

## SPEAKING FOR BLACKS

Race problems at the *New York Review of Books*

by Randall Kennedy

**N**EGLECT, exclusion, and the stifling mediation of well-meaning white friends have long been the bane of black intellectuals. As early as 1827, the opening editorial of the first black newspaper in the United States, *Freedom's Journal*, objected to the near-monopoly exercised by whites over the interpretation of black affairs. "We wish to plead our own cause," the editor declared. "Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick been deceived by misrepresentations in things which concern us deeply."

A hundred years later, leaders of the Harlem Renaissance complained that the standards of white taste and the power of white-owned media forced black writers to take back seats to whites as interpreters of black life. Thus it was *Nigger Heaven*, by white novelist Carl Van Vechten, that became the era's best-selling portrait of cabaret Harlem in the 1920s, while the musical drama *Porgy and Bess*, by DuBose Heyward and the Gershwins, became the most popular rendition of southern black folkways. The first recording of *Porgy and Bess* used white singers because blacks were not considered good enough, and no blacks were among the scores of writers employed to produce it for Broadway and Hollywood. This helps explain why *Porgy and Bess* is considered a classic by many white observers of American culture, while to many black intellectuals it merely calls to mind Langston Hughes's lament: "You've taken my blues and gone."

By the 1960s, the Black Power movement, the assertion of a "black

aesthetic," and the demand for black studies raised black intellectuals to a higher status than they had ever before enjoyed. But despite the decade's emphasis on "authenticity," media entrepreneurs tended to prefer white views of black realities to the views of Negroes themselves. June Meyer ably documented this pattern in an article in *The Nation*, in which she concluded that the "preferred format of communication, black to white, is *through* a white intermediary." In the pages of *The Nation* itself, and of its liberal rival, *The New Republic*, blacks were counseled, analyzed, pitied, and championed—but seldom heard from. Indeed, in 1967 *The Nation* ran a special report on violence featuring five articles on black and Hispanic ghetto rebellions—all by white reporters. Nor was book publishing any better. Although the publishers abandoned their manifest indifference toward black society when racial turmoil sparked popular interest in black life, the beneficiaries of the contracts were often not long-neglected black scholars but well-connected white ones. No blacks, for instance, were among the editors of *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*, published by New American Library, or *Black Protest in the Sixties*, published by Quadrangle, or *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, published by Bobbs-Merrill. Is it any wonder, then, that black intellectuals became increasingly resentful of the privileges accorded white Negro-ologists and the

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presumptions these privileges helped to encourage?

**R**ALPH ELLISON eloquently criticized the pretensions of white-on-black documentary in polemical exchanges with Irving Howe, editor of *Dissent*, and Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary*, in 1967. Addressing himself to the latter, Ellison observed how amazingly often "white liberals, possessing little first-hand knowledge of any area of the society other than their own, eagerly presume to interpret Negro life while ignoring their primary obligation as intellectuals—which is to know what they are talking about." Liberal "experts," Ellison said, claim authority

*they've neither earned nor been intellectually honest enough to admit they don't possess. Instead, like absentee owners of tenement buildings, they exploit the abstract sociological "Negro" as a facile means of getting ahead in the world. Worse, when decked out in the trimmings of social science, their nonsense sometimes catches the eye of powerful politicians seeking accurate data on social reality, and then the whole nation suffers.*

Largely as a result of protest from Ellison and other black writers, a few magazines—I think again of *The Nation* and *The New Republic*—have become sensitive to the temptations and dangers of cultural imperialism. But most journals supposedly committed to informed opinion (including *Harp-er's*) still suffer from an absence of

participation by black intellectuals.

One in particular whose tradition of racial exclusiveness remains firmly entrenched is the *New York Review of Books*. The *Review* warrants special attention not only because it is so widely respected, but also because of its politics. The *Review* is a left-liberal journal that has, to its credit, exposed and excoriated many of society's worst failings, including the racism that remains etched so deeply into American psyches and institutions. It is precisely because the *Review* represents much that is best in American critical thought that its record with respect to black writers is so disturbing. That record shows how subtle varieties of racism can stubbornly reside within even the most intellectually sophisticated communities.

R.W.B. Lewis once commented in the *Review* that "even those among us who consent to Negroes being accepted as human beings, don't really want them to be writers." It would be difficult to find a more apt description of the *Review's* own editorial imagination. In its pages the black occupies a prominent role as a slave, a slum-dweller, or a victimized child. Yet his status as a writer approaches in-

visibility. Between 1963 and 1973 the *Review* published blacks as reviewers on fewer than ten occasions; between 1973 and 1978 blacks appeared only twice.\* Indeed, during its entire history only two black writers have been published in the *Review* as critics of fiction: James Baldwin in 1967 and Darryl Pinkney in 1978 and again in 1979.

