
Editor's Column

Mental Work, Metal Work

“**W**HO AM I?,” that interesting question you may put to yourself, has little to do with the query strangers may put to you at social gatherings: “What do you *do*?” When caught up in situations where your line of work is taken to define your deepest subjective nature, you may be as hard-pressed to explain that you “do” literatures and languages as electrical engineers, store managers, or construction workers are to explain their work—but there is a difference: they likely can express the value of their work with confidence.

In the large world outside the classroom and the study, a relation among cultivated skills, enhanced productivity, and measurable economic results is assumed. A person's worth in the marketplace is backed by hard facts, as hard as the tensile strength of fine metals. Charts and graphs give visual evidence of gains in hard cash through the reduction of soft time achieved by an efficient use of raw material, whether mental or manual. *But what sort of measure can vouch for the exchange value of intellectual knowledge during transactions within the academy or the pages of scholarly publications such as PMLA?*

I wish to discuss a few of the (mis)perceptions and (mis)representations that sour the value granted to, and denied to, intellectual work once standards are imposed on it that are more appropriate to metal work. I take it as given that the great mass of academics are genuinely committed to a work ethic as stringent as any pondered by Weber, Marx, and Gramsci or mandated by General Motors and Microsoft. My focus on the true workers of the scholarly world ought not to be distracted by the few fraudulent individuals who fit the contemptuous profiles of academics held by some students (It's the TAs who do all the work!) and politicians (They're getting paid for just six contact hours a week!)

The air is filled with arguments on education that seem to fly in different directions. Taxpayers define profitable production in higher education as a matter of whether their children are being prepared to get good jobs, while scholars of literature and language talk of opening up minds

to new ideas.¹ The two aims (metal and mental) ought not to be at cross-purposes, but they often are. The full complexities of these issues can hardly be covered in the space of this column. I touch here on selected aspects in support of the cause of intellectual work by which *PMLA* justifies its long existence. My remarks follow up the January 1998 Editor's Column and extend the letters in the October 1997 Forum.

A century ago the founders of the Modern Language Association and *PMLA* felt that their intellectual endeavors were undervalued by those groups (academic and lay) that measured performance by the standards of business and science. These founders, albeit members of the white male upper-class establishment, felt disrespected by the American public, and as the examples to follow suggest, they were not (and their successors are not) alone in feeling that way. Mental work has had to endure judgments biased by matters of class, of gender, and of race; by the view that utilitarian rationality is of more worth than passionate commitment to thought; by methods of production management tested in steel mills and transferred to the academy; and by mind-sets that harden distinctions between so-called real life and so-called intellectual elitism. No wonder that *PMLA* strives to lessen the tensions that set mental work and metal work at odds.

In that tone of mild, rueful angst with which Henry James casts his consciousness back into the past, he restages the need the little Jameses had to know what it was their father did, so that they might better comprehend who he was in a culture that equated the making of money with being a useful contributor to American society:

I remember well how when we were all young together we had, under pressure of the American ideal in that matter, then so rigid, felt it tasteless and even humiliating that the head of our little family was *not* in business. . . . I perfectly recover the effect of my own repeated appeal to our parent for some presentable account of him that would prove us respectable.

To the Small Boy's plaintive query "What shall we tell them you *are*, don't you see?" the father's answer, "Say I'm a philosopher, say I'm a seeker for truth, say I'm a lover of my kind, say I'm an author of books if you like; or, best of all, just say I'm a Student," saw us so very little further" (64, 65).

