THE FRENZY OF RENOWN

Fame & Its History

Leo Braudy

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For Dorothy,
Never finished, always complete

Preface

We live in a society bound together by the talk of fame. But it is the argument of this book that fame has a past as well as a present. We did not invent fame. It has a history that has decisively shaped our understanding of what it means. To document this history thoroughly would require the work of at least a lifetime, since everything preserved for us from the past can in some sense be considered a message that perpetuates someone's fame. My goal instead has been to map the major routes and important byways of this constant theme in the history of Western society. Such a mapping must cross the boundaries of many different specialized areas of knowledge. I have therefore tried to respect the current state of learning, without becoming too minutely involved in the swarms of controversy that preoccupy those with far greater expertise in such matters than I possess—or to which I aspire. Readers more deeply acquainted with some of these issues will notice that I do take sides in many long-standing discussions, for example, the degree of premeditation in the career of Julius Caesar, the order of composition of the Gospels, and the influence of Dante's *Divine Comedy* on Chaucer's *The House of Fame*. But, more often than not, I am led to such interpretations by my own developing argument about the changing nature of fame. My interests therefore give me an angle on these intriguing issues when I arrive at them. But I have not shaped the book in accordance with a preliminary study of them.

In order that the work be finished, if not completed, I have had to be ruthless in my inclusions and rely on advice and counsel to justify my omissions. Books like this, which attempt to sketch the evolution of a basic cultural theme, cannot be written without the immense aid of the vast and sophisticated historical scholarship that has developed over the last two hundred years. To accomplish even this much, I have had to call on the knowledge of specialists in a wide variety of fields and disciplines, both through their written work and through the greater courtesy of personal comments and suggestions. As Edward Gibbon writes in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire:*

> . . . in the contemplation of a minute and remote object, I am not ashamed to borrow the aid of the strongest glasses (vol. 4, chap. 47, 106 n. 1).

I owe a considerable debt both to these writers, whom I identify in my notes and bibliographic entries, as well as to the many colleagues and friends who helped me find my way through such a voluminous literature.

The references at the end of this book indicate those works from which I have quoted or to which I had alluded, as well as those secondary works that I have found particularly helpful. I am grateful also for the opportunities I have had over the years to present some of these ideas in lectures at many universities. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation funded some of my early research, and I would also like to thank *Raritan Review* for publishing an earlier version of the section on Jesus.

I first began thinking about the ideas behind this book more than ten years ago in New York City, where faces and names are pressed upon you at every moment. I wrote it in Baltimore—a more quiet and reclusive place, whose distance from the rush of ambition engendered its share of detachment. I complete the final revision in Los Angeles—where the flocking to fame coexists atmospherically with a sense of being on the border of an eruptive nature that cares little for human aspiration. All three cities contributed their own special ambiance to the work, but friends and colleagues contributed more tangible goods. The enthusiasm of Erwin Glikes, first at Harper & Row and later at Simon & Schuster, helped me to cast the book into its early shapes. Bill Sisler at Oxford University Press drew on his own high energy and enthusiasm to bring it to publication. Faced with the task of editing the copy, Andy Yockers and Henry Krawitz have responded with a ferocious and fruitful attention to both its details and its whole, as have Margery Schwartz, who closely and thoroughly read the proofs, and Nick Humez, who brought both his care and his expertise to the making of the index. In the years this book has taken, my agent, Maxine Groffsky, has similarly contributed more than anyone could expect in the way of support and patience.

Hardly anyone to whom I spoke while researching and writing this book failed to contribute to it in some way. For their special help I would like to thank the following people in particular, among the many who supplied references, shared ideas, asked intriguing questions, and read sections of the manuscript: John Baldwin, William Cain, Jerome Christensen, Diskin Clay, Jane Cody, Vincent Crapanzano, Elizabeth Ferriter, Stanley Fish, David Fitzgerald, George Fitzgerald, Harris Friedberg, Allen Grossman, Susan Hartt, Jeffrey Henderson, Sandra Hindman, Peter Kafer, Herbert Kessler, Jane Kramer, Jerome McGann, Jay Martin, Dan Menaker, Raoul Middleman, Stephen Orgel, Annabel Patterson, Lee Patterson, Richard Poirier, John Pollini, Naomi Rand, Paula Rome, Stuart Rome, Frank Romer, David St. John, Elaine Scarry, Gordon Stewart, Jane Tompkins, Steve Weisman, Fred White, and Jonathan Yardley. Beth Blum, Jeffrey Burbank, Sonia Maasik, and Frank Donoghue helped track down often elusive facts for me. Nadja Awad helped collect the illustrations from a wide variety of sources, a task made immeasurably easier by the courtesy

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Finally, I dedicate this book to my wife, Dorothy, without whose insight and clarity it would never have achieved whatever coherence and point it has. Although I began the work when both my parents were alive and vigorous, neither has lived to see its completion. But their loss impresses on me still more the feeling that writing this book has nurtured: In the heart of aspiration is the desire for recognition by those whose approval is unconditional and therefore need never be sought, but also can never be assumed.

