Review Essay

American Synecdoche: Thomas Jefferson as Image, Icon, Character, and Self

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GREAT MEN STRIDE ACROSS THE PAGES of popular history, determining the fate of nations. In the modern era, the lives of revolutionary leaders have been inextricably linked with the histories of the states they founded. America's Thomas Jefferson was neither Russia's Lenin nor China's Mao, nor, he himself would have assured us, was he Europe's Napoleon Bonaparte, the founder and destroyer of countless states. Jefferson did not have the talents or inclination or opportunity to impose his will on his countrymen; modest and self-effacing, he had to share a crowded stage with the large cast of revolutionary heroes arrayed around George Washington, the father of his country. Yet perhaps it was the very modesty of Jefferson's personal ambitions, epitomized by the claim that his Declaration of Independence was intended "to be an expression of the American mind" (and not of his own imperious will) that has made him such a compelling and resonant figure in the American historical imagination.[1] As historian James Parton put it in 1874, and Jefferson biographers have repeated ever since, "If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right."[2] More recently, filmmaker Ken Burns has said that "one approaches Thomas Jefferson with the sense that he is, in a biographical sense, the Holy Grail of American history."[3] Pauline Maier has suggested that it is not so much Jefferson as the Declaration of Independence that has been sacralized, "remade into a sacred text, a statement of basic, enduring truths often described with words borrowed from the vocabulary of religion."[4] As with Lenin and Mao, whether the focus is on Jefferson himself or the document with which he is most closely associated, and whether one worships him or calls him

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[1] Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, Merrill Peterson, ed. (New York, 1984), 1501.

[2] See, for example, Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 234; Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), 3.

[3] See Public Broadcasting Service web site for *Thomas Jefferson: A Film by Ken Burns*, available from World Wide Web at http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/making/KB_00.htm.

[4] Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997), xviii.

a false god, the intellectual moves are similar: Jefferson is identified with the nation. Studying him becomes a way to discuss American nationhood—and a substitute for studying the nation's history. Given our long history of equating Jefferson with the nation, is it possible still to historicize him, to situate and understand him within the context of his times? Or, to put the question another way, how can historians hold onto the historical Jefferson in the face of powerful cultural pressures to make him a proxy for all that is right or wrong with America?

Ken Burns's televised documentary, *Thomas Jefferson: A Film by Ken Burns*, raises serious questions about the role of historians in shaping the public's understanding of history and the ways in which historians participate in and respond to the images of history that are now reaching mass audiences.[5] The opportunity for professional historians to play a role in such productions is certainly seductive. Both of us gladly complied with the invitation by Florentine Films (Burns's production company) to speak on camera about Jefferson. Both of us—like a number of our colleagues—ended up on the cutting-room floor. The insult to our vanity notwithstanding, it is not clear that *Thomas Jefferson: A Film by Ken Burns* would have been a better production with us as talking heads. We know better than to equate historians with history. The real question is: Is Burns's *Thomas Jefferson* good history?

That Jefferson scholars would find little new in Burns's recycling of familiar materials is not necessarily a problem. Burns's claim on our attention is not original research or interpretation but his capacity to frame the familiar in a new way and make it speak to our civic soul and aesthetic sensibility. With their ability to reach huge audiences, Burns and his fellow documentarians are becoming the custodians of our national historical consciousness. Hence it is troubling that the line separating Burns's "fact" and Oliver Stone's "fiction" is less distinct than one might suppose. In *Thomas Jefferson*, Burns dispenses with, by and large, not only professional historians but also the fetish of authenticity that has, for instance, conspicuously characterized the costume dramas of James Ivory and Ismail Merchant.[6] The film uses the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" to convey folk simplicity, anachronistic photos of plantation slaves to suggest tobacco-planting field hands in Jefferson's Virginia, an 1833 painting, "Black Hawk and His Son, Whirling Thunder," to illustrate the Indian policies of Jefferson's presidency, and, without any sense of postmodernist playfulness or even modernist irony, a Jefferson impersonator and a children's book author to play the role of "historians."

