



UNIVERSITY of
HAWAII
PRESS

BIOGRAPHICAL FRAUD AND TRAUMATIC NATIONALISM: JOSEPH ELLIS'S VIETNAM TESTIMONY

Author(s): MARK MASLAN

Source: *Biography*, fall 2006, Vol. 29, No. 4 (fall 2006), pp. 605-614

Published by: University of Hawai'i Press on behalf of Center for Biographical Research

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23540629>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



and University of Hawai'i Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Biography*

JSTOR

SKETCHES FROM LIFE

**BIOGRAPHICAL FRAUD
AND TRAUMATIC NATIONALISM:
JOSEPH ELLIS'S VIETNAM TESTIMONY**

MARK MASLAN

What does lying about one's past have to do with being American? This is the question I found myself asking in the spring of 2001, after the *Boston Globe* reported that the eminent historian Joseph Ellis had invented a Vietnam War record for himself. For years, the prize-winning presidential biographer and professor of history at Mount Holyoke had been telling students and journalists about serving under General Westmoreland, patrolling near My Lai, and joining the antiwar movement after being discharged. In fact, the paper revealed, he spent the entire period quietly teaching history at West Point.

The question reflected my sense that Ellis was impatient with narrating American history from the sidelines. As a teacher, historian, and public figure, he seems to have felt that his nationality demanded more of him—and that he could meet that demand only by rewriting his life story. But my question also reflected my encounters with other recent cases, both factual and fictional, in which the falsification of life stories appeared to be bound up with the desire to freight them with national significance. Such cases are not all morally equivalent. Lies differ in degree and kind, and to celebrate a character's prevarications as a realization of nationality in a novel the way Philip Roth does in *The Human Stain*, for example, is quite different from indulging in such behavior oneself in real life, as did Ellis.¹ The equivalence of such stories lies not in their moral import but in the aspirations they express.

Biography 29.4 (Fall 2006) © Biographical Research Center

Psychiatry offers one way of understanding such aspirations. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association classifies the self-aggrandizing liar as a victim of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (658–61). But this diagnosis answers the question of *why* Ellis lied only by raising a more difficult one concerning *what* he lied about. For it seems fair to say that the Vietnam War was not one of the grander events in American history, and Ellis, for all his inventiveness, did not suggest otherwise. We can dispose of the question of why he lied only by also explaining how his feigned participation in what he himself saw as an episode of national defeat and disgrace might serve as a source of self-aggrandizement.

This question demands a cultural explanation as well as a psychological one. After all, Ellis is not the only one to have been caught lying about service in Vietnam. “Epidemic is an understatement,” according to Larry Bailey, a former Navy SEAL whose web site, *cyberseals.org*, once featured a “wall of shame with hundreds of names” of fake SEALs on it (Campbell). Another Vietnam veteran, B. G. Burkett, complains that “Thousands of liars and phonies, celebrated in the media, have stolen the valor of the dead to claim as their own” (590).² In his book *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation Was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*, Burkett suggests several motives for why people lie about serving in Vietnam, including to get veterans’ benefits, “to excuse their failures . . . to polish their professional image, to hide criminal behavior, to get attention, to extort money from sympathetic people, even to get elected” (176). But Edmund Morris, who fictionalized his own past in order to coordinate it with his subject’s in his controversial biography *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, suggests a broader cultural motive.³ In a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece, Morris suggests that by claiming to have served in Vietnam, Ellis was merely trying, like any good historian (himself included), to bring American history to life for his audience. “As a fellow communicator, I can understand his urgent desire—Only connect!—to convey the divisiveness of the 60’s to a generation rendered comatose by MTV,” Morris writes; and “how better to awake their interest than to say . . . ‘I was there’” (“Imaginations”).