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I

THE URGE TO BE UNIQUE

Introduction

> Man, out of man, will make himselfe a frame,
> Seekes outward helpe, and borrowes that of Fame.
>
> —FULKE GREVILLE,
> *An Inquisition Upon Fame and Honour*

"What is honor?" asked Falstaff and answered "a word." With such an understanding of the way the name, look, and gesture of honor were becoming more important than the thing itself, he would hardly be surprised by our own preoccupation with the democratic descendant of honor, fame. What is honor? What is fame? A name? A face? The "it" in "making it"? Every day, from every corner of the world, faces and names pour into our eyes and ears. If we read, if we see, if we hear, we cannot escape the flood of human images that, desired or not, forces itself upon us. Some few last for a lifetime and beyond, most for no longer than it takes to scratch their initials on the walls of our attention. And yet all this effort, substantial as much as trivial, is done in the name of what is called fame.

"How many times do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national attention?" complained a murderer in a letter to the Wichita police. Only with his sixth killing, he continued, had he begun to get his due in publicity (AP, 12 February 1978). In a cursory reading of any daily newspaper, it is easy to find similar stories that illustrate the various insanities to which individuals have been driven by the lust for recognition. Who knows whether the urge to fame drove this man to murder or his murderous nature found the language of fame-seeking a comfortable 'normality' to wrap around himself? But it is clear that, particularly since World War Two, the increasing number and sophistication of the ways information is brought to us have enormously expanded the ways of being known. In the process the concept of fame has been grotesquely distended, and the line between public achievement and private pathology grown dimmer as the claims grow more bizarre.

In great part the history of fame is the history of the changing ways by which individuals have sought to bring themselves to the attention of others and, not incidentally, have thereby gained power over them. But few self-assertions, especially those staged in public, are ever wholly original. From the beginning fame has required publicity. Alexander the Great ostentatiously imitated Achilles among other gods and heroes; Julius Caesar mourned that he had not done as much as Alexander; and

the Wichita murderer said he was moved by the same force that drove Jack the Ripper. Each learned about his chosen precursor through some medium of communication. Whatever political or social or psychological factors influence the desire to be famous, they are enhanced by and feed upon the available means of reproducing the image. In the past that medium was usually literature, theater, or public monuments. With the Renaissance came painting and engraved portraits, and the modern age has added photography, radio, movies, and television. As each new medium of fame appears, the human image it conveys is intensified and the number of individuals celebrated expands. Shadowed by such powerfully evocative images, the daily reality of someone who is not famous in those terms often seems inadequate. Not long ago the *New York Times* ran a story about the problems of ranching in Wyoming. After recounting the adventurous life of one rancher, the impressed big-city reporter asked him to describe himself. "Well," said the rancher, stroking one leathery cheek, "I suppose you could say I'm one of those Marlboro Men."

Up through the Middle Ages clothes were a costume denoting one's place in a strict, though complex, social hierarchy in which individual nature was staged against the backdrop of inherited form. Chaucer may give a wonderfully precise portrait of his Monk, but all those details find their meaning primarily in the context of the Monk's social role. With the Renaissance, however, comes a fascination with creating one's own costume. In the terminology of the anthropologist Edward Hall, the media are "extensions" of the man, ways of increasing the scope of the senses. But in the history of fame the more elaborate extensions of human images often hinder self-awareness instead of expanding it. Our sense of wholeness is as fragmented by the media we use as it is by the media hurled at us. By now, in a society so suffused with images, the tricks and gestures of the surface have become easily detachable from whatever substance they once signified. Fame shades imperceptibly into fashion, while fashion, in its turn, spawns and then discards an infinite parade of superficial distinctions. In a world of crew cuts and good grooming, beards and long hair may imply antiestablishment politics. Soon enough, however, they adorn Ku Klux Klan members, college professors, and plumbers. Similarly, impressionists and mimics, who build careers by becoming a succession of specifically recognizable others, could hardly have existed before radio. And who can measure with precision the congealed role playing encouraged in each of us by the invention of the telephone?

Now that there are so many ways for names and faces to appear in public, the meaning of that appearance seems less and less personal. When each occupation, neighborhood, or club has its own events, publications, and T-shirts, fame also carries with it a comfortable element of familiarity. The fame of others, their distinguishing marks, becomes a common coin of human exchange—code words more forceful (and easier to express) than mutual political or religious beliefs for establishing intimacy. Similarly, the self-exposing and self-asserting gestures we learn from the fa-

mous become licensed for our own use. As we have a collage vision fostered by the rapidly escalating demands on our attention, so we have collage personalities made up of fragments of public people who are, in turn, made from fragments themselves—polished, denatured, simplified. In old documentaries the people being interviewed often regard the camera with wary hostility. It was an intrusion into their privacy and sense of self. Now, of course, it can be considered an enhancement. The passerby on the street naturally smiles broadly, gives an opinion, and even calls the interviewer by his or her first name. Armed by their vocational belief in publicity (more virtuously referred to as "the public's right to know"), television reporters never hesitate to ask a grieving parent, "How does it feel to lose a child?" The most personal tragedy will be soothed, for the audience if not for the individual, when the mourner can be assured a spot on the "11 O'Clock News."

