroadcasting it periodically over the past year. An adaptation of the film's narrative text, written by Geoffrey C. Ward, Ric Burns, and Ken Burns was made into a companion book (also *The Civil War*, published by Knopf) that spent several months on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The soundtrack recording of background music to the film has been the all-time best seller for the Elektra Nonesuch label.

The power of *The Civil War* derives from its ability to convey the largeness of the story. It explains the sectional crisis, rooted in conflict over slavery, that led to the war. It offers gripping accounts of the major battles, and covers in fascinating detail the politics, strategy, and logistics of war. There are deft and incisive sketches of the key *dramatis personnae*—Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, William Tecumseh Sherman, "Stonewall" Jackson, and Nathan Bedford Forrest, to name just a few. While it provides the Big Picture from the standpoint of politicians and generals, *The Civil War* also gives the "worm's eye" view, focusing considerable attention on the fears, hopes, tribulations, and sufferings of common soldiers, North and South. We hear in their own words (from their diaries and letters) the experience of war as they knew it. Special and continuing attention is given to two soldiers in particular—Elisha Hunt Rhodes of the Second Rhode Island Volunteers and Sam Watkins, Company H, First Tennessee—both volunteers of '61 who saw action in many of the major battles and somehow managed to survive four years of war, writing sensitively and revealingly (and with a chastening degree of literacy) about their experiences.

There is also the view from the homefront, by, among many others: mothers and wives of the soldiers, civilians caught up in the whirlwind of war, masters and slaves, journalists, politicians, a Northern businessman (George Templeton Strong), the wife of a Confederate cabinet member (Mary Chesnut), a famous nurse (Clara Barton), and a black freedman who became a prominent advocate of abolition and Negro rights (Frederick Douglass). While the "voice-over" for the main story line is provided by historian David McCullough, the diaries, letters, speeches, news reports, memoranda, and other contemporary material are read by actors or other prominent personages (Sam Waterston, Jason Robards, Morgan Freeman, Garrison Keiller, Colleen Dewhurst, Julie Harris, Jody Powell, etc.). There are frequent on-camera interviews with Civil War historians, the most conspicuous being Shelby Foote, a Southern writer whose folksy wisdom and courtly manner contributed enormously to the documentary's success. Foote's three-volume account of the war perhaps served as the model for this work; both the Foote trilogy and the Burns film display a similar artistry in integrating the story's diversity into a single seamless narrative. The film is further reminiscent of Foote's writings, and also those of the late Bruce Catton, in its ability to create poignant moments by seizing on just the right picture, anecdote, or quotation.

Unlike documentarians of more recent wars, who

can utilize motion-picture footage, Burns had to rely on still images—photographs, paintings, and lithographs—accompanied by narrative, sound effects, and music. Dull as this might sound, Burns makes his images of war come to life with unexpected vividness and force. The rendering of battles is often electrifying and harrowing. Indeed, the lack of visual realism, rather than detracting from the film's interest, may actually enhance it by allowing the narration and sound effects to work more effectively on the imagination.

For all its virtues, however, *The Civil War* does equivocate in dealing with the larger significance of its subject, displaying a curious, sometimes confusing, ambivalence as between the mythic and the mundane. There is a certain value in allowing the heroic and the unheroic aspects of the story to remain in uneasy tension within the same narrative as an unbiased sampling of witnesses from the era. Yet one often wishes there might have been greater clarification and reconciliation between the divergent tendencies. For after experiencing the gamut of emotions aroused by this most affecting of documentaries—exhilaration, sorrow, anger, regret, compassion, fascination, incomprehension—we are still left asking how, in the end, we should regard and tell the story of the Civil War. Is America's great national ordeal just a lot of stuff that happened or is it, among other things, also a genuine morality play between the Forces of Freedom and the Forces of Slavery to be regarded with due reverence and awe? The question is really three questions:

(1) Looked at up close, and in view of the full reality of its suffering, pain, fear, and death, with all its squalid and ungallant aspects, does the war seem by its very nature to be unsuitable material for edifying tales and lessons?

(2) Was the war actually a struggle over freedom, and can we speak of the nation (in anthropomorphic terms) as undergoing a crisis of the "soul"? Or was the war merely the point of convergence for various social trends, constitutional and juridical quarrels, personal ambitions, and chance occurrences—having to do with freedom only in its unanticipated side effects?

(3) Did the country in fact experience "a new birth of freedom" as a result of the war?