According to Morris, Ellis wanted not just to teach his students what happened in Vietnam, but to make them feel as though they were “there” by proclaiming that he had been. And this is indeed what seems to have occurred when Ellis lectured to a hushed auditorium about being in the vicinity of My Lai shortly before the massacre. “I recall this ominous silence when he said that,” a former student told *The Washington Post*; “I know what was on my mind was, ‘Wow, how does a man live with that? He’s been there’” (Ferdinand, “Historian’s”). By offering himself as not just an historian of the

Vietnam War but an *embodiment* of it, Ellis fostered in his students the illusion of personal contact with events in American history that neither he nor they had actually experienced. This is why, although Burkett sees lies like Ellis's as offenses against history, Morris sees them as attempts to make history matter. For history to matter to us, Morris implies, we must be able to "connect" it with ourselves—that is, to experience it as somehow our own. The fact that history consists almost entirely of events and experiences that happened to others therefore constitutes a fundamental challenge to the historian—one to which he or she must seek other than merely factual solutions. One such solution is to pose as someone who *did* experience the events in question. If Ellis "appropriated an authority that was not his," then, as the President of Mount Holyoke acknowledged in announcing his year-long suspension, it was because he wanted his students to feel connected with American history (Ferdinand, "Professor"). According to this view, robbing the dead is just part of the historian's job.

Yet this formulation overstates the difference between Ellis and Morris, on one hand, and Burkett on the other. In arguing that frauds like Ellis "have stolen the valor of the dead to claim as their own," Burkett suggests that the past should be considered the inalienable property of those who underwent it—so inalienable, in fact, that it remains theirs even in death. While it seems uncontroversial to condemn Ellis for falsifying his past, however, it is unclear why this should involve assigning ownership of the past to the dead. For whatever arguments might be offered in support of the already debatable idea that our experiences while living constitute a kind of property would appear to be mooted by our death, since the dead, being nonexistent, cannot hold *any* kind of property. By complaining that the dead have been robbed of their property, therefore, Burkett treats them as though they were in some sense still alive. From this standpoint, Ellis's most fundamental offense may be not that he misrepresented his own past, but that in attempting to reincarnate the past and its inhabitants, he failed to acknowledge that they not only had, but *continue* to have, an existence of their own. But to put the conflict this way is to highlight the fact that both sides locate the meaning of the past not in its pastness but in its presence. The only question between them is whether the dead are already present (in which case impersonating them means violating their rights), or whether they need to be made so. In other words, whereas Ellis and Morris believe we need to be connected with the dead by means of some fictional or fictitious device, Burkett thinks that we can repair that connection only by exposing people like Ellis as liars. Neither side is prepared to acknowledge that such a connection is impossible.

For Burkett, as for Ellis and Morris, then, the claims of identity—the abiding identity of the dead and our identity *with* them—rule out any categorical distinction between past and present. This may help explain why Ellis claimed proximity to the My Lai Massacre when trying to make his students feel connected with the Vietnam era. While Burkett expresses abhorrence of what American troops did at My Lai, he is no less incensed at how the massacre, which he considers “an aberration” (138), has come to exemplify America’s conduct of the war in the media and in popular perception. He sees this as the work of “a handful of antiwar activists,” including psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, who claimed that “My Lai epitomizes the Vietnam War not only because *every* returning soldier can tell of a similar incident . . . but also because it is an expression of the psychological state characteristic for Americans fighting that war” (Knoll 106). According to Burkett, such statements illustrate how My Lai was used by the antiwar movement to pathologize the war. “The goal of the left was to show that the Vietnam conflict was so immoral it permanently damaged the psyches of those who fought it,” he writes (233). The culmination of that effort, Burkett claims, was the official recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, largely on the basis of case studies involving Vietnam veterans. Burkett questions the factual basis of many of these studies, including that of one man, identified only as “the My Lai survivor” by Lifton, who claimed to have witnessed the massacre.⁴

Yet if PTSD appears to Burkett to be part of a leftist conspiracy to rob America’s dead, it can also be understood as a model for just the sort of relation to history that he himself envisions. As Judith Herman explains in *Trauma and Recovery*, “Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (37). In other words, PTSD effects the same equation of past and present in the mind of the sufferer that Burkett, Ellis, and Morris all seek. Furthermore, Herman claims that the victim’s trauma can be transmitted to his or her audience: “Trauma is contagious. In the role of witness to disaster or atrocity, the therapist . . . may begin to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. . . . She may also notice imagery associated with the patient’s story intruding into her own waking fantasies or dreams” (140).

