THE CASE FOR GREATNESS
Honorable Ambition and Its Critics

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Mankind has never been in this position before. Without having improved appreciably in virtue or enjoying wiser guidance, it has got into its own hands the tools by which it can unfailingly accomplish its own extermination. . . . It is therefore above all things important that the moral philosophy and spiritual conceptions of men and nations should hold their own amid these formidable scientific evolutions.

—Winston Churchill, *Thoughts and Adventures* (1932)
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction:
Honorable Statesmen and Obscuring Theories

His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest.
—Herndon, *Life of Lincoln* (1888)

Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed by my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition is yet to be developed.

—Abraham Lincoln, 1832

This is a book about great political ambition and especially its good version, honorable or statesmanlike ambition. Statesmanlike ambition is well known, of course, unless one could maintain that Nelson Mandela or Winston Churchill does not differ from the tyrant Joseph Stalin or the dangerous mediocrity Neville Chamberlain. Mandela and Churchill appeared larger and better than life to many of their free contemporaries. They attract as a matter of course attentive political historians who size up their efforts at defending, reforming, and founding a free country. But what seems obvious to the public-spirited is not so obvious to many scholars, thinkers, and intellectuals. There is a big divide between the easy acknowledgment of greatness that arises among thoughtful citizens and appreciative historians (I’m not talking of foolish hero worship) and the doubting cynicism of many contemporaries who generalize about human affairs. Among the theorists, too often, skepticism as well as cynicism prevails. Why is it that social scientists speak much of rational maximizing, power seeking, self-interest, and popular voice, but not much of extraordinary judiciousness, hon-
orable aims, and knowing justice? Or that influential professors of philosophy and literature talk confidently of autonomy and equal dignity, while deprecating ambition for office and accomplishment as elitist domineering or a remnant of repressive culture? The contrast between our experience and our theories set my inquiry in motion.

I begin with the obvious thing, the ambitions all around us. You see the candidate running for office, the representative vying for the television lights, and the mayor trying to improve the schools. But how to understand the underlying motives and the different kinds of motive? The ambitious candidate wants to rise, we tend to say; he or she wants to get ahead, to succeed. But that description, familiar in our mobile democracies, is even there loose and inadequate. It doesn't catch what distinguishes the ambitious candidate from the careerist or moneymaker, who also wants to get ahead. It doesn't even catch what distinguishes the politically ambitious candidate from the time-server or the candidate on the take. If he or she is in it for lifetime security or graft, he or she is not politically ambitious, except in an imprecise sense. Who, then, is ambitious in the precise sense? It is the candidate who wants not so much the security or the money as to be in charge, to have his name in the papers, to make a difference. These three objects, superiority in power, reputation, and notable accomplishment, are crucial to the disposition we call political ambition. If present on a grand scale, they distinguish grand ambition as well. Napoleon sought kingly command, imperial fame, and enlightened empire over all Europe and farther. (He also got riches on an imperial scale, although not job security.) And if the aims are honorable and just as well as grand, they mark a truly grand ambition, ambition good as well as great. George Washington, the American icon, sought command in just and necessary battles, honorable fame, and the establishment of his country as an exemplar of popular self-government.

In our everyday experience we distinguish all the time between good and bad ambition. It is too obvious that Mandela, who liberated his fellow citizens while working for a free and multiracial country, differs from the twisted despot Idi Amin, who slaughtered hundreds of thousands of his countrymen. Jus-
tice, judgment, the common good, honorable conduct—these make a big difference. Which is not to deny cases, such as that of Julius Caesar in a decayed republic, in which the merits are complicated and disputed. Here it is enough to remind of the American congressman's simple distinction between the show horse and the workhorse. The show horse shines at press conferences and in the media; the workhorse does his duties, even as he appreciates a good reputation among his knowing peers. Doing one's duty, and if one seeks grand office and famous command, then doing one's grand tasks there, too—that is the obvious key. I illustrate the point with some reflections on two famous descriptions, quoted at the start, as to Abraham Lincoln's ambition.

