

The Yale Review

☛ On Afro-American
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Arnold Rampersad ☛

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Robert Erwin, Robert Karen,
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VOLUME 78, NUMBER 1

The Yale Review

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The editorial office of *The Yale Review* is located in the Whitney Humanities Center, Yale University, at 53 Wall Street. Mailing address: 1902A Yale Station, New Haven, Connecticut 06520. US ISSN 0044-0124. Advertising, sales, and subscription office: Yale University Press, 92A Yale Station, New Haven, Connecticut 06520. Subscription rates in U.S. dollars: individuals, \$16.00 a year; institutions, \$25.00 a year; postage to all foreign countries including Canada and Mexico \$3.00 extra. Single copies \$6.00 each, plus postage and handling. Subscribers who do not receive a copy will be sent a replacement free of charge on notification within three months following the month of publication. Back-issue prices available on request. Designed by Nancy Ovedovitz and printed by Capital City Press, Montpelier, Vermont. Published quarterly by Yale University Press. Copyright 1989 by Yale University.

Part of "Psychology and Afro-American Biography" by Arnold Rampersad was delivered at a symposium on biography and black American culture at the Hatch-Billops Collection in New York City, and appeared in its publication *Artists and Influence 1986*, edited by Leo Hamalian and James V. Hatch.

Second-class postage paid at New Haven, Connecticut 06510 and Montpelier, Vermont 05602. Printed in U.S.A. Postmaster: Send form 3569 to Box Number 92A Yale Station, New Haven, CT 06520.

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ARNOLD RAMPERSAD

Psychology and Afro-American Biography

Biography has enjoyed a place of some significance in Afro-American literary culture, but in general, biographers of black Americans have tended to shy away from the kind of psychological investigation that marks similar inquiry in the mainstream of the national culture in recent decades. This observation is not meant to undermine the reputation of the more important biographies and quasi-biographies produced so far, with the emphasis on writers—studies such as Robert Hemenway's portrait of Zora Neale Hurston; the biographies of Richard Wright by Constance Webb, Michel Fabre, and Addison Gayle; Wayne Cooper's recent *Claude McKay: Memory and Reality*; Jean Toomer, which has been followed by Gynethia Earl Kenner and Richard Eldridge's more detailed account of the same life; Nathan I. Huggins's *Frederick Douglass*; Louis E. Harlan's prize-winning two-volume *Booker T. Washington*; and the various portraits of W. E. B. Du Bois by Elliott Rudwick, Francis Broderick, and others. Nevertheless, the general hesitancy of these and other biographies to attempt a psychological probing of their subjects according to the instruments formed by modern psychologists raises provocative questions not only about these books but also about the fields and the cultures involved in their making.

It is useful to remember that remarks about biography should be made only with caution. Scholarship in biography is a neglected and perhaps intrinsically narrow business, and contrasts sharply with the fertility of related fields. Scholarship in autobiography, for example, is bountiful, and its expansiveness has only been encouraged by the recent explosion of interest in the general field of literary theory, within which speculation about

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autobiography seems to fit comfortably. Certain aspects of biography clearly make it a difficult area about which to theorize. For instance, an actual autobiographer is not likely to be a scholar of autobiography, and a scholar of autobiography is almost never asked to offer evidence that he or she has written — or, indeed, can write — an autobiography. A theorist about biography, on the other hand, is almost inevitably someone who has written a biography and then feels a need, or sees an opportunity, to reflect on the genre. Perhaps as a result, biography has generated comparatively little important scholarship concerning itself. The would-be biographer sits down to the task with little formal or informal instruction in the field, and less that is likely to be useful. Such a person also can learn little from his or her mistakes, since one may write — at most — two or three biographies in a lifetime, and most biographers write but one.