Blacks are simply not included among those networks from which the *Review* draws its writing and editorial talent. They are generally not among the "name" professors at the most prestigious American and British universities. Nor are they among the loose coterie of New York intellectuals. It takes no conscious effort from the *Review* to exclude black writers, only laziness. The problem of having to grapple with the perceptions of black critics seldom arises; blacks are not, as a rule, members of the club.

Every magazine depends on writers' and editors' networks; these are, in fact, its bloodlines. But a truly distinguished periodical should constantly seek to revivify itself and its audience by finding and presenting talent that may reside outside the ranks of its circle of friends. Some journals simply cannot attract new talent. Such is not the case with the *Review*; its prestige would assure an eager receptivity among many of the finest black American or black African writers. But its editors seem peculiarly at a loss to know how to give black voices a hearing, even on themes directly concerning African or Afro-American life.

**A** CHARACTERISTIC RESPONSE to this criticism is the assertion that writers should be published not on account of their race but only according to the

\* I have derived these and subsequent figures from rereading back issues of the *New York Review of Books* and noting the authors of articles having to do with black America or Africa. Because the *Review's* coterie of "experts" on black affairs comprises a small number of well-known white intellectuals, identifying black authors was not very difficult; exceedingly few in number, blacks who have broken the color barrier at the *Review* are also well-known. Although my search for black authors was mainly confined to articles on racial themes, I suspect that an analysis of black participation in other subjects would also lead to gloomy conclusions.

merit of their work. I agree. What is exasperating about this response, however, is that it is seldom used to challenge the barriers that prevent black writers from being published or gaining proper recognition—barriers that have nothing to do with talent. Instead, assertions of the need for meritocratic integrity are used to defend a profoundly unmeritocratic status quo. In publishing, as elsewhere in society, racial oppression is ignored, while those who protest against it are castigated as "racists in reverse" and portrayed as vulgar levelers uninterested in high standards. Concern for racial equality is rendered the adversary of quality in education, job performance, or, in this case, art. Yet the relationship between standards of excellence and the practice of democratic ideals is not antagonistic but complementary. The more artificial fetters are removed from the creative enterprises of neglected minorities, the greater will be their contribution to our national culture.

I am not saying that race should be a criterion of literary worth, nor that a writer's background is a substitute for study and the skill to translate perceptions into engaging language, nor that a writer's cultural or racial identity—let's say the fact that he is black—necessarily ensures sharper insights into his own group's experience than those offered by an outsider. During the 1960s, I.F. Stone, a Jew, wrote with far more "soul" about the aspirations of young black militants than did Carl Rowan, the most widely read black journalist in America. Yet the racial or cultural identities of writers do make for differences in concern and sensibility that are valuable.

Editors may deny that writers' social identities should be considered when writing assignments are distributed, but their publications show how well they recognize that a writer's identity can be of decisive importance. This certainly is true of the *Review's* commentary on the Middle East: the writers are almost invariably Jews, Israelis, and, somewhat less frequently, Palestinians and Arabs of various nationalities. Hence the articles by I. F. Stone, Bernard Avishai, Mattiyaha Peled, Abba Eban, Amos Elon, Guido Goldman, Shlomo Avineri, Elias Tuma, and Sara Hussan.

This combination of subject and

## WHO IS IT ACCUSES US?

by Linda Pastan

Who is it accuses us of safety,  
as if the family were soldiers  
instead of hostages,  
as if the gardens were not mined  
with explosive peonies,  
as if the most common death  
were not by household accident?  
We have chosen the dangerous life.  
Consider the pale necks of the  
children  
under their colored head scarves,  
the skin around the husbands'  
eyes, flayed  
by guilt and promises.  
You who risk no more than your  
own skins  
I tell you household Gods  
are jealous Gods.  
They will cover your window sills  
with the dust of sunsets;  
they will poison your secret wells  
with longing.

commentator makes sense. The deep and directly personal stake that these writers have in their subjects charges their arguments with an urgency and intuitive understanding that is the special privilege of the articulate insider. Of course personal experience is but the material that discernment and eloquence make meaningful. But in the arts of reporting and essay, experience deserves respect. A writer's social identity is important because it inescapably influences his experiences and thus, indirectly, the form and concerns of his work. To be a black writer in America, for instance, is necessarily to be subject to certain pressures no white writer, regardless of his empathic powers, will ever be able to feel. Similarly, a black writer's racial identity provides him with an entrée to sources of knowledge and understanding—the barbershop, the church, the backyard cookout—that are simply unavailable on the same terms to his white colleagues.

