
only a given number of themes in love poetry," she argues, "so too people have kept saying the same things about God over and over again."

The image is of a constant systole and diastole of belief: The monotheistic vision, while exercising what appears to be an irresistible draw on the imaginations of people born with a certain "spiritual talent," is just abstract enough to be exceedingly difficult to maintain. Slippage recurs in several directions: toward idolatry, the reduction of God or God's will to some person or small part of the ideal; toward the anthropomorphism that finally makes it difficult to see the divinity as a Being of a radically different order of existence from oneself; or, the opposite danger, toward the Platonic idealism that becomes so remote that people cease to apply human standards of decency or logic to what's seen as God-inspired. As for the future, Armstrong suggests, "The anthropomorphic idea of God as Lawgiver and Ruler is not adequate to the temper of postmodernity."

Though the tone veers occasionally, as here, toward the peremptory, the author surely is entitled to a few wobbles in the course of writing 400 pages on the (by definition) inexpressible. The compendium hangs together because of her unflinching warmth of appreciation for the human phenomena she records: the steady pull toward the "particularly difficult virtue" of compassion and the continual "shock of human surprise and wonder" that anything should exist at all.

THE AGE OF FEDERALISM: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800. By Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick. Oxford Univ. Press. 925 pp. \$39.95

In the annals of political catastrophe, it is hard to top the story of the Federalists. From the commanding heights of American politics after the ratification of the Constitution in 1788, the Federalists plunged to nearly complete oblivion 12 years later with the election of the Republicans' Thomas Jefferson to the presidency.

The Federalists' collapse undoubtedly owed much to their uncanny knack for the political boner. Even before the brilliant and irascible John Adams succeeded George Washington as president in 1797, the Federalists—never for-

mally constituted as a party—fell to brawling among themselves. By 1800 the nation's two leading Federalists were openly at odds, with Adams disdaining the very idea of party and Alexander Hamilton violently slandering Adams for "vanity without bounds," among other real and imagined defects. But Elkins and McKittrick, historians at Smith College and Columbia University, respectively, argue that deeper historical forces were undermining the Federalist cause. Seeking to extend into the post-Revolutionary era the historical interpretation of the American "mentality" begun by Bernard Bailyn in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) and lately enlarged by Gordon Wood's *Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), they argue that changing "modes of thought and feeling" in America during these years rendered the Federalist idea unworkable.

That idea was a similar but more partisan version of the Founding Fathers' vision of a society ruled by men of "enlightened views and virtuous sentiments." It was a vision that could accommodate neither the rise of new wealth and the political interests it generated nor the arrival and integration of immigrants, especially the Irish. It left no room for the rise of political parties. It was a vision, in short, that was spectacularly unsuited to democratic politics, and especially to the clash of interests and parties in the commercial republic then aborning. (James Madison, the chief author and defender of the Constitution, thus shifted to the Republican camp.)

As the authors show, the Alien and Sedition Laws of 1798, one of the Federalists' most dramatic blunders, amounted to little more than a desperate attempt to stamp out the practice of politics. Under these laws, the Federalists in 1799 had John Fries and other rather meek German tax protesters in Pennsylvania dragged from their homes in the middle of the night and tried on charges of treason before what was virtually a kangaroo court. Fries was saved from the gallows the next year only by John Adams's pardon, which the president granted over the angry protests of his own cabinet. But the Federalists lost the once-solid support of the Germans and with it the entire state of Pennsylvania. So it went for the Federalists in case after case—in seeking an active federal government and a standing army,

and in opposing the French Revolution, they proved to be hopelessly out of step with the times.

Unfortunately, this argument about the decline of the Federalists is really one of two books struggling to emerge from the roughly three and a half pounds of smallish print here. The other is a conventional survey of the period, and both books suffer from their cohabitation between the same covers. Oddly, something that would have greatly enhanced both, an extended discussion of the economic and demographic forces that reshaped the country during the Federalist years, is missing. A delightful chapter-long digression on the siting and construction of the new national capital, which itself contains digressions on matters such as the Egyptian hieroglyph for "city," is typical of the book's charms. Read as a kind of Federalist era omnibus, it succeeds.

AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURES. *By Richard Ellis. Oxford Univ. Press. 251 pp. \$45*

Whatever else may be said about it, revisionism is scholarship's one dependable growth industry. Ellis, a history-minded political scientist, here offers a new critique of Louis Hartz's decades-old "consensus theory." According to that much-attacked theory, political and social disagreements in America occur within the dominant and largely unchallenged framework of liberal capitalism.

Ellis urges historians to cast aside Hartz and consider the more capacious model of anthropologist Mary Douglas. While consensus scholars deem competitive individualism the defining aspect of the American social and political experience, Douglas finds it to be one of five "competing cultural biases." The other four are hierarchical collectivism, egalitarianism, fatalism, and "hermitude." (That's three more "isms" and one more "tude," for those keeping score.)

Ellis finds challenges to competitive individualism everywhere: in Puritan New England, with its strong group orientation and orthodox community rules that limited individual autonomy; in the socialist utopian communities of the mid-19th century; in Jane Addams's Hull House, which, as Addams said, provided "little islands of affection in the vast sea of impersonal forces."

Louis Hartz believed that the absence of feudal-

ism in America meant that it never developed hierarchical political and social cultures. But Ellis finds a great deal of hierarchy in American social life: among Virginia's Anglican gentry, among 19th-century New England Federalists, in the civil-service reform movement of the late 19th century, and, of course, in the system of slavery.

Armed with new data and theories on race and class, scholars have been attacking the consensus theory with some success since the 1960s. Ellis brings a new historical/anthropological dimension to this campaign. Unfortunately, the framework he proposes is somewhat strained. He occasionally ignores the complexity of historical figures and movements, and seems perplexed when they don't fit neatly into his pigeonholes. "Paine's credo was 'question authority' and Madison's was 'check authority,'" he writes, citing Madison's success at limiting executive authority in the Constitution. But look harder: Madison's original draft, known as the Virginia Plan, provided for a truly powerful national executive and a congress that could veto state legislation.

What Ellis inadvertently shows is that there *has* always been a consensus: a consensus of contradictory attitudes. Americans—the People of Paradox, as Michael Kammen put it 20 years ago—have agreed to disagree. Of course, *how* the country has been able to live with antithetical beliefs without ripping apart at the seams remains the unanswered question.

Arts & Letters

THE BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling. *By Diana Trilling. Harcourt Brace. 442 pp. \$24.95*

Long before his death in 1975, Lionel Trilling—University Professor at Columbia and perhaps the most distinguished literary critic in America—was a distant figure. It was widely believed that he had refined himself out of existence. If Morningside Heights were England, one ex-student griped, he would have been known as "Professor Sir Lionel Trilling." When he spoke of human consciousness, he characteristically dropped the definite article and addressed himself directly to "mind," as if it were a downstairs neighbor.