Lincoln's law partner and friend, William Herndon, characterized Lincoln's ambition as a powerful drive, like an unceasing mechanical force: "His ambition was a little engine that knew no rest." The phrase reminds of a popular and rather cynical opinion: politicians are always out for themselves, and the stronger ones more strongly. Lincoln's own description, at twenty-three, when he first sought office as a representative in the Illinois Assembly, is more complex and revealing: "Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition. Whether it be true or not, I can say for one that I have no other so great as that of being truly esteemed by my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem. How far I shall succeed in gratifying this ambition is yet to be developed." Let us suppose that this published view is Lincoln's true view. (Whom would one believe more?) What does it show about his ambition?

Lincoln disavows talk about some universal force or ambition in men generally, while talking of a certain kind of ambition, his own, that he might certainly know. He seeks office, that is, to be (to an extent) in charge. But he also seeks the good opinion of his countrymen, and he wishes to be worthy of their good opinion. The wish to be deserving, not only to win a name but also to do things worthy of such a reward, is important. Otherwise put: Lincoln seeks the true "esteem" of his fellowmen. To seek esteem is not to seek notoriety, as by crimes or spectacles, since those who esteem someone have a good opinion of him. Lincoln seeks the good opinion of his fellow citizens, not their shock and awe. He
seeks their reasoning, discriminating approval. He does not have in mind the now-fashionable notions of charisma or prestige, which involve dazzling or blinding people rather than obtaining the appraisal one deserves. (According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *prestige* originally meant an illusory impression.) Nor does Lincoln mean here mere image making, although that certainly has its place in politics, not least in mass democracy. Consider Honest Abe the railsplitter, of his first presidential campaign. While Lincoln was extraordinarily shrewd as to the ways of political success, he sought something more reasonable than mere victory and more to do with his merit or deserts. He wants to be “truly esteemed,” not merely esteemed. I take this to imply a wish for approval not by mere public opinion, but rather by the opinion of a discriminating public. Lincoln would not characteristically describe himself as seeking glory, which glows blindly. Esteem warms one with intelligent honor, bestowed knowingly and deservedly. This is what Lincoln seeks for himself.

Admittedly, this preliminary description of truly great ambition is drawn from small evidence, although the full facts do place Lincoln among the most commanding, knowing, and morally serious of liberal democratic statesmen. Admittedly, too, the ambition so described is more just and wise than that of the vast majority of the ambitious, in any time or place. But this is the point. I am suggesting that Lincoln's kind of ambition sheds indispensable light also upon the lesser kinds, including the ambition of decent but more ordinary leaders, and not excluding that of the tyrant and the time-server. That is the reason to clarify ambition at its best; it illuminates what we most often find lacking. It sheds defining light. Alternatively, it helps explain the admiration of discriminating citizens for grand statesmen, those who make, defend, or preserve a decent country. Theirs can be a deserved fame, imprinted in the hearts of their countrymen as well as on streets, cities, states, and public buildings.

But can such a rather simple and old-fashioned analysis still be true, given the pluralism, moral skepticism, irrationalism, historicism, and egalitarianism of this sophisticated age? Many decades ago Churchill urged the special need in modern times to hold fast to “the moral philosophy and spiritual conceptions of
men and nations.” He was confronting new ideological tyrannies and new scientific and industrial powers of destruction. Great victories have now been won over the twentieth century’s fascist and Marxist tyrannies, partly owing to his inspiration and leadership. But has his plea for preserving moral and spiritual standards been successful? I fear not, at least if one judges by the intellectual fashions of the enlightened West. Seven or eight decades later one sees a pervasive relativism as to values and, what is more, a positive project to liberate from traditional values, especially moral restraint and high character. Modern skepticism and postmodern liberation make up a strange tag team of beliefs, beliefs in one way or another ratified and broadcast by the universities, by most novelists and playwrights, and by much of the media. These intellectual fashions now penetrate a mass public, and in such broadening circles, at least, things moral and spiritual seem less sustained than systematically undermined. This, even as the movements of doubt and liberation provoke a moral and religious backlash, especially among Muslims but also among a Christian right and other circles in the democratic West.