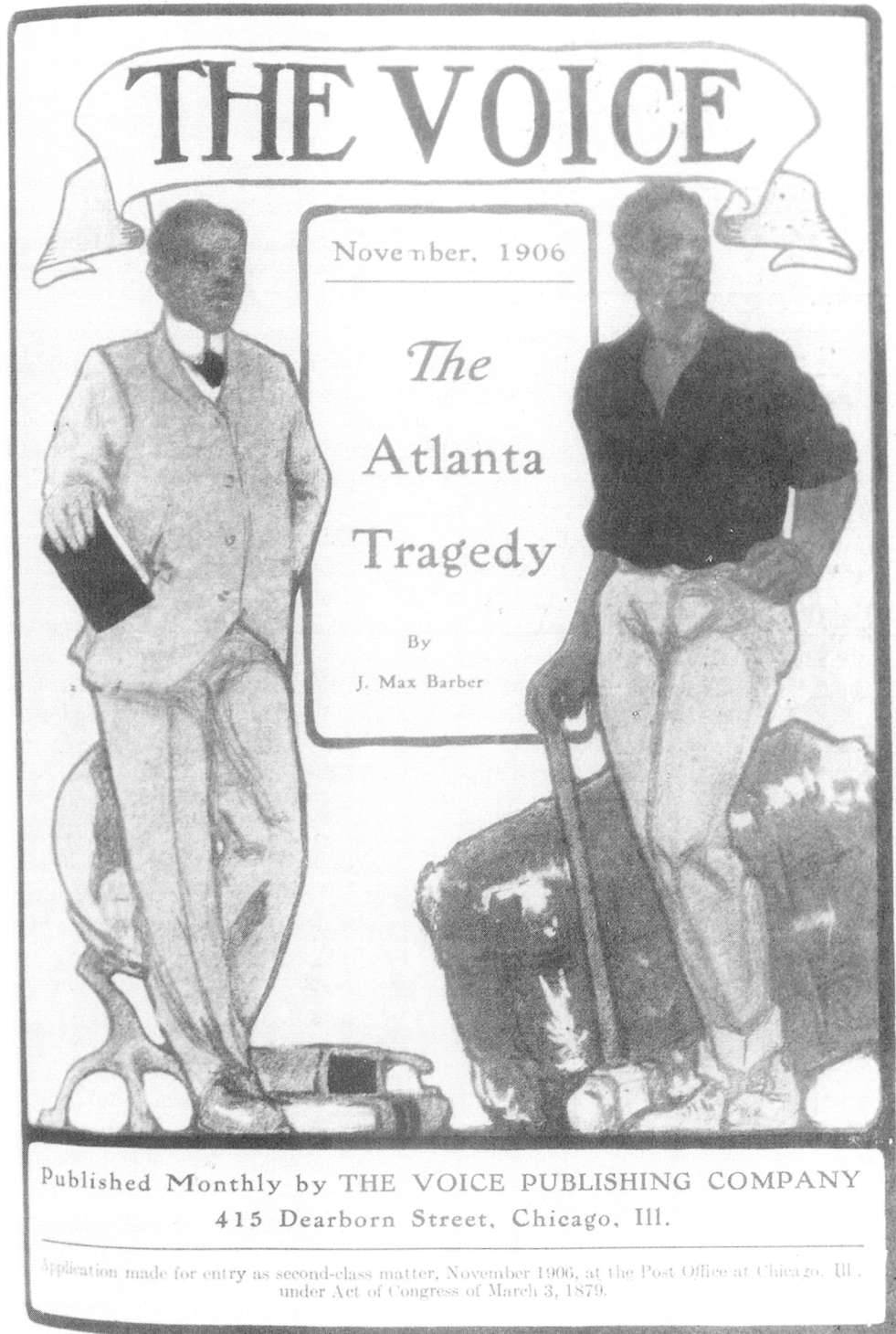
This is the unhappy state into which an upper-class American male (even though still a small boy) could be thrown. He not only had to reckon with disdain for the *artes vulgares* or *sordidas*; he had to feel as well the press of public indifference toward the *artes liberales*. The class-conscious society of James's youthful years had clear-cut biases against manual occupations, deemed since the Middle Ages "fit only for foreigners and serfs," while the "activities suitable for 'liberal' or free-born citizens," which had been honored by the ancients and by medieval theoreticians, were now also under deep suspicion (Osborne 658).

Class-bound, caste-guided responses to intellectual work can swerve in different directions. On the one hand, the gentleman's C was in high repute among young collegians with assured incomes; intellectual indifference became the young swell who had no need to make a living, thus no imperative to be smart. On the other hand, Mr. Bernstein recently arrived from Russia—a scholarly young man “who is fit to be a rabbi, and is as *smart* and *ejecate* as a lawyer”—is mocked by Jake Podkovnik for “tormenting” his books. In relocating from Russia to America, Jake and Bernstein have reversed their castes. Not only can illiterate Jake boast, “I don't learn and yet I speak quicker than you!,” he is a success in American terms. Because he makes more money in a week in a New York cloak shop than Bernstein, revered in the Old Country for his studious ways, will ever make, Jake flaunts a contempt toward book learning matching that held by any possessor of a gentleman's C (Cahan 7, 88).