The entire field, it seems to me, is surrounded by an aura not of mystery but of uncertainty. The standards are unclear, the provenance uncertain. A basic question arises: Is biography valuable to the study of literature, and in particular, of Afro-American literature? This is a pressing matter, since much of the most exciting discourse generated in recent years in literary theory (both within and outside Afro-American literature) seems to me not only of conspicuously little application to biography, but in some ways in direct opposition to its vagueness of standards, values, and techniques. For the moment, and perhaps for the foreseeable future, biography is and will remain the poorest relation in the family of Afro-American literary enterprises — being neither the fundamental fish that is art nor the (winged) fowl of theory and criticism. In fact, as younger scholars are drawn to literary theory, biography may be increasingly slighted. Theory is almost always elitist, and never more so than when it attempts to press the claims of democracy. Biography may affect elitist manners, but its business is essentially democratic. It is a leveler: it introduces the great to those who are little by comparison and who are curious not so much about other people's art as about other people's business.

If we assume, however, that biography is an important aspect of our literary enterprise, then I would like to advance certain notions concerning our approach to it.

First, there is no real substitute for the full-scale portrait. Terms such as *literary biography* and *intellectual biography* are probably, in most cases, confessions of partial portraiture, and partial failure. (This is not true of all cases; Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston* calls itself a "literary biography," but it virtually revolutionized the field of biography in Afro-American literature.) To borrow from what Henry James said about the distinction between novel and romance, there are probably only good biographies and bad biographies. "Literary" and "intellectual" biographies should be attempted before full-scale biographies only when there is an acute and most likely permanent shortage of data; *after* a full-scale biography, of course, anything is possible. Above all, the terms *literary* and *intellectual* should not be taken as signs of a greater depth or seriousness on the part of the biographer. A biography is not the place for excessive discussions of artistic texts, especially artistic texts the reader probably has not read. Such an approach is an abuse of the form—unless the unavailability of evidence makes these elaborate discussions necessary. On the other hand, a biographer may search for and find embedded in almost every aspect of his or her subject's texts evidence, perhaps circumstantial but yet sometimes incontrovertible, about the life of the author.

Secondly, the biographer working in Afro-American culture must not curtail his or her work out of a sense of protectiveness either toward the subject or toward the race—a natural sense, given Afro-American history, but one that should be overcome in this instance. The example of Alain Locke (the influential Howard University professor and one of the major presiding figures of the Harlem Renaissance as a mentor of younger artists and as editor of *The New Negro*) is helpful here. Often peevish and even vindictive, Locke nevertheless carefully preserved for posterity even those documents that appear to show him in a poor light. Similarly, the black biographer can hardly allow himself

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or herself to imagine that the reputation of the race can be affected by what he or she writes about a particular subject. In time, everything will out, and the concealing biographer merely postpones the inevitable. No topic is too intimate for treatment by the biographer — whether that topic is sexuality or political or racial apostasy. A free and frank investigation, within the bounds of reason and the basic rules of evidence, is needed.

The biographer working in as controversial an area as the Afro-American literary tradition, or in any area, should set the highest standards of evidence. In one aspect in particular, the oral tradition, this may be a truly significant point. Much has been made, and deservedly so, about the value of the oral tradition to black culture. It needs to be remembered that a biographer must deal in specifics — and that the strong suit of the oral tradition, whatever it may be, is not the specific but the gloriously general. Gossip passed down through the generations is not superior to gossip passed over a telephone line, and is hardly the same as the oral tradition. The biographer must be on guard to distinguish one from the other, and on guard to save the reader from that most dangerous of interviewees — the person who knows little or nothing but is eager to help.

As for the basic question of overall form, I believe that there is certainly no one design that would accommodate the lives of black writers who cover the entire spectrum of human personality, politics, sexuality, and artistic sensibility. By *form* I mean, for example, the epic, in which the subject is a hero; or the approach of scientific, Zola-like detachment; or the novelistic; or even the approach taken in certain commercially successful biographies — though not of blacks — in which excerpts from interviews form the entire biography. The most tempting form in the context of black or minority culture in general is that of the epic, in which the hero or heroine advances his or her fortunes simultaneously with those of the race against almost insuperable odds that are usually identified with racism. There is indeed a deadly undertow that pulls many biographers of black subjects (or of subjects belonging to other politically and culturally aggrieved groups) toward propaganda and hagiography. But the

most casual acquaintance with the lives of black writers should tell us that few of them — certainly few of the major ones — have been centrally impelled in their careers by a desire to champion the race. Many, indeed, have worked against the racial grain, and attempted to prove in their art the unimportance of race by showing their art to be somehow “above” race. A few have even defested the race, even as their careers have been taken, ironically, as triumphs of the race.