I

Ken Burns' film never directly confronts the issue of whether familiarity with the reality of battle sours all attempts to see grandeur or transcendent meaning in war. He simply presents two contrasting perspectives. There is, on the one hand, a very definite mythic aura about the whole presentation—a celebration of heroism and greatness, a vindication of the martial virtues, and a musical background that is elegiac and wistful (particularly the mournful fiddle tune "Ashokan Farewell," which recurs throughout the film). The vantage point is sometimes remote, with a dreamlike quality, as if events, by having receded into the past, attain a kind of sacred status. The opening scene shows a solitary cannon on a hilltop at dusk, the sound of wind is heard, fog and smoke swirl all around (could it be the mist of legend?), while a voice reads the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes: "We have shared the incommunicable experience of war. We have felt, we still feel, the passion of life to its top. . . . In our youths, our hearts were touched with fire." In the very last scene, Shelby Foote reads from the memoirs of a Confederate soldier, who, thirty years after the war, revels in imagining a recurrence of marches and battles in Valhalla, after which the slain arise and, together with the living, all enjoy good fellowship, saying, "Did it not seem real? Was it not as in the old days?"

On the other hand, there is a strain in which heroism and idealism are eclipsed by the ignoble, low, and squalid: the stupidity and incompetence of generals, the petty intriguing of politicians, the greed of government contractors, the erratic (often unlovely) nature of public opinion. And for all its witness to valor and the sanctity of strife touched by devotion to a great cause, Burns' documentary also presents a vision of war that is not only terrible, but positively infernal and obscene. Scenes of the aftermath of battle are sometimes accompanied by the sound of flies swarming around the bloated bodies and blackened faces of the dead. In the Wilderness Campaign, it is noted, a forest fire consumed a multitude of Union wounded who were waiting to be evacuated. Amputated limbs are shown stacked in a bucket at a field hospital where surgeons operated without the use of anaesthesia or the knowledge of bacteriology; the patients, often victims of "minor" gunshot wounds to the arm or leg, died in droves from shock or infection. And, as if the perils of warfare were not bad enough, unsanitary army camps were even more lethal than the battlefield: of the 600,000 total dead in the Civil War, two-thirds died from disease. So unhealthy was the Union camp at Falmouth, Virginia in the winter of '63, we are told, that when reveille blew every morning the sound of drums and bugles was drowned out by the noise of a hundred thousand soldiers coughing as they rose.

Repeated exposure to such scenes threatens at points to overwhelm the story with a morbid and melancholy sense of war's sheer physical horror. Burns mitigates this effect in part through a skillful switching of mood and scene, but he still leaves the viewer somewhat shaken, suspicious of patriotic or romantic language to describe wars and battles. One calls to mind the post-World War I writings of Ernest Hemingway, which disdain lofty expressions such as "heroism," "courage," "glory," "honor," "devotion," "sacred," and "hallowed," implying that these words cannot possibly have meaning in a world where men by the

thousands are mutilated and slaughtered like hogs.

How, if at all, is it possible to assert the value and worth of a just cause if the immediate, felt reality of war is inevitably that of sterile anguish, of meaningless chaos, terror, pain, and death? Is not the larger historical view merely a luxury available only to those not involved in the fighting or to participants only in retrospect, when, after the passage of time, and in light of subsequent events and reflections, they may sometimes see trials and ordeals as part of a meaningful whole? People *in the midst* of a terrible trial or ordeal, lacking transcendence over their immediate condition, are inevitably more impressed by the horror of the situation than by any sense of larger design or redemptive meaning. It might be argued, then, that to give an intellectually respectable history of the Civil War would mean to purge those traces of grandeur that could not have been experienced as such at the time.

It can hardly be denied that many Civil War soldiers in fact came to feel that no cause could be worth the human wreckage and horror they saw. The Burns' film shows how an early, naive enthusiasm for adventure and glory gave way to disillusionment and a loss of ideals and romance. On both sides there were many deserters, especially when, after years of fighting, it seemed that the war would drag on forever. There is nothing remarkable about war destroying youthful illusions or shattering the nerves of strong men. What really requires explanation, though, is why, in such an environment, so many men maintained such a high level of duty, courage, and devotion to cause. Shelby Foote, for instance, himself a World War II combat veteran, marvels at the long, arduous marches that the Civil War soldiers were able to endure and the perilous (often suicidal) stands or attacks they would routinely make, without complaint, when ordered to do so.

