

Narcissus Enters the Press Pool

Fact: Everything interesting that has been written about Bill Clinton this decade, pro and con, has been about his personality. That is the nature of 1990s journalism.

The rush to therapeutic, personality-based reporting kicked into high gear eight years ago at the hearings on Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court. Feminist bleatings provided the script for a new sort of media drama, one emphasizing private psychic travails over public deeds.

The psycho-battle pitted Anita Hill ("the poised daughter of so many generations of black women who have been burned carrying torches into the battle for principle," gushed *Time* editor Nancy Gibbs) against Clarence Thomas (put "a little flour on his face, you'd think you had David Duke talking," sneered pundit Carl Rowan). The ratings-fest that followed convinced the media that in a world without the kind of hard news that the Cold War used to provide, talking endlessly about peoples' private lives could be their best new way to make a living.

This is not to say that private lives aren't sometimes worthy of investigation and understanding. But '90s-style press coverage has created two serious problems: 1) The press has often become infatuated with documenting trivial aspects of *personality* rather than focusing on fundamentals of character. (Do we really need to know so much about our President's taste in junk food?) 2) More seriously, arguments over facts are increasingly fought through personal appeals that call into question the motives of those using the facts. (Way back in the 1930s Hannah Arendt exposed this as a favorite left-wing trick.)

The best of the new breed of journalists have been rewarded handsomely for their dives into the quicksand of motivation and

personality. Maureen Dowd was given a *New York Times* column for brilliantly, and sometimes not so brilliantly, mocking public figures (calling Elizabeth Dole, for example, a "throwback to the days of unasailable girdles and unmussable hairdos"). Beneath its snarky wrapping, the substance of Dowd's column is mostly very conventional wisdom.

Similarly, *Vanity Fair's* Gail Sheehy has created a cottage industry around her gift

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for slumber-party psychobabble, on display most recently in her new Hillary book. As Judith Shulevitz of *Slate* observes, "Sheehy is a therapist to the stars, not a political reporter. She tells us how our leaders *feel*, not what they stand for...or even what we should think about the things they do."

And of course there's Sidney Blumenthal, whose political journalism landed him a White House job as Hillary Clinton's "plumber." In one infamous article for the *New Republic*, he equated the war record of President Bush—one of the youngest combat pilots in American history, shot down in action—with the war record of Bill Clinton—pot brownie addict at Oxford, constantly trying to give free mammograms to co-eds—by suggesting Bush's fear and uncertainty in a flaming plane over the Pacific were somehow equivalent to the angst of a guy writing term papers by the light of a lava lamp.

Some would object that journalists have always dissected the personalities of powerful people. True, but generally "personality" was searched for hints of the individual's professional judgment. Remember all those stories suggesting that Reagan's "cowboy" nature would be a bad match with control over nuclear weapons. But by the time Clinton's impeachment came around, the press had stopped connecting private actions to professional judgment. Clinton had become just another fascinating celebrity.

Perhaps this fixation with personality is a phase, a moment of the giggles after the tension of the Cold War. That may be the best way to understand Edmund Morris's recent biography of President Reagan, for instance. Morris began working on that book just as personality journalism was hatching, and his eventual text read much more like a *Vanity Fair* profile than a serious work of history. The book almost entirely ignores politics and policy—allotting a mere page and a half to the election of 1980, for example.

The future of this trend is unclear. On the one hand, magazines that have placed personality above politics—like Tina Brown's *Talk* and especially JFK, Jr.'s *George*—are foundering. On the other hand, Edmund Morris may simply have been ahead of his time when he inserted himself and his emotions, as a fictional supporting actor, in his supposedly non-fiction biography. The *New Republic's* Stephen Glass wanted to be part of the story so much he actually fabricated events, with himself at the center.

Such narcissism is the logical outgrowth of personality reporting and I/me journalism.

—Jonah Goldberg

Out of the Huddled Mass

Among the first and last images we see in *Angela's Ashes*, the big-screen adaptation of Frank McCourt's Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir about growing up poor and miserable in Limerick, Ireland, are shots of the Statue of Liberty, that emblem of comfort for the "huddled masses" to which McCourt's beleaguered family most assuredly belonged. If Lady Liberty hovered in the background of the best-selling book, she shines her light even more brightly in the film. In bringing McCourt's memoir to the screen, writer-director Alan Parker has made *Angela's Ashes* a gritty and gripping tribute to the old-fashioned idea of working toward the American Dream.

"We must have been the only Irish family in history to say *good-bye* to the Statue of Liberty instead of hello," a young Brooklyn-born Frank says at the start of the film, as his mother and father pack up their four boys and head back to live with Angela's family in Ireland. The McCourts already have lost a baby girl, causing Angela to nearly lose her sanity. Little did they know that in the sooty, sewage-strewn streets of Limerick, things would only get worse.

Shot with a color palette so dirty and gray that the film looks as if it had been left out in the ubiquitous Limerick rain, *Angela's Ashes* is rife with familial horrors, most of which visit at night while the six McCourts share one ratty bed. Early on, they are startled out of their slumber by the ferocious fleas that have made a home in the mattress. But that experience pales in comparison to the time, years later, when Frank awakens in the middle of the night to find his little brother's cold, dead body next to him.

The overarching tragedy through all of this is the alcoholism of Frank's father



AP Photo/Bill Keays, Inc.

Malachy (Robert Carlyle), which leaves Angela (a devastatingly weary Emily Watson) begging for food outside of churches and collecting forgotten lumps of coal along the roadside. Without a father to anchor their family, the McCourts watch as what little life they were able to establish slowly gives way to squalor.

Anointed as the man of the house far too soon, Frank manages to carry his heavy burden with the help of a strong sense of humor, one that is skillfully carried over from McCourt's memoir to Parker and Laura Jones' impressive script. Yet there is something else that keeps Frank from giving in to despair, especially as he begins to mature: the thought of returning to America, that seeming paradise of his youth. "Oh Billie, Billie," the teenaged Frank says as he listens to a Billie Holiday record. "I want to be with you in America. Oh, America, where no one has bad teeth and everyone has a lavatory."

Frank's teacher in Ireland sees something even more valuable across the Atlantic: the right to an education. "We throw our talented children on the dung heap," he tells his class. "If this is the end of school for you boys, you must go to America."

And so, indeed, Frank goes, but not in pursuit of some get-rich-quick scheme or with the intention of living on handouts

from the U.S. government. Instead, he takes with him the strong work ethic that he learned while toiling at the jobs—shoveling coal, delivering telegrams, writing business letters—that earned him the money for a transatlantic ticket. These are jobs with costs (the coal dust nearly destroys Frank's eyes), but they also prove to be the most valuable experiences of the boy's life. For while hard at work he developed the determination that would allow him to thrive in a land of opportunity.

Of course, America isn't exactly as Frank dreamed it would be, something that's evident in McCourt's follow-up memoir, *'Tis*. At his first job in the United States—as a janitor at New York's Biltmore Hotel—he's disgusted by a class system that is much like Limerick's, in which wealthy snobs ignore his existence as he cleans up after their afternoon cocktails.

But jump ahead in his life, after the hours he spent in New York's public libraries, which led to a career as a school teacher, and eventually to the authorship of a Pulitzer Prize-winning book, and you'll find that young Frank's boyhood dream most certainly came true. All it took was hard work, a lifetime of perseverance, and a chance—a chance that McCourt may only have gotten in the land of Lady Liberty.

—Josh Larsen