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A NUCLEAR NARRATIVE: ROBERT OPPENHEIMER, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AND PUBLIC AUTHORITY

DAVID K. HECHT

April 28th, 1954, was a particularly unfortunate day for Robert Oppenheimer. Already he had spent two-and-a-half weeks in front of a specially convened Personnel Security Board, which aimed to determine whether his security clearance for top-secret government work should be restored. Oppenheimer—the physicist whose work on the Manhattan Project and whose subsequent political and public prominence had earned him cultural status as “the father of the atomic bomb”—had requested the hearing to challenge the suspension of his security clearance several months before. The deck was stacked against him; by 1954, he had acquired powerful enemies. Many of these adversaries, newly influential in the first Republican presidential administration in two decades, were disturbed by the radical politics in Oppenheimer’s past, his opposition to the hydrogen bomb, and his continuing reservations about key aspects of nuclear policy.

That day, however, a particularly devastating blow was struck. Edward Teller—himself a veteran of the Manhattan Project and an influential and prominent physicist—testified against Oppenheimer. When asked if he felt his former colleague was a security risk, Teller conceded that Oppenheimer had often acted in ways that were “exceedingly hard to understand.” In fact, Teller continued, “I thoroughly disagreed with him in numerous issues and his actions frankly appeared to me confused and complicated. To this extent I feel that I would like to see the vital interests of the country in hands which I understand better, and therefore trust more” (Stern, *In the Matter* 710). Many of his colleagues in the physics community regarded Teller’s testimony as deep betrayal; some refused to shake his hand afterwards (Weart 180). Teller’s testimony marks an important rift in science policy advising in the Cold War, which can be seen as a contest between Teller’s nuclear enthusiasm and Oppenheimer’s more moderate approach. It also provides an

important clue about how Americans—inside and outside of political circles—decided what sorts of public figures to trust with the daunting responsibility of nuclear weapons. Teller noted that he would prefer advisors that he could “understand better, and therefore trust more.” This is a reasonable enough wish, but its simplicity belies an important reality surrounding nuclear discourse in Cold War America. Not only did Oppenheimer’s supporters and Teller’s have contrasting views on substantive matters of policy, they also had profound differences in how they legitimated scientific and political authority in the first place.

This essay uses the Oppenheimer hearing to explore the role of personal narrative in establishing understandings of—and therefore trust in—cultural icons, particularly scientific ones. I will focus on a particular personal narrative central to the hearing: Oppenheimer’s lengthy self-defense that appeared in the *New York Times* just as his security hearing was beginning. Formally, this narrative was addressed as a letter in response to a list of charges from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). The letter was, however, a full autobiographical sketch; when placed into the official hearing record, it occupied thirteen pages of small, single-spaced type. The text opens with his early life and the beginnings of his professional career, spends much time on his social and intellectual circles as a young man and the radical politics often a part of those associations, and finishes with detailed accounts of his service at Los Alamos and after the war as a technical advisor on nuclear matters. These are not distinct thematic sections, however. Rather, they are woven into a chronological account of his life, together with plentiful detail about family milestones such as his marriage, the death of his father, and friendship with his brother. It is the only autobiographical account that Oppenheimer ever published, which alone renders it of historical interest. However, the letter is also very revealing about the role of personal narrative—as opposed to disaggregated facts, or even other kinds of narratives—in establishing trust.

Loyalty investigations in the McCarthy era were explicitly personal: they necessitated finding ways to ascertain an individual’s true motivations and beliefs, things which potentially lay underneath and at odds with their professed feelings. When confronted with a letter of charges from the Atomic Energy Commission, Oppenheimer—significantly—chose to respond in autobiographical form. He wrote that the charges against him “cannot be fairly understood except in the context of my life and my work” (Stern, *In the Matter* 7).¹ This statement was made at the outset of his letter, and means that his autobiographical sketch must be viewed as more than a means of providing his version of the facts. It was also a statement that personal narrative matters; he invited his audience to judge him personally—what Oppenheimer

scholars such as Charles Thorpe have called the “whole man” approach (*Oppenheimer* 220). Of course, this does not mean that we can take Oppenheimer’s recollections at face value. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have noted, “autobiographical truth is a different matter” than verification. “It is an intersubjective exchange,” they write, “between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (13).

I argue that Oppenheimer’s autobiographical self-defense demonstrates the central role of personal narrative in establishing cultural authority. Specifically, his letter highlights how such a narrative conditions the authority many (though not all) Americans were willing to grant a man who was not only a scientist, but an atomic scientist. In Oppenheimer’s case, the “shared understanding of the meaning of a life” central to autobiographical truth helped readers conceptualize him as a physicist-hero free from the various suspicions and stereotypes that often constructed the atomic scientist as an ambiguous cultural figure. Personal narrative was key to this.