Burns takes these liberties with the implicit promise of giving us the real Jefferson. From the opening shots of a mist-enshrouded Monticello at dawn and the expert witnesses' remarks about Jefferson's contradictions and sphinx-like nature, Burns conveys the impression that he is in pursuit of the truth. No fewer than eighteen shots zoom in on the eyes in a Jefferson portrait, as if Burns's camera could take us literally inside Jefferson's head, penetrating the inner man. Likewise, Jefferson's home, Monticello, represents the man himself, just as the objects in his

[5] *Thomas Jefferson: A Film by Ken Burns*, produced by Ken Burns and Camilla Rockwell, directed by Ken Burns, written by Geoffrey Ward (Florentine Films, 1996), 3 hours.

[6] Compare *Jefferson in Paris* (Merchant-Ivory Productions, Touchstone Pictures, 1995), 136 minutes.

home represent the furnishings of his mind. The camera pans across rooms empty except for objects, a visual image reinforced by repeated shots of Jefferson's empty chair. Yet these are objects without function: like Jefferson's ideas in Ken Burns's documentary, they have no purpose and no relationship to other objects or ideas. The only relationship that matters is the one between Burns himself and his subject, for Burns's conceit is that his all-seeing camera can reveal the truth behind a portrait or inside a book stand, as if meaning could be disclosed by the right camera angle. It is as if the objects of Jefferson's material world had the same meaning to him as they do to Burns's camera, as if Thomas Jefferson were, in fact, a film by Ken Burns, rather than a historical figure.

At the end of the film, Burns's talking heads are still speaking portentously about Jefferson's mysteries. But the filmmaker knows better. In the film's final shots, the camera recedes from a Jefferson portrait, pans across a portrait from the right, holds a close-up, pans across another portrait from the left, and finishes with another close-up. Burns no longer needs to take us behind Jefferson's eyes. Jefferson is now the same from whatever direction the camera looks. And, to underscore his point, Burns concludes with a beautiful, fiery sunset: the mists surrounding Monticello and its owner have been dispelled!

Burns's image of Jefferson stands in contrast to the most recent scholarship on Jefferson, which is skeptical and, indeed, often critical. By failing to engage these debates, Burns misses an opportunity to engage his audience as well. The only exceptions are the opening and closing sections with the cacophony of voices talking about Jefferson's complexities and the twenty minutes or so devoted to race, slavery, and the Sally Hemings issue. Here, the viewer's gaze is deflected from transparent objects and images to the conflicting testimonies of talking heads. But in Burns's film, all authorities are created equal, and they tend to cancel each other out in a way that inert images and objects are never allowed to do.

This is why Clay Jenkinson, a Jefferson impersonator who is identified on screen as a "historian," is so important a presence in Burns's film.[7] By seeming to collapse the distinction between scholarly interpretation and Jefferson himself, Jenkinson allows Burns to appear to engage Jefferson directly, without the mediation of historians and their distracting agendas—while at the same time giving his film an academic gloss. As Burns has put it (in an interview posted to the film's web site), "We're not here to debate as much as we are to cohere." The hard work, then, is that of the filmmaker, who explains that "what I engage in is a very, very difficult . . . process of distilling information."[8] Although Burns repeatedly raises the issue of race in his films—co-producer Camilla Rockwell says, "Any film by Ken is going to have race as a central focus"[9]—he treats it as an incoherence, an insoluble problem in an otherwise explicable past. Hence the function of Burns's banal camera work, his anachronistic sounds and images: he presents the public with what it already knows—familiar images of slavery and native Americans, authentic-

[7] According to his web biography, Jenkinson has degrees in humanities and literature; he has taught at several colleges and universities, most recently the University of Nevada, Reno, available from World Wide Web at http://www.th-jefferson.org/html/jenkinson_biography.html.

[8] Ken Burns, quoted at www.pbs.org/jefferson/making/interviews.htm; and pbs.org/jefferson/. See also pbs.org/jefferson/making/KB_01.htm.