In making such observations, however, Burns' *Civil War* also exposes its frequently superficial treatment concerning the character of the ordinary soldier—in particular his inner spirit and source of moral courage, which, above and beyond strength and physical courage, can sustain a person through the worst trials. No doubt, the fortitude of the Civil War soldier is partly explained by the fact that life was generally insecure and arduous in the nineteenth century, that men expected to struggle hard, and, most likely, to die before they attained three-score-and-ten years. Too, the will to sacrifice and avoid disgrace must have been accentuated by the fact that most Civil War soldiers served with longtime friends and neighbors in locally organized regiments.

But any full explanation for their actions also must take account of the inner religious life of the time. For as it happens, nineteenth-century American Protestantism possessed an especially valuable stock of moral and spiritual resources for preparing people both to endure terrible trials and to see them as being part of a larger redemptive scheme. Being greatly concerned with the continuing actions of God in the world, Americans frequently interpreted the unfolding of both personal life and larger worldly affairs in biblical terms, as a drama and morality play authored and guided by Providence, containing various signs and portents that could be read by discerning believers.

Such efforts to "discern the signs of the times" were frequently crude, facile, and tainted by self-righteousness (as when a military victory would be seen as evidence of God's favor). At their best, however, they could grasp not only vindication but also a sense of God's righteous judgments on oneself or on one's own nation. Above all, the soldiers and citizens of the Civil War era did not think their sacrifices to be meaningless or "in vain"; much less did they regard history as a weird, Kafkaesque torture chamber. Even when the full meaning of events might temporarily remain obscure, their faith and hope in the meaningfulness of history enabled them to overcome, in significant measure, the radical split between the immediate perspective that knows only today's misery and the retrospective/transcendent view that sees higher purposes being worked through the apparent confusion of events.

Except in superficial or fleeting asides, Burns' *Civil War* fails to convey the intense and all-pervasive religious character of the age. The religious idiom of the day, echoing the King James Bible, occasionally surfaces in the film's narration; but without an explanation of its context, this language is easily misinterpreted as mere rhetorical convention or as the inevitable emotional excess of people in extreme situations. (In fairness, it must be said that the religious dimension is largely absent from *all* modern accounts of the Civil War.) Understood in this religious perspective, a Civil War narrative that makes intimations of larger meaning and grandeur (as the Burns film clearly does at many points) does not impose something alien upon the lived experience; such a dimension is in fact essential to any faithful rendering of how people at the time experienced and interpreted their lives and the larger events of which they were a part.

II

Of course, the Civil War's mythic viability cannot be maintained solely on the noble bearing of the contestants. Its larger importance, as the Burns' film recognizes, is that it finally settled the issue of slavery in the United States. The plight of the slaves is never far from center stage, and their great yearning for freedom provides some of the most powerful moments in this documentary's eleven hours. But was emancipation merely a side effect of the war, or was it integrally related to a larger morality play of Freedom against Slavery?

Burns' *Civil War* does not answer the question decisively, one way or the other. Much of the narration seems to suggest that emancipation occurred fortuitously, as an unintended consequence of a North-South sectional dispute concerning abstract constitutional questions about the relation of federal and state authority. The war for the Union and the emancipation of the slaves are presented, in effect, as two separate stories that only happen to impinge on each other: the issue of slavery is seen to trigger sectional strife, and sectional strife in turn becomes the occasion for the slaves to attain their freedom—as a wartime exigency of the Federal government (to deny black manpower to the South and deploy it for labor, and eventually fighting, in the Federal Army; to destroy the planter class that had started the war; to energize an idealistic section of the North; to head off diplomatic recognition of the Confederacy by England and France).

Historian Barbara Fields, who appears repeatedly throughout the film as an expert on the emancipation angle of the story, lends weight to this interpretation. Even the main line of narration suggests that the war became an event of larger moral and historical significance almost by accident: "What began as a bitter dispute over Union and states' rights ended as a struggle over the meaning of freedom in America. At Gettysburg in 1863 Abraham Lincoln said perhaps more than he knew: the war was about 'a new birth of freedom.' "