The first section of this article shows how the Oppenheimer hearing can be read as a contest of competing narratives about how to establish trust in a public figure. In this context, Oppenheimer’s autobiographical self-defense becomes more than a compelling presentation of one interpretation of a life; it also functions as an argument that personal narrative was both relevant and essential to adjudicating the issues of credibility and loyalty raised by the charges against him. The second section discusses the role of Oppenheimer’s personal narrative not simply in answering specific accusations, but in continuing to develop his role as a prominent scientific icon. Because of his deep connection with atomic weapons, legitimating Oppenheimer as a public authority worthy of acclaim was not a simple matter. Scientists, particularly nuclear physicists, were complex public figures in the early atomic age; they were objects of a wide range of shifting emotions, such as respect, anxiety, suspicion, mystery, and hope. Oppenheimer’s autobiographical letter implicitly addressed many of these concerns, reflecting the way he came to embody an alternative—and reassuringly moderate—nuclear vision for the country. Finally, a concluding section discusses public reaction to the Oppenheimer case, including an analysis of direct responses to his personal narrative. The case quickly became a cause célèbre, touching a variety of societal nerves about science, political dissent, and national security. This cultural prominence allows us to ask questions about the conditions under which personal narrative is most readily welcomed into political discourse. Despite his stature as an icon of the political (moderate) left, Oppenheimer composed a fairly conservative interpretation of his life to present as self-defense. Temperate tone and conventional form marked his personal narrative. This familiarity gave

his words a cultural reach—and even a degree of radicalism—amid a thawing but still tense Cold War backdrop not fully comfortable with the kind of nonconformist vision a personal narrative can facilitate.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE AS POLITICAL DEFENSE

Oppenheimer's security clearance—necessary for top-secret work in nuclear physics—had been an issue since the earliest days of the Manhattan Project, when some officials argued that his radicalism during the late 1930s should have disqualified him from work on the atomic bomb project. But these questions became far more volatile by 1953, and became widely broadcast the following year, as a result of several political and cultural changes in the early Cold War. Three factors stand out, in addition to the general backdrop of McCarthyism: narrowed criteria for security clearances, Oppenheimer's opposition to key aspects of defense policy, and the ascendancy to power of personal enemies like Lewis Strauss. Strauss, who became head of the Atomic Energy Commission in 1953, had long harbored animosity toward Oppenheimer on both personal and professional grounds, and he initiated a chain of events resulting in a suspension of Oppenheimer's clearance. On December 23rd, K. D. Nichols—an army major general associated with the Manhattan Project since the early days of World War II, and now general manager of the AEC—wrote to the physicist informing him of this development. Oppenheimer requested a hearing to contest the decision, and began his defense with a lengthy autobiographical answer to the charges in Nichols's letter. This self-defense was published in the *New York Times* on April 13, 1954, as the security hearing was beginning. The hearing itself lasted nearly a month, with a specially convened Personnel Security Board ultimately recommending that the suspension of his security clearance be upheld. The AEC itself concurred, and its final word meant that Oppenheimer was officially removed from government service—one day before his clearance was due to expire had there been no suspension or subsequent hearing (Bird and Sherwin 506). Public opinion steadily swung in Oppenheimer's favor during and (especially) after the hearing: editorial consensus in April of 1954 was cautious, but the fundamentally political and exaggerated nature of the charges soon became apparent. Oppenheimer quickly became a martyr figure, extolled by those interested in the right to dissent and those who wished his attempts to moderate the arms race had gotten a fuller hearing.

To a large extent, the Oppenheimer case can be seen as a contest between competing narratives—of Oppenheimer, of atomic policy, and of the proper place of dissent in policy advising. Charles Thorpe, among others, has noted that the charges against Oppenheimer reflected a particular, and influential,

conception of the proper role of the scientific expert in government. "Being a good scientist," Thorpe writes, "was increasingly inseparable from being a good official" ("Disciplining" 550). From this perspective, Oppenheimer was disloyal by the mere fact of difference; his reluctance to support intensive research into the hydrogen bomb, and his advocacy of continental defense rather than thermonuclear strike capability, marked him as suspicious. This "disloyalty" narrative painted Oppenheimer as a scientist who used his expertise to overstep his proper bounds. As part of his public campaign against the physicist, for example, Lewis Strauss quietly supported a 1953 *Fortune* article titled "Hidden Struggle for the H-bomb," in which the hidden struggle was a "campaign to reverse U.S. military strategy." As AEC chairman, Strauss was able to provide extensive information that helped fashion a negative portrayal of Oppenheimer.²

