

his journey to the East, where he died, his death surrounded by mystery and ambiguity, but also, to his admirers, by peace. Thomas Merton was a humble, loving man who was in some ways misunderstood, and who misunderstood some things himself. His bequest of misbegotten causes has been promulgated

and mutated until it is unrecognizable as the wistful thinking of a meditative man in the forest. But political movements grow old and die. The real legacy of Thomas Merton, as Monica Furlong suggests, is triumphantly of the monastery at Gethsemani where he is buried. □

## Let Us Return to First Principles

Joseph Epstein: *Ambition*; E. P. Dutton; New York.

by Paul Gottfried

Joseph Epstein, editor of *American Scholar*, is a cultural critic who writes with flair and offers learned judgments about the state of American society. Like the more explicitly conservative George Will, Epstein is fond of citing 18th- and 19th-century authorities on 20th-century problems. His essays, also like Will's, abound with references to Tocqueville, Emerson, Matthew Arnold, Dr. Johnson and Burke; they and others are cited to good effect on the dangers of cultural leveling, emotional excess and educational mediocrity. A relentless advocate of high linguistic and learning standards, Epstein seems to be, in one of his own favorite phrases, "on the side of the angels."

His latest book testifies to his continuing concern with a changing American character. The major theme is ambition—or, more accurately, the highly ambivalent attitude that modern Americans have toward worldly success. One part of his book consists of portraits of famous Americans who amassed great fortunes by steadily exerting themselves to get ahead. Henry Ford, Samuel du Pont, Meyer Guggenheim and that self-promotion genius, Ben Franklin, are treated as devotees of the traditional

American work ethic. They, like many others, sought unabashedly to gain money and influence, convinced as they were that the pursuit of both was entirely meritorious. Epstein mentions in passing the Weber thesis on the correlation between the psychology of the capitalist entrepreneur and Calvinist moral theology. According to Max Weber, a capitalist economy in either Europe or America would never have been achieved in the absence of those moral attitudes toward work and profit which Calvinist theology imparted. Calvinism taught service to God through the pur-

tion, he argued that Calvinism's moral values continued to shape men's characters as a social ethic even after the religious doctrines had lost their spell. Thrift, sobriety and the systematic pursuit of profit, even if no longer taken as a sign of divine election, remained the hallmarks of the early American capitalist. And, as Epstein notes, they became universalized ethical imperatives which German Jews and Irish Catholics could embrace with the same zeal as Scottish Presbyterians.

Despite the long-time identification of American prosperity with the prevalence of the Protestant work ethic, men of letters in the mid-19th century were already denouncing material ambition as a national obsession. Epstein traces the genealogy of this powerful dissent from Henry Adams's intellectual elitism and social snobbery down to the new-left attacks on the "American system." To his credit, he makes appropriate distinctions between 19th-century traditionalist critiques of the Gilded Age and modern rejections of the work ethic. Although critical of his own

"The silliest and most dangerous part of Epstein's book [is] the pretense that the commercial foundations of our society have been undermined by currents of radical chic . . ."

— *The Nation*

"Take a can of Corn Niblets, blend into a pot of slightly warm Cheez Whiz, and voila, you'll have the culinary equivalent of Joseph Epstein's *Ambition* . . ."

— *Village Voice*

suit of one's worldly vocation. Since Calvinists viewed salvation as a gift conferred independently of human merit, they looked for signs of divine grace in their social and material relationships. Calvin and his immediate disciples were highly critical of commercial dealings, but they helped to create an ethos of "worldly asceticism" that found its fullest expression in the incipient capitalist economy of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Significantly, Weber turned to secularized Calvinists like Benjamin Franklin to furnish examples of a triumphant Protestant ethic. With some justifica-

society, Henry Adams, for example, considered his productive scholarly life a failure for being devoid of his ancestor's political accomplishments. By contrast, our contemporary attacks on ambition curse America's past as well as its present. Adams criticized the work ethic of his day for being too closely associated with material pleasure and ostentation, but, like Max Weber, he respected the moral restraint and ascetic values of his own ancestral Protestant culture.