This “traumatic countertransference” may pose dangers for therapists and their clients, but it offers promise to those in search of a basis for the idea of *historical* transference—that is, the idea that history transmits identity. With the belief that “trauma is contagious” comes the possibility of past events recurring continually in the present not only for those who originally experienced them but also for those who were not even alive when they occurred. “Trauma’s ‘contagion,’” writes Cathy Caruth, “is also its only possibility for transmission,” and transmission is the only way victims can transcend “historical isolation” (*Trauma*, 10–11). Trauma thus provides a mechanism for making the past personally immediate to people who did not experience it. By lecturing about My Lai, then, Ellis was drawing attention to an event in American history that presumably continues to be *vivid* for some of those present at the time—it continually recurs—and highly *communicable* to those who were not. But for My Lai to work its magic on his audience, Ellis needed somebody who had actually experienced the trauma at first-hand.⁵ “The basic model for . . . transmission is the face-to-face encounter between a victim . . . and a witness who listens and is in turn contaminated by the catastrophe,” Ruth Leys explains (284). When Ellis claimed to have been nearby, he was thus assuming the aura of an event whose traumatic content as an American atrocity allowed it to be transformed from a source of national conflict into a vehicle for national affiliation.⁶ The concept of trauma allowed him to see the disgrace of My Lai as a vehicle for self-aggrandizement, and this narcissistic urge thereby assumed a nationalistic purpose. For insofar as events in American history such as the My Lai Massacre seem to *live*—insofar as Americans continue to “live with” them—they seem to belong not just to the past or the dead (or the Vietnamese) but to us.

Transforming My Lai into a site of American trauma, however, was not what got Joseph Ellis in trouble. That curious evolution began shortly after the first reports of the massacre, when Lifton dubbed his patient “the My Lai survivor.” It was not Ellis’s desire to identify with American history, but what he believed this required of him, that was the problem. In fact, identification with victims is widely advocated by academic trauma theorists, if sometimes with qualifications. While Dominick LaCapra acknowledges that “it is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim,” for example, he nevertheless argues that “empathic unsettlement,” which he defines as “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position,” can enable historians “to come to terms with the wounds and scars of the past”—which is to say, with historical events in which they did not take part. LaCapra suggests why he thinks historians need to do this when he describes their task as “involving both an objective . . . reconstruction

of the past and a dialogic exchange with it" (78, 42, 35). This statement implies that he rejects full identification because that would entail speaking for the past instead of allowing it to speak with us. From this standpoint, Ellis's effort to make the past speak through him could only in fact silence it. But LaCapra does not ask whether it is desirable or indeed possible for the psychic wounds of history to speak to us. Instead, assuming that the traumatic events of the past not only outlive their victims but continue to call out for response after their victims' demise, he assigns historians the task of listening and responding to what they say.

The most fundamental question raised by the Ellis scandal is not the rather narrow one of whether we should try to encounter the traumas of history through identification or through empathy, but whether we can *encounter* them at all. By staging his identification with American history as *identity* with it, Ellis tried to dodge that question. He felt personally connected with the Vietnam debacle because he was *there*, and through him, his students were too. At the same time, the desperate nature of his deceit suggests that, for him as for Burkett, mere identification is no substitute for having been there. For what, after all, are our grounds for identification with historical events such as the My Lai Massacre? One answer we have been exploring is that these events were not only experienced in the past but continue to be experienced in the present—that My Lai, for example, lives on in the flashbacks of the participants and the secondary trauma of their auditors. And yet, to the extent that the experience in question is what Herman calls "vicarious," or what LaCapra calls "virtual," this answer begs the question, since these are *examples* of identification, not grounds for it (Herman, 140). The psychiatrist who is traumatized by treating a participant in the My Lai Massacre may share her patient's symptoms—imagery associated with his story may even intrude into her dreams—but she does not thereby partake of the massacre itself. Identifying with someone's suffering is not the same thing as having shared the history that caused it.⁷ This is why Ellis claimed that he *did* participate in Vietnam. What makes his story important is the way it confuses personal history with national history in an attempt to justify our identification with events in the past in which we played no role.⁸ His lies substitute for such a justification. And the fact that he did lie about his past suggests that, for him, merely being American is not enough. For while our nationality will eventually turn our lives into elements of American history, it does not automatically turn events in American history into the substance of our lives.