[9] Camilla Rockwell, quoted at www.pbs.org/jefferson/making/rockwell.htm.

sounding music, conventional cinematography—in the process, enclosing and neutralizing what is dangerous and disturbing in a reassuring visual package. It is as if Burns believes his aesthetic can solve the problem of race in this country, a conceit perhaps not unlike Jefferson's. Indeed, the subtext of the entire documentary is about the collapsing of distinctions—between scholarship and Jefferson himself, between authentic and anachronistic images, between artist and subject, and, finally, by way of the Jeffersonian synecdoche, between the artist and the nation.

UNLIKE BURNS, MOST CONTEMPORARY JEFFERSON SCHOLARS have not dissolved themselves into their subject, but they do generally assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that Jefferson is in some sense a proxy for the nation. Present-day historians have been trained to discount Parton's equation of Jefferson with the nation, and great white men have been in ill repute for some time, as have the celebratory excesses of national history in the exceptionalist mode. But what is remarkable about recent studies of Jefferson by popular and academic historians is the extent to which they continue to embrace the premise of a "pantheon" of American gods even as they take potshots (or, in the more extreme cases, launch warheads) at the Sage of Monticello. In marked contrast to Burns's *Jefferson*, recent works by Conor Cruise O'Brien, Joseph J. Ellis, and Pauline Maier all offer critical perspectives on their subject.[10] O'Brien magnifies the Sage's significance, a much-diminished Jefferson comes into sharp, psychological focus in Ellis's *American Sphinx*, and the Virginian threatens to disappear altogether in Maier's wide-angled account of the drafting and reception of the Declaration of Independence. Yet, for all their differences, these books are variations—or interrogations—of Parton's theme. They ask us to consider the civic consequences of the Jeffersonian synecdoche.

Conor Cruise O'Brien's trashing of Jefferson in *The Long Affair* has been widely and appropriately assailed by reviewers, but the Irish writer deserves credit for laying his cards on the table.[11] O'Brien has no doubt that there is a pantheon: a cast of larger-than-life founding heroes who provide successive generations of Americans with a framework for historical self-understanding. Does Jefferson belong in this select company? O'Brien insists that this question can be answered (negatively) on objective grounds, contemptuously dismissing the pathetic efforts of "liberal Jeffersonians" to refurbish their idol's image. Here is the short version of *The Long Affair:* while representing the new nation in Paris in the years immediately preceding the French Revolution (1785–1789), Jefferson contracted the revolutionary contagion; this ideological absolutism made him a (rhetorical) terrorist who would (in theory) drench the earth in blood in vain pursuit of the perfect and pure; the Haitian Revolution had a chilling effect on his affair with France, but

[10] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution; 1785–1800* (Chicago, 1996); Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997); Maier, *American Scripture*.

[11] See, for example, Gordon Wood, "Liberty's Wild Man," *New York Review of Books* 44, no. 3 (February 20, 1997): 23–26.

Jefferson's inveterate hostility to the black republic revealed the deeper, darker core of his racism. O'Brien thus concludes that there is no "usable" Jefferson who can serve our present needs: instead, we are stuck with the one we have (or rather, that O'Brien has given us), a radical racist ideologue forever fixed in and condemned by "history." Historians, custodians of our civic culture, must therefore knock Jefferson off his pedestal. Jefferson is certainly "wrong," and if we fail to banish him from the national pantheon, America will certainly, tragically, go wrong as well. If Jefferson is America, America is . . . Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

O'Brien's pseudo-positivism (his book strings together long quotations from original sources, with a few "talking head" secondary sources thrown in) clearly signals his alienation from fashionable humanities scholarship: no relativism, no constructivism, no "invented traditions," thank you, just the facts. Leaving aside the dubious historicity of *The Long Affair* and its breathtaking leaps into the interpretative unknown, what is most striking about O'Brien's stance is the enormous cultural power he claims for himself and other right-minded authority figures. The Jefferson image may be beyond rehabilitation, but historians can—if they only would—read him out of our civic culture, exorcising a dangerous ideologue who licenses contemporary extremists to represent themselves as patriotic Americans. In O'Brien's fanciful scenario, historians not only enjoy a monopoly over "history," they must also decide what historical themes and which historical figures offer the most appropriate images of our civic culture.