What follows might be called an attempt to refresh a reasonable understanding of human excellence. To speak more within compass, I attempt to revive a once-celebrated understanding of honorable ambition, in particular, by returning to the seminal accounts of the classical political philosophers. This will seem to many a strange step. I shall contend that it is a necessary step. While along the way I address contemporary critics who say it can’t be done or shouldn’t be done, the core of this book does it. In the three most important chapters I investigate the accounts of political greatness by Aristotle, Plato, and Xenophon. Whatever the differences, all three diagnoses are variations on the Socratic beginnings of moral and political science as we know it. All three, I mean to show, have the freshness of beginnings. Here is the key contention. These old accounts illuminate our experiences of a Mandela or a Margaret Thatcher far better than the critical and doctrinal theorizing that is more familiar and has been in the works for three or four centuries. This is what I seek to prove.

Nevertheless, mine is an inquiry, not a screed or a creed, and I also address the critics. The last two chapters review the leading
objections, that so-called grandeur of soul is really mere vanity and desire for domination, and that the old philosophic defenses only gild an inhumane, impracticable inequality. These discussions are in small compass, and they offer less rebuttal than genealogy, an account of the philosophic developments underlying our intellectual predicament. But there is some rebuttal, if only to exhibit the doubtful premises in the family tree. I also confront relevant theoretical objections and plainer political doubts throughout, especially in the remainder of this introduction and in the following chapter, which examines Aristotle’s proposal, now often disdained, of the gentleman-statesman.

In general, the book begins by considering an honorable and just form of grand ambition, the statesman who works within the laws of his free country. The focus then moves to the political dangers and psychological dynamics of the less bounded and less just forms, the ambitions of those who seek empire and rule for themselves. I conclude by weighing certain modern theories that obscure these moral-political phenomena and make them peculiarly alien to our apprehension and sensibilities.

Aristotle’s model of grand ambition is a distinctively moral interpretation, at least in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It treats of a special virtue, magnanimity (or greatness of soul: *megalopsuchia*), and this, plus other virtues such as justice, shape the gentleman-statesman that he encourages. I concentrate upon this discussion of moral virtues, although I acknowledge less rosy remarks in the *Rhetoric*, and I make much of subsequent developments, within the *Politics* and *Ethics* both, that would subordinate such a man to the laws and politics of his country.

Magnanimity, in Aristotle’s version, is the disposition to claim great honors because one is worthy of them. Lincoln, to repeat, sought not only the esteem of his fellowmen, but also to be worthy of their esteem. Attention to true worth, which means concern not for honor and glory but for being honorable and just in what one does, becomes a leading theme in the *Ethics*’ analysis of the great-souled man. This is not simple or trite moralism, partly because the account proves more subtle and the soul in question much more strained, than is usually observed. If at first Aristotle describes a rather general, honorable, and reasonable disposi-
tion, he then outlines particulars that manifest a powerful passion for one's own superiority. Aristotle's proves to be a remarkable moral psychology that shows us the tensions within such a soul (as well as the promise). Nevertheless, the efforts of the *Politics* as well as those of the *Ethics* go to foster neither a radical adventurer such as the Alcibiades portrayed by Thucydides and Plato, reaching beyond any free country, nor the Cyrus that Xenophon analyzes, who so ranks greatness over goodness as to become a world conqueror and despot. On the contrary: Aristotle fosters ambitious men good as well as great, and he would subordinate their greatness to the service of their country. Besides, he encourages a certain knowing resignation before the lawful limits and harsh necessities of political striving. The first serious biographer of George Washington was the American chief justice John Marshall, himself no mean statesman, and the character sketch that concludes his *Life of Washington*, on which I shall occasionally draw, virtually paraphrases the *Ethics*’ description of the great-souled man.

