Review Essay

"Civil War Memory in the Civil Rights Movement and Contemporary Culture."

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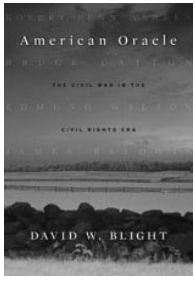

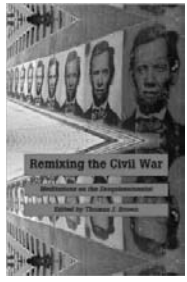

AMERICAN ORACLE: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era. By David Blight. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2011.
REMIXING THE CIVIL WAR: Meditations on the Sesquicentennial. Edited by Thomas J. Brown. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 2011.

The bloodiest war in American history, the Civil War ensured the survival of the union, ended chattel slavery, and accelerated technological development, territorial expansion, and economic concentration. Yet its promise of a new birth of freedom was soon betrayed by violence and disenfranchisement. Now, as the nation marks the Civil War Sesquicentennial, two important books consider the war's legacy and memory.

In *American Oracle*, Blight revisits the Civil War Centennial commemoration, which both consistently reflected and studiously ignored the upheavals of the Civil Rights Movement. In the early 1960s, the nation restaged the battles of a century earlier. A February 1961 ceremony to mark the founding of the Confederacy paraded directly past Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, whose young pastor Martin Luther King, Jr. had come to prominence five years

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earlier during the Montgomery bus boycott. In April of that year, northern state commissions threatened to boycott the commemoration of the first shot fired at Fort Sumter because Charleston's segregated Francis Marion Hotel would not accommodate the New Jersey delegation's one black member, Madeline A. Williams. The dispute was only resolved after the reluctant intervention of President John F. Kennedy resulted in alternate lodging arrangements across the bay at the Charleston Navy Yard. A year later, Blight relates, "white Southerners and their commission members threatened not only to boycott" a ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial commemorating the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, "but also to secede from the national Centennial altogether" (18).[1] No Civil War enthusiast in period costume could more faithfully reenact the battles of one hundred years prior than did the almost compulsive repetition of debates about federal authority, states'—rights, secession, and—above all, even if seldom acknowledged outright—race. "Civil rights intruded over and again on the Civil War" (13), Blight concludes, yet "the official Civil War Centennial could never find adequate, meaningful ways to balance Civil War remembrance with civil rights rebellion" (11).

No scholar knows the subtleties and sophistries of Civil War memory better than Blight, whose magisterial *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (2001) remains the authoritative treatment of Civil War memory in American culture.[2] In that work, Blight documents how narratives of reconciliation—of mutual valor and shared sacrifice—often worked hand-in-hand with white supremacist narratives to erase a narrative of black emancipation. A similar whitewashing colored the Civil War Centennial, which "became largely a series of public rituals and events mired in conservative, sometimes pro-Confederate, racially divisive, and Cold War impulses" (11). Such impulses issued in a commemoration characterized by crass commercialism, "by a consensual evasion of the story of Emancipation," and by a commitment to "only the ends of reconciliation and patriotism" (11). It was, in other words, an "astonishing acquiescence to racism and blatant avoidance of the present" (19).

With the official observance marked by unintentional irony, unreflective nostalgia, and selective memory, it fell in large part to writers, those unofficial historians, to offer more complex, ambivalent acts of remembering the Civil War and more critical, searching analyses of its role in the national memory. Blight examines the works of four writers—Robert Penn Warren, Bruce Catton, Edmund Wilson, and James Baldwin—who reflected fifty years ago on what Wilson referred to as "this absurd centennial."[3] "To various degrees," Blight states, "each of these writers wrote with an awareness of the public dimensions of the Centennial commemoration, though all of them pursued their art for its own sake" (10). Rather than offering an overarching thesis that would unite all of these writers, Blight focuses on them "because they represent divergent backgrounds, genres, and points of view" (8). Read together, they offer a more complex version of Civil War memory than could ever be achieved by the official commemoration. Warren, Catton, and Wilson were not directly writing about

race, but their works nevertheless document, at times by enacting, the erasures of national and cultural narratives of Civil War memory. Baldwin, while not taking the same focus on the Civil War as his primary subject, complements the goals of the previous three through his insistence on the unfulfilled narrative of emancipation and very different ideas of "union" and "reconciliation."