Joseph Ellis and Pauline Maier are also self-conscious participants in the ongoing conversation about American civic culture and historical self-understanding. Ellis's *American Sphinx* and Maier's *American Scripture* are both worthy contributions to historical scholarship. Neither writer wants to banish Jefferson from the pantheon (quite), although both suggest that his historical importance is vastly overrated. O'Brien gives short shrift to Jefferson's "authorship" of the Declaration. As it is "increasingly perceived as a collective document, Jefferson may be increasingly cast in the prosaic and subordinate role of a draughtsman."[12] Maier agrees: the story of the drafting "is not of a solo performance or even, to extend the metaphor, a performance of chamber music with a handful of players."[13] Ellis makes a similar point, showing how preoccupied Jefferson and his congressional colleagues were during these stressful months with other, more immediately compelling issues than justifying themselves to "a candid world," and emphasizing how much Jefferson would have preferred to be back home in Virginia, taking a leading role in the much more important work of drafting his state's first constitution.[14]

O'Brien's solution to the supposed crisis in what he provocatively calls "American civil religion (official version)" is to invest the authorless text "with the aura of the sacred."[15] This is precisely what our historians would not do: their prescriptions are instead for more heavily populated pantheons, the proliferation, not the death of authors. In Maier's capacious conception, Jefferson is granted his due as a gifted

[12] O'Brien, *Long Affair*, 321.
[13] Maier, *American Scripture*, xviii.
[14] Thomas Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence," July 4, 1776, in *The Portable Jefferson*, Merrill D. Peterson, ed. (New York, 1975), 236.
[15] O'Brien, *Long Affair*, 319.

turner of phrases but is surrounded—and brilliantly edited—by his congressional colleagues; more important, he is also surrounded by countless more-or-less ordinary Americans in localities up and down the seacoast who are busily churning out their own declarations. Maier's intention, signaled in the semi-ironic title of her book, is, contra O'Brien, to desacralize the *American Scripture*, and so make it a vital link—part inspiration, part provocation—between the revolutionary generation and ours: "The vitality of the Declaration of Independence rests upon the readiness of the people and their leaders to discuss its implications and to make the crooked ways straight, not in the mummified paper curiosities lying in state at the [National] Archives."[16]

Maier is no less interested than O'Brien in the state of our civic soul. Like O'Brien, she thinks that the cult of divinely inspired authorship, reading the Declaration reverently as Constitutional Originalists read their sacred text, is ultimately demoralizing. But where O'Brien sets up shop as iconoclastic reformer, preaching a new civic religion, Maier's civic impulses take a more indirect, sublimated form. In her account of the drafting of the declaration(s) as a formative event in the history of American civil society, Maier speaks to currently fashionable concerns, but she also evokes an old-fashioned image of American consensus, a creedal nationalism that lays heavy emphasis on pragmatism, procedure, and principles that were so deeply imbedded as to be almost unconscious and instinctive. Her assault on American filiopietism and scripturalism is anything but a demolition job in the postmodern mode; Maier instead offers an expansive and attractive conception of the revolutionary founding that is designed to revive and rehabilitate our civic self-consciousness, if not our civil religion. Maier's pantheon, if we may call it that, is nothing less than the nation itself, the arena within which successive generations have struggled to define their civic identities, not a place where "false gods" are worshiped but, rather, where we must "define and realize right and justice in our time."[17]