There is certainly much evidence supporting the view that the cause of Union really stumbled into, and accepted only grudgingly, the cause of emancipation. One cannot watch Ken Burns' documentary, for example, and think that the conflict originated in a Northern project to root out the evil of slavery in the Southern states. What we see is that the sectional tension preceding secession and war was not principally about the fate of slavery in states where it existed, but rather a dispute over whether slavery should be permitted in, or prohibited from, the newly settled western territories. Northern interests, articulated largely by the recently formed Republican Party, favored the formation of new states in the west on the basis of "free soil" and "free labor." But these slogans represented more the economic self-interest of Northern whites than a desire to extend the blessings of liberty and equality to the black race: free soil worked to the advantage of small farmers against large plantations worked by slaves, and free labor protected white workers from the depressing effect on wages caused by slavery. Relatively few "Yankees" held a principled objection to Negro slavery, with only a tiny minority favoring its general abolition. Consistent with the racial feelings of their constituents, most Northern states severely limited the civil and political rights of free blacks within their borders. And in that fall and winter of 1860-1861, when Southern states began dropping out of the Union, Northerners (including Lincoln) made desperate, unseemly attempts to appease the South with promises to protect slavery in perpetuity.

If this picture of the North is not altogether inspiring, neither is a fair picture of the South likely to be entirely condemning. Southerners had, after all, inherited the "peculiar institution," and with it the fear of revenge by four million blacks in their midst. And they were to some degree pushed into an intransigent defense of slavery in reaction to the rhetoric from self-righteous Northern abolitionists who took no account of their precarious position, vilifying, even demonizing, them, and so creating a hardening of positions all around. (This ambiguous aspect of the abolitionists' role is *not* touched on by Burns' *Civil War.*) Set aside the tragic flaw of slavery, and the South becomes in some respects arguably the more attractive of the two regions. Had the Southern cause not been bound up with slavery, it would have been possible to sympathize more with the claim of "states' rights" advocates to be defending the freedom of individuals and smaller communities from the encroachments of a meddling and potentially tyrannical central government. The typical "Johnny Reb" was in fact not himself a slaveowner and very likely understood his cause as a defense of hearth and home more than anything else.

Clearly, then, it is impossible to make a simple identification of virtue with the North and vice with the South. Neither can the cause of Union be equated simply with freedom; the Burns film, following many venerable historical interpreters, is correct in insisting that the war began as a narrower legal-political dispute, only later assuming the higher, nobler aim of emancipation. Yet while strictly true, such a "realistic" interpretation will be inadequate to the extent that it explains events only in terms of impersonal social "forces," overlooking the subtle ways in which conscience and idealism actually operate in the political and historical realm. There are, even within the film, intimations that the war really was, from the start, "a struggle over the meaning of freedom in America" and that Lincoln was by no means saying "more than he knew" at Gettysburg when he spoke of "a new birth of freedom."

True enough, the Northern rhetoric of 1861 was concerned not with emancipation but with restoring the Union and the *status quo ante.* As Lincoln said, "We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they chose." But this was no mere abstract issue of legality and jurisdiction; it was about the life or death of a *free* government, the government of what was, in the parlance of the time, a "redeemer nation," an example and hope for all nations, an experiment in democracy and ordered liberty whose fate (it was widely held) would determine the course of free institutions—as James McPherson

has written—"in a world of kings, emperors, tyrants, and theories of aristocracy. If secession were allowed to succeed, it would destroy this experiment."

In short, then, the cause of Union was never merely about Union as such, but always about a particular kind of Union, i.e., a Union—even before Lincoln uttered the words in 1863—"conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." If many or most white Northerners did not yet include black people within the terms of that proposition, they did at least sense that the institution of slavery was incompatible with freedom and democratic government as they understood it. If few Northern whites were abolitionists, many hated the idea of slavery and thought it a moral evil that would coarsen and brutalize the culture and polity were it to spread. To make this point is not to minimize the racial hatred and fear that pervaded North as well as South. But it did happen that the supporters of Union were in this instance the more faithful bearers of the American proposition, which, as Lincoln realized, is ultimately the only ground for universal human equality. If many Unionists failed to recognize the full implications of that proposition, they did at least follow their inchoate sense of what it meant—and they paid a terrible price for it.

During the war, of course, Northern sympathy for the slaves did grow, as did the movement, much of it church-led, to embody the principle of human equality in law. The Emancipation Proclamation and the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution brought the Union cause into closer identity with the cause of freedom—by abolishing slavery, extending equal protection under the law to the former slaves, and establishing universal male suffrage. In one sense, the moral basis of the Union cause had clearly changed; in another sense, the moral issue did not so much change as become clarified.