For those old enough to remember, *American Oracle* will elicit fond memories of first encounters with these exciting studies, especially *The Legacy of the Civil War, Patriotic Gore,* and *The Fire Next Time* as they came off the press. Blight's study now cogently clarifies why those books then were so exciting and yet so discomfiting. Readers influenced by the fight for racial equality were increasingly disturbed by the militarism and bloodletting in Vietnam, where another civil war was playing out. Blight brilliantly analyzes how considering Civil War memory in the context of the Civil Rights Movement forced four great but flawed writers to face conflicting values within themselves and within their country—between the sense that the violence of war supported no justification and the belief that some causes remained worth fighting for—a grappling that William Faulkner described in his Nobel Prize address as "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself."

Blight reminds readers that Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963, "what should be considered the most important speech marking the turbulent and divisive commemoration of the Civil War Centennial," did not begin with the extemporaneous line for which it is most often remembered (1). Rather, King's opening gambit was to call attention to Abraham Lincoln's promise of a "new birth of freedom" that had yet to be realized "five score years" later. King's speech represents a "transcendent oration to the world on the meaning of the unfinished American Civil War, and thereby on the meaning of America" (1). From our contemporary perspective, it is easier to see Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and King's "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered a mere three months shy of exactly one hundred years apart, as complementary moments in an ongoing movement. Indeed, the allusive tactics of Obama's Second Inaugural, which refers to both speeches, assume as much. But although the "Civil War and civil rights have been forever intertwined in American history and mythology," Blight reminds his readers that "in the period of the Centennial, from the 1950s to the mid-1960s, the two phenomena were too often like planets in separate orbits around different suns" (2).

"Before the Civil War," Robert Penn Warren wrote in 1961, "we had no history."[4] Warren learned that history at the foot of his grandfather, an anti-slavery Union man who nevertheless served as a captain in the 15th Tennessee Cavalry under General Nathan Bedford Forrest, seeing action at Shiloh and participating in the massacre of black Union soldiers at Fort Pillow in 1863. As the focus of Blight's first chapter, Warren serves as something of a touchstone for those that follow. The Civil War was a lifelong preoccupation for Warren, and Blight provocatively includes a section on *All the King's Men* (1946)—which gained Warren an enthusiastic following of professional historians for its use of history in fiction

without violating the canons of either—rightly emphasizes the neglected novel *Wilderness: A Tale of the Civil War* (1961), and refers to the all-but-forgotten *Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back* (1980). But above all Blight focuses on Warren's brief but trenchant book, not much longer than an essay, *The Legacy of the Civil War*, an Aristotelian meditation on tragedy published at the beginning of the centennial in the same year as *Wilderness*.

Warren's writings about the Civil War evince a border-state ambivalence that characterizes his mutual disdain for both the Confederate "Great Alibi"—the myth of the Lost Cause and "a set of excuses for every grievance and resentment that animated white Southerners"—as well as the Yankee "Treasury of Virtue"—"a set of pat arguments justifying their self-definition as noble victors."[5] These myths of Civil War memory function as moral evasions and delusions. Warren counters these two narratives by combining a tragic vision he finds in Herman Melville with a pragmatic philosophy he takes from Oliver Wendell Holmes: Warren's hope is that pragmatism emerges as the self-knowledge gained from tragic experience.