A similar narrative focused on allegations of left-wing activity. These charges made up the bulk of Nichols's letter, which resembled a list, enumerating specific causes for concern: for example, "It was reported that in 1943 and previously you were intimately associated with Dr. Jean Tatlock, a member of the Communist Party in San Francisco," and "It was reported that you were a subscriber to the *Daily People's World*, a west coast Communist newspaper, in 1941 and 1942" (Stern, *In the Matter* 4). There were thirty-eight such charges, many highly detailed.³ The overall effect of the list was imposing. Even Joseph Volpe, an Oppenheimer supporter, looking at his record seven years before it was broadly known, had noted that, "if anyone were to print all the stuff in this file and say it is about the top civilian advisor to the Atomic Energy Commission, there would be terrible trouble" (Stern, *Oppenheimer* 103).

Volpe's comment reflected an awareness that these facts, in the absence of personal narrative, would seem more damning than he believed they were. Volpe was able to create such a narrative about Oppenheimer for himself, and had thereby developed a reassuring understanding of the famous physicist. But disaggregated facts about a person do not create a personal narrative; in fact, they mitigate against one because the disaggregation encourages readers to perform their own interpretative acts. These acts may be accurate or inaccurate, generous or distrustful, well-intentioned or malicious. But they are unlikely to take into account the subject's personal narrative, instead being more heavily influenced by the personal, institutional, and cultural pressures on particular readers. These conflicting modes of analysis clashed frequently during the hearing, as a short debate between Roger Robb and Isidor Rabi illustrates. Robb was the lawyer Strauss asked to present the government's case.⁴ Rabi, a Nobel Laureate and former Manhattan Project consultant, was one of the many distinguished people who testified on Oppenheimer's

behalf. The incident in question was a mishandling of security procedures during World War II, about which the Board had much information but Rabi had no direct knowledge. Robb asserted that his superior knowledge of the classified case file was of paramount importance, asking Rabi if “perhaps in respect of passing judgment on that incident, the board may be in a better position to judge than you?” (Bird and Sherwin 528). But Rabi refused to accept that this discredited his own authority, even though he acknowledged that the board may have been in possession of information he did not have:

On the other hand, I am in possession of a long experience with this man, going back to 1929, which is 25 years. . . . [Y]ou have to take the whole story. That is what novels are about. There is a dramatic moment and the history of the man, what made him act, what he did, and what sort of person he was. That is what you are really doing here. You are writing a man’s life. (Bird and Sherwin 528).

This exchange reveals a core difference between the pro- and anti- Oppenheimer interpretations: whether “a dramatic moment” needed the whole “history of the man” to be interpreted properly. Robb felt that a set of facts—the information the Board might have that Rabi did not—should be given the most weight. Rabi argued that such facts could not be properly interpreted without an understanding of the whole person.

Oppenheimer understood that his adversaries would try to keep the conversation on disaggregated facts, which would be assumed to be as damaging as they appeared on the surface. But the more that personal narrative—“the history of the man”—was appreciated, the easier it was to see actions in their proper context. Therefore, he aimed to create a personal narrative that not only attempted to contextualize the charges outlined in the Nichols letter, but also argued that such a narrative was the proper lens through which to view the entire matter. In his letter to Nichols, Oppenheimer argued that the charges “cannot be fairly understood except in the context of my life and my work”—a powerful statement particularly in the context of McCarthyism, in which certain kinds of facts were assumed to have intrinsic meaning (Stern, *In the Matter* 7). Oppenheimer’s own narrative put a different gloss on each item. Consider, for example, how Nichols mentioned Jean Tatlock: “it was reported that in 1943 and previously you were intimately associated with Dr. Jean Tatlock, a member of the Communist Party in San Francisco.” If any narrative at all emerges from this claim, it is through the surrounding allegations, all of which are roughly parallel, concerning left-wing associates, activities, and organizations. Oppenheimer, by contrast, made his association with Tatlock—his former fiancé—part of a well-developed personal narrative:

In the spring of 1936, I had been introduced by friends to Jean Tatlock, the daughter of a noted professor of English at the university; and in the autumn, I began to court her, and we grew close to each other. We were at least twice close enough to marriage to think of ourselves as engaged. Between 1939 and her death in 1944 I saw her very rarely. She told me about her Communist Party memberships; they were on again, off again affairs, and never seemed to provide for her what she was seeking. I do not believe that she was really political. She loved this country and its people and its life. She was, as it turned out, a friend of many fellow travelers and Communists, with a number of whom I was later to become acquainted. (Stern, *In the Matter* 8)

It is clear in this example that Oppenheimer is trying to contextualize both this relationship and his other associations with political radicals, making them less threatening than they may have appeared in retrospect, given the atmosphere of the early 1950s. But there are many ways to contextualize facts, and Oppenheimer's rhetoric reflects his argument that personal narrative is the only way to understand the charges against him.