During the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s, class rankings were consistently caught up in assessments of the intellectual life. One of the charges made by students against the university establishment was that they were being treated as “classroom niggers,” plantation menials denied access to an authentic mental life by the entrenched elite. It was a charge that involved a certain sense of guilt; the students' middle-class status brought deferments from Army duty, while young men of the working class were shipped off to Vietnam and possible death. But surely one of the most dramatic clashes over what it means to be treated as a “classroom nigger” came with the public debate between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, and between the black and white communities, over the nature of mental and menial work—a debate in which the crucial issues of gender (black manhood), class (black middle-class respectability), and race (black pride) were all at stake.

The laborer and the student are paired as equals on the cover of the November 1906 issue of the *Voice* (see p. 202).² This image dares viewers to classify either the aspirant to the talented tenth or the worker in the field or factory as “classroom nigger” or “plantation dardy.” That people like Mark Twain's Pap Finn could not accept images that gave pride to the intellectual and manual work accomplished by American blacks was the continuing situation against which Du Bois and Washington had to struggle, whatever their opposing views.³

In 1903 Du Bois published critiques (both oblique and direct) of the Atlantic Exposition speech of 1895 in which Booker T. Washington argued the economic and social wisdom of restricting education for the southern black man to manual training. Du Bois countered with the argument that “the Submerged Tenth” (the ratio of blacks to the entire population of the United States) should be guided by the “power of intellectual leadership [that] must be given to the talented tenth among American Negroes before this race can seriously be asked to assume the responsibility of dispelling its own ignorance” (“Training” 356, 360).⁴ In the same year Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chapter after



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chapter of this book outlined the special plight of freedmen, whose mental work was ignored, mocked, or deemed dangerous by the dominant white society. Through a variety of rhetorical means, Du Bois did what he could to ensure that thoughtful readers would realize that more was at stake within the black community than the usual sense of worthlessness experienced by the usual American intellectual. Black men in post-Reconstruction America were undergoing crises of masculinity and class status, as well as enduring race prejudice that could (and did in the case in "Of the Coming of John") lead to the murder of the black intellectual.⁵

Du Bois demolishes the notion that the black community exists on two sides of a chasm separating the intellectual (stupidly defined as "the dilettante") and the common man (inadequately defined as "the fool"; *Souls* 156). After the inaction of the federal government in 1876 led to the betrayal of the freedmen's "dream of political power," this dream had to be replaced for the time being by "the ideal of 'book-learning'; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters to the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan" (104).⁶ In 1903 Du Bois powerfully expressed his belief that the journey toward Canaan would bring all blacks together. By 1940, however, he spoke in anguish over the indifference shown toward his race by the white world, to whom the talented tenth was as invisible as the rest of the submerged tenth.⁷ It was as though the passing crowd stripped all his comrades' efforts, whether mental or metal, of any value.

The language of Du Bois's impassioned pleas for an educated black elite is masculine; this trait is not surprising since he was fighting for an acknowledgment of the manhood of black men, whom white society viewed as no more than irrational, intuitive, mindless creatures—all that the authentic American man must never be. That the same demeaning attributes were also associated with women of any race is another layer to the history of how intellectual work is perceived and valued.

It seemed to make little difference in the popular mind that increasing numbers of women had entered the workplaces of the academy and the factory floor throughout the nineteenth century. Women won public approval mainly for domestic work, cleanly separated from the work value assigned to men. A woman like *Ántonia Shimerda* might receive double credit on that Nebraska day when she performed both a man's field work and a woman's birth labor. ("She got her cattle home, turned them into the corral, and went into the house, into her room behind the kitchen and shut the door. There without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down on the bed and bore her child" [Cather 358]). But after all, *Ántonia* was an immigrant from Bohemia. Demeaning factors of class and ethnicity ensured that her labors could not win the appreciation given the domestic work expected of decent native-born women.

A century ago the general public had no need of latter-day Samuel Johnsons to remind it of the grotesquerie of the bluestocking or the

preaching woman; a century later certain strategies are still being deployed to placate popular unease about thinking women. Until just the other day the movie romance recognized the effectiveness of defining an intellectual heroine by glasses, a clip binding her hair, and a fully buttoned blouse. When her suitor removes these attributes in a climactic striptease, the filmic imagination transforms the (essentially) unattractive female thinker into a (necessarily) unlearned object of desire. Another way to comfort those thrown off balance by the thought of the woman as scientist is to introduce a crisp white lab coat (an oxymoron as a woman's garment, suggesting the virginal and the masculine). Think of Ingrid Bergman in *Spellbound*, Gillian Anderson in *The X-Files*, and Jodie Foster in *Contact*, but also notice the insistence on removing that coat by the final reel, to reveal acceptable feminine allure.