For Warren the Civil War not only gave the nation a history, it also gave the nation an "awareness of the cost of having a history."[6] Blight describes the contradictions of Warren's relationship to and representations of Civil War memory: he was relentlessly critical of the romantic images of and ideological delusions about the war held by both North and South and also endlessly attracted to the epic scale of the conflict; he insisted on the necessity of retaining tragedy in history even as he postulated the possibility of growth resulting from tragedy; he found it impossible to determine whether the war was inevitable yet unable to tear himself away from the question. This doubleness, Blight suggests, led Warren "to love irony and to hate ideology, to distrust idealism and abstraction, to probe ceaselessly, in his writing, the idea of original sin and the question of whether redemption from evil was possible" (34). If, as Warren suggests, evil is ingrained in human nature, and not a result of human actions, then the writer's burden is to show that both sides in a conflict are equally culpable because both are essentially corrupt. In this respect, *The Legacy of the Civil War*, a meditation on history, tragedy, and human nature, evinces Warren's keenest insights and his blind spots. His treatment of the Great Alibi and the Treasury of Virtue insightfully debunks the northern and southern myth-making underwritten by the Civil War. Yet in attempting to balance these myths against one another, showing how each compensates for a tragically depraved human nature, Warren bends and contorts. Blight suggests that Warren "tilted the scale a little too far," pointing out that, for all of Warren's attempts to consciously rid himself of the romantic vision of the Civil War he acquired as a child in the South, Warren's tactic in criticizing white southern racism is to differentiate the 1960s racists from their Confederate idols, implying that the latter embodied a type of honor absent from the former (69). Blight notes that readers of *Legacy* in 1961 "might easily have concluded that were it not for the abolitionists, the war could have been avoided in 1861" (70). Warren contributes to an old historiographical tradition of blaming the

perceived extremists on each side, one that dates at least from James G. Randall's needless war school and is reflected in the work of Penn Warren's close friend, the historian C. Vann Woodward.

Blight's second chapter focuses on Bruce Catton, "the most prolific and popular historian of the war" (81). Like Warren, Catton grew up imbibing Civil War memory, thanks in large part to the members of the Grand Army of the Republic, E. P. Case Post No. 372, who marched in Decoration Day parades in Catton's native Benzonia, Michigan. Catton is best known for his two Civil War trilogies, the first published in the early 1950s and the second during the Centennial years—*The Coming Fury* (1961), *Terrible Swift Sword* (1963), and *Never Call Retreat* (1965). Those years witnessed the initiation or acceleration of grand projects of narrative history. Historian Allan Nevins's eight-volume history of the war appeared between 1947 and 1971, with two volumes anticipating the Centennial commemoration: *The Improvised War, 1861–1862* (1959) and *War Becomes Revolution, 1862–1863* (1960). Writer Shelby Foote launched his massive *The Civil War: A Narrative* at the time of the Centennial. The first volume, *Fort Sumter to Perryville* (1958), anticipated the Centennial, and the second volume *Fredericksburg to Meridian* (1963), appeared at its height (the third volume, *Red River to Appomattox* [1974], would not appear for another decade). Nevins worked as a journalist before becoming a professional historian, and before Foote turned to narrative history, his novels included *Shiloh* (1952). As Blight relates, Catton, too, cut his teeth as a journalist—he referred to himself as a "newspaperman" (85)—and then worked as a public information officer for the U.S. Maritime Commission (he had served in the Navy during World War I) and as a public relations man for the Roosevelt administration during World War II. His first book, *The War Lords of Washington* (1948), grew out of this experience. By that point Catton was nearly fifty years old, but ahead of him lay a fecund career, which would begin in short order and unfold in quick succession with his first narrative history trilogy, published by Doubleday and read by hundreds of thousands: *Mr. Lincoln's Army* (1951), *Glory Road* (1952), and *A Stillness at Appomattox* (1954), the last of which would win him the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Although Blight does not explicitly compare Catton to his counterparts in this golden age of narrative history, he deftly analyzes what came to be known as "the Catton touch." Blight quotes extensively from Catton's copious fan mail, discusses his additional work as editor of *American Heritage* magazine (a post he accepted at the urging of Nevins, with whom Catton also served on the Civil War Centennial Commission), and his remarkable professional relationship with his collaborator E. B. Long, who appeared on Doubleday's payroll as Director of Research for the Centennial History project, and who "made Bruce Catton possible" (101).