Ellis's ambitions are perhaps more modest than those of O'Brien and Maier: Americans will not revere an authorless text, nor in this cynical age are exhortations to good citizenship likely to grip the public imagination; yet, despite the best efforts of modern scholarship, ordinary folk (or, more accurately, those extraordinary folks who still buy books) still love their great men. Jefferson will not be downed, and even those writers who would blast him away—or contextualize him into insignificance—can only get a hearing from the so-called "general public" because they are writing about him. As Ellis tackled Jefferson's life, he encountered an "American icon," an "electromagnetic" figure who "symbolized the most cherished and most contested values in modern American culture."[18] *American Sphinx* is a character study framed as an episodic biography. It burrows into Jefferson, discovering elaborate psychological mechanisms for protecting and projecting adolescent fantasies: the vision of a good society in the Declaration of Independence "came from deep inside Jefferson himself," eloquently expressing "personal cravings for a

[16] Maier, *American Scripture*, 215.
[17] Maier, *American Scripture*, 215.
[18] Ellis, *American Sphinx*, x–xi.

world in which all behavior was voluntary and therefore all coercion unnecessary."[19] Ellis's Jefferson has the narcissism of youth; he is an adolescent who could not grow up. Such an approach would seem radically at odds with Maier's contextualism, but the net effect in both cases is deflationary: the history of ideas does not amount to much, and Jefferson's were, in any case, half-baked. Recognizing the dangerous and delusionary character of these adolescent impulses in Jefferson, Ellis suggests, modern Americans will be better able to recognize and restrain their own idealistic excesses. As a chastened Jefferson recedes from preeminence, other voices from the founding, more sober and circumspect—more adult—will be easier to discern. If our ears are properly attuned, we may even hear the voices of Maier's ordinary folk, declaring their own independence.

Ellis the realist would settle for a little more Adams and a little less Jefferson. The famous late-life correspondence between Jefferson and Adams, which Ellis has so eloquently rehearsed both in *Passionate Sage*, his superb history of Adams's retirement years, and in *Sphinx*, offers an image of Ellis's pantheon.[20] Jefferson never recanted his youthful idealism, remaining "a dedicated political warrior" to the (increasingly) bitter end of his life, but he treasured his "fourteen-year dialogue with Adams": it proved "impossible to dismiss his irascible old colleague."[21] Jefferson and Adams "were the proverbial opposites that attracted"; "if the American Revolution had become a national hymn, they were its words and its music," their revolution "an ongoing argument between idealistic and realistic impulses."[22]

Ellis's brief against Jefferson is not all that different from O'Brien's: their commentaries on the infamous "Adam and Eve" letter to his protégé William Short ("Were there but an Adam and Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than it is now") evoke similar horrors. For Ellis, Jefferson's complacent acceptance of mass slaughter points toward the "revolutionary realism . . . in the Lenin and Mao mold." O'Brien gives us Pol Pot and right-wing militias as contemporary avatars.[23] But while O'Brien concludes that Jefferson must be read out of the American pantheon, Ellis would neutralize Jefferson by bringing other, more sensible, icons back to life; in order to check and balance his pernicious influence, Ellis would not kill Jefferson off, he would institutionalize him. Civic life, it would seem, still requires heroes.

MEMBERSHIP IN A PANTHEON suggests a larger-than-life, iconic quality. These are not quite ordinary mortal human beings we are dealing with here. The task of Jefferson biographers has traditionally been to give their subject a "life," although some have concluded, with Albert J. Nock, that Jefferson's private life is "inpenetrable."[24] In any case, the genre of biography tends to defeat its practitioners' humanizing

[19] Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 59.
[20] Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York, 1993).
[21] Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 257, 250.
[22] Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 251.
[23] Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 127; O'Brien, *Long Affair*, 150, 313–14.
[24] Quoted in Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (New York, 1970), 29.

purpose, even when warts and all are conspicuously on display. Why bother spending so much time and effort on a subject who does not represent something much bigger, in this case, America? Even the warts tend to take on a portentous character when the humanizing gives way to demonizing in revisionist accounts. The great man remains great, after all, even if greatly culpable. So, too, high-minded efforts to knock Jefferson off his pedestal altogether focus our gaze on the pedestal, and remind us of the missing figure.