Through the technology of image reproduction and information reproduction, our relation to the increasing number of faces we see every day becomes more and more transitory, and "famous" seems as devalued a term as "tragic." If these are famous, we may wonder, then what is fame? They certainly don't seem as permanent as the famous of the past, those names that echo in our minds—Alexander, Caesar, Cleopatra, Jesus, Mohammed, Joan of Arc, Shakespeare. But fame gives and fame takes away. In part it celebrates uniqueness, and in part it requires that uniqueness be exemplary and reproducible. What special individuals pioneered, many can imitate. Religion and morality may counsel that subordination of the self is the only way to both personal peace and social justice. But every newspaper constantly brings the message of assertion, without which, it is said, personal security is impossible. The choice seems absolute: Everything (and everyone) that fails to progress is doomed to decay. What only kings could accomplish in the past is now available to aspirants of more modest means. The impact of the face of Alexander the Great on a coin where only those of gods and mythical heroes had been before becomes thinned out in a million fleeting images on the evening news, images that reach a larger audience than Alexander could touch in his lifetime—or for long after.

Societies always generate a number of people willing and eager to live at least part of their lives in the public eye. The larger, more heterogeneous, and democratic a society is, the more such public people there will be aiming for the security of such a secular eternity. In a society committed to progress, the seeking of fame, the climbing of the ladder of renown, expresses something essential in that society's nature. Even the more grotesque forms of ostentation are connected to normal desires to be known for one's talents or for oneself. Entertainers and politicians, who court public appreciation (and possible disapproval) on a grand scale, cannot be considered normal members of their society. But they are certainly extensions of what is normal, extensions of everyone's culturally fostered desire to be given his or her due.

Between the ideal (and safely dead) figures of the past and the infinite compromises and corruptions of the present appear the figures of contemporary fame—aspiring to a condition of achievement and recognition independent of the normal pressures of age and imperfection. Like a dim remembrance of unfallen purity, the dream of fame promises a place where private dreams of recognition triumphantly appear in public. Fame allows the aspirant to stand out of the crowd, but with the crowd's approval; in its turn, the audience picks out its own dear individuality in the qualities of its heroes. Famous people glow, it's often said, and it's a glow that comes from the number of times we have seen the images of their faces, now superimposed on the living flesh before us—not a radiation of divinity but the feverish effect of repeated impacts of a face upon our eyes. The ease with which we allow ourselves to be absorbed by such images, the desires to be that way ourselves, confirms that the essential lure of the famous is that they are somehow more real than we and that our insubstantial physical reality needs that immortal substance for support. Where the infinite reproductions of the faces of the famous mediate between us and whatever they have actually done, the urge to public fame has little necessary connection to the urge to recognition for worthy actions. Its goal becomes a state of being. In compensation for the erosions of life and death, the new media of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries thus create the modern dream of fame as a vision of wholeness, an effort to move outside the blare of publicity by using it for oneself, to be an object of attention rather than one of the mob of attention payers.

Not everyone can be famous. But much of our daily experience tells us that we should if we possibly can, because it is the best, perhaps the only, way *to be.* Fifteen hundred years ago, St. Augustine, turning his face against Roman public life, argued that the emptiness that comes from living exclusively in the eye of others could be filled with God. But even he wrestled with the desire to be praised openly for his denial of worldly values. In the present, more secular dilemma, a competitive world of job seeking and visible achievement implies that only some will be filled by fame, while the rest must be satisfied with lesser degrees of emptiness. In compensation we have the fame of others—people we might have been if fate or even choice had not deprived us. The great of the past are, of course, already complete: dead as bodies, undying as images. And when death takes the idols of the present away, they too will be translated to the highest realms of fame—forever untouched by the innumerable irritations that plague the fan.

In the heart of the fan and the famous alike, fame is a quiet place where one is free to be what one really is, one's true, unchanging essence. To be famous, goes the myth, is to rest in solitude, but without aloneness: like Achilles in his tent, sulking at Agamemnon's affront to his heroic nature, while the Greeks wonder if he will rejoin the battle; like Lindbergh in *The Spirit of St. Louis,* flying over the Atlantic, while the world waits for him to land. In this dream the will is finally free, untrammeled by social

forms, the expectations of others, or the pressure of the past—bounded if at all only by the confines of nature.

The dream of fame in Western society has been inseparable from the ideal of personal freedom. As the world grows more complex, fame promises a liberation from powerless anonymity. In search of modern fame, we often enter a world of obvious fiction, in which all blemishes are smoothed and all wounds healed. It is the social version of a love that absolves the loved one of fault, restoring integrity and wholeness. Those whose fame depends least on anything specific are, in an image-conscious world, the most likely to be emulated. To be famous for yourself, for what you are without talent or premeditation, means you have come into your rightful inheritance. To be compared to Farrah Fawcett required only hair. In the face of fragmenting social demands, fame creates its own etiquette, allowing the famous to be themselves in a way no one else can afford to be, and to be accepted into a mystic community of other famous people, a psychic city of mutual respect for each other's individual nature. The celebration of true fame as a personal justification that allows the famous to relax in the company of those equally secure and complete runs through all fan magazines, gossip columns, and even the more soberly intended "personality" magazines that began appearing in the late 1970s. I remember one inept candid shot whose main point was to show Jacqueline Kennedy and Elizabeth Taylor in the same room together because, the caption noted with an air of disbelief, these women, whose faces had appeared on innumerable magazine covers, had somehow never met.