But it is in Blight's treatment of Catton's style and his audience that his most perceptive and searching analyses emerge. "Catton almost always wrote about the Civil War with a sense of the epic, and of romance and an appeal to the nostalgic," Blight remarks, adding that he also achieved "his own brand of

realism." The qualifying description is telling, as Catton would be criticized more than once for a backward looking perspective that was overly romantic and nostalgic, and a forward looking perspective that was overly triumphalist and optimistic. Blight points out the whiteness of Catton's audiences and cites criticism of Catton's work by black critics, journalists, and poets, raising the question of whether the Catton touch was predicated on civil rights evasion. Although Catton refused to support commemorative events designed to uphold segregation and interfere with the Civil Rights Movement, he also lauded the Lost Cause despite its role as justification for anti-black violence in the South. Catton acknowledged slavery as the root cause of the war and was cognizant of continuing injustice for black Americans, yet remained unable to wed the two phenomena meaningfully in his emotionally evocative descriptions of the Civil War, choosing instead to center the parallel honor and parallel loss of white soldiers on both sides as a mechanism for uniting Cold War America. Blight refers to Catton as "reconciler-in-chief" (122).

Above all, Blight argues, Catton portrayed war, its causes and consequences, "as essentially an unfathomable *mystery*, its profoundest meaning perhaps just beyond human comprehension, like the ultimate significance of life or religion" (97). These attempts to create a sense of "mystery" often came at the cost of ignoring reality. In a 1956 address delivered in Schenectady, New York, Catton proclaimed: "We have always had the feeling that life in America began to the sound of trumpets. Somewhere behind us we feel there was a golden dawn" (107). After calling attention to the doctrine of progress, "bone marrow to American civil religion," that Catton's work consistently presupposed, Blight cuttingly remarks: "And no one likely asked the mother of the murdered boy Emmett Till . . . or the weary, sore-footed women who held together the Montgomery Bus Boycott whether they felt part of Catton's 'heaven-sent mystery' or his Civil War-induced, all-encompassing 'we'" (107). One might add, in the same spirit, that for the four million slaves who were freed as a result of the war and for their ancestors, life in America began not with the calling of trumpets but with the clanking of chains.

Edmund Wilson's early impressions of war were formed during his service in the World War I hospital corps, a gruesome experience reflected in the title of his only work on the Civil War, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (1962). Wilson's study, which "became a literary sensation," shed light on what until that point had been a neglected aspect of American letters (152). It is an intense and uneven attempt to answer the question of why the country's constitutive conflict produced no Tolstoy, no *War and Peace*, to chronicle it. Yet despite the lack of epic literature about the war, Wilson rightly notes that "the brilliant journal of Mary Chesnut" represents an accomplishment "so much more imaginative and revealing than most of the fiction inspired by the war" (*Patriotic Gore* ix). Blight recounts how Wilson uncovers little known figures of literary and historical interest (e.g. George Washington Cable, John W. DeForest, Francis Grierson); how he masterfully depicts Ulysses S. Grant

