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Review Essay
American Synecdoche:
Thomas Jefferson as Image, Icon, Character, and Self

JAN LEWIS and PETER S. ONUF

GREAT MEN STRIDE ACROSS THE PAGES of popular history, determining the fate of nations. In the modern era, the lives of revolutionary leaders have been inextricably linked with the histories of the states they founded. America's Thomas Jefferson was neither Russia's Lenin nor China's Mao, nor, he himself would have assured us, was he Europe's Napoleon Bonaparte, the founder and destroyer of countless states. Jefferson did not have the talents or inclination or opportunity to impose his will on his countrymen; modest and self-effacing, he had to share a crowded stage with the large cast of revolutionary heroes arrayed around George Washington, the father of his country. Yet perhaps it was the very modesty of Jefferson's personal ambitions, epitomized by the claim that his Declaration of Independence was intended "to be an expression of the American mind" (and not of his own imperious will) that has made him such a compelling and resonant figure in the American historical imagination.¹ As historian James Parton put it in 1874, and Jefferson biographers have repeated ever since, "If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right."² More recently, filmmaker Ken Burns has said that "one approaches Thomas Jefferson with the sense that he is, in a biographical sense, the Holy Grail of American history."³ Pauline Maier has suggested that it is not so much Jefferson as the Declaration of Independence that has been sacralized, "remade into a sacred text, a statement of basic, enduring truths often described with words borrowed from the vocabulary of religion."⁴ As with Lenin and Mao, whether the focus is on Jefferson himself or the document with which he is most closely associated, and whether one worships him or calls him

The authors thank Joyce Appleby, Edward Ayers, James Goodman, and James Grimmelman for helpful suggestions; they also note their personal involvement with the Ken Burns film (see text below) and two of the books discussed below. Onuf was the supervisor of Andrew Burstein's dissertation, subsequently published as *The Inner Jefferson*, which Lewis reviewed for the University Press of Virginia. Lewis read Annette Gordon-Reed's *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings* prior to publication; Onuf reviewed the manuscript for the University Press of Virginia.

¹ Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in *Thomas Jefferson Writings*, Merrill Peterson, ed. (New York, 1984), 1501.

² See, for example, Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 234; Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), 3.

³ See Public Broadcasting Service web site for *Thomas Jefferson: A Film by Ken Burns*, available from World Wide Web at http://www.pbs.org/jefferson/making/KB_00.htm.

⁴ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1997), xviii.

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