The roots of the urge to find the place of fame were particularly fertilized in the eighteenth century when a new-minted industrial age set the scene for individuals to make their way relatively unhampered by the traditions and restrictions of the past. But at the same time new standards for achievement had to be defined. Fame and success therefore became much more important than they had been in a time when the orders of society and the realms of the spirit were more fixed. From the eighteenth century to now, two variations of the same story indicate the close relation of the desire for fame to the uncertainty of personal identity. In one the hero's true and noble nature is discovered beneath his socially insignificant surface; in the other his truly despicable nature is discovered beneath his socially superficial manners. Whether the story is that of the prince in disguise or of Jekyll and Hyde, it dramatizes the gap between what a person is to society and what he is to himself. In the past, said Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, "man was of a piece." But the new age brought anxieties that only success could allay, when the struggling individual would be gathered into the realm of security and justification that he thought awaited him at the top of the ladder. Without a Napoleon, who rose from obscurity, there could be no one with a Napoleon complex, mad for a recognition that had been denied him.

In contemporary America, a country born seemingly without a past, the desire to be unprecedented—the old dream of fame in European history—

has become a national obsession, the only way out of increasingly complex political and economic dependence on others. Of course, the escape is illusory. But I am not talking about fame as an extreme *expression* of individuality so much as fame as the *appearance* of individuality, the more and more baroque costumes people assume in order to distinguish themselves in a more crowded, corporate, and collective world. As *The Guinness Book of Records* demonstrates, everything humans can do has been turned into something that humans can compete to do, with someone, whose name one hopes will not be misspelled, coming out on top, at least until the next edition. Fueled by such expectations, we look at the past and wonder why great men and women were ignored, when perhaps the society in which they lived did not value individual personal recognition the way we do; Achilles or Jesus could do the job for them. In the midst of the present frenzy, some passages in the past history of fame seem like calm retreats, worlds in which (it seems) satisfaction for accomplishment was secondary to accomplishment itself, in which doing was not totally superseded by telling what had been done, and in which the appreciation by a few, or even self-appreciation, was sufficient, without the need for an ever-expanding, perpetually unsatisfying audience.

But such Golden Ages of true worth and justified fame never existed. And in any case we would never have heard of them, since to trumpet one's disdain for fame, as we shall see, necessarily follows in the tracks of fame itself. Nor can the answer (if answer could be given) to the search for recognition be found in the nostalgia for a more compartmentalized and hierarchical society, where, as in present-day Russia and China or in medieval Europe, we would be satisfied with a few famous who appear in public to represent all. America poses the problem of self-importance in a constantly changing democratic society. In these terms a famous person has to be a socially acceptable individualist, different enough to be interesting, yet similar enough not to be threatening or destructive. Thus the urge to fame intensifies the basic conflict between society and individualism, and the paradoxes of fame come from the effort to balance thinking about oneself with the obligations of belonging to a society. That these paradoxes are becoming more obvious is due to the effort of both American and European culture to maintain a public rhetoric of individualism that offsets an increasingly pervasive web of institutional and corporate relations.

In the urge to find a better, more perfect self, the possibility of uncovering a worse, more misshapen one hangs like a threatening cloud. Lurking behind every chance to be made whole by fame is the axman of further dismemberment. Fame promises a freedom from worry about the opinions of others, only to trap the aspirer inside an even larger audience. Every beggar knows how to exploit the mingled contempt and obligation engendered in the person for the moment onstage. We applaud our heroes, and we condemn them. The speed with which a president can change from an authority to a scapegoat cannot help but reflect the styles of other public

performers—the comedians who alternately insult and flatter their audiences, and the singers who are as contemptuous offstage as they are seductive and pleading onstage. Whatever the field, in public life fame is a contract between the audience and the aspirant, a contract that the fame seeker often knows less about than do those who are asked to be his appreciators. As Clark Gable remarked to David Niven on hearing of the mysterious death of the actress Thelma Todd:

> We all have a contract with the public—in us they see themselves or what they would like to be. . . . They love to put us on a pedestal and worship us. . . . But *they've* read the small print, and most of *us* haven't. . . . So, when we get knocked off by gangsters, like Thelma did, or get hooked on booze or dope or . . . just get sold . . . the public feels satisfied. Yeah, it's a good idea to read that small print (Niven, 22).

Gable's opinion of the implicit contract between public person and audience may be excessively gloomy. But his basic insight remains: Modern fame is always compounded of the audience's aspirations and its despair, its need to admire and to find a scapegoat for that need. To dismiss the circus of contemporary notoriety with pat versions of Daniel Boorstin's phrase, 'a celebrity is someone who is famous for being famous,' too easily allows us to ignore the importance of even celebrity in shaping the values of our society, not always for the worse.[1] Moralists from the classical Stoics down to the present have made great reputations for books denouncing the desire to be recognized. In our own time, when preachers evangelize about inner, spiritual truths, they do it on television.

We have become immensely sensitive to the subject of fame. Since the late 1960s, its hazards have become obligatory fare in every celebrity interview. But that sensitivity has not yet brought very much understanding. Julius Caesar, for example, would hardly be a phenomenon today, in a world that has seen varieties of Caesarism as diverse as Napoleon, Hitler, and Douglas MacArthur. But in the first century B.C., Caesar created a career as military politician that left a pattern for ages to come. To ask how he and others—warriors, politicians, spiritual leaders, artists—were able to make such an impact on the minds of men (and historians) can allow us to take the measure of how our own minds were created and what has dictated our individual desires for achievement. The urge to fame occupies that strange and vitally important area where matters of the spirit and matters of the flesh meet. It has therefore to be understood or at least approached both in its history and in its immediacy, as a reaction to society we share with each other as well as with people long dead—a reaction that has changed along with society itself.

