White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic Realism

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PART ONE

Liberal Time vs. Literary Time
Liberalism is a perspective that posits the intrinsic reasonableness of human beings and that views progress as proceeding from the exercise of reason.

Ruth H. Bloch, “Utopianism, Sentimentalism, and Liberal Culture in America.”

Thirty years ago, with the passage of the great civil rights laws, one could have reasonably expected—as I did—that all would be set right by now.
Nathan Glazer, We Are All Multiculturalists Now.

On April 1, 2003, a lawyer defending the University of Michigan before the United States Supreme Court was pressed by the justices to answer a single question. The case, Gratz v. Bollinger, concerned the university’s use of affirmative action when reviewing student applications. Supreme Court transcripts do not identify by name the individual justices who ask questions during oral arguments.

QUESTION: “Mr. Payton, let me ask Justice O’Connor’s question, when does all of this come to an end?”

“End” can be taken here to mean not only finishing point but also goal. Versions of the very same question have been posed in every case I have read involving affirmative action at universities. Assuming (for now) that affirmative action is allowed to continue, when will it stop? When will it have achieved its goal and hence no longer be necessary? Despite its obviously unedited nature, I provide lawyer John Payton’s response in full. Its inner conflict on the issue of temporal progress points to the following two chapters’ main areas of concern.

I think that we all certainly expect it to come to an end. I think we’re all quite surprised, if we looked back at Bakke, in 1978, I think all of us would be quite surprised from that vantage point to realize that
today in Michigan students live in such segregated circumstances growing up. It’s really quite unbelievable. We could not have foreseen that. I think people thought that we were coming together in a way and that hasn’t occurred. That’s created some educational challenges and opportunities. The test score gap, I think is narrowing—we put that in our brief. I think we’re all quite optimistic about how this is going to progress. There is progress. I think the pool is increasing. But I can’t give you how long is it going to last. I think we’re all quite confident that it’s only going to last for X number of finite years, I just can’t answer with any precision that question either.1

Payton’s response to the judges’ repeated question has two main elements, but the elements do not fit together very well. Both his opening line and the second half of his answer insist on “progress,” which he uses as verb and noun in quick succession. These portions of Payton’s answer claim an optimistic confidence that “we” all share regarding racial circumstances in Michigan and at its university. Yet he also admits to amazement, even bafflement—“it’s really quite unbelievable”—at what he sees as a lack of progress in moving toward racial equity over the last twenty-five years in Michigan and by extension, the United States. Like Nathan Glazer, a prominent ex-liberal who for decades opposed affirmative action but who recently changed his mind and now supports it (see second epigraph, above), lawyer John Payton here finds himself divided between two seemingly irreconcilable understandings of the relationship between temporality and racial justice in the United States.

Liberal common sense, or as Glazer puts it, what it is reasonable to expect, suggests that race relations and racial justice must be progressing along a model of positive change, in the same way that history itself is presumed to do, from the past (concerning racial injustice a dire past) to the present (with its substantial improvements) to the future (when, one reasonably expects, racial injustice will finally be “set right”).2 Yet history somehow refuses, or is unable, to move past the “segregated circumstances” that Payton references or the “undeniable reality” of “radical disparities” between blacks and whites in higher education that, Nathan Glazer is forced to admit, still persist. Though this second sort of observation may be “undeniable,” it can nonetheless also be called “unbelievable” because, for both Payton and Glazer, it runs contrary to reason itself. Occurring outside of “what one could have reasonably expected,” given the adoption of “the great civil rights laws” of the 1960s and more than three decades of affirmative action—such stasis defies the temporal relationship of cause and effect integral to liberal visions of human progress. When it comes to race matters in the United States, the reasonable predictions of reasonable
people appear useless. “I think people thought that we were coming together in a way and that hasn’t occurred,” Payton says: “We could not have foreseen that.”

Now, as an individual, John Payton (who happens himself to be African American) might well be prepared to offer any number of cogent remarks regarding the apparent lack of progress in resolving the deeply rooted inequities that were supposed to be “set right” by a modest, after all, and narrowly tailored affirmative-action program, especially in the context of a nationally eroding commitment to social justice. Civil rights activists, historians, and critical theorists have, for several decades now, been exploring and exposing myriad facets of the permeating deep structure of white privilege in U.S. society. But as a lawyer defending the University of Michigan’s affirmative-action program—and hence representing the university’s “liberal identity”—John Payton is in a bind. On the one hand, he cannot help but cite intransigence in Michigan’s racial “circumstances” in answer to why, after more than a quarter century of vigorous operation, affirmative action has not yet achieved its own “end.” But he needs to move quickly past—even to cancel out—his mention of this intransigence in order to assure the justices that affirmative action is effecting steady progress toward its end. He must assure them, that is, that the affront affirmative action (“racial preferences”) presents to the Constitution’s requirement for color-blind treatment will, beyond doubt, cease after “X number of finite years” because there will no longer be any need for it.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, it is not only lawyers defending affirmative action in court who seem to oscillate between an optimistic view of racial injustice in the United States as slowly but nonetheless surely lessening, thanks to all the affirmative efforts made by individuals, institutions, and society as a whole, and a contrasting feeling, however intermittent or even involuntary, that “progress” in this area is somehow stuck. Nor is lawyer John Payton alone in eliding any serious attempt to reconcile these two contrasting views, or even to explain their propinquity in his own discourse. Contradictory takes on the temporality of racial progress and an embarrassed awkwardness (at the minimum) around that contradiction characterize many white Americans today, particularly, I believe, those who would identify themselves as liberal regarding matters of race and racism.

The most common way in which liberals seek to resolve this tension is through what Paul de Man would call “the rhetoric of temporality.”3 Seemingly immovable racial injustices and inequalities are aligned with the past—for most liberals a past that is almost, if not quite yet, entirely behind us—while progressive improvement is aligned with the present, or at the very least with a presumptive future. Consider the University of
Texas, which was founded during the 1880s, when segregation and racial violence were at a high point in the southern United States, and which vigorously defended its white supremacist practices into the 1950s. Over the past several decades, the university has striven to embody the “liberal whiteness” that, for Robyn Wiegman, “is characterized by its disaffiliation from segregationist forms of white identity and identification.” Mason Stokes observes that when whiteness defines itself against white supremacy (as it does for white students, faculty, and administrators at UT-Austin today), “white supremacy makes whiteness possible because it allows whiteness the space of moderation and normality that it needs to survive. White supremacy, so often imagined as extreme, allows whiteness once again its status as the nonthreatening, as the good.” In other words, white supremacy and “segregationist forms of white identity” allow liberal whiteness to stand as normative. In the rhetoric of temporality prevalent at the University of Texas, and formally articulated by its lawyers in *Hopwood v. Texas*, segregationist forms of white identity are aligned with the past. That past is clearly distinct from our nonracist present, except for certain localized and ever-lessening residues that affirmative action can help to clean up.

Regarding race, white liberal identity is intellectually, emotionally, and structurally invested in the idea of a developing history and an oncoming future of substantive, positive change. By practicing a version of what Wai Chee Dimock has called “offbeat reading,” reading that is temporally “at odds with the chronological progression of the nation,” the purposefully anachronistic juxtapositions of Part One strive to produce new angles of vision on how the past can and does uncannily and unpredictably pervade the intimate present of our selves, our institutions, and our nation.