* * * * *



Memorial Day, 1996, Brooklyn, New York. At the Vietnam Wall Experience, a traveling replica of the Washington, D.C. Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Wall, Roni DeJoseph identifies himself as a US Marine veteran who fought in Viet Nam. Six weeks later, federal officials reported that Mr. DeJoseph did not serve with the Marines in Vietnam (*The Dallas Morning News* 13 July 1996) (AP Photo/Adam Nadel).

In his book *Past Imperfect*, a survey of recent scandals in American historiography, Peter Charles Hoffner portrays the field as burdened by the divergent obligations of celebrating “the strength and achievements of past generations,” on one hand, and “instruct[ing] us by bitter example and self-examination on the other.” When historians of the United States like Ellis violate professional norms, he believes, it is because “they tried to shoulder that burden, and in different ways it proved too heavy for them” (2). Hoffner views Ellis’s fabrications as misguided attempts at the “bitter example” school of history: “Ellis, who had opposed the Viet Nam War, had found a way to pass on that opposition to a generation that did not experience the war as his had. It was moral instruction if not a moral method. Or perhaps that is what he told himself” (225). One purpose of this essay has been to suggest that the two principles described by Hoffner are not so different as they might appear. Why consider American history a source of pride *or* shame unless we consider it *our* history? And why should we do that if we were not there at the time? In the

past, we might have answered this question by appealing to concepts of trans-historical identity, such as race and nation. Since those concepts have recently been historicized, we now turn to history itself for an answer. History, it is argued, is traumatic, and trauma, it is further argued, allows us to experience history as our own.⁹ Once our relation to the past is thus established, we may struggle over its affective content by devoting ourselves to balancing our pride and our shame in the manner Hoffner describes. This is what Ellis's students were doing when they learned to oppose a war that ended before they were born. To do this, however, is to accept the pursuit of an affective relation to history, such as La Capra's "empathic unsettlement," as a valid goal of the historical enterprise. In the case of United States history, this also means accepting the nationalist project in its contemporary, traumatic form, according to which what matters most is not *what* we feel about the national past, but *that* we feel about it, since by so doing, we perpetuate the illusion that it belongs to each of us.

The lesson of the Ellis scandal is that such illusory bonds cannot be maintained except at the cost of the truth. By lying about his wartime activities, Ellis tacitly acknowledged that mere identification with the past is not enough to make us one with it. Some grounds for identification are needed, and in the absence of racial or national grounds, only personal history will suffice. When Ellis lied, he misled his students not only about his past, but also about what history can do for us. His error was methodological as well as moral. Once we recognize the significance of his deception, perhaps we can acknowledge the untenable nature of the nationalist enterprise it was intended to sustain. Then we can liberate ourselves from the chimerical obligation to experience history, and focus instead on understanding it.

NOTES

1. On *The Human Stain*, see my essay "The Faking of the Americans."
2. Burkett's is the only book on its subject and therefore an important resource for my discussion of the Ellis scandal and related cases. But this self-published volume, which comes heavily endorsed by top military brass, is also part of the ongoing, often angry, debate about the war and the conduct of those who fought it. While this aspect of the book adds to its interest as a cultural artifact, it also accounts for its problematic blend of factual information and politically motivated speculation. Luckily, Burkett is forthright in distinguishing documented fact from what he would probably consider educated guesswork. In my discussion of *Stolen Valor*, I have attempted to balance my reliance on its considerable factual content with analysis of its identitarian rhetoric. An evaluation of Burkett's view of the war is beyond the scope of this essay.
3. On *Dutch*, see my essay "Telling to Live the Tale: Ronald Reagan, Edmund Morris, and Postmodern Nationalism."

