horrors: "For more than a century after Luther's death, Europe was strewn with the slaughtered corpses of people who would have lived normal lives if Luther had never lived at all." Marius cannot shake his awareness of the enduring consequences of the man's actions, for better and for worse. Luther's translation of the Bible helped shape the modern German language, but his nationalism and his insistence that people obey their rulers helped shape modern Germany.

Born in 1483 into a Europe haunted by death and plague, by skepticism, and by threats to belief, Martin Luther became a monk after he endured a terrifying apparition on a country road during a thunderstorm. Marius argues that he was impelled throughout his life by an overwhelming fear of death as nothingness. For Luther, religion was the means of conquering death through belief in the Jesus Christ of Scripture, which the individual Christian could interpret without direction from the church. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church, its superstitions, and its hated pope had to go.

By his early thirties, Luther was a figure to reckon with, ready to set himself against centuries of Catholic practice, as he did in challenging indulgences and sacraments. He was declared a heretic by Emperor Charles V after a showdown with the secular and religious authorities at the Diet of Worms in 1521. "By 1526," writes Marius, "the most creative part of his life was over, and his ceaseless battles with adversaries descended often into repetitive invective and vituperation that weary the soul." Many of those adversaries were Luther's fellow reformers, but he became as doctrinaire as a pope in resistance to their claims. Although Marius acknowledges that the final two decades of Luther's life merit fresh consideration, he confesses that he is not the man for the job. It takes a wise biographer to beg off.

Marius devotes much of the book to considering the key texts through which Luther evolved and spread his beliefs (the American edition of Luther's works runs to 55 volumes). The author admirably explains the theology, but contemporary readers, free to worship the planet Pluto if they choose, may tire of the furious old controversies. In a way, our freedom is part of Luther's legacy, because the scourge of religious war unleashed by his rebellion against the Catholic Church led in time to an age of reason (though not of reasonableness). That consequence would have appalled him, but readers of this book may see it as a nice justice—a divine justice, even.

—James Morris

BUILDING A PROTESTANT LEFT: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941–1993.

By Mark Hulsether.
Univ. of Tenn. Press. 400 pp. $38

Some readers may prefer to retitle this book *Dismantling a Protestant Left*. In the wake of Vietnam, black power, and women's liberation, the more-or-less unified Protestant left of World War II—pro-labor, pro-Allies, pro-Niebuhrian realism—was split in fragments. *Christianity and Crisis* magazine tried to bridge the gaps, both inside and outside the church. But, in the view of many centrist observers, the bridging efforts simply endorsed identity politics, exacerbated the divisions, and, ultimately, doomed *Christianity and Crisis*. For these critics, the magazine's heroic founding generation—including Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett—was ill served by its successors, who fell victim to the same utopian longings that Niebuhr and Bennett had tried to foil in the 1940s.

But Hulsether, a professor of religious studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is shrewd to stick to his "building" metaphor. To begin with, the fragmentation that afflicted liberal Protestantism (and liberalism generally) after Vietnam was not altogether new. Rather, it was an extension of splits that developed in the late 1940s and 1950s between hawks and doves, and between cultural traditionalists and modernists on such issues as sexual morality. In addition, Bennett himself, as chairman of the *Christianity and Crisis* editorial board in the late 1960s and senior contributing editor in the early 1970s, sought some accommodation with anti-war, feminist, and minority groups, which were—rightly, in his view, and Hulsether's—demanding structural reforms in race relations, education, family, and treatment of the poor at home and abroad.

In Hulsether's judgment, the magazine's demise in 1993 is not evidence that it should have stuck to its original Niebuhrian guns. Even Niebuhr, before his death in 1971, was questioning his earlier Cold War militancy, especially on the morality of nuclear deterrence. Rather than signaling the failure of pro-

gressive liberalism, the death of *Christianity and Crisis* resulted from collapsed bridges linking liberal sub-movements—gays and lesbians, environmentalists, feminists, African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. Liberalism's voices simply grew too numerous for a single magazine to encompass. So, in Hulsether's view, religious and secular liberalism may be stronger than we think.

But if liberals are going to reassert themselves, as Hulsether hopes, they will need to take better stock of the intellectual power of the conservative forces arrayed against them. The "democratic capitalism" of Michael Novak and Peter Berger (both former contributors to the magazine), which seemed ridiculous to many social-justice liberals in the 1970s and 1980s, does not look quite so laughable now. To mount a new assault on inequality, religious liberals will have to reexamine their presuppositions about freedom and individual responsibility, as many black intellectuals such as Orlando Patterson and Stephen Carter have been doing. That kind of intellectual reexamination is the aspect of Bennett's Christian pragmatism that contemporary leftists should be most eager to emulate.

—*Richard Wightman Fox*

Arts & Letters

DANGEROUS WATER:
A Biography of the Boy Who Became Mark Twain.
By Ron Powers. Basic. 328 pp. $24

Most literary biography leaves the image of a sour old man in pince-nez and tweeds chasing a fabulous butterfly. Sometimes he nabs the creature and pins it to his corkboard. Often he misses it altogether. In either case, we spend far too much time with the lumbering academic and not nearly enough time with his prey.

That's not the case with this account of Mark Twain's early years. It's easy to see how Powers won a Pulitzer in 1973; he writes marvelously. Also—equally important—he knows when to shut up. In an era when well-meaning hacks cheerfully rework the King James Bible, Powers lets his subjects speak. He quotes Twain, of course, but also his doltish brother, Orion, as well as newspaper accounts, letters, other historians, any source of light.

Because there's so little cotton batting, one comes almost immediately on the raw nature of the boy who became Mark Twain, a nature quite out of the ordinary before he ever wrote a word. In the summer of 1844, for instance, when he was eight, measles swept through Hannibal, Missouri. Each day, more children died. "The mothers of the town were nearly demented with fright," Twain later recalled. When his best friend came down with the disease, Twain sneaked into his house, was thrown out, sneaked in again, and climbed into bed with the sick boy. "It was a good case of measles that resulted," Twain wrote later. "It brought me within a shade of death's door. . . . I have never enjoyed anything in my life any more than I enjoyed dying that time." Courage? Excessive sympathy? A desperate need for attention? Who knows, but this is not your average youth.

Another great flaw in literary biography is that writers often lead dull lives. Not Twain. He saw men shot and knifed to death, saw them drown, saw a white man murder a slave with a lump of iron ore—all before he was 11 years old.

Fortunately for us, his brother had a print shop, and by the time Twain was 12 he was working there, sitting on a box in order to reach the type cases, puffing on a cigar. "As he worked and smoked," Powers writes, "he was building his literary consciousness letter by letter, word by word, line by line. More than the adventure books of his young boyhood, more even than the Bible, these years of typesetting would anneal him to language by making it a tactile presence in his hands, with weight and shape and scent, the scent of the ink. The paradigm of typesetting remained a lifelong guiding principle of Mark Twain's writing and even speaking style. As fast and torrentially as his work could flow, 20 man-