Just as a writer's social identity shapes his sensibility, it also helps to define his relationship to his subjects and to his audience. Jack Beatty, literary editor of *The New Republic*, called attention to this recently when he compared travelogues by two writers of Indian descent, the brothers Shiva and V.S. Naipaul. Beatty noted that one reason why he found V. S. Naipaul's writings on India more striking than Shiva Naipaul's writings on Africa was that in reading the former, one felt that "his soul was on the line: he was an Indian castigating his own culture, so he had a moral warrant for saying such harsh things." Shiva, on the other hand, "has no warrant in Africa. He is on moral holiday there."

In publishing the writings of Jews, Israelis, and Palestinians, the *Review* has recognized their special warrant to discuss the Middle East. Yet no such recognition has been accorded to black Africans or Afro-Americans in discussing African affairs. Most recently, the *Review's* regular Africanists have been Xan Smiley, a white English journalist, and Conor Cruise O'Brien, the omniscient Irish man of letters.

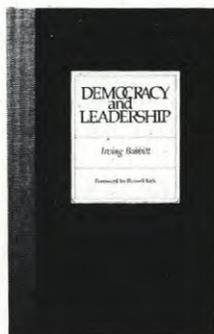
One looks in vain in the *Review* for articles by talented black African writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, or Alex La Guma. All one finds are white spokesmen for black grief. Similarly, when cover-

ing Uganda, the *Review* overlooked the clusters of emigré Ugandan intellectuals who tried desperately to alert the world to the savagery of Idi Amin's regime. It presented instead the analyses of two white Englishmen, one of whom, Dennis Hills, had been a captive of Amin's. Hills noted in his article that the white world took serious notice of Amin's crimes only when he began menacing a few white lives. True enough. But analogous to that blindness was the deafness of the *Re-*

*view* and other "enlightened" publications to opinions voiced in other than white accents.

The *Review* has presented an authentically African point of view only in essays by such white Africans as the distinguished South African novelist Nadine Gordimer. Gordimer is a fine writer with a keen sense of social justice. In 1976 she wrote for the *Review* a chilling portrait of the black rebellion in Soweto and the ruthless violence used to suppress it. But for all

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### Democracy and Leadership

By Irving Babbitt

A penetrating work of political and moral philosophy, first published in 1924, *Democracy and Leadership* is packed with wisdom. Irving Babbitt was a distinguished professor of French literature at Harvard and a leader of the intellectual movement called American Humanism. This was his only directly political book, and in it Babbitt applies the principles of humanism to the civil social order. He summarizes the principal political philosophies; contrasts Rousseau with Burke; describes true and false liberals; distinguishes between ethical individualism and destructive egoism; and stands up for work and duty. *Democracy and Leadership* joins the broken links between politics and morals—and that accomplishment marks it as a work of genius. With a foreword by Russell Kirk. Hardcover \$9.00, Softcover \$4.00.

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her disgust with apartheid and sympathy for its victims, she necessarily views its infernal workings as a privileged observer. Gordimer herself has trenchantly analyzed, in the South African situation, the mentality that refuses to hear black voices but allows white articulation of blacks' grievances. She does this in the context of describing how the apartheid regime strictly censors black writers but reluctantly allows dissident white writers a bit more freedom.

*Tolerance has operated in one small area only, and provides a curious half-light on the psychology of white supremacy. Literature by black South Africans has been successfully wiped out by censorship and the banning of individuals. . . . But white writers have been permitted to deal, within strict limits, with the disabilities, suffering, hopes, dreams, even resentments of black people. Are such writings perhaps tolerated because they have upon them the gloss of proxy? In a strange way, although they may indict white supremacy, they can be claimed by it because they speak for the black man, as white supremacy decides for him how he shall live.*

There is, of course, a world of difference between South African white supremacists and the white liberal community that shapes the *Review*. Yet the logic of cultural domination ensnares not only its most self-conscious advocates, but also opponents unaware of their own susceptibility to it.