But whatever the differences between Adams's and Irving Babbitt's ap-

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peals to ascetic and scholarly ideals and the liberal culture's hedonism, Epstein notes a thematic continuity between them. They all attack the allegedly dehumanizing effect of men's ceaseless striving for worldly advancement and single out their own country for special blame. Because of a success fixation, Americans, it is claimed, have ignored higher cultural values and have lost sight of any nobler end beyond "making it." Epstein concedes the force of these arguments but also shows what moral problems have attended modern America's abandonment of ambition as an ideal. Our commercial and political leaders have grown embarrassed about money and power. They spend much of their time apologizing to others while supporting their own declared enemies. Families of established wealth underwrite the cost of revolutionary agitation and subsidize their countercultural detractors. Even those who remain explicitly ambitious are often morally less admirable than earlier generations of self-made men. What survived of the older religious (Victorian) work ethic in Carnegie and Rockefeller has by now been badly eroded. Those who strive after money do so only to enjoy it and not to fulfill a God-given calling, even one stripped of its older theological context.

Epstein describes a flawed ideal (ambition) being replaced by self-hate in a moral vacuum. No eulogies to capitalist productiveness or to material progress can dislodge the problem here posed. A moral difficulty bedevils us as a modern nation and goes back to what our founding fathers failed adequately to address: the social-ethical dimension of our national life. *The Federalist Papers*, produced by Madison and Hamilton in defense of a newly framed constitution, viewed religious institutions primarily as mutually restraining forces. The "extended republic" which they hoped to build depended upon having churches and social institutions function within a system of countervailing influences. Not virtue and justice, but freedom and

prosperity within a federal framework, were the paramount values to which our national founders appealed. That they gave short shrift in their constitutional arguments to public virtue and the moral requirements of citizenship may be hard to hold against them. Most Americans were then churched and still living in what, by modern standards, were tightly knit communities. Appeals to doctrinal orthodoxy also went against the nature of the American political experiment. The confessional strife that had proved so ruinous in Europe was still vivid in the Founders' minds.

Yet the pluralism we inherited has, by now, been strained to the breaking point. The principle of religious diver-

sity based on common biblical and classical values has given way to "alternate lifestyles," while ambition has been emptied, both in fact and in the popular imagination, of moral substance. Perhaps the time is then ripe—and certainly many Americans believe that it is—for a return to "first principles." If, as Aristotle taught, each activity, study, life and community is directed toward a specific inherent good, our ambitions as individuals and as a people can be rendered defensible only in the form of a shared vision of justice. Without this common perspective, we can surely expect a quantum leap in those unhappy family histories that Epstein so eloquently recounts. □

## Chatting About Evil

**Ingeborg Day: *Ghost Waltz*; Viking Press; New York.**

by Christina Murphy

Early into *Ghost Waltz*, Ingeborg Day comments that between 1945 and 1975 alone nearly fifty thousand books were written about Adolf Hitler, and she wonders whether her own book will contribute much toward unraveling the complex tapestry of evil and conflicting values that was Nazi Germany. In a way, she is right to wonder, for *Ghost Waltz* is a probing of one central issue: how the parents Day remembers as loving and kind could have endorsed Hitler's vision, how her father, especially, could have served as a member of the Nazi secret police. *Ghost Waltz's* success thus depends upon two main premises—Day's ability to probe her father's psyche and her ability to relate her father's individual actions to the larger pattern of an understanding of human nature, or at least of human values.

Success eludes Day in her first en-

deavor. She readily admits that her father has remained to her an enigma all her life, a man whose life was closed up and bound by duty and honor, whose rigid and inflexible character made it impossible for his children to feel close to him, a man whom she describes as possessed by "an inability to see any matter from another person's point of view, not a refusal, an inability." Rigidity she perceives as the essence of his character:

Either/or, yes/no, black/white . . .

This slavery held my father captive all his life . . . For a lifetime my father lived as if driven by a machine with only an on/off switch governing emotion and brain, a switch, moreover, that worked only once for any human being or idea.

Perhaps this "on/off switch governing emotion and brain" is a form of blindness, for surely if one is oblivious or dispassionate to the shades of gray in human existence absolute actions become easier to perform and certainly easier to justify. Day perceives that her mother operated in the same manner, blinding herself to what she chose not

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