The next two chapters draw out the problems for free politics of unbounded grand ambition and then go more comprehensively into the psychology. Both discussions involve the Athenian general and politician Alcibiades. I focus on Alcibiades partly because of his spectacular if questionable ambition, but mostly because, like a brilliant comet, he attracted observers of the highest capacities. While I examine chiefly Plato's diagnosis of the psyche, I introduce that with Thucydides' account of the political exploits. In Alcibiades one sees grand ambition writ large in imperialism, civil strife, and even treason. But one sees also daring strategy and victories, brilliant policy, a certain justice, and a moderation from the heights, that is, an equable judiciousness above vengeance and the usual animosities of class. An Alcibiades poses insoluble problems for free societies, I conclude, and free societies pose insoluble problems for an Alcibiades.

The discussion of the political effects sets the stage for the Socratic cross-examinations in Plato's two *Alcibiades*. These little dialogues develop the psychological complications, not least the tendencies to both masterful tyranny and Oedipus-like self-hatred. I look to the two *Alcibiades* as one whole, which is rarely
done, partly because Plato's authorship had been denied for a couple of centuries. Whatever the authorship (I shall argue for Plato or some follower of equivalent powers), together they shed a light perhaps unparalleled upon such a man's desires, pleasures, opinions, scruples, and internal contradictions. They show extraordinary ambition, first in the hopes of youth and then in the gloomy obsessions of frustration. The Alcibiades of both treatments is moved most by one extraordinary desire: love of honor and rule. He desires to "fill practically all people with his name and power"; he would have everyone in the world perceive him as tyrant. Yet in each dialogue Socrates makes Alcibiades prove that he knows what he is doing. He cannot, and in the course of the cross-examinations he comes face to face with other inclinations and devotions, such as a certain nobility, justice, and patriotism. The paradoxes shake his pride and shake him almost to the core. These two examinations, together with relevant passages from other dialogues, exhibit grand ambition in the capacious mirror of Platonic wisdom about the soul.

The last of the chapters on classical diagnoses looks at ambition on an imperial scale, and the subject seems more the stuff of historical novels than of some allegedly profound argument from a philosopher. I examine the now-obscure account by Xenophon of Cyrus the Great. One could be excused for thinking that doubts about the imperial type, from the famous Plato and Aristotle, are here replaced by a simple picture of imperial ambition on the march. The Education of Cyrus seems a how-to book on conquering the world. However, Xenophon's engaging work, once thought the first and authoritative "mirror of princes," proves not so simple, not merely practical, and not so adoring. Under the guise of an adventure story starring the founder-conqueror of the Persian empire, Xenophon shows the most rational and moderate way to empire. You can do it with a minimum of oppression and killing and a maximum of benefiting and cleverness. Yet instrumental rationality is not enough. Xenophon shows more quietly the defects of such an imperial ambition. In the Education of Cyrus Cyrus's desire for superiority edges aside justice, love, nobility, and friendship as well as deep thoughtfulness—all. The edging aside of these good things becomes my
chapter’s leading theme. What seems in many ways a grand and defensible project managed with extraordinary generosity and consummate skill narrows toward cold despotism. That is an outward and political sign of the narrowing within: Xenophon’s is also a psychological study, albeit within a marvelous tale. I argue for the superiority of Xenophon’s political psychology to that of Niccolò Machiavelli, who admired the *Education* most, perhaps alone, of ancient political-philosophic books.