The black biographer, like any other biographer, must gather as much evidence as possible, and remain as open and pliable as possible — and think vigorously and independently all the while. Only then is he or she likely to be rewarded with the emergence of the form that is inevitable to the particular biographical situation. In this respect, biography is a passive exercise; in other respects, it is anything but passive. The biographer has a smaller range of choices than one perhaps imagines; the material, I think, chooses the form — when the form is well chosen. The suggestion by a friendly critic to me that there may be a form akin to and attuned to the rhythms of jazz and the blues and other predominantly black artistic achievements, and that the black biographer should seek it out, is charming but not likely to be very useful. In fact, it is likely to be useless unless one is approaching biography as if it were an art itself. But biography, even the biography of an artist, is definitely not an art; it is only in part an art. Nor is it a science; it is only partly a science. There should be no doubt, however, that the biographer must face his or her subject more like a scientist than an artist. Without an attempt to pursue the elusive and unattainable truth within recognizable rules of evidence — the heart of the scientific method — the biographer is a menace to literate society.

Hence my particular interest in the subject of the role of psychology in Afro-American biography. To many people, psychology still raises the specter of a flagrant violation of the intimate. In one of the finer novels written by an Afro-American, John A. Williams's *Sissie*, the attitude of a black man to a certain doctor might be instructive as we look at this subject. The man,

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Ralph, is meeting Dr. Bluman, a white psychiatrist, for the first time. After some verbal fencing the doctor asks:

"Can we get started now?"

"I feel a little awkward about this," Ralph said.

"Ummm, yes?" Bluman gave Ralph an interested, open look.

"I feel a little defeated too"—Ralph turned his eyes quickly toward the doctor. —"I mean, finding it necessary to come here."

"Why did you find it necessary?" . . . Bluman's eyes twinkled. He waited this time.

"I'm out of dreams. . . . I'm at a dead end—" He broke off, thinking with a sudden suspicion that even his speech patterns would be under analysis here.

Many of us, faced with a psychoanalytic or a psychotherapeutic initiative—not to mention a psychiatrist—respond as Ralph does: We "feel a little defeated . . . finding it necessary to come here." The same quality of reticence is noticeable when we look at the field of black biography—by which I mean the biographies of black Americans by anyone—and try to determine the extent to which books in the field have been influenced by, or have taken into account, the insights, discoveries, and methods of psychologists. If biographies of important blacks have not been so influenced to a marked degree, should they be? And what are the major problems and difficulties involved in the incorporation of psychological approaches in the field in general?

I believe it is fair to say that, far from being influenced by psychology, black biography has kept a vast distance between itself and that discipline. If one looks at even the most acclaimed books in the field, one sees hardly any attempt to link the art of biography to what I call—if only in provocation—the science of psychoanalysis. Methodologically, insofar as black biography is concerned, we have really not advanced beyond W. E. B. Du Bois's historic description of the black American mind in *The Souls of Black Folk*—the famed, oft-invoked description of the Afro-American's "double-consciousness":

. . . this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two

souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

As biographers, we have hardly reached Du Bois's second significant formulation or description of the black mind — a description of a mind like his own — which appears in his autobiography *Dusk of Dawn* (1940). The passage begins:

It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation. It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively. . . . One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate. [Then some persons may become "hysterical."] They may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers. . . . They may even, here and there, break through in blood and disfigurement, and find themselves faced by a horrified, implacable, and quite overwhelming mob of people frightened for their own very existence.