Treatments of Jefferson that make him a god, standing or fallen, or ask him to represent the entire nation, necessarily distort his human qualities. Jefferson's proper context is not the array of gods and demi-gods in the American pantheon but rather the social and intellectual milieux that shaped him—and within which he acted. Andrew Burstein's book *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* and Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* each give us what might be called "possible Jeffersons."[25] Although both are sympathetic to Jefferson (if in different ways), these two books differ dramatically in approach, method, and style, not to mention their conclusions. Burstein's is a profoundly sympathetic attempt to read the "inner Jefferson" by closely examining what he read and what he wrote to those nearest and dearest to him. Burstein situates Jefferson in what Henry May once labeled "the sentimental Enlightenment," and his book helps illuminate both Jefferson and that intellectual context.[26] Gordon-Reed's study is not so much of Jefferson himself as the historians' controversy about whether he engaged in a long relationship with his slave Sally Hemings and fathered her children. Gordon-Reed, a law professor, is most interested in the ways in which historians handle evidence. In the process of sifting through everything historians know that has any bearing on the issue, and in insisting that we consider evidence from black sources as seriously as we take that from whites, she reminds us forcefully that Jefferson lived in a thickly populated plantation world inhabited by whites and blacks both. Despite their differences (Burstein argues against the Hemings affair), Burstein and Gordon-Reed both give us Jeffersons who live in rich, complex worlds—Burstein's, a mental and felt world of books and correspondents, reading and writing, and Gordon-Reed's, an embodied world of masters and slaves.[27] In the end, these are very different worlds, one of the head and heart, the other (implicitly) of the body. And though the reader would like to know more about the coexistence of these domains, the Jeffersons who inhabit them are plausible, even compelling: both Jeffersons correspond to the available evidence, both are successfully situated in complex and comprehensible worlds.

The proliferation of possible Jeffersons does *not* constitute the failure of the biographical enterprise. We would suggest rather the opposite. The search for a single, definitive, "real" Jefferson is a fool's errand, a hopeless search for the kind

[25] Andrew Burstein, *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville, Va., 1995); Annette Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (Charlottesville, 1997).

[26] Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1978). For a more recent, and very suggestive account, see Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, Calif., 1993).

[27] See Burstein, *Inner Jefferson*, 228–31, for the argument against Sally Hemings as Jefferson's lover.

of "knowledge" that even (or especially?) eludes sophisticated moderns in their encounters with each other—and themselves. If, in this age of full disclosure and true confessions, people are increasingly reluctant to rush to judgment on questions of character, how can we expect historians and biographers to explain to us an intensely private man who has been dead more than a century and a half? Perhaps the public's desire to know "the character" of a man such as Thomas Jefferson and, even more, to know if it is good or bad, is a form of compensation for the dim recognition that we are doomed to cluelessness in our own world, like Plato's cave, a domain of shadows and hand-me-down light.[28]

Ironically, it is the thin-skinned Jefferson himself, with his obsessive concerns with privacy and his reputation (or "character" in his world and to posterity), who tantalizes us with the prospect of discovering the "real" Jefferson. On his deathbed, he complained to his grandson that the enemies who had slandered him and besmirched his character "had never known *him*. They had created an imaginary being clothed with odious attributes, to whom they had given his name."[29] Jefferson has seduced us with the promise of intimacy, the prospect of meeting the real Jefferson, the true "him." Yet this notion that intimates might know—and only intimates could know—the real person is itself a time-bound notion, one coming into being precisely during Jefferson's lifetime.[30] Likewise, as Burstein notes, the very concept of an "inner life," which we take for granted today, was the creation of Jefferson's time, and Jefferson himself was "part of the transition from neoclassical to romantic, from visible to inner life."[31] Jefferson's inner self, the true "him," was not so much, then, a core, coherent self that could be "known" to contemporaries or to successive generations of scholars (or filmmakers), transparent to their empathetic, unmediated gaze. Instead, Jefferson's true "him" was the Jefferson he knew himself to be, his notion of himself, the person he hoped his intimates might come to know—and that his enemies (and hostile biographers) would never begin to comprehend. This self was necessarily hidden, for the very notion of an "inner life," the premise of Burstein's book, required that it be distinct from the public self, the "imaginary being" that others saw. Yet, however hidden, and therefore "real," this private Jefferson might be, it was nonetheless as much a self-conscious construction as the artfully projected public image. Both were artifacts of their times.