the writer; and how he found an unlikely affinity for Alexander H. Stephens, the Confederate Vice President with whom "Wilson stumbled into a rather nostalgic companionship" (160). Wilson's book gave readers reason to find redemptive value in the Civil War Centennial commemoration: "Right when it seemed the Centennial might produce only some worthy narrative histories at best and a great deal of commercial claptrap at worst, an eight-hundred page epic about American 'writers,'. . . burst on the scene to save the day. It was as though a writer with a mind more expansive than anyone else's had gone and found a story where most believed there was no story" (153). Wilson demonstrated that although American writers had not produced an *Iliad* or an *All Quiet on the Western Front*, they nevertheless bequeathed to posterity a treasure trove of works. He provided a coherent framework in which to understand together Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Abraham Lincoln's speeches, Mary Chestnut's diary, Ambrose Bierce's stories, and William T. Sherman's memoirs. In a sense, *Patriotic Gore* becomes the final entry into the collection of Civil War literature that it made possible. Daniel Aaron—whose own study of Civil War literature, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (1973), also remains relevant forty years after its publication—noted the epic quality of *Patriotic Gore*, how the achievement of the scholarship outstrips that of many of the works that it discusses; Aaron refers to Wilson's book as "a Tolstoyan meditation on the power of myth."[7]For all its archival depth and generic scope, however, Wilson's reading lacked true breadth, reflecting how for "white intellectuals generally of the 1950s and 1960s, nineteenth-century African American culture remained invisible" (165–66). While Wilson often searched for the American Tolstoy among minor and forgotten figures, he failed to read Frederick Douglass. Blight reminds readers that before Harvard University Press published a new edition of Douglass's *Narrative* in 1960, what is now widely considered the most important slave narrative had remained out of print for decades. In this context, Blight revisits a 1995 debate in which Harvard law professor Randall Kennedy criticized Wilson's omission of Douglass, and in which Toni Morrison defended the literary critic. Nevertheless, Blight notes that Wilson's otherwise exhaustive scholarship, which extends to "speeches and pamphlets, private letters and diaries, personal memoir and journalistic reports," yielded an analysis of only one African-American writer, Charlotte Forten, who wrote in her diaries and essays about her experience as a volunteer teacher and nurse in the South Carolina Sea Islands during the war.[8] Given his significant and sustained archival research, if anyone did not need to rely on a university press to signal the importance of Douglass, it was Wilson.

One of the great ironies attending the reception of *Patriotic Gore* is that despite the decades of work that issued such an encyclopedic publication, it is most often remembered for its brief, polemical introduction. "Wilson's Introduction has been called everything from shocking to naïve to brilliant," Blight writes, "some have considered it unpatriotic, even un-American" (146). Writing very much in a Cold War context, Wilson announces his position forthrightly: "Having myself lived through a couple of world wars and having read a certain amount of history,

I am no longer disposed to take very seriously the professions of 'war aims' that nations make."[9] Wilson develops the memorable comparison between nation states and sea slugs, both devouring smaller rivals with an insatiable voracity. The only substantive difference between the two, Wilson suggests, is that unlike sea slugs, nation-states develop heroic vocabularies with which to describe their base instincts: *Lebensraum*, *Kultur*, "master race;" *la glorie*, *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*; "the American dream," "the American way of life," "the defense of the Free World."[10] As these last entries suggest, Wilson by no means exempts the United States from this critique, including the American Civil War, which he denounces as one more imperialistic attempt to retain existing territory and to continue expanding: "The next step was the repression of the Southern states when they attempted to secede from the Union and set up a republic of their own.[11]"

The originality of Wilson's thesis and its limitations are of a piece: "I am trying—as in the book that follows—to remove the whole subject from the plane of morality and to give an objective account of the expansion of the United States."[12] (xxxi). Having renounced all moral justifications for war as cant, thinly disguised rationalizations for the will to power, Wilson strips himself entirely of a moral vocabulary. The idea that an "objective account" entails no reference to morals, to values, and to ideals does not hang together. Slavery is a moral wrong. Violence, forced dispossession, sexual exploitation, and the forced separation of families are moral wrongs. Lynching is a moral wrong. Segregation is a moral wrong. To position the South as a victim of American imperialism does not explain the racial discrimination and violence that, during both the antebellum and postwar periods, are an integral part of southern history, politics, economics, and literature. It is not even to explain it away. It is simply to ignore it. Thus, despite Wilson's effort to remind us of aspects of our history that our cultural narratives encourage us to forget, or even require us to forget, that same effort also asks us to engage in similar acts of forgetting.