Still, the hallowing of the Union cause, if we may speak in such terms, rests not on the North's very dubious virtue, but rather on the Union cause's subordination of itself to a higher cause, the one upon which Union depended. It was said (by Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens) that Lincoln had elevated Union to a principle of religious mysticism. But in fact it was less a matter of elevating the Union than of prostrating it before the Ruler of History, as in the Second Inaugural:

> Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Such a laying of a nation's destiny at God's disposal and judgment (especially judgment) has no equivalent in modern history. Though there is no question in Lincoln's speech that the greater part of right ("as God gives us to see the right") is thought to reside in the cause of Union, there is a contrite recognition that only God, and not the Northern cause, is vindicated. Out of the maelstrom of conflicting interests, all of them largely wrong and sinful, God fulfills a design that cannot be identified with the aims of any individual, party, or section: "The Almighty has His own purposes."

Lincoln's religious interpretation was in large measure drawn from the Protestant piety of the time. It takes this popular religion, purges it of its unlovely features (e.g., self-vindication and premature, facile pronouncements on God's will) and distills its best insights (an appreciation for the ambiguity of all human agencies, a humble acknowledgement of the universality of sin, and a forgiving temper—"with malice toward none; with charity for all"). Drawn *from* the people and reformulated into sublime prose, Lincoln's sentiments and ideas could be spoken only *to* a people prepared by religious training to receive them and ponder them. If the failure of Anglo-Protestant culture in America was responsible for slavery and the Civil War, the religious depth of this tradition was able to make those experiences redemptive, and to display that redemptive process to the world as a possession for the ages.

So, then, while the Civil War may have been many different things, to speak of it as being in its essence a contest between Freedom and Slavery is not to impose an artificial mythic construct on events. The story of the Civil War cannot be told faithfully or truthfully if everything is reduced, as in the "scientific" historical method, to social dynamics, practical necessities, and chance occurrences. For in a sloppy, imprecise way—perhaps the only way that history is capable of displaying meaning—the Civil War does in fact present us with a fully human story, possessing, among its diverse elements, an "inner drama" of conscience and a groping toward a higher state of life.

III

Of course, some people have denied that America's long night of the soul resulted in a new dawn for the nation. During the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, one school of historians argued that formal emancipation changed little or nothing. Laws for racial equality passed during the war and in the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) were mere expedients, quickly abandoned after having served immediate opportunistic goals. Care for the freedmen's lives and rights was

finally handed over to white Southerners who imposed upon blacks a system of racial oppression and exploitation differing from slavery (the argument runs) only in name. If there was any revolution in the *post-bellum* period, it is sometimes added, it was the delivery of the country into the hands of Big Business, "trusts" and oligopolies, the factory system, and legislatures corrupted by monied interests.

To remove the "new birth of freedom" is to cut the heart out of the story of the Civil War, and to diminish its significance as a mythic event, instructive for the moral and spiritual health of both social and personal life. But was the new birth of freedom in fact suffocated in the crib?

Clearly, the promise of national rebirth held out at Gettysburg was not entirely fulfilled. Blacks did not achieve social and political equality as a result of the war; after Reconstruction their story is largely one of hopes dashed, promises betrayed, and dreams deferred. None of this can be denied; indeed the legacy of slavery, in our persisting racial problem, continues to this day. Yet is there not a certain obtuseness and perversity in denying real improvement because one's brightest hopes and ideals are not fulfilled? If blacks did not gain full equality, they *did* win release from the long nightmare of slavery. Indeed, some of the most moving passages in the Ken Burns' narrative are taken from the words of jubilant ex-slaves, who exulted that no longer could husbands and wives be separated from each other, babies no longer be torn from their mothers' breasts. Even if emancipation had been the sole fruit of the war, the four years of violence and destruction might still have been justified.

In fact, however, emancipation was not the only beneficial result for blacks. Their lives were improved in diverse and demonstrable ways, as pointed out by James M. McPherson, a professor of history at Princeton, in his latest book, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*. McPherson cites statistics showing palpable improvement in a variety of areas: literacy, education, income, land ownership, and even political influence. He concedes that "the long, tragic history of sharecropping, peonage, poverty, and lynching would seem to confirm the thesis" that "the war and Reconstruction accomplished little or nothing of genuine freedom for [the ex-] slaves." Yet McPherson argues persuasively against this thesis as a final conclusion.

> The counterrevolution overthrew the fledgling experiment in racial equality. But it did not fully restore the old order. Slavery was not reinstated. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were not repealed. Blacks continued to own land and to go to school. The counterrevolution was not as successful as the revolution had been. The second American Revolution left a legacy of black educational and social institutions, a tradition of civil rights activism, and constitutional amendments that provided the legal framework for the second Reconstruction of the 1960s.