Burstein's Jefferson, then, is one of several possible Jeffersons: the inner Jefferson, the Jefferson as Jefferson saw himself. Burstein takes us as close as we are likely to get to Jefferson's interior world, the fragile and vulnerable self that he was still brooding about on his deathbed. At the same time that Burstein shows us this "inner Jefferson," he demonstrates how slippery such a concept was. It is not only that Jefferson embodied the transition between two very different notions of the self but also that he defined himself in relation to others. "The essential

[28] For further discussion of the "character issue," see Peter S. Onuf, "The Scholars' Jefferson," *William and Mary Quarterly* 50 (1993): 671–99.

[29] Sarah N. Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, Va., 1947), 369.

[30] See Lucia McMahon, "'While Our Souls Together Blend': Narrating a Romantic Readership in the Early Republic," in Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States* (forthcoming, New York, 1998).

[31] Burstein, *Inner Jefferson*, 287.

Jefferson," Burstein writes, "was the private individual, an engaging and considerate friend . . . Friendship was . . . essential to his own pursuit of happiness." Jefferson was at once private and social; his privacy derived its meaning from its relation to his social world, the one in which a private man was a friend to other private persons. "John Donne's dictum 'No man is an island' applies particularly well to the age of Jefferson . . . and to Jefferson's own ideal of developing friendship and good feelings among men."[32] Consequently, this Jefferson can only be understood in relation to his friends and his family, the chosen community in which he found himself and which he believed vital to his existence. This was a community, as Burstein shows, of fellow letter-writers and sentimentalists, people who valued the distinctive mixture of expressiveness and restraint that characterized the waning days of the Enlightenment in America in its transition to a Romantic sensibility.

Like Burstein, Gordon-Reed situates Jefferson in a community, a densely populated social world not of sentimentalists of the same elite social class but of black slaves and their owners and employers. As Gordon-Reed makes clear, too often previous students of Jefferson have tried to study him in isolation from that community. In responding to Ken Burns's question about the possibility of a relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, author Natalie Bober stated, "I think we must consider who Thomas Jefferson was," as if the question could be answered by reference to character rather than evidence.[33] Although this is not her immediate purpose, Gordon-Reed shows us a Monticello inhabited by blacks and whites, a world that was *lived* alongside the world that Burstein shows us, a "dream world" of enlightened sentiment and bold ideas.

In the world of Thomas Jefferson that Gordon-Reed recreates, certain things happened: over a period of fifteen years, Jefferson's slave Sally Hemings bore six children, all or some of whom had a strong resemblance to Jefferson. His family later acknowledged a family connection, claiming that one of Jefferson's nephews, either Peter or Samuel Carr, was the father. Although Jefferson was typically at home only a few months a year during this period, he was always at Monticello during the periods when Hemings would have conceived her children. The Carr brothers might have been there as well, as they lived in the vicinity, but there is no evidence of Hemings having conceived a child when Jefferson was *not* around. All of Hemings's four surviving children were freed at about the time they turned twenty-one, though generally in ways that would not have attracted the notice of the community. Beverley Hemings, for example, ran away from the plantation, and no effort seems ever to have been made to find him and bring him back. Such indifference to a runaway was unusual for Jefferson, and although he freed several slaves over his lifetime, freeing an entire family as they reached the age of twenty-one was exceptional. Sally Hemings herself was also freed, informally, after Jefferson's death.

Gordon-Reed attempts not so much to explain this remarkable confluence of events as to evaluate how historians and witnesses have explained them. Members of the Hemings family asserted that Jefferson had promised Sally Hemings freedom

[32] Burstein, *Inner Jefferson*, 149, 195.