There are times when it appears impossible for the intellectual woman to receive full value in the popular mind. Frederick Winslow Taylor knew it was impossible even to associate *thinking* with *woman*. In mounting his famous crusade to advance scientific management, Taylor aimed to save the workplace from the innate stupidity of common laborers—a mass of “donkeys” into which women, immigrants, and blacks were lumped, a single *Lumpenproletariat* (1450).

When Taylor delivered his address on shop management before the American Society of Mechanical Engineers in 1903 (the same year Du Bois spoke out in *The Souls of Black Folk* and “The Training of Negroes for Social Power”), he proposed a radical plan, philosophically reactionary and technologically advanced, for bringing the workers' animal energies into line with the mechanical energies of the machines the workers serviced. Drawing on his early experience as a mechanic-engineer-manager at Midvale Steel and Bethlehem Steel, Taylor asserted that “all possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centred in the planning or laying-out department” (1390). However, Taylor could not trust that turning over the mental work to the managers (his version of Du Bois's talented tenth) was enough to guarantee success to the metal work exacted of the factory laborer. According to his cramped views of human nature, in the entire work personnel only self-interest and the willingness to do anything to get a higher wage could convert hotly irrational impulses into coolly effective productivity (1349, 1353, 1372, 1388–89, 1418).

Taylorism and its associate Fordism (practices happily accepted in post-World War I Germany and in Lenin's Soviet Union) have had lasting effects on the status of the working intellectual. Take for example the recent document titled *Breaking the Social Contract: The Fiscal Crisis in Higher Education*, the result of a two-year study by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE). The report touches on matters too large for this column, but it is impossible to overlook the relation between the thrust of the report and the continuing legacy of Taylorism or to ignore

what this relation augurs for the perpetuation of certain perceptions about the thinking person's role in future American cultural and economic enterprises.

The steel-clad language of Taylorism that pervades the CAE report unfortunately helps to reinforce the fact that principles determined by the experience of the engineer and the manager are paramount throughout the American work world. This welding of the mental to the metallic is apparent in phrases such as "the kind of restructuring and streamlining that successful businesses have implemented," "improve productivity," "a systemwide process for reallocating resources among departments and other parts of the institution," "focus on their core competencies—the products and services they supply at a better quality and lower price than their competition," "a concerted effort to generate data on the costs and benefits of providing different services," "move toward systematic performance-based assessment," and "timely 'profit and loss' information" (Council for Aid to Educ. 3, 16, 17, 19).

How can someone trained in the practices of literatures and languages not wince at the dull clang of these words? But aesthetic displeasure may not be the only response to a document whose recommendations are startlingly like the principles of scientific management that led to frequent clashes between workers and bosses. During the first decades of the twentieth century, workers opposed to Taylor's plan to hand "brain work" over to management promoted the cause of "industrial democracy," by which they would retain some say over their work lives. They argued, struggled, and usually lost against the kind of logic that binds the CAE report together. Once *Breaking the Social Contract* states the infeasibility of "the assumption that faculty members should govern themselves, making all decisions about what should be taught, who should be hired, and so forth," the report concludes that self-appointed "decision makers" are to take over the tasks of "improving performance-based assessment, defining and measuring faculty productivity, and integrating accounting systems" (3, 16).

However persuasive these arguments are at the level of cool rationality, few scholars huddled within the humanities divisions of the university can avoid being chilled. Consider this step-by-step diminishment of the intellectual life proposed by rhetorical questions cunningly offered in the name of enhanced productivity:

Would another classics professor contribute to the educational mission more than another mathematics professor? More than acquiring equipment for the geophysics laboratory? More than expanding the student counseling program? More than repairing classroom and dormitory roofs? (16–17)

So much for ever hoping to gain respect by being part of the complex community called up by James ("just say I'm a Student"), by Du Bois ("this power of intellectual leadership must be given to the talented

tenth”), and by countless other toilers over the years in the intellectual vineyards. So much, too, for believing that the gloriously wasteful economics of mental passion will ever be recognized as equal in value to the “systematic performance-based assessment” of mental efficiency. It would seem as though the scholar (at whatever rank or filling whatever job description) is fated to experience the dull despair expressed by the graduate students in Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*. (It should not be overlooked that this novel, commonly thought of as devoted to smarmy politics, is also the story of a young man who cannot complete his dissertation because he, together with his peers, fears what lies ahead.)