To repeat: I don't believe that biographers of Afro-Americans have moved in psychological terms past Du Bois's image of the two souls to Du Bois's image of the plate glass between the races. And it goes without saying that the latter image, published in 1940, has itself been superseded by other images from the arts. Our biographers have thus lagged far behind our artists — a fact that should not be a revelation to anyone. Some years ago, I suggested that all of Afro-American literature has come out, in a sense, of *The Souls of Black Folk* — and most precisely from Du Bois's image of the divided souls. I would add that the greatest of postwar black fiction, notably that of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison (and especially Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" and Ellison's *Invisible Man*), had as their symbolic antecedent Du Bois's image of the plate glass and the invisible; increasingly enraged black who smashes his way out. Richard Wright, unlike our biographers — indeed, unlike even some of *his* biographers — had a deep interest in psychiatry, which sprang from his own relationship with Dr. Frederic Wertham (author

of "An Unconscious Determinant in *Native Son*," first published in *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Psychology* in July 1944). This relationship led to Wright's helpful role in setting up the first psychiatric clinic in Harlem, and to his novel *Savage Holiday*, which is explicitly psychiatric in its approach.

If one goes beyond postwar fiction, one sees in at least one place—John A. Williams's *Sissie*, which I cited earlier—the black novelist unafraid to take psychiatry seriously, and in its most proper, clinical form. The truth is that some of our best artists have forged ahead in their interest in psychology, while their biographers have lagged behind. Take Du Bois, for example. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is about a people, he borrowed the concept of "double-consciousness" from academic psychology, or what passed for it then. This concept was relatively young in academic and intellectual terms when Du Bois adapted it from the scientific currency of William James and his colleagues in the field. But Du Bois did not see fit to make a similar appeal to psychology when he himself became a biographer in his *John Brown*, published six years later. There he fell back on hoary methodology—the historian Hippolyte Taine's pseudoscientific notion that the great determining factor in the emergence of a leader is the trio of *race*, *milieu*, and *moment*. Du Bois used this approach to explain the mind of a man who clearly, even according to his own brother, was crazy at least part of the time. Du Bois's disloyalty to psychology was unfortunate. Double-consciousness, as a term, facilitates entry into the human mind. *Race*, *milieu*, and *moment*, on the other hand, are as external as dialectical materialism in explaining it—by no means completely invalid, hardly impossible of psychological application, but nevertheless almost inherently external, one might say, to the working of the mind.

One recent book by a black litterateur turned veteran social scientist has addressed this problem directly (in fact, apart from the black historian Earl Thorpe's efforts in psychohistory, I don't know of anyone else who has come close to the subject). That book is *Leadership, Love, and Aggression*, written by the late Allison Davis and published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1983. In attempting four distinct psychological studies—of Frederick

Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—Davis does not conceal his hostility to most of their biographers. On Douglass: “None of his biographers has studied the central paradox in Douglass’s personality—the conflicting hatred and love for a powerful father who treated him as a son at times, but never emancipated or publicly acknowledged him. Only Dr. Stephen Weissman, in a short article, has explored this early, ambivalent bond.” And later: “From the ages of seven to fifteen he had been reared by Sophia Auld and loved by her as her own son. It seems extraordinary that his biographers have ignored so central a fact in his emotional life and identity development.” On Du Bois: “He was an enigma to friends as well as to enemies. Faced with his inscrutability, his biographers have dealt only with symptoms.” On Wright (“the angriest, and yet the most influential of all black writers”): Michel Fabre, the leading Wright scholar, and author of the biography *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (1973) is “a man of good intentions but of incredible naïveté both about black life in Mississippi and about the psychology of personality. [Fabre] is not equipped to deal with Wright’s emotional development. He has no knowledge whatever of Wright’s basic emotional conflicts, and apparently no interest in learning their continual working in his behavior, his fantasies, and his writing.” On King, no such direct attack is mounted against a biographer, but we may infer Davis’s sense of the inadequacy of King’s biographers by noting that the books he praises most for their understanding of King were written by King’s widow and by a man who lived with the family for many years: Coretta Scott King’s *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1969) and L. D. Reddick’s 1959 study *Crusader Without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (“All other biographers have depended upon Reddick’s book for a knowledge of King’s first thirty years”).