In describing the method of *Patriotic Gore*, Blight writes: "It portrays writers as historical actors through some frequently sparkling biographical portraits, and the critic is there when we need him, reminding us how the wielders of words and ideas are the drivers and reflectors of history" (156). This description of Wilson's method doubles as a description of Blight's own, nowhere more so than in the Baldwin chapter, in which Blight creates the sense, through a sparkling biographical portrait, that Baldwin conceived of his work as a writer in terms of historical action. Baldwin was less inclined to reflect on the Civil War or to commemorate American history as he was impelled to fight a civil war and to intervene in American history. While Baldwin's writings seldom make explicit reference to the Civil War, Blight argues that Baldwin "embodied" its legacy, history, and literature: "Yet he did so not as the clash of Blue and Gray, or as the consequence of secession, disunion, and reunion. Baldwin's Civil War was a deeply internal battle against the fear and rejection caused by racism, homophobia, and what he came to analyze as America's mythic sense of its own invulnerable, self-righteous, unexamined, or even unknown history" (187). For Baldwin, these

personal, internal struggles were always also reflective of national conflict and indicative of national fate.

Baldwin provides a framework in which Civil War commemoration becomes Civil Rights commentary. Whereas Warren could suggest that the Civil War inaugurates American history, Baldwin counters by pointing to a history still deferred: "You know, and I know," Baldwin writes in a letter to his nephew, "that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon."[13] By these lights, even the titles of Civil War works transmute into Civil Rights polemic: read Catton's *The Coming Fury* as Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. For Baldwin, "the war for union and emancipation never really ended," and therefore his writing is not a meditation on the legacy of the war as much as it is wartime writing (188). Without often addressing the war specifically, Baldwin nevertheless manages to challenge—sharply, systematically, unrelentingly—nearly every piety and truism about the Civil War promulgated by our cultural narratives. Blight demonstrates that Baldwin's writings always "exhibited a keen and passionate, if sometimes inchoate, sense of history" (206) and that "Baldwin played the historian in his own populist, artistic way" (207). Just as much as he was concerned with public memory, Baldwin was equally concerned with public forgetting, with what must be ignored or excluded in order to lend cultural narratives coherence and force. And, of course, what Americans tended then as now to ignore or exclude, Blight reminds us, is the absolute centrality of race in American history: "This American habit—the nation's inability to know or see the racial history of slavery and its brutal aftermath—emerged as a Baldwin trademark subject" (220). And it also emerges, Baldwin insists, as an enduring legacy of the Civil War, one that reunites South and North in their shared amnesia. The nation, Baldwin writes in *Nobody Knows My Name*, "the entire nation, has spent a hundred years avoiding the question of the place of the black man in it."[14]

Baldwin made visible the blanks and omissions in the national narrative that Warren, Catton, and Wilson often passed over in silence, thus providing what Blight describes as "the voice of an African American counternarrative" (15). As Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois did before him, "Baldwin provided a thoroughly public, often strident voice of dissent" (184). No reconciler-in-chief on the model of Catton, Baldwin instead offers, over multiple years and in different genres, a persistent, pointed *J'accuse*: "[T]his is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, . . . for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it."[15] Americans, Baldwin insists, "are, in effect, still trapped in a history that they don't understand."[16] Blight argues that such omissions enabled much of the mythic cant that attended the Civil War Centennial. "By the late Fifties and early Sixties," he notes, "most Americans who cared still really did not comprehend how slavery, the African American experience, and the Civil War and Reconstruction fit into the same epic story" (186). As the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, Baldwin the

novelist-turned-essayist took it increasingly upon himself to remind Americans of the skeletons in their national closet.