They drank because they didn’t really have the slightest interest in what they were doing now, and didn’t have the slightest hope for the future. They could not even bear the thought of pushing on to finish their degrees, for that would mean leaving the University . . . to go to some normal school on a sun-baked crossroads or a junior college long on Jesus and short on funds, to go to face the stark reality of drudgery and dry-rot and prying eyes and the slow withering of the green wisp of dream which had, like some window plant in an invalid’s room, grown out of a bottle. (158)

PMLA has no leverage in the world of “decision makers” who try their best (let them be granted that much) to fix the faltering economy of the academic job market. As a journal devoted to featuring the best “products” of effective intellectual research, it can, however, encourage our right to take passionate interest in our work. The preceding review of past and present responses to American workers in various areas of the economy suggests that passion does not easily fit into sanctioned programs for rational, productive behavior—certainly not in the view of those who look askance at the inefficiency they associate with women, blacks, immigrants, and emasculate men. But passion is, should be, part of the life of the mind promoted by 10 Astor Place.

By what signs is authentic passion to be recognized? It is known by the swell of intellectual joy that comes from reading a work (note that word) of literature or from exploring the forms a language takes. *Joy*: remember that feeling? If you do not, try to regain it. If you never had it, then you ought not to be in this business.

Passionate intensity as the ruling force of one’s intellectual work does not seem to be what the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities (Los Angeles) has in mind in proposing its 1998–99 Scholars and Seminars Program, “Representing the Passions.” The Getty’s stated intention is to “bring scholars together to study the variety of ways in which the passions have been represented and classified.” The program description makes much of the traditions of ungovernability, unreasonableness, and intensity that attend the passions and of the hope that the chosen scholars will study the “cultural conventions and

codes that attempt to fix, ritualize, and control" these unruly emotions. The question that dangles in the air: if the Getty scholars dwell on the representing of the passions, is it because they fear introducing their own intellectual passions into their analyses?

PMLA locates the possible sources for intellectual passion in many areas of the scholarly endeavor. One prompting force is certainly of the sort championed by Marjorie Perloff in her essay "A Passion for Content," although Perloff's admonition that we focus primarily on the "how" of literary practices ought not exclude an enthusiastic pursuit of what a work of literature conveys (B5). Others find their passion in forthrightly analyzing the politics of texts; for them the legacy of La Pasionaria, the heroine of the Spanish Civil War, commits them to enterprises like that which Daniel Bell defines as a "total ideology," an "all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality" imbued by a "set of beliefs infused with passion" that "seeks to transform the whole way of life" (400). There is no reason for Yeats's rough and slouching beast to claim all the passionate intensity the world has to offer, but it is reasonable to suggest that if one's intellectual passion derives *solely* from political causes, at the cost of sympathy to the pleasures held out by literature, it is probably time to cross the aisle over into another discipline and to seek out another venue than *PMLA* for the display of one's mental productivity.

PMLA avidly responds to essays not written in flat passionless prose churned out in the belief that only "metal work" gains a scholar tenure or promotion. Who of us does not have to face bureaucratic policies that continue to float the tawdry notion of publish or perish as the only truth? Yet it is possible to shake free from the fatalistic idea that mental work will always be at a disadvantage to the metal work privileged by the steely principles of scientifically managed administrations.

PMLA should not stand as a kind of safe house, where work-weary members of the intelligence community retreat when they wish to come out of the cold of an indifferent or a disapproving world. Perhaps the ideal is for *PMLA* to publish essays whose passionate making justifies the acts of scholarly thought they embody *and* that are fully accessible to the lay reader. However, such a Janus-headed ideal is probably neither possible nor completely desirable. The scholarly community is what *PMLA* has to serve first, and the journal's primary task is not so much to alleviate the general public's misunderstanding of or uninterest in the scholar's life as to encourage the scholar to care, and to care deeply, about what it means to do a fine piece of research and to write up a forceful analysis of the findings that result.