1. This is a frequent misquotation. In fact, Boorstin's formulation is *"The celebrity is a person who is well-known for his well-knownness"* (57). See his chapter on "The Human Pseudo-event" in *The Image*. As the subtitle (*What Happened to the American Dream*) suggests, Boorstin's book is a witty diatribe against the way media culture has alienated Americans from true values. My own argument questions his assumption that, say, heroism and its expression can ever really be fully separated.

* * *

> See, I never did want to be a big mucky-star. At the Vendome they said, "You're going over so big—you get up on stage to play your solos and we'll give you more money." I thought it was stupid and I wouldn't do it. They said, "Look at what it'll mean to you." I didn't see what it'd mean. Finally they just put a light on me in the pit. If I'd gotten up there on the stage, people would say, "Shoot, he just wants to be a star, an individual," and even your own musicians you're playing with, you wouldn't get that same warmth. See, I tried to have fun as long as I could, but they wouldn't keep it that way. . . . You know you don't have no fun at all if you get too famous. . . . [T]he main thing is to live for that audience, live for the public.
>
> —LOUIS ARMSTRONG

The process of fame seemed much simpler and the special nature of the famous much easier to appreciate in the ages before the present crush of people awaiting their turn before the camera, in a time when the aspiration to fame implied imitating a hero's actions instead of smoking his brand of cigarettes. Or at least the terms of the competition were clearer, and the contenders ideal figures, not the locusts of today. But our involvement with the famous, as well as our dismemberment and absorption of them into our own natures, is hardly an invention of the twentieth century. Nor is it an indication of contemporary decadence or of our unseemly preoccupation with ourselves. The history of fame is also the history of the shifting definition of achievement in a social world, achievement often defined by the eyes of others, but just as often by their ostentatious absence. Both the extreme gestures and the high-minded denunciations of the urge for fame spring from the ambiguous heritage of a Western society devoted, on the one hand, to Roman and classical ideals of public service, civic virtue, and national glory and, on the other, to Judeo-Christian ideals of humbleness, modesty, spirituality, and private virtue. "Read the lives of great men" advised the principal of my father's Philadelphia high school to the graduates of 1921, echoing a preoccupation with the example of past heroes that is hardly distinctly American, yet has been given a distinctive intensity by America's historical myth of the new man in the new country. Jean Paul Sartre once remarked that American society was like a skyscraper (the Empire State or the Chrysler Building, he meant, not one of the Kleenex boxes of the 1960s): exactly the same floor to floor, until the top, where individuality with all its curlicues and baroque elaborations could flourish. But Sartre—to shift his architecture slightly—forgot to observe that for every Levittown of uniformity there are neighborhoods of the defiantly unzoned and hodgepodge. And within every Levittown grows the need to be different, nurtured on the outside appearance of sameness. In Europe individualism has been generally considered antisocial, while in America it seems encouraged by society, although subject to society's often-hidden terms. Every American therefore draws in each breath simultaneous urges to conformity and distinction. No other country, in the

midst of creating a modern state, has so defiantly evolved so many institutionalized differences, so many ways of being outside. No other country so enforces the character-wrenching need to be assertive but polite, prideful but humble, unique but familiar, the great star and the kid next door. To the extent that we are all stars, waiting to be discovered, no one is very surprised to discover that stardom and shyness, public assertion and private withdrawal, are the twin offspring of the desire for fame and recognition.

Whether outside or inside, one always needs credentials, even if one has to issue them oneself. In this book I am attempting to explore the general and historical nature of fame, but for the last few pages—with their talk of the "contract" between performer and audience and their assertion of what "we" feel about fame and what fame does to "us"—I have become uneasy with the pose of objectivity that steals into language whenever one attempts to generalize. Before going on, then, I want to say something about the way I became personally aware of the mingled strands of individual assertion and social approval in the urge to fame, and how the book, with all its intended historical sweep, grew out of my personal situation.

Growing up in America, I had dimly realized that my own impulses toward achievement, which if written out would appear logically contradictory, yet within me gripped on all sides with perverse strength. I wanted to be the best, yet noted for my humility. I wanted to be individual and distinct, somewhat of a recluse, yet be praised and applauded when I appeared and did my stuff. The more I was aware of these paradoxical urges, the less they seemed understandable. Whenever one was uppermost, the other would appear with a dark, beckoning hand to lead it astray. When in the late 1960s it became fashionable for celebrities to complain about the burdens of their fame on television talk shows, I could bask in the feeling that my personal confusions were mirrored by those of many famous names.

These otherwise common musings were painfully focused in the fall of 1971, when I discovered in the accumulated summer mail the manuscript of a book my first wife had written about the breakup of our marriage. My first reaction was a twinge of pleasure. I had known she was going to write it, and I welcomed the possibility. These, after all, were the 1970s, the confessional years. Although, of course, my own divorce was special, yet divorce was an important social problem and mine therefore carried within it the impress of larger cultural forces. Like a fragment of DNA, with its own set of the genetic code, it might be a key to what was going on between men and women all over the country. Not only was my ex-wife doing something socially useful, it would help her career as well. And how could I stand in the way of that? I was sure she would make many mistakes. But then we could appear on a talk show to argue the whole thing out. In some sense such a book was the culmination of all the reasons why we had come to New York in the first place, she as a journalist, I as an English teacher. We had been nurtured on the central importance of literary fame and New York as the place to get it. To be in New York, still more

to arrive in New York, was to compete for the spotlight. I had already believed that writing in the public eye—reviews, articles, books—was one of the highest forms of cultural achievement. To be put in a book oneself was the necessary next step.