THE RACE PROBLEM at the *Review* is not simply the subtle absence of black perspectives. The more visible failing is displayed by some of the *Review's* critics in their attitudes toward black culture, a complicated set of responses whose hallmark is arrogance. Perhaps this seems odd given the *Review's* leftist leanings; political radicalism is often associated in our minds with cultural openness. But racial exclusiveness and politics bear a peculiar relation to each other at the *Review*; its radicalization during the 1960s seemed to intensify its preference for white writing on black life. In the *Review's* early, liberal days, its contributors often displayed a healthy self-con-

sciousness with regard to their status as outsiders. H. Stuart Hughes frankly acknowledged that he and most of his readers "have no knowledge at all of the Negro majority. . . . Most of the time we see our fellow Negro citizens only from the outside as people remote and alien." Later, however, radicals like Andrew Kopkind and Eugene Genovese would have none of this caution. Indeed, Genovese was so impressed by his own commitment to black rights, felt so confident in the authenticity of his radical credentials and so unencumbered by his whiteness, that he actually began referring to blacks as "niggers," without quotation marks, a brazen act of assumed kinship that black intellectuals bitterly resented.

This combination of radicalism and presumptuousness was startlingly evident in the August 24, 1967, issue of the *Review*. The cover of this issue displayed a detailed model of a Molotov cocktail, and inside was a critique by Kopkind of Martin Luther King, Jr., and an account of the Newark riots by Tom Hayden. The third piece of this grand mosaic of white on black was Philip Rahv's review of William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, a fictional reconstruction of a historical slave rebellion. Rahv praised *The Confessions of Nat Turner* effusively, extolling Styron's ability to get inside his black characters' psyches. Rahv suggested that "whereas Faulkner's Negroes are still to some extent the white man's Negroes, Styron's are strictly themselves." He also declared that "Styron thoroughly explores the Negro militant's hatred of whites." One might question Rahv's familiarity with the vaunted black hatred he credits Styron with re-creating so well. But that aside for the moment, what is most reprehensible about Rahv's review is his assertion that only a white southern writer could have successfully portrayed Turner's insurrection. "A Northerner," he says,

*would have been too much "outside" the experience to manage it effectively; and a Negro writer, because of a very complex anxiety not only personal but societal and political, would probably have stacked the cards, producing in a mood of unnerving rage and indignation a melodrama of saints and sinners.*

Emotion would have overpowered a

black novelist's imagination and skill! (Ralph Ellison, are you listening?) But, declares Rahv, Styron "at once seizes upon his own background and transcends it."

Ignorance of black literary history helped prepare the way for Rahv's belittlement of black creative achievement, and, even worse, for his disparagement of black creative potential. He states, for instance, that the theme of black rebellion against slavery had "never before [been] attempted on a large scale by a modern American writer." In 1936, however, Arna Bontemps, a black novelist, wrote *Black Thunder*, a fictionalized account of Gabriel Prosser's aborted slave uprising in Virginia. Though highly regarded by knowledgeable students of Afro-American literature, *Black Thunder* received little attention when published. Beacon Press reissued it in 1968 in an attempt to popularize this undeservedly neglected work by capitalizing on the tremendous stir created by Styron's effort. But again *Black Thunder* was ignored, and the *Review* was among the publications that neglected it.

Having promoted Styron's *Nat Turner*, the *Review* also defended it. In the September 12, 1968, issue an article by Eugene Genovese was published that responded *not* to Rahv's review but to ten black writers who had published a book of essays sharply critical of Styron's novel. Genovese mounted a major polemical assault on Styron's black critics to counter what he described as the "ferocity and hysteria" of their charges. Several of Genovese's most important criticisms were correct; as a group, the black critics had ascribed motives to Styron that were simply implausible and had attacked him along lines that had little to do with pertinent literary criteria. But Genovese repeated Rahv's mistake when he suggested that Styron had rescued Nat Turner from "obscurity." And he erred also when he sought to blame black intellectuals for the increasing racial tensions building up within academia.

In answer to Genovese, black historian Vincent Harding corrected the notion that Styron had served as some sort of cultural archaeologist. He pointed out that in the poetry and fiction of Arna Bontemps, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, Margaret Walker, and

many other black artists Turner's rebellion and the tradition of black resistance to slavery has been ably memorialized. Harding declared that "the 'obscurity' in which Nat Turner and other slave rebels languished was created out of the same material as the 'darkness' of pre-sixteenth century Africa: the blindness of white observer-experts." Furthermore, he proposed that black intellectuals' hostility was provoked not so much by black nationalism as by "non-black authorities on black life who are certain that they have eaten and drunk so fully of our [black] experience that they are qualified to deliver homilies to us (at the least provocation) on how that experience should be understood, recorded, and lived." Genovese's response to Harding was conciliatory. He praised Harding's scholarship and that of other black intellectuals and agreed that for too long their efforts had been shamefully overlooked. He could have documented his point with the fact that for all the *Review's* many articles on the history of black slavery, not once has it published the ideas or research of a black historian.