[33] Natalie Bober, quoted at www.pbs.org/jefferson/archives/interviews/Bober.htm (under Sally Hemings).

for herself and any children she might bear if she returned with him from France, where he was serving as his nation's ambassador. Members of the Jefferson family denied not only that Jefferson was the father of Hemings's children but that he could have been. As Jefferson's granddaughter Ellen Coolidge put it, "The thing will not bear telling. There are such things, after [all], as moral impossibilities."[34] By and large, subsequent historians have repeated these explanations and elaborated on them more than they have weighed the evidence, and, all too often, Gordon-Reed argues, white historians have treated similar sorts of evidence from white and black sources differently.[35]

One of Gordon-Reed's chief accomplishments is to problematize the usefulness of a term such as "character" for historical explanation. Is the concept of "moral impossibility" a meaningful term for historical analysis? Gordon-Reed notes, for example, that some historians have argued that Jefferson could not have been the father of Madison Hemings because Hemings was conceived when Jefferson's daughter Polly was home at Monticello dying. But, she argues, "Human beings have sex for many reasons other than depraved lust."[36] They have sex when they are happy, and they have sex when they are sad or depressed or frightened or need comfort. Gordon-Reed shows that the use of "character" as an explanatory mechanism necessarily flattens the human experience. It speaks to our emotional needs—Ellen Coolidge's defense of her grandfather rests more on the plaint "how could he have done this to us?" than evidence—more than the complexity of human life. Like the pantheon paradigm, the use of character as an explanation requires us to evaluate human beings in terms of black and white, as it were, either on the pedestal or off.

Gordon-Reed gives us another possible Jefferson. Although she by no means asserts that Jefferson was the father of Hemings's children, she certainly demonstrates that this is the best explanation currently available for the evidence we confront. She does not attempt to infer Jefferson's state of mind if and when he had sex with Sally Hemings while his daughter was dying; she suggests only that if he did, he might have been frightened or he might have been depressed or he might simply have needed comfort. Her evaluation of the evidence requires us to imagine a different Jefferson—one very different from Burstein's. This Jefferson would have persuaded a young slave woman to return with her master to Virginia by promising her and her children freedom. He would subsequently have fathered at least six children by her, seen four of them survive to adulthood, and kept his promise to their mother. There is additional evidence of affection or at least care for this family, enough at least for us to begin to imagine even if we cannot reconstruct a mulatto family that lived next to Jefferson's white one at Monticello, one that inhabited a tenuous, liminal space in the plantation world, somewhere between slavery and an unenforceable promise of freedom. Of course, this possible Jefferson in this possible Monticello gives rise to its own critique. As Brenda Stevenson has suggested, it runs counter to historians' depictions of the ravages of

[34] Quoted in Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, 259.
[35] Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, xvii, 34–38, 97–98, and *passim*.
[36] Gordon-Reed, *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings*, 196.

slavery and may portray the institution in a light we find unacceptably romantic.[37] In the end, Gordon-Reed's revisionist effort may lead only to another American synecdoche, in which Jefferson and his plantation world stand for a multi-racial America in which racial reconciliation is achieved by interracial sex.[38] The desire to make Jefferson stand for the nation may be too powerful for historians to check.

For now, however, Burstein and Gordon-Reed offer alternatives to the powerful cultural imperative to make Thomas Jefferson represent America in order that we may judge the country right or wrong. Although both authors' Jeffersons are sympathetic, neither is a god—not because of imperfections but because they live in the world, surrounded by other people. These new, possible Jeffersons are complex men, living in complex worlds. They remain impenetrable, but perhaps no more so than any of the rest of us. These Jeffersons shift our attention to the worlds they inhabited, and they invite us to find him not in some inner, essential core but somewhere between those worlds, one of words and feeling and one of promises kept and promises broken.

[37] Brenda Stevenson, "Founding Father's Folly?" *Washington Post Book World* (June 15, 1997): 4.
[38] See Sean Wilentz, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Thomas Jefferson," *New Republic* 216, no. 10 (March 10, 1997): 32–42.

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