Virtually without knowing it, I had crossed the line between an urge to fame for specific achievement and a desire for public recognition that would be protective and justifying in itself. Reading the manuscript, however, threw cold water on my cheery anticipation of the warming attention the book would bring: I was totally unprepared to discover what it means to be a character in someone else's scenario. I thought the book was self-absorbed and self-deceptive, a narcissistic act pretending to be a social act, a transparent bid for fame and power in the guise of a baring of the heart that concealed much more than it exposed. Any value that it might have was entirely in the areas of encouragement and support: 'You're doing well,' it said to the reader. 'I've had a much harder life, and yet I've written a famous book.'

As time went on, my own complicity in what my ex-wife had done became more obvious. Since I had to sign a release for the book and was not willing to resist its publication, I had a lawyer draw up a list of changes I wanted, to obscure incidents involving my second wife, to change the name of our cat, and to try as much as possible to reduce the harm to innocent bystanders. But I could hardly bring myself to ask her to change anything that had to do with me, no matter how inaccurate I thought it was. It was a penance for my own complicity. I was beginning to realize that the heart of what it meant to "go public" was to be entrapped by the gaze of others, to be reduced by their definitions, and to be forced into shapes unforeseen in the innocent aspirations to the golden world of fame. Until now, I had some small sense of the problems and the paradoxes. But I didn't think they applied to me. And so I would stand in the stocks and be pelted by the crowd on whom I had forced my presence.

It's hard to sustain even such a marginal martyrdom when no one is looking. Without severe cost, I had been privileged for a moment to stand outside the apparatus of modern fame and observe myself as a tiny element in its vast operation. Perhaps my own piece of the puzzle, because it had contained so many of the same paradoxes, might also hold some of the clues. To gain the freedom that such understanding could bring, I began working in two different but allied directions—collecting examples of the baroquely warping effect the pursuit of fame was having on individual lives in the present, while examining the history of fame and the famous in the past.

The contemporary examples were easy enough to find and soon filled a fat folder: the person who wrote to *Time* magazine, "on behalf of myself and the 650 million people in India," to give thanks that the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize was given to Mother Teresa; the man who buzzed the United Nations to force his publishers to give him more publicity for his new book; the innumerable "political" actions by those who were convinced

that the road to power lay through the publicizing of themselves and, secondarily, their cause; the rock-and-roll band whose members had plastic surgery in order to look like more famous (and usually dead) rock stars—to cite only a few. In such examples fame had collapsed almost entirely into self-regard, and the ancient belief that fame was the crown of achievement had been replaced by the conviction that it was the only thing worthwhile at all. Part of the ideology of the late 1960s had involved an assertion of the necessary entanglement of personal fulfillment and political well-being—the twentieth-century version of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But, as the next decade wore on, the cynicism about public life became even more acute and was complemented by a turn toward private satisfactions. In this vacuum the pursuit of fame, with its special formula of private justification through public acclaim, came to define the pursuit of happiness.

But, as I looked into the past, I discovered that the standards of modern fame had been in the process of refashioning for the last hundred years. Shakespeare in the sixteenth century was still suspicious enough about immediate fame to consider only fame after death as truly substantial. Fulke Greville, writing his *Inquisition Upon Fame and Honour* a few years later, characterizes the search for personal fame as an effort for men to find a "frame" beyond themselves that should be equivalent to religious and civic virtue. A more modern note appears in the middle of the seventeenth century in Thomas Hobbes's theory of the secular state, *Leviathan*. "In the nature of man," says Hobbes, "we find three principall causes of quarrell. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory." The first two describe actions undertaken for gain or for defense, the third for reputation. In his cool way Hobbes turns classical honor into modern fame by removing any justification beyond an inner demand to be appreciated. In competition and diffidence men act for tangible reasons, but in pursuit of glory it is "for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other signe of undervalue, either direct in their Persons or by reflexion in their Kindred, their Friends, their Nation, their Profession, or their Name" (185).

With the beginning of the Industrial Revolution new political and economic factors further encouraged the transformation of the classic idea of personal honor—the unprecedented growth of urban population, the expansion of literacy, the introduction of cheap methods of printing and engraving, the extension of the political franchise, and the revolutionary overthrow of monarchical authority. In this world acting and self-promotion abounded. The proliferation of new modes of communication, the breakdown of hierarchy, and the careers now open to talents made it easier to author oneself. Ben Franklin dressed up in animal skins at the French court to mime the native American to the aristocrats; his face quickly appeared on fans, perfume bottles, and a hundred other items of fashion. Laurence Sterne, the author of *Tristram Shandy* (1760–1767) and the first English author who can be called a celebrity, said that he wrote "not