THE NAT TURNER affair was a major instance of racial effrontery. But the *Review's* racial snobbery also expressed itself in small, annoying pebbles of insult. In 1969, in a review concerning American slavery, British historian J.H. Plumb gratuitously chided blacks for what he described as "the new black contempt for the white, . . . a hatred of white democracy, a growing insistence on authoritarian, almost totalitarian, attitudes within the black community." By 1969, of course, black contempt for whites was anything but new. And perhaps blacks *should* hate democracy when it is, to quote Plumb, merely "white." But more to the point, one doubts that the professor, comfortably ensconced in Cambridge, England, knew anything much about "authoritarian," or any other, attitudes then current within black communities. Or listen to Virgil Thomson, a composer and music critic who describes himself as "an unreconstructed Confederate." During the course of a review of books concerning black music, Thomson patronizingly suggested that "with our black friends punctuality is not to be

counted on." He then posited that blacks possess "an oral culture . . . radically opposed to our literate culture"—as if the rich, though neglected, black literary tradition now represented by such acclaimed artists as Toni Morrison, James Alan McPherson, and Ishmael Reed never existed. It used to be thought that blacks, though gifted musically, were doomed to literary incompetence. But by 1974, the year of Thomson's article, one would have thought that such stereotyping would be confined to cultural backwaters, and certainly not to be found in a journal with the *Review's* aspirations. Or consider Diane Johnson's article on the mass suicide in Jonestown last year. She writes that "black leadership, in its zest to cure whites of their racism, has done little to encourage black people to value education, and the powers of analysis and penetration that education supposedly confers." Obviously, Johnson, a white novelist, knows little about the history of black leadership. For despite the many failings of this leadership, one of its primary themes historically has been the value of education. In fact, from Booker T. Washington to W.E.B. DuBois to the NAACP's fight for school desegregation to Jesse Jackson's current campaign to encourage academic excellence, black leadership has, if anything, oversold education as a panacea for deprivation and inequality.

Despite the willingness of certain reviewers to interpret, indeed criticize, aspects of black life from postures of ignorance, it must be said once again that the *Review* has published some excellent articles on racial and African topics. Eric Foner's defense of black nationalism, Catherine Hoskyn's analysis of Patrice Lumumba, and Andrew Hacker's commentary on the persecution of the Black Panthers, for instance, were models of humane, informed analysis. And during the 1960s, the *Review's* coverage of conditions in inner-city schools was exemplary. The *Review* has also performed a service by lancing bloated literary reputations. Among black writers, James Baldwin is the one whom it has stalked mercilessly. (Yet with one recent exception, the reviews of Baldwin's work have all been written by whites.) Still, the *Review's* biting analyses of Baldwin's descent into literary mediocrity have been a welcome respite from the

obligatory praise that has gushed forth elsewhere from other liberal white critics.

Unfortunately the *Review* has seemed far more intent on discrediting Baldwin and a few other less stellar black writers than on shedding light on genuinely talented but overlooked black craftsmen such as John Wideman and Leon Forrest. This is partly a reflection of its critical style; the *Review* has made a virtue of intellectual malevolence. Some white liberals flatter black efforts only to proclaim their own triumph over prejudice. But writers for the *Review* often display a willed refusal to be impressed in order to demonstrate their freedom from bias and liberation from guilt. Note Elizabeth Hardwick, on the occasion of the funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., standing on tiptoe to be critical:

*King's language in the pulpit and in his speeches was effective but not remarkably interesting. His style compared well, however, with the speeches of recent Presidents and even with those of [Adlai] Stevenson.*

The *Review's* editors, like all editors, must to some degree accommodate their audience's demands. To this extent, the *Review* roughly mirrors its readers' values and concerns. Therein lies the larger significance of the journal's racial exclusiveness, for it does not just represent a failure of effort and imagination among the relatively few people who create the *Review*. It suggests as well the myopia of thousands of highly educated readers who have allowed the neglect of black intellectuals to continue unabated and unnoticed. In their passivity, however, readers cheat themselves. It is especially the readers who are impoverished by the homogeneity that deadens so many cultural enterprises. At the *Review* this unwillingness to explore the riches of diversity shortchanges blacks and whites alike. For instead of transcending the insularity that has always blighted the nation's intellectual life, the *Review* simply perpetuates this dismal parochialism. Ever eager to criticize narrow-mindedness "out there," the *New York Review of Books* is itself provincial. But then it is always at home that ideals meet their truest, most difficult test. □