Having discussed various forms of grand ambition, I weigh in the three final chapters certain modern theories that obscure or deny such things. Chapter 6 discusses interpretations of the iconic American gentleman-statesman Washington. I contrast Marshall’s account, which focuses on character, with the historian Douglass Adair’s influential interpretation of the founders, which focuses on fame. The founders generally were moved above all by desire for fame, according to Adair, albeit as channeled through a complicated republican tradition. That tradition encompassed ancient as well as modern theories, Plutarch as well as the Enlightenment philosopher Francis Bacon, all in one basically seamless web. On the contrary, I argue, there is a crucial seam, and the failure to open it muddies the differences and a Washington’s distinctive grandeur of character. I pit Adair’s account against Marshall’s attention to honorable pride and devotion to duty, and Bacon’s interpretation of fame seeking, on which Adair relies, against Cicero’s account of the priority of duty, which Marshall recommends. The point is to bring out the differences between the classical account and the enlightened account, and to bring out too the practical bearing as to a very great statesman still more or less familiar. Washington, like Lincoln, exhibits the importance of high character, especially duty, to liberal democratic statesmanship.

Objections far more sweeping and theoretical are the topic of the two concluding chapters. Chapter 7 lays out the most influential contemporary critiques of the ancients’ diagnoses. I sketch first John Rawls’s extended argument against any politics of greatness and then Hannah Arendt’s effort to restore a certain greatness without the inequalities of classical rationalism. This prepares the final topic, how we arrived at these critiques. Chap-
ter 8 samples the key stages, starting with Thomas Hobbes’s slashing critique of pride, ambition, and virtue itself (I include an occasional darting comparison with Machiavelli and other Enlightenment thinkers). There follows an outline of the Kantian reaction, both the critique and the construction. In the face of Machiavellianism and Hobbism Kant would restore a moral teaching, albeit a novel version compatible with equal rights. He supplies a searching critique of Aristotelian magnanimity as well as of Hobbist power seeking, and he devises the famous idealism of equal moral dignity and self-respect. I conclude by reminding of Friedrich Nietzsche’s extreme reaction against bourgeois security seeking and democratic idealism both. Confronted by difficulties arising from earlier modern premises, Nietzsche was led to develop historical and value relativism and to resort to an irrational and willed greatness, the notorious superman. This has for good reason given grand ambition a bad name.

In short, mine is an inquiry into a perennial moral-political phenomenon that turns for help to now-unfashionable but once-admired political-philosophic thinking. Thoughtful help is what I seek; the reader will notice that the classical diagnoses yield no panacea. While taking account of political greatness, they measure it soberly. I’ll close this introduction by distinguishing what I attempt from two similar efforts at recovery and then by confronting, in a popular formulation, the usual objections to any such efforts.

I’m not trying to restore a comprehensive “honor culture” in war and peace, with its “old-fashioned, even primitive, notions of honor.” That task James Bowman set himself in *Honor: A History*, an independent, pungent, and wide-ranging contribution. My task is a measured appreciation of the honor-seeking life, not simply a revival of it. That leads me to distinctive and outstanding examples, not everyday cases, and to penetrating thinkers, not a common and amorphous culture. It leads me also to focus on character and true worth. Bowman dwells on retaliation and “the honor group,” that is, on the social need for members to stand up against threats to their closed community. He fears that a focus on “inner” honorableness, on desert or worth, dilutes the
real thing. He fears, despite our secular age, Christianity's under­
mind of spirited ambition in the name of inoffensiveness and pious humility. But can one understand Lincoln, Washington, and Mandela without appreciating their desire to do good things and thus to deserve the honors they get? Besides, the classic authors themselves separate their moral and intellectual doctrines from the woollier extremes of religion, as I point out. In any event, in our circumstances I worry less about the dangers of Christianity and more about modern theories that undermine uprightness altogether, especially the noble pride that disdains base conduct. My last chapter confronts these theories, whereas Bowman dismisses them as unimportant adjuncts to an alleged historical process, one started by the Christian “bias against honor.”