to be *fed,* but to be *famous*" (90). Denis Diderot, the *philosophe* and compiler of the French *Encyclopédie,* carried on a long correspondence with the sculptor Étienne Falconet in which they debated the question of whether fame in one's lifetime or fame after death was preferable. Falconet chose immediate fame, Diderot looked to posterity. Appropriately enough, Falconet published the correspondence, while many of the works for which Diderot is now most famous did not appear until after his death. But, whether the choice was now or later, the eighteenth century seemed particularly preoccupied with the question of fame in the modern sense—as a way of defining oneself, making oneself known, beyond the limitations of class and family. Economic, social, and political revolution had produced so many new ways of naming oneself that what had been an urge in few, in many became a frenzy, a "frenzy of renown," as Matthew G. Lewis's novel *The Monk* (1796) calls it. Almost fifty years before, Samuel Johnson, in his poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes," had called it "the fever of renown." But "frenzy" predicted more of the future desperation, and the imagistic passage from sickness to madness promised little chance of a permanent cure.

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It was a great party. A lot of names were there.
—Don Rickles on "The Tonight Show"

Names inundate us in the present. And names flow from the past as well, sometimes accompanied with only a few half-remembered facts, coming and going in our minds like the transient names in the news. In this world of incessant information, we know so much about the people of the past, more than they usually knew about each other, that many names familiar to us may have been virtually unknown, except to a small group, for years after their death. One side effect of our possession of so much information is that we create fame retrospectively. People are aghast with the cosmic ironies when they read about the death of Socrates or the crucifixion of Christ. Didn't the Greeks and Romans know whom they were dealing with? But at the time of their deaths neither of these men had the stature that has retrospectively shone on them, singling them out, and making them famous posthumously. Fame is carried first by words and later also by images, and both Socrates and Jesus required men to transmit their messages and in the process create their fame. Socrates may have been famous to those who read Plato, but from the fourth century B.C. to the fifteenth century A.D., few either could or had the chance to read Plato. John Lennon of the Beatles caused a scandal by saying that his band was more famous than Jesus. As far as immediate fame goes, he was right. But the outcry over Lennon's remark is instructive because it implies that fame is by definition a positive category: If Jesus is the greatest man, he must also be the most famous. Some scholars similarly have argued for years that Shakespeare couldn't have written his plays because he wasn't smart enough

or experienced enough—or famous enough—and so have assigned his plays to a variety of men with, they say, demonstrably greater learning and social status.

To understand the place of fame in our culture, I want to see its relation to a history of Western ideas of what an individual is. In older cultures, where few had either the resources or the inclination, the phenomenon might be seen in isolation and therefore a little more exactly. The careers of men like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar became standards against which monarchs were measured for centuries. A different sort of model for fame was extracted from the lives of Socrates and Jesus, from Horace, from Dante, from Shakespeare. Yet to loosely call all these "famous," as we do, obscures the most interesting questions about the relation of the fame of the past to the fame of the present. To understand why some are remembered with more force than others, we need to investigate the process by which fame becomes a matter of premeditation, a result of media management as much as of achievement, as well as how the great of the past behaved in such a way as to project larger-than-life images of themselves that would last longer than any specific action. Gazing back from a world in which the production and multiplication of images is in the hands of many, we might wonder what it meant to be famous when the means of communication were slow and the methods primitive. Then we might be on the way to framing an answer to the question I was always asked when I first told people about this project: Was Julius Caesar (or Jesus) famous?—as if we had invented the category.

Fame is made up of four elements: a person and an accomplishment, their immediate publicity, and what posterity has thought about them ever since. The difficulty in writing about the great figures of the past is that in every age they have been reinterpreted to demonstrate the new relevance of their greatness. The continued interest in the most famous is similar to our continued fascination with a great work of art or an important historical moment: The ability to reinterpret them fills them with constantly renewed meaning, even though that meaning might be very different from what they meant a hundred or a thousand years before. Such people are vehicles of cultural memory and cohesion. They allow us to identify what's present with what's past. By preserving their names, we create a self-conscious grammar of feeling and action that allows us to connect where we have been as a society and where we are going. How they and their supporters ensured that they would be remembered is therefore a crucial part of the story of their fame. The style may be ostentatious or reticent, assertive or evasive, but it is always conscious of the audience who must be lured into remembering. Even those, like Stoics and Christians, who philosophically reject the classical idea of fame, still substitute their own models of renown and personal realization to stand as examples for the future.

This book deals with large movements in the attitudes individuals have had toward themselves, toward other people, toward institutions, and to-

ward society at large. These attitudes are focused by the concept of fame, which sits at the crossroads of the familiar and the unprecedented, where personal psychology, social context, and historical tradition meet. Although I deal almost exclusively with western European culture and all those who have been brought into its orbit and absorbed (and transmuted) that way of perceiving the world, at the heart of the book is a theory of the effect of historical change on what has usually been called, with some overtone of invariability, human nature. I realize that calling attention to the fact that the desire for fame has a history (or to say that any emotion has a history apart from the personal expression) threatens to undermine that very independence and originality we associate with "true" fame. But knowing the historical roots of what otherwise seem to be purely personal urges is the first step to surmounting them. Are emotions innate? Developmental psychologists have charted the ages at which a child has the capacity for different emotions. But such charts rarely distinguish between having the capacity for an emotion and actually expressing it. They gloss over the fact that emotions have to be expressible in the terms that observers can read, that is, the terms that their culture has decided are appropriate. If for some reason a child has learned to repress anger or transmute it, will an observer then decide that it does not yet have the capacity for anger?

