

## Book Reviews

*Ideas are a capital that bears interest only in the hands of talent.*  
Rivarol

Higgs, Robert J. *Laurel and Thorn: The Athlete in American Literature*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1981. Pp. xi, 196. Index, notes. \$15.00.

Robert Higgs is a professor of English at East Tennessee State University, and *Laurel and Thorn* is the outgrowth of his M. A. Thesis and Ph.D. Dissertation at the University of Tennessee. In an earlier book Higgs collaborated with Neil Isaacs to produce an anthology, *The Sporting Spirit: Athletes in Literature and Life* (See *Journal of Sport History*, Winter, 1978) which contains many of the authors and works discussed in *Laurel and Thorn*.

The purpose of the book is, stated very simply, to examine the athlete in American literature as a symbol of American culture in the 20th Century. Higgs has chosen to exclude popular literature and juvenile fiction, and deal with authors who have "literary and social significance" and works that "treat of the athlete in some significant way." (p. ix). Although some may find the criteria too vague, Higgs' choices should allay the doubts.

The opening philosophical and theoretical chapter which sets "The Game Plan," begins with the deceptively simple question, "Who is the athlete?" The answer is anything but simple, and leads to other questions. The athlete, says Higgs, is like all men a combination of body and self. The self seeks to direct the body both on and off the field, and therefore the study of the heroics of the athlete cannot be isolated to the playing field. In dealing with the question, "What is the self?" Higgs answers that the self consists of both mind and soul. "If the soul is the impulse toward order, toward a healing of the cosmic crack, the mind appears to be that side of self which is conscious of the crack or flaw in the first place." (p. 3). He borrows Richard Hofstadter's description of the two parts of the mind—intelligence and intellect. The athlete, as athlete, uses intelligence, which is that part of the mind that seizes "the immediate meaning in a situation and evaluates it." He also has intellect, which along with intelligence and the soul, constitutes the self. The story of the struggle of the self to overcome the body, to achieve the victory over nature or death, is the universal struggle of man for wholeness. This is why

the athlete, who conducts the struggle in the public arena, achieves the status of hero. It is the "quality of athletic heroism in American literature" which is the "major theme" of this book. (p. 6). And the basic questions are: "what is the quality of athletic heroism . . . in relation to the whole social mythos?" and "What does the athlete hero expect for his accomplishments and why and what praise by hero-worshippers is rendered him and why?" (p. 7).

According to Higgs the athlete in American literature comes in two forms: conformist and rebel, Apollonian and Dionysian. The Apollonian types are the know-it-alls and true believers such as "the busher, the sporting gentleman, the apotheosized WASP, the booster alumnus, the muscular Christian, and the brave new man." (p. 9). The Dionysian type is the natural, familiar as "the babe, bum or beast." (p. 10). There is also a variation of the Dionysian type, the Adonis, a half-way type between the two, often a sacrificial figure. Examples of Adonis are "the folk hero, the fisher king, the scapegoat, the absurd athlete, and the secret Christian." (p. 11). The athletic ideal is the unity of mind and matter, strength and beauty, seeking excellence, *Arete*, which is associated with the Greek term *aidos*, defined as a "sense of duty to an eternal ideal, restraint from wrongdoing, abhorrence of insolence, delight in the toil of the agon." (p. 13). As this ideal fragmented after the turn of the century, American writers commented on the development, both condemning and praising the athlete and his admirers, within the controlling myths of Apollo, Dionysus and Adonis.

The balance of the book explores each of the types and sub-categories in a marvelous tour of 20th Century American literature. Among the Apollonians are Lardner's Jack Keefe, Thurber's Bolinciewicz, and Walker Percy's Lancelot Lamar. Among the Dionysian types are Irwin Shaw's Christian Darling, and Harry Crews' Joe Lon Mackey. Among the Adonis types are London's Pat Glendon, Malamud's Roy Hobbs, Williams' Brick Pollitt, Updike's Rabbit, and James Whitehead's Sonny Joiner. These and many others constitute an impressive array of authors and characters which illuminate American culture and offer an opportunity to comment on the values of that culture.

A sampling of Higgs' accomplishments within each type must suffice here. The analysis of Ring Lardner's Jack "Busher" Keefe presents Keefe as a character of considerable complexity who is at once disturbing and funny, as well as a symbol of American culture. He adds that it is time to return to Lardner's use of the ironic mode to see if modern baseball is really as devoid of humor as modern reporting would indicate.

In the Dionysian type there is a brilliant analysis of Harry Crews' character Joe Lon Mackey from *A Feast of Snakes*. This is a portrait of the self run amok in indulgence, devoid of values or meaning, and a marvelous example of the banality of evil and terror at a personal level. One of the Adonis types is

Faulkner's Labove from *The Hamlet*. He is the Absurd Athlete who pursues the code of *mens sana in corpore sano* in a world that has no idea of its meaning. This is part of the absurdity. Labove is astounded by the commercialism of college football in which he stars, while never aware of the fact that he is used or is a joke. At one point Labove asks the ultimate question about intercollegiate sport: What is a touchdown worth or winning worth to a University? Says Higgs, "Faulkner asked it, and American coaches and alumni have answered it for him. Winning is worth more than anything else on earth . . . As for the worth of a touchdown, it cannot be computed, for touchdowns lead to bowls, advertisements, new cars, magazine feature stories, public office for the asking, and even deification, all at the expense of *aidos*." (p. 161). This may ultimately be the epitaph of American sport.

This book succeeds at several levels. One could not ask for a better survey of the athlete in 20th Century American literature. The examination of characters and values is sophisticated, complex, stimulating and challenging. The use of the mythic types offers an excellent organizing principle and a useful point of departure for analysis. And the analysis itself looks at fundamental questions about values and life, with a critical measurement of modern American sport against the ideal. Because of its richness this is a book that can be, and deserves to be, read again and again. It is not so much a book to be read, as to be intellectually and philosophically wrestled.

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