On the other hand, I'm not merely seeking a more effectual interior “agency” on behalf of equal rights, as is Sharon Krause in Liberalism and Honor. Worrying that liberal democrats may not risk their necks for diversity and the rights of minorities, she looks to a sense of honor as spur to moral courage, thus to oppose an oppressive majority or government. Krause supplies some refreshingly precise arguing. She also supplies invaluable sketches of honorable character in plainer wrapper: Lincoln, yes, and Martin Luther King, but also Frederick Douglass (“the soul of honor”) and Susan B. Anthony. These sketches should be consulted, for they supplement with less orthodox examples of protest my own focus on figures such as Washington, Lincoln, and Mandela. But do her theories do justice to the admirable and honorable pride that she praises? Or do they decapitate the phenomenon? Krause's chief authority is the Enlightenment philo­sopher Montesquieu, and she acknowledges that Montesquieu advanced “false honor”—a passion for distinction “detached from moral virtue”—as incentive enough for political purposes. Another of her authorities, Alexis de Tocqueville, explained honor similarly: it is chiefly an opinion of right that serves a class or caste, as opposed to the true “moral rules” serving the “perma­nent and general needs” of the human race. Krause herself thus recommends a new type of honor that disavows any connection with perfection of soul. But this beheads honorable uprightness.
It may also mix incompatibles. An honor oriented neither to uprightness nor equality is married to a Kantian moral agency that upholds moral rules prescribing equality.

My own effort is to recover honorable ambition in its fullness, not as demoralized, and to look to thinkers open to the phenomenon, not to those who explain it away or introduce a substitute, however politic. Which is not in the least to deny the troubling tendencies that provoke these two impressive efforts at recovery. As Tocqueville put his own apprehensions about mass democracy: what is "most to be feared is that in the midst of the small incessant occupations of private life, ambition will lose its spark and its greatness; that human passions will be appeased and debased at the same time. . . . This same man, who can tolerate neither subordination nor equality, nonetheless despises himself to the point that he believes himself made only to taste vulgar pleasures. . . . I should want one to strive to give them a vaster idea of themselves and of their species."

This introductory summary would perhaps suffice, especially since objections to Aristotle, Plato, and the others are addressed in the relevant chapters, were it not for a widespread contemporary prejudice against any such return to ancient philosophers. This is the Great Intellectual Barrier. Arguments against going back are in the air. Everyone has heard them. Some contend that ancient diagnoses are historically obsolete; others, that ancient rationalism (unlike ancient tragedy) is dry, repressive, and imperialistic. Some maintain that the old rationalism is naïve and subjective, compared to scientific accounts of leadership; others, that attention to classical virtue is at odds with popular government and the equal dignity of persons. Some contend even that human nature has changed, or does not exist at all because of social conditioning. These criticisms are often combined, whatever the contradictions.

Still, such arguments are easier to assert than to live by. They cannot be lived by. To make the point in a plain way at the start, while avoiding unneeded detail, I examine briefly a book that advances these objections and more, Leo Braudy's *The Frenzy of Renown*.

Braudy's big volume came out in 1986 and was republished in
1997 essentially unchanged (except for an afterword), and it ranges from the passion for glory of the heroic Homeric Achilles to the celebrity worship of modern mass democracies. The author aims for a comprehensive "history of fame." But he also seeks reform. He seeks, that is, lessons in moderating precisely contemporary celebrity worship. In our individualistic mass democracies, status depends on one's success in rising, and Braudy would allay the "frenzy" to stand out as unique, to seek personal validation, "to stand out of the crowd, but with the crowd's approval."

Nevertheless, whatever the defects of contemporary fame seeking, Braudy rejects any return to some ancient outlook that puts honor and "true achievement" at the core of a serious desire for distinction. He gives arguments why we cannot go back. But he cannot sustain these arguments, and he contradicts them.