"You can't change human nature," we constantly say and hear. But every culture also determines its own guidelines for how emotion can and ought to be expressed, and these vary from age to age—even as they retain the common thread of connection to what that culture defines as human nature and the essence of human character. Understanding of ourselves and our cultural assumptions often comes, as Edward Hall has pointed out, when we realize that what we considered to be innate is actually only frequent or habitual. Ambition and the desire for fame are special cases of the need to understand the relation of emotion to its time-bound expression. Even more than anger or envy, they are the prime social emotions—especially in America, where the assimilation of so many groups and traditions have forced us to focus on what we hold in common.

The path to either changing or transcending history—let alone making one's tiny mark—must lie through history. Now, when so many gestures of fame are clearly known and easily manipulated, we have the impression that it is almost entirely our own creation. But if we think about the past at all, we think especially about its inhabitants who tried to announce themselves to the future. Beyond the self-serving statements, the inscriptions, the flattering portraits, I am looking for a style of self-serving and how it changes with the centuries. By focusing on some of the most famous individuals of the last twenty-five hundred years, I do not imply that their wills have shaped history, nor do I want to argue the greater importance of impersonal causes. I am less interested in the tactics of great battles or in economic development or in political structures than in the way such general and impersonal patterns meet in the nexus of individual desires to be famous—unique—extraordinary—and thereby to put one's mark on time.

Navigating the history of fame as it flows through a variety of political, religious, and artistic histories, my argument does not seek to substitute a new totalist view for the old, but to see familiar phenomena in new arrays. This book contains no Great Man or Great Woman theory of history. It is instead a quest for the ancestors we have chosen for ourselves and those who chose themselves for us, an effort to understand what is general in the history of individual nature in Western culture by observing those examples who tried to stand out on their own and those who stand out for our eyes as well. Their shape in our backward glance, just as the shape negotiated between themselves and their audiences, can never be the sole result of an individual will, but only of individual wills and cultural inclinations modifying each other. Too often historians think they are writing histories of politics or literature when they are in fact writing histories of political or literary fame. Just as often they believe that their proper role is to excavate whatever was invisible to the people who lived in the past. But here, instead of delving into hidden causes, I want to ask what was meant by the obvious, the explicit attempts to impose oneself upon the imaginations of others. In the pages that follow appear a gallery of emblematic figures. Different ones will resonate for different readers, but through them all one can read a psychic biography of what it means to be public in Western culture. The history I shall map in the following pages traces the inheritance we all share, wittingly or unwittingly, from those figures: the shards of individual nature embedded in our own. It proceeds in both art and daily life, within the heart and in the public square, in concepts of the good society and in visions of eternity.

Such a project must be accomplished in language, for language, visual as well as verbal, carries the message of the past to the present and beyond. Falstaff therefore begs the question when he says that *honor* is merely a word, because *honor,* like *fame,* is also a word that invokes the special ability of words to carry the human image beyond its immediate expression. The sensitivity to what language can do is crucial to the creation of fame. For reasons that we shall see, the words of fame that have come down to us are primarily Roman: *fama* (with a Greek ancestor), *rumor, ambitio, celebritas.* Even in Rome the terms could be positive or negative. "Famous" (*famosus*) is derogatory, "egregious" (*egregius*) is complementary. But *fama* itself is appropriately ambiguous. From early on its contradictions were an essential part of the nature of fame—a subject about which everyone has something to say.

In search of these patterns, I have cast this book in five main sections. The first part deals with fame as the effort to be unprecedented, taking its lead from two twentieth-century figures, Charles A. Lindbergh and Ernest Hemingway, and then moves back to the very beginnings of fame to discuss Alexander the Great. The second part focuses on Rome—a whole society animated by the urge for fame, whose definition of achievement was almost entirely oriented toward public behavior. The third part begins to tell the other side of the history of fame, in which not public and political

but private and spiritual values are stressed, particularly in the direct challenge Christianity makes to Roman ideas about what makes a person worthy and his name last. In the fourth part I explore the effort—particularly since the Renaissance, but with many classical ancestors—to name the artist, the writer, and the wise man as the judges of true fame and the mediators between public show and private inwardness. The fifth part examines the evolution of modern fame amid the collapse of monarchy and the rise of an intricate web of national and international communications. Although the progression is roughly chronological, the organization is thematic, for time and the evolution of human societies have their effect most clearly on the arena available for personal distinction, just as the modes of communication available in a period indelibly mark what is communicated.

Often the most memorable formulations of the problem of fame have been those generated by the experience of performers and the contemplation of philosophers and writers. Nominally, they are at opposite ends of a continuum of professions stretching from the most public to the most private. Yet, perhaps for that reason, they seem equally sensitive to fame's paradoxes, acutely aware of the necessary role the audience plays in the completion of their actions and their writings. As Clark Gable would say, they read the small print of the contract between anyone who seeks an audience that finally finds him. The ignorance of what fame means and what it can bring may itself be a hallmark of our period. Only with the modern frenzy of renown have so many appeared with little or no comprehension of the contract of eyes and attention by which the audience and the fame seeker balance their desires. I therefore turn first to two men in whose careers the urge for publicity and the urge for privacy had a characteristically modern clash and commerce—Charles A. Lindbergh and Ernest Hemingway.