By including a chapter on Baldwin, Blight employs Wilson's methods to avoid Wilson's mistakes. Although the chapter threatens to disrupt the structural integrity of the book, given that Baldwin wrote little about the Civil War relative to Warren's lifelong preoccupation, Catton's multiple volumes, and Wilson's massive study. And, indeed, the final chapter is considerably longer and somewhat more inchoate than the three previous; when the life of the writer rather than a particular subset of his works are the object of study, there are fewer limitations and more possible directions. In another respect, however, the chapter on Baldwin takes the book to a different plane, achieving a higher level of integrity. After all, for all that Warren, Catton, and Wilson had to say about the Civil War, they had relatively little to say—though Warren more than the others—about the Civil Rights Movement. By including the Baldwin chapter, Blight is able to emphasize both terms in his subtitle. *American Oracle* is not simply a book about Civil War commemoration in the Civil Rights era; it is also a book about the Civil Rights context of Civil War commemoration.

To the extent that Blight does offer a unifying thesis or thematic framework that joins all the writers he discusses, it is the idea of tragedy, both as a genre of writing and as a philosophy of history. Blight views a sense of tragedy as a corrective to the American tendency for narratives of promise, progress, and, only when necessary, redemption: "The favored American conception of the nation's history—a story of uniqueness, special or divine destiny, and progress—has had countless advocates of all kinds and in all eras . . . Against this vision of progress, a genuinely tragic sense of America's past has always struggled to gain traction" (22). He attempts to provide that traction, both in his analysis of each individual author's work and as the dominant strand of his own. "Warren, Catton, Wilson, and Baldwin were not alone, but they may have been the best at imagining a tragic sensibility from which to understand the Civil War and its legacies for a people and a culture unaccustomed to such a conception of the nation's master historical narrative" (22–23). In the end, however, "tragedy" does not quite explain the generic forms or philosophical commitments of these writers. Or, perhaps better put, the works of Warren, Catton, and Wilson are "tragic" inasmuch as they fail to achieve a fully de-romanticized vision of the war and its significance. Rather than representing a tragic content, they instead enact a tragic structure, whereby their best efforts to avoid a seemingly predetermined end only hurl them more inevitably toward that end.

Thomas J. Brown's editor's introduction to *Remixing the Civil War: Meditations on the Sesquicentennial*, takes the 150th anniversary of the Civil War as the occasion "to reconsider the influential claims that Warren put forward at the centennial anniversary" (2). Although most of the contributors to the collection are academic historians, Brown remarks that "the contributors focus on the ways in which the imaginative appeal of the war extends beyond the framework of professional scholarship" (2). Focusing "primarily on the twenty-first century,"

Brown rightly suggests that "this volume provides a much more thorough investigation of the current uses of the Civil War than any previous study . . . covering the works of more than thirty artists and writers as well as three political and social movements" (4).

As this last remark indicates, one can divide the collection's essays into two groups: three essays discussing socio-political moments and movements, and four focusing on visual and literary representations of the war. In the former category, C. Wyatt Evans writes about then candidate Barack Obama's invocations of Abraham Lincoln and the subsequent association and even conflation of the two, as with the case of Ron English's *Abraham Obama* (2008). Wyatt suggests that "the Lincoln-Obama phenomenon demonstrated the ever-changing and dialogic character of collective memory" inasmuch as it returned history to Democratic Party discourse and revived the memory of Lincoln (19). Thomas Brown's own essay on the controversy surrounding the Confederate battle flag, particularly at the state house in Columbia, South Carolina, is one of the most thoroughly researched and compellingly argued contributions to the collection. And Mitch Kachun's essay on the incredibly varied and irregular history of African American celebrations of emancipation, including most prominently Juneteenth, is one of the most original and well-documented.