The very meaning of fame differs historically with the development of society, according to Braudy, and for that reason one cannot update an old outlook (however thoughtful) for a modern time. Actually, Braudy does not much believe in superior thoughtfulness, at least among the big thinkers. He writes history instead of philosophy or political science, and among a plethora of vignettes about fame he does not even bother to include the diagnoses of Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, or Cicero. The poet Homer, the conquerors Alexander and Augustus, and imperial Rome—these suffice for his picture of the classical view, as if serious rational analysts were but typical parts of a historical process of changing eras. Yet Braudy cannot stick to this historicism. Despite his disdain for the philosophers, he allows that Hobbes turned "classical honor into modern fame by removing any justification beyond an inner desire to be appreciated." Despite his insistence that desire for fame is defined by "the context" and that it is but "a nexus of more generalized forces," he speaks of "perennial contradictions" within the desire for fame, explains Alexander by his "enormous desire to achieve," and finally seeks a new understanding of fame that corresponds to the underlying needs of human nature.

According to Braudy, the ancients' recommendations of honor, honorable conduct, and serious achievement were "un-
real” and at most but class oriented. “Golden Ages of true worth and justified fame” never existed, and any such pretension to purity was an attitude of the unjust aristocracies and monarchies of a now-forgotten past. To measure ambition by enduring achievement merely marks someone nostalgic for fixed values. But Braudy himself contrasts the contemporary preoccupation, with self-image, with an older version of honor, when “appreciation by a few” or even self-appreciation of “achievement” was “sufficient.” Is, then, the wish for discriminating judgment and true achievement not mere nostalgia? Indeed, by the end of his second edition Braudy goes farther in this direction than any ancient philosopher would have thought realistic. He envisions even the “end of fame,” when a media-induced contemporary frenzy will be replaced by devotion not to fame but to others. Devotion will be less to self-consciousness than to self-awareness, not to one’s unique self but to “selflessness,” and not to other-directed alienation but to “the intrinsic satisfaction of acting for others.” This seems an extreme version of the old self-appreciation, and of the achievement, earlier dismissed. “We have forgotten the elements of selflessness in honor and renown as well as the elements of community good in any worthy definition of individualism.” In short, Braudy urges something foreign to his individualist and self-indulgent historical era, something always good as opposed to mere selfishness, and something good apart from the pretense of image and fame. “Where now, for example,” Braudy asks, “are the models of a truly disinterested and principled patriotism like that embodied by Lafayette?” Contrary to the antiphilosophic bent, the historicism, and the egalitarianism, Braudy advances what he supposes to be a true diagnosis of his era’s fame seeking and a true corrective of democracy.

Admittedly, these are proposals more asserted than argued, and they are asserted in the manner of a prophet, albeit a secular prophet of progress. Over the horizon is a “new individualism not yet defined,” in which people will concentrate not on themselves but on others. The end of fame is part of a vision of “socialist individualism,” a new “commonality of shared desires.” We are given little supporting argument, let alone a properly socialist argument. Are these visions any more than unconsidered
residues of a secular faith in historical progress? Enough. With­
out pretending to a full accounting of this big book, it is enough
to have brought out some typical prejudices against recurring to
a classical philosophic diagnosis, the difficulty of living by them,
and the costs of avoiding thinkers, modern as well as ancient, who
considered these matters with sobriety and clarity.

Admittedly, mine is thus far a most preliminary weighing of
objections. Books such as *The Frenzy of Fame* hardly enter into
the telling arguments on which they depend, relying lazily on
an eclectic mix of premises drawn vaguely from more serious
thinkers. One can discern some hazy combination of, say, Hegel
and Marx on history and civil society, the early Enlightenment’s
critique of common sense and ancient philosophy, Kant’s defense
of the equal moral dignity of everyman, and Nietzsche’s develop­
ment of relativism and his call for secular prophets of a trans­
formed humanity. I address contentions of this quality in my final
chapter as well as in the accounts of grand ambition that follow,
especially in the next chapter on Aristotle’s diagnosis.