As far as I can tell, Davis’s book is the first to attempt a psychoanalytic reading of black leaders. If it isn’t required reading for any other reason, it should be for *that* reason. A published psychological study of a black leader is an act of courage in itself—so entrenched is the opposition to such work. (The fear

of theory runs deep, as I found out some years ago, when after a mildly Freudian analysis of an aspect of Langston Hughes, I was publicly rebuked by two senior black scholars—one who asserted that his only interest was in the work, not the life, and another who urged me to leave Freud alone and instead consult the African gods for my insights. To the first scholar, I protested that biography is about the life first and foremost; to the second, I should have said, among other things, that his statement was Olympian.)

Davis's model in *Leadership, Love, and Aggression* is more than mildly Freudian; it is strongly so. Originating in a paper first delivered before a meeting of the American Psychiatric Association, it depends heavily on Freud's discussions of aggression—which takes many forms, of which anger is "the simplest, most normal." Davis's model distinguishes between "realistic anger" and the nourishment of resentment, most often by the conflict between "the wish to be loved and an angry desire to avenge a lack of love." The handling of aggression falls into three basic types: sadistic, masochistic, and affiliative or "reality-oriented." Davis cites Freud's "War and Death" on the closeness between the human desire to kill and the drive to love; anger must be vented or it will destroy. He also cites Freud's "On Narcissism": "In the last resort we must begin to love in order that we may not fall ill, and must fall ill if, in consequence of frustration, we cannot love."

Davis's book received scant attention. As far as I can tell, it went unnoticed by the *New York Times*; no academic literary journal reviewed it. To some extent, this treatment was deserved. For example, Davis undertook to discuss Martin Luther King, Jr.'s toilet training without, to say the least, sufficient evidence. And in treating Richard Wright, he defied the many indications that the autobiography *Black Boy* was in a number of ways (as Michel Fabre showed conclusively) an unusually wide manipulation of the facts of Wright's life, quoting Wright's words there as evidence of the truth. He therefore takes it as a fact that Wright was reared in "a clan of obsessively religious and sadistic women," in "a family of infinite sadistic inventiveness." "I have

never read," Davis writes, without irony, "of so violent a clan of women." On the other hand, it was on something akin to first-hand experience (they had known each other in Chicago) that Davis declares of Wright that "he never enjoyed life among Negroes," and he also asserts, on grounds justifiable by an intelligent reading of Wright's work, even though none of his biographers noted it, that "Wright hated blacks as deeply as whites did."

At least two of the few reviews of *Leadership, Love, and Aggression* were wildly contradictory. One, in the *Library Journal*, thought the book "not likely to change history's view of these men." On the other hand, the *School Library Journal* believed that it filled "a giant gap in the knowledge and understanding of these men." The latter may be overstated, but I think it errs, if it errs, in the right direction. To those who say that to impose psychoanalytic thought on the black mind is to extend European hegemony over blacks I would answer, first, that any analysis is better than none, and anti-Freudian blacks have offered no countersystem or antisystem worthy of the name; secondly, that the Freud-Erik Erikson model does not so much declare itself as final truth as it raises questions of enormous value to ourselves. We need to remember, in examining our reservations about psychiatry and psychobiography, that as scholars we have no real hope of reconstituting the past, and therefore should have no immobilizing fear of utterly misrepresenting it. We investigate and re-create that past, ultimately, in order to understand our lives and our society better. For that reason alone, we should proceed with less caution.

In his essay on King, for example, Davis's intention is to uncover how King was able to turn hate into affiliative love. If one does not make this psychiatrically inspired attempt, fraught with danger as it is, the consequences can range from simple dullness as a biographer to a range of error—the greatest of which would be to suppose that such a turning of hate into love is really impossible, and that the love-gestures of King were superficial and strategic, like the advertising campaigns of our ambitious, image-building politicians. We need to approach our