Robert Brinkmeyer, Jr.'s detailed survey of the Civil War in contemporary southern literature introduces the volume's four essays devoted primarily to aesthetic representations of the war. Elizabeth Young's "Lincoln and the Civil War in Twenty-First-Century Photography" compellingly examines "nineteenth- and twenty-first-century images that 'blacken' the president" (117). Gerard Brown follows with an essay on the Civil War in contemporary art, including both performative and visual works, and W. Fitzhugh Brundage with an essay on African American artists' and writers' contemporary responses to the Civil War. Each of these contributions does an admirably thorough job of surveying their respective fields; readers are bound to learn about new plays, novels, films, paintings, and photographs that treat the war's legacy. And each contributor equally excels at situating that legacy in the context of contemporary events. Just as Blight's *American Oracle* points out that the Civil War Centennial commemoration cannot be separated from the Civil Rights Movement, so too the Civil War sesquicentennial anniversary must be understood in light of 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the presidency of Barack Obama, and the ongoing struggle for economic equality, civil rights, and social justice. Brinkmeyer notes that many works of contemporary fiction that represent the Civil War simultaneously "imaginatively engage with America's most recent wars, particularly the Vietnam and Iraq Wars (and what the government has deemed the War on Terror), superimposing the newer war onto the older, each conflict bleeding into the other" (93). Writing about *The Muster*, Allison Smith's public participatory performance on Governor's Island in 2005, Gerard Brown remarks: "If the so-called War on Terror provided immediate context for *The Muster*, the event also explored the American culture of war more broadly by appropriating the

form of a Civil War reenactment" (143), an exploration and appropriation that intentionally drew parallels "between the culture of Civil War reenactment and the culture of gay flamboyance" (144–145).

Kirk Savage's Afterword emphasizes the importance of further analysis of the significant body of artistic production and cultural conflict representing Civil War memory in the past fifty years. Savage concludes *Remixing the Civil War* in a fashion analogous to Blight's conclusion to *American Oracle*: "the sesquicentennial of the war and of emancipation should be remixed with the semicentennial of the decisive phase of the civil rights movement" in order to avoid repeating the shortcomings of the Civil War Centennial, when Americans used "romantic nationalism as a cover for flagrant injustice" (185). Blight laments the ideological perniciousness of such heroic narratives of Civil War memory and identifies how those narratives have always been about civil rights struggles. Suggesting that the Civil War remains our "mythic national epic," he adds that the ways in which that epic is retold and that myth is remembered define our national identity: "the United States, to an important degree, *is* the stories it tells about its Civil War and its enduring aftermath" (6). *American Oracle* is a historical narrative about historical narratives, about the power of writers and their books to shape our national stories. In revisiting the works of Warren, Catton, Wilson, and Baldwin and recounting their successes, evasions, and ambivalences, Blight carefully reveals their relation to one another and to our own ongoing efforts to find in the conjuncture of Civil War memory and Civil Rights struggle that stone of hope that can still sustain us in our own time's rock pile of disinformation, disarray, and dysfunction. And in so doing, Blight reaffirms his own place as one of the foremost chroniclers of our intellectual history and popular memory of the Civil War.

Notes

1. On the troubled history of the Civil War Centennial, see Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961–1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007). Cf. Robert Cook, et al., "Historian's Forum: The American Civil War's Centennial vs. the Sesquicentennial," *Civil War History* 57.4 (2011): 380–402.
2. David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2001).
3. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (1962; repr., New York: Norton, 1994), xxxi.
4. Robert Penn Warren, *The Legacy of the Civil War* (1961; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 3.
5. Ibid., 66, 68.
6. Ibid., 3.
7. Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 329.
8. Wilson, *Patriotic Gore*, ix.
9. Ibid., xi.
10. Ibid., xii-xiii.
11. Ibid., xv.
12. Ibid., xxxi.
13. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963; repr., New York: Vintage, 1993), 10.
14. James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961; repr., New York: Vintage, 1993), 114.
15. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 5.
16. Ibid., 8.