Few in the profession have been or will be sustained by popular opinion. The day after the end of the 1997 United Parcel Service strike, it was heartening to read an account in the *Los Angeles Times* of a driver who had passionately supported the walkout and who was passionately back on the job. (She had obviously been chosen as the subject of the piece because she gave so much enthusiasm to her work, whether waving a

Teamsters placard or hefting UPS boxes.) It was heartening to see that the problems of part-time workers at UPS had roused active public interest. Polls showed that while the “decision makers” (union leaders as well as company managers) remained suspect, the image of the drivers in the big brown trucks won the day. It is, however, disheartening to realize that the members of the academic community, who face the same disadvantages of downsizing and part-time jobs, are woefully low on saleable images in the media.⁸ But this is not reason to capitulate, either by internalizing contempt for the scholarly traditions one has been trained to uphold or by slavishly assimilating the enemies’ position in the mistaken notion that their power can be appropriated on one’s own terms.

It is difficult to deal with the indifference of outsiders or to fend off feelings of betrayal when colleagues become renegades. But if one can still believe in the value of mental work, even while undergoing the burnout that constantly afflicts members of this profession, the hard, gemlike flame of passionate intensity will return. When it does, *PMLA* will be waiting to see the happy results.

MARTHA BANTA

Notes

¹Marjorie Perloff raises this disaccord in her piece “A Passion for Content.” She reiterates the public challenge that demands to know “the rationale for our discipline today. What is its *urgency*? And why *should* the taxpayer support us?” She comments further, “It is not enough to argue that taxpayers want undergraduates to learn only practical subjects that lead directly to jobs, and that shortsighted administrators respond by transferring budget lines from English to economics or engineering. For when did a degree in English or comparative literature ever lead to a specific job?” Before giving her proposal for restoring “literary literacy,” Perloff concedes that “there is surely something to [the] critique” that current college programs “don’t teach a particular or coherent body of knowledge and hence are expendable” (B4). Ironically, as Henry Adams learned a century ago, prestige value is still taken into account in some areas, as well as intellectual literacy. It is not surprising that Adams was confused at times over the cash value of higher education. While attempting to teach medieval history at Harvard in the 1870s to an “excellent company” of students, he asked what practical use they expected to make of their education, since his own formal studies had led him to believe that Harvard was “rather a drawback to a young man in Boston and Washington” looking for a job. He was surprised when one student replied, “The degree of Harvard College is worth money to me in Chicago” (305–06).

²The *Voice* was an important black periodical edited by J. Max Barber. Founded in 1904 in Atlanta as the *Voice of the Negro*, it had fifteen thousand subscribers by 1906. Barber was forced to leave Atlanta following his reports on the bloody riot there in September 1906. He moved his periodical to Chicago, changing its name to the *Voice*. The publication folded in October 1907.

³Here is Pap Finn’s antebellum hatred of the educated black man as expressed through his own lack of “literary literacy”: “There was a free nigger there, from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest

hat; and there ain't a man in that town that's got as fine clothes as what he had; and he had a gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane—the awfulest old gray-headed nabob in the State. And what do you think? they said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could *vote*, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming too?" (49–50). Pap Finn is indeed "let out" of many of the signs of success he observes in the black man: fine clothes, personal ornaments, trained intelligence. When a black had the look of a white and the right to vote, held precious by the white American man, what guarantees of race superiority were left to the likes of Finn?

⁴By Du Bois's calculations, the times called for elite leadership by one-tenth of the black population, which in turn made up but one-tenth of the general population. The somewhat patronizing tone found here and in passages from *The Souls of Black Folk* is inevitable: during this period of his long and complex career, Du Bois was, in his own way, a political gradualist. Social ascent from out of the depths comes in stages. If ever black laborers find "their stomachs be full," they will still deny that "it matters little about their brains." "They already dimly perceived that the paths of peace winding between honest toil and dignified manhood call for the guidance of skilled thinkers, the loving, reverent comradeship between the black lowly and the black men emancipated by training and culture" (*Souls* 156).

⁵In "Of the Coming of John," the fictionalized account Du Bois includes in *The Souls of Black Folk* to press home his point about the necessary yet perilous decision by the talented tenth to return home to aid the submerged tenth, a white judge asks an educated black man, "Now, John, the question is, are you, with your education and Northern notions, going to accept the situation and teach the darkies to be faithful servants and laborers, as your fathers were . . . ?" (227), displaying a view in line with Booker T. Washington's shrewd readings of the white southern character.

