The American Protest Essay and National Belonging: Addressing Division (review)

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Book Reviews

The American Protest Essay and National Belonging: Addressing Division

Norman, Brian

SUNY Press, 2007. 222 pp., ISBN: 9780791472361, $24.95

Across time, American protest writers have tried to remake their country. Asking America to *be* America, they have taken on "a role beyond that of entertainer," as Ralph Ellison once put it—explaining that these writers have "played a special role in the development of the American nation." This "special role" has involved a careful fusion of aesthetics and ideologies; protest writers have made form central to political protest. Yet, until recently, their protest literature remained unexplored as a distinct literary tradition: protest has been set "apart from high literature . . . because it is perceived as too politically driven, partisan, factionalizing" (40), notes Brian Norman in *The American Protest Essay and National Belonging*. Protest novelists like Edward Bellamy and protest essayists like Helen Hunt Jackson have been dismissed by literary scholars as mere propagandists precisely because of their "special role" as writer-advocates.

Norman, the codirector of the Idaho State University Women's Studies Program and an assistant professor of English, challenges the notion that protest writings are nonliterary. Insisting that "writers do not jeopardize their art when they assume the mantle of political advocacy" (40), he examines the "form and function of the American protest essay tradition" (16). This is the first book of its kind, heralding a new era in the field of protest studies. Telling the story of a protest nation and grappling with debates over liberalism and radicalism in social movements, Norman treats the American protest essay as its own literary form, one that turns advocacy into art. He argues that it fuses elements of the European personal essay and American political oratory to produce an aesthetic of inclusion. The American protest essay, he explains, has addressed

divided audiences within a nation that enacts exclusion even as it promises inclusion. The form has engaged national myths, denounced the failure of those myths to become reality, and worked for their final realization—seeking "collectivity in the face of division" (6).

While comparing the form to pamphlets, declarations, and speeches, Norman also points out that the protest essay, produced by witness-participant writers (with a self-fashioned dual role as both citizens and artists), has best enabled this confrontation with division. Writing from their own liminal space as "partial citizen[s]" (7), protest essayists have opened to scrutiny the space between national promises and lived experiences, the gaping hole within "stories of national belonging" (5). Protest essayists, Norman argues, have "used their partial citizenship to gain a toehold on the viable, but unfinished, project of full democracy" (7).

Across six chapters, Norman focuses on the politics of form in essays by Emma Goldman, Helen Hunt Jackson, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Alice Walker, and June Jordan, also setting these essayists alongside America's founding documents and literary ancestors like Samsom Occom, David Walker, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Henry David Thoreau, Henry Highland Garnet, and W. E. B. Du Bois. The book's final chapter moves beyond U.S. borders to consider how the protest essay speaks to transnational concerns. And although his chosen essayists span decades and movements, Norman brilliantly argues that they share a five-strand protest aesthetic: First, they build a bridge between particular readers and the notion of collectivity. Second, they speak on behalf of the marginalized, offering not an autographical "I" but a representative stance. Third, they straddle the particular and the universal, or what Norman terms "specific historical details and universalist national promises" (29). Fourth, they cleave apart the official rhetoric of inclusion from the lived experience of exclusion, to expose the hypocrisy of that official rhetoric while claiming its promise. Fifth, they use open-endedness to draw readers into a continuation of their projects. Here, the essay's readership takes responsibility for delivering the new future.

Norman's analysis will change how we think about the relationship between art and protest—perhaps finally liberating that relationship from the notion of a "pistol shot in the middle of a concert" (as Stendhal famously put it in 1839, speaking of politics in literature). His book will also change how we understand the essay form itself, how we define a national literary tradition, and how we approach writers who are not usually celebrated as practitioners of the essay.

We might also use Norman's framework to begin new work on other protest forms. He suggests that the "American protest essay is eclipsed by the more

famous protest novel tradition" (1), but there has been no examination of the protest novel to rival Norman's work on the protest essay. Nor have scholars theorized a poetics of engagement for the protest speech, the protest autobiography, the protest pamphlet, the protest poem, or the protest image-text. Norman's highly convincing argument that there exists an "American protest imaginary" (19) and that "*protest* defines a formal tradition in its own right" (12) is a challenge to build on his groundbreaking work.

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■ ***The Bowery Boys: Street Corner Radicals and the Politics of Rebellion***
Peter Adams
Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2005. 168 pp., ISBN 0-275-98538-5, $39.99

Peter Adams's express goal in this well-researched and lively 168-page text is to separate fact from myth and explore the political dimensions of New York City's Bowery Boys gang. Building on the previous research done by Gustavus Myers, Sean Wilentz, and Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Bowery Boys* is in part a biography of the hard-drinking, Spartan Association leader and Democratic insurgent, Mike Walsh. Charismatic and formidable, Walsh articulated "the views of the far left of the Jacksonian democracy of the 1840s and 1850s" (xi). But in a broader sense, the book examines New York City's demographic changes, its appalling working conditions, and its inequality. *The Bowery Boys* is also an instructive book for those readers interested in the history of Tammany Hall, the Democratic Party's internecine squabbling, and as popularized by Martin Scorsese in 2002, the ruffians and scrappers that participated in certain *Gangs of New York*.

At the heart of *The Bowery Boys* is Mike Walsh. His was a New York of ethnic and class division. Adams contends that the Industrial Revolution had fostered division by modifying the nature of the urban workplace. He also holds that, by 1820, economic and political power had come to be controlled by a group of commercial and merchant elites (26). Walsh, an anti-intellectual rabble-rouser, recognized and inveighed against this growing inequality. He voiced the frustrations of New York's poverty-stricken immigrants and native-born alike with his incendiary newspaper *Subterranean*. Thereafter, as a New York state legislator and United States Representative, Walsh continued to