4. On the “My Lai Survivor,” see Lifton 36–43.
5. The late Walter Capps of the Religious Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, handled this problem when teaching a celebrated course on the Vietnam War by inviting veterans to address his students. According to Burkett, however, the military records of the speakers were never checked, and at least one, Dan Gisel, “a lynchpin of this class for a decade,” made up most of what he told the class (431–34). Literary scholars like Cathy Caruth substitute encounters with texts for face to face encounters with victims on the theory that the failure of reference that characterizes literature is itself traumatic in nature. See Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*. For criticism of this view, see Michaels.
6. Duncan Campbell finds it ironic that “20 years ago, people were more likely to have told lies in order to cover up their involvement in the Vietnam war . . . because of its association with failure and humiliation. It is only in the last few years,” he claims, “that Vietnam veterans have started to emerge as heroic figures in the American media and with that realignment have come the stories.” My point is that the Ellis scandal shows how the “failure and humiliation” of the war have themselves become objects of identification and appropriation. How else to understand cases like that of Patrick Couwenberg, who was removed from his seat on the Los Angeles County Superior Court in 2001 when it was found that he had not served in Vietnam as he had claimed on his job application? According to Campbell, Couwenberg claimed to have “been awarded a Purple Heart after being wounded in the groin by stray shrapnel” while “acting as a CIA operative working underground in Laos during the Vietnam war.” Surely the paradigm for national identification in a case like this is not masculine heroism but emasculating trauma. This is not exactly to say, however, that pseudo-veterans like Couwenberg and Ellis are not examples of self-aggrandizement. Ellis also lied about being a high school football star and a civil rights activist. These are textbook examples of grandiosity. One of the questions I am trying to answer here is how claiming connection with something as shameful as My Lai might also fit that description.
7. Caruth seems to confuse historical cause with traumatic effect in this manner when she suggests that trauma’s transmission can alleviate victims’ “historical isolation.” My point is that even in cases where trauma is transmitted from patient to psychiatrist, or victim to historian, the historical event that caused the initial trauma is not. The event is distinct from the pathological response it may engender. Indeed, events are not traumatic *in themselves*: an accident or atrocity may induce trauma in one witness but not in another. So while transmission may be thought to make the experience of *trauma* accessible, it does not follow that it makes the experience of *historical events* such as My Lai accessible.
8. Ordinarily, identification with the experiences of others requires no special justification. We may use our imaginations to put ourselves in the place of another without implying any real claim to that person’s experience, and indeed we do so constantly. The problem arises when such imaginative *identification* is expected to engender some form of *identity* with that person, such that his or her experience actually becomes ours. Then we must ask what justifies this expectation. For trauma theory, the answer is traumatic contagion. I critique this idea in the previous note.

9. In the more sophisticated versions of trauma theory exemplified by Caruth, this argument relies on a view of history as dispossession: we escape isolation through a collective experience of loss. For a critique of this view, see my essay "The Faking of the Americans."

WORKS CITED

- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 4th ed. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994.
- Burkett, B. G., and Glenna Whitley. *Stolen Valor: How the Vietnam Generation was Robbed of its Heroes and its History*. Dallas: Verity, 1998.
- Campbell, Duncan. "Tin Soldiers." *The Guardian* 22 Aug. 1999. <http: www.guardian.co.uk>.
- Caruth, Cathy, ed. and intro. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Ferdinand, Pamela. "A Historian's Embellished Life." *Washington Post* 23 June 2001: C1.
- . "Professor Suspended for Lying." *Washington Post* 18 Aug. 2001: A2.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1993.
- Hoffner, Peter Charles. *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud—American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin*. New York: Public Affairs, 2004.
- Knoll, Erwin, and Judith Nies McFadden, eds. *War Crimes and the American Conscience*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999.
- Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000.
- Lifton, Robert Jay. *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.
- Maslan, Mark. "The Faking of the Americans: Passing, Trauma, and National Identity in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*." *MLQ* 66.3 (Sept. 2005): 365–89.
- . "Telling to Live the Tale: Ronald Reagan, Edmund Morris, and Postmodern Nationalism." *Representations* forthcoming.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. "'You Who Never Was There': Slavery and the New Historicism—Deconstruction and the Holocaust." *The Americanization of the Holocaust*. Ed. Hilene Flanzbaum. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999. 181–97.
- Morris, Edmund. *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*. New York: Random House, 1999.
- . "Just Our Imaginations, Running Away." *New York Times* 22 June 2001: A21.