⁶William Faulkner's "The Bear" includes fervent words spoken by an educated black man of his hope in "a new era, an era dedicated, as our founders intended it, to freedom, liberty, and equality for all, to which this country will be the new Canaan. . . ." But as the man speaks—"the book closed upon one finger to keep the place, the lensless spectacles held like a music master's wand in the other workless hand while the owner of it spoke his measured and sonorous imbecility of the boundless folly and the baseless hope"—his white challenger retorts, "Freedom from what? From work?" (278–79). The exchange fits into the continuing controversy over Faulkner's attitudes toward the southern black. The white man's response can be interpreted either as a variation of Pap Finn's hostility toward the book-educated black or as an example of Faulkner's effort to undercut the folly of any of his characters who believe it is possible to escape from the demands of a brute world of work into an illusory realm of unrealized ideals.

⁷"It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it. . . . One talks on evenly and logically in this way, but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world" ("Concept" 95).

⁸The images supplied by the film and television industries hurt more than they help. Aided by a sense of humor (always a good thing to have in this profession), one can learn useful lessons from the ways by which intellectual or creative endeavors are easily trivialized in film and television. I grant that it is difficult to represent mental activity dramatically—an apprentice's long private hours of training, an author's endless false starts, an inventor's fatiguing failures, or a composer's inner workings. The valiant attempts by filmmakers to capture the sense of mental work have not been happy ones. *Madame Curie*, C. A. Lejune noted, "achieves a notable triumph in making the discovery of a new element [radium] seem almost as glamorous as an encounter with Hedy Lamarr"; *Pauline Kael* wrote that *8½* was a "de luxe glorification of creative crisis, visually arresting but in some essential way conventional-minded"; *A Song to Remember*, with Cornell Wilde as Chopin

and Merle Oberon as George Sand, was judged by James Agee to be “[a]s infuriating and funny a misrepresentation of an artist’s life and work as I have seen”; and Bosley Crowther described *The Agony and the Ecstasy* as “an illustrated lecture of a slow artist at work” (Halliwell 631, 309, 943, 16). PBS often tries to dramatize the mind at work. The network’s three-year series *The Paper Chase* enacted the entirety of a law-school program in real time; *The Double Helix* re-created the fumbling experiments leading to the attainment of two Nobel prizes; an early biographical series on the Adams family and Ken Burns’s recent documentary on Thomas Jefferson struggled to be faithful in their representations of what it means to think. But in these programs, the weight of essentially undramatic thought processes had to be borne by little dramas of a law student’s personal problems, scenes of Watson and Crick scrambling to beat out the competition (including the woman who almost got there first), and glorious vistas of colonial America interspersed with still lifes of famous documents lying on desks. Filmed professor stories, featuring pipes and baggy cardigans, are usually plotted as the pathetic lives of socially and sexually impotent men, as in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *The Browning Version*. In *Quiz Show* Carl Van Doren is relocated from his Columbia University lecture hall into a glass booth before a television studio audience, where—by sweating brow and pursed lips—he enacts the physical gestures of (fake) mental strain. The intellectual investigator is typed as an eccentric: Sherlock Holmes with violin bow and addict’s needle, Oxford-degree holder Fox “Spooky” Mulder hidden away as an embarrassment in a basement office of the FBI. Perhaps the most successful Hollywood movie yet to glamorize mental work is *All the President’s Men*. Its scenes are filled with all the busyness of research (note-taking, interviewing, drafting and redrafting reports), while the audience waits to find out whether Ben Bradlee (is he the department chair or the college dean?) will grant promotion to Woodward and Bernstein or deny them tenure. To make certain that moviegoers do not mistake these events for the usual anemic academic plot, the script raises the stakes: as Bradlee declares, his young scholars are toiling to protect “the future of the country.” All this, plus Robert Redford. Take note, however, of the judgment Joan Didion passes on Bob Woodward’s oeuvre: she dismisses it as “books in which measurable cerebral activity is virtually absent,” in which there is “no product of . . . research so predictable as to go unrecorded,” in which “not only inductive reasoning but ordinary reliance on context clues appear to have vanished”—all evidence demonstrating the “disinclination of Mr. Woodward to exert cognitive energy on what he is told.” Not the right kind of passion, it seems.

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