McPherson goes on to argue that the Civil War also created a new dimension of liberty for the nation as a whole—that the Congress and Administrations of the era initiated a gradual shifting of responsibility for protecting basic rights from the states to the federal government, and that they established early foundations for the welfare state that would be built in the twentieth century. The expansion of government power is a complicated and often ambiguous story, one beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say, McPherson is correct to mark the Civil War era as a turning point in the social, economic, and political integration of America. Unattractive as it often was in the decades immediately following the war, the dynamic modern society that finally emerged would, in the next century, be prepared to play a crucial role in still larger, worldwide struggles over the meaning of human freedom.

In any case, one can see in McPherson's reflections on the period a confirmation of Shelby Foote's remark that the Civil War "defined us as what we are," that it was "the crossroads of our being." The war *defined* us as who we are in that it confirmed us, through terrible suffering, as a nation dedicated to a proposition. It was the *crossroads* in an almost literal sense, i.e., the point at which the nation might have taken another path, might have abandoned the proposition, or simply disintegrated. Because they helped to maintain the course set at the founding of the republic, the fallen soldiers eulogized in the Gettysburg Address did not die in vain. The ideals that triumphed at Gettysburg and on other battlefields were, for various reasons, imperfectly realized, and this is both a cause for regret and a reason for a measure of humility in telling our national history (particularly from the Union side). But such recognition does not negate the worth of what *was* achieved. The temporary frustration of the nation's highest ideals in no way disqualifies the fruits of that war as "a new birth of freedom."

IV

To return to the question posed at the outset of this essay: can the Civil War bear the weight of mythic interpretation, i.e., is it a story that incarnates permanent truths about life and history? Anyone familiar with the clutter and complexity of history knows how difficult it is to identify a clear story line, let alone an unambiguous lesson or moral, in events. The desire for edifying tales too often leads to false and premature constructions of meaning—again, "myth" in the pejorative sense of the word—and clearly, it is intellectually and morally corrupt to suppress or ignore inconvenient facts that threaten our neat schemes of meaning.

Still, in the end, human beings require coherence and meaning. They cannot live, at least they cannot live *well*, if they feel that life and history are nothing but "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." The fact that events leave loose ends or unresolved problems may be cause for modesty and tentativeness, but not for abdication in treating history as a realm of meaning; and for this reason the anti-mythical mode of historical narrative is not, finally, desirable or even possible. The Civil War does not provide a simple, unproblematic fable for the nursery. But, with a full appreciation for both the difficulties and responsibilities involved in telling our story, perhaps it is true, as Robert Penn Warren has put it, that "we can yet see in the Civil War an image of the powerful, painful, grinding process by which an ideal emerges out of history." FT

Money

I

It took him 20 years to reach the top,
but he made it, CEO, a winner,
just what his mom always wanted. Thinner
than his brothers, tougher, he'd never stop
until he'd earned more in a year than all
his frat mates earned together all their lives,
until his parents, brothers, and their wives
admitted he was number one. He'd call
the way he managed his affairs and dough
an eagle's way, but his essence is all
turkey buzzard, a money disposal
bird, dour, gaunt, who loves to squawk, "If you know
the currency, there's no one you can't buy,"
yet trusts no carrion's too rich to try.

II

Four years ago I won the lottery.
Each June I get a million dollar check
in the mail, stare at it awhile, and stick
it in the bank. Then all the buttery
calls start up again. I don't know how they
find my number or even remember
when the money's due, could be September
or never, I don't care. They know the day
to beg: "Ms. S., you are a generous
woman, and my husband's slowly dying
of a malignancy. It's a crying
shame we're broke," or "My legs are cancerous."
I'm too bored with my own life to say 'yes,'
and far too lucky to be in this mess.

III

He sits at his desk calling clients and
strangers, trying to sell them mutual
funds they don't want to buy, call after call,
down the gradual tilt of the day, a trained
monkey of a small town salesman, he thinks,
holding a cup for the wealthy yokels,
to spit in, might as well be. Might as well
be holding their dongs. He fears his job stinks
of misused intelligence, aggression,
persuasion by misimplication, old
women's trust bought with a smile, half-lies told
through wooden lips for the big commission
someone always pays. But it's not his fault:
It's his career, perfecting his assault.

William Buege