

from," and explores the shadowy theoretical territory that lies between fact and fiction. Arguing that fiction informed by real-life experience is often more true than self-declared history or biography, she cites the novels and poetry of South African revolutionaries as "testimony" to their search for a physical and artistic homeland. She allies herself with writers who have followed Proust's directive, "Do not be afraid to go too far, for the truth lies beyond." These include Naguib Mafouz in Egypt, Chinua Achebe in Nigeria, and Amos Oz in Israel, whose fiction was banned in their respective countries, as hers was in South Africa, for revealing unpleasant political and social realities. This slender book is most involving when Gordimer speaks of trying to "write her way out" of her adopted country's physical and cultural boundaries. One wishes that the personal and critical honesty had to contend with less theory, which nearly obscures her considerable wisdom. Gordimer manipulates her Barthes, Said, and Lukacs well, but they seem beside the point when she tells us plainly in her own words how "fiction is an enactment of life."

Alfred Kazin, now 80 years old and a professor emeritus of English at Hunter College, provides a clear-eyed analysis of 20th-century literary history as it parallels his own career. He regrets the "tides of ideology" that have swamped the reader "mercilessly" since the 1960s, and, unlike Gordimer, he has little patience for the "guidance" that too dogmatic—or abstract—a theory can impose on the impressionable reader. "Only in an age so fragmented," he growls, "can presumably literate persons speak of Dante, Beethoven, or Tolstoy as 'dead white European males.'"

Kazin interweaves personal with literary anecdotes to show that living, writing, and reading are necessarily intimate. Indeed, all his personal stories are literary, and one gets the impression that, from the moment he was "shaken and seized" by *Oliver Twist* at the age of 12, books rather than events have marked the significant moments in his life.

Kazin might flinch at Gordimer's theorizing, but when he bears witness to the intermingling of writers' lives with their art, his testimony is not unlike hers. In particular, he recalls how the writings of Hannah Arendt and Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz made clear to him, an American Jew, "the European agony we did not experience." At such moments, he and Gordimer share the same sensibility: writing does not merely record human "experience"; it shows that life is narrative, and it lets the two converge.

Contemporary Affairs

THE NIGHTINGALE'S SONG. By Robert Timberg. Simon & Schuster. 540 pp. \$27.50

In January 1961, John F. Kennedy told the world that the United States was willing to "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship" to advance the cause of world freedom. He struck a chord in the hearts of Americans of his generation who believed in America's special mission abroad and thought military service a duty and an honor. How dramatically things had changed by April 1975, when the Ford administration ordered the emergency evacuation of the United States embassy in Saigon. America had suffered through an unpopular and devastating war that spawned enormous social upheaval and, as Timberg puts it, opened a "generational fault line" between those who served (as Timberg himself did) and those who did not.

His book is about this fault line and how it endured to contribute to the election of Ronald Reagan and to his administration's involvement in the Iran-contra affair. Timberg, deputy chief of the *Baltimore Sun's* Washington bureau, pursues his theme through fascinating portraits of five prominent Vietnam veterans who were also, like him, graduates of the U.S. Naval Academy—John S. McCain III, Robert C. "Bud" McFarlane, Oliver L. North, Jr., John M. Poindexter, and James H. Webb III. These five men, so different in character and personality, shared an "unassailable belief in America" which led them to distinguish them-

selves in action in Vietnam. McCain's ordeal was the most notorious: as a prisoner subjected to humiliation and brutality in the Hanoi Hilton, he held to the military's highest standards of honor and courage. (McCain is now a U.S. senator from Arizona.)

The physical and emotional trauma of the war was only a portion of its legacy for the five men (and for hundreds of thousands of other veterans). They returned home to "hostility, contempt, ridicule, at best indifference." Little wonder, then, that the fault line in the society grew so wide: the spat-upon veterans came to view the pious activists who surreptitiously (or illegally) evaded service with an equal measure of moral contempt.

For the most part, Timberg's subjects managed to get on with their lives after the war and make successful careers. But for McFarlane, North, and Poindexter, he argues, something was missing. They had been "stunned into silence" by the hostility and ridicule of their fellow Americans. Timberg likens them to nightingales, who find their voice only when they hear another nightingale sing. Ronald Reagan's full-throated patriotism and generous praise for Vietnam veterans restored their voices, even as it provided "resonance" for the message in Webb's novels and "mood music" for the emerging politician McCain, who had remained "silent by choice."

In 1984, the Congress—full of individuals who had not served in Vietnam and could not appreciate "what it meant to be bloody, hungry and out of ammunition"—voted to cut off all aid to the contras in Nicaragua. Determined that the United States not betray another ally, as it had South Vietnam, and seduced by patriotism's song, North, McFarlane, and Poindexter became involved in a covert plan to support the contras with proceeds from Iranian arms sales. They acted for what they thought good and noble reasons, and they suffered eventual rebuke on both sides of the fault line.

For all but the seasoned ornithologist, Timberg's governing metaphor is strained. The considerable strength of his book lies rather in the wealth of stories through which he gives individuality to each of his five prin-

cipal characters and makes of their collective histories a vivid account of America's social and political climate from the morass of Vietnam to the quicksand of Iran-contra.

THE TYRANNY OF NUMBERS:

Mismeasurement and Misrule. By Nicholas Eberstadt. AEI Press. 310 pp. \$24.95

We Americans are allowing statistics to rule us and drive public policy, argues Eberstadt, a visiting fellow of the Harvard University Center for Population and Development Studies and a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. But how do statistics gain ascendancy, and what happens when we cede control to them? Eberstadt takes aim not at any specific political ideology but at the faith we now place in the official figures collected by governments. He believes that, despite current doubts about the future of the nation-state and its centralized methods of governance, the rise of public sectors in free societies has yet to reach its peak: "The modern voter and his agents have demonstrated already that they are quite capable of inveighing against the heavy burden of an excessive government even as they militate for additional state subventions." Because more will be at stake in the political redistribution of resources, the need for reliable data—from governments and other sources—will grow, and the data will continue to inform politics.

Eberstadt analyzes contentious public claims about social problems by examining how numbers are constructed for the purposes of argument. On the controversial issue of poverty in America, for example, he insists that "the poverty rate" itself is "an arbitrary and, in some ways, a seriously misleading statistical indicator" because it focuses on income rather than consumption. That focus resulted, Eberstadt explains, from a federal agency's unwillingness 30 years ago to collect information about expenditures because data about income were already available. Having a different (and less alarming) measure for material deprivation, Eberstadt argues, would create a different public debate about poverty.