Most importantly, Oppenheimer turns the focus from Tatlock's membership in the Communist party—the only fact about her life deemed relevant in the Nichols letter—to the nature of their relationship. There is a sense of time in his portrayal, as he notes, “we were at least twice close enough to marriage to think of ourselves as engaged.” Any reader can envision the rhythms of a relationship that twice comes close to marriage without ending in it; this rhetorical move changes the focus of the Tatlock story from one of Communism to hints of the emotionally intense relationship that it in fact was. Furthermore, the depth of the account complicates her story as well as his. Oppenheimer's mention of her untimely death and intimation that she may never have found “what she was seeking” are among the details that de-emphasize the role of radical politics in her life. There is also Oppenheimer's interesting choice to refer to her party memberships as “on again, off again affairs”; this language recalls the up-and-down nature of their romantic relationship, and further suggests that in this case radical politics have to be understood as woven in with, and secondary to, personal needs and development. Taken together, these narratives about Tatlock suggest that her place in Oppenheimer's life was as something other than the Communist temptress implied in Nichols's letter.

Oppenheimer followed this portrait by immediately denying that it was “wholly because of Jean Tatlock” that he became immersed in radical politics. He outlines a number of reasons why this was so, all of which place his radical politics in the context of his whole life. He noted that he “liked the new sense of companionship” and the feeling that he was leaving his professional isolation to become “part of the life of my time and my country” (Stern, *In*

the Matter 8). Both of these prioritize a personal explanation, rather than a political one, for his interest in radical politics. Furthermore, these explanations resonated with points Oppenheimer made earlier in his letter. His mention that Tatlock was the daughter of a “noted professor of English” recalls his earlier statement that his friends “were mostly faculty people, scientists, classicists, and artists” (Stern, *In the Matter* 8). His recollection of his interest in becoming “part of the life of my time” recalls his earlier statement about having had no radio, having read no newspapers, and for a time in the 1930s being “almost wholly divorced from the contemporary scene in this country” (Stern, *In the Matter* 8). The internal coherence of the document is no surprise; his secretary recalled that he labored over it (Bird and Sherwin 493–94).

Oppenheimer’s letter worked as personal narrative, both in part and in whole, because it asserted that his own life and development were essential data. Oppenheimer answered many other charges with the same detail with which he discussed Jean Tatlock. Thus each part of the letter asserted the importance of personal narrative, and together worked to create just such an overarching narrative. Toward the close of the letter, Oppenheimer made explicit the structurally central role of personal narrative to the presentation of his defense. He ended by noting that he hoped to learn from error, not avoid it: “What I have learned,” he said, “has, I think, made me more fit to serve my country” (Stern, *In the Matter* 20).

CONSTRUCTING A SCIENTIFIC ICON

Much of the significance of Oppenheimer’s response to Nichols’s charges lies in its assertion of personal narrative as relevant to the issues raised in his hearing. It was also a factor in helping to construct Oppenheimer as an admirable cultural and scientific figure, and in so doing, addressing a variety of anxieties current in the early atomic age. Certainly, not all admiration for Oppenheimer centered on this theme. For example, Joseph and Stewart Alsop’s book on the hearing became one of many works to make Oppenheimer into a martyr figure: “This act did not disgrace Robert Oppenheimer; it dishonored and disgraced the high name of American freedom” (59). Previously celebrated as a scientific hero, Oppenheimer had now become a symbol of intellectual freedom as well. This take on the case became so influential that a *Business Week* article titled its defense of the decision “There’s Still Freedom to Dissent.” But even this ostensibly nonscientific discourse about political dissent was not separable from the politics of nuclear weapons. An article in the *New Republic* asked if Oppenheimer’s “opposition to H-bombs” should be regarded as “proof of present disloyalty” (“Case” 8). This query makes clear what most

observers—then and now—have taken for granted about the hearing: that the loyalty questions surrounding Oppenheimer could not be separated from his role as an atomic scientist. His autobiographical sketch in the *New York Times*, therefore, has significance beyond its role in asserting the importance of personal narrative and the particular utility of such narrative in challenging McCarthy-style allegations. It also served to portray him as a trustworthy steward of atomic power.

Perhaps the chief function of the personal narrative lay here: in presenting Oppenheimer as a trustworthy scientist, and in particular, a trustworthy *atomic scientist*. This was a critically important issue in the early Cold War. Nuclear weapons, of course, are intrinsically ominous and spectacular. By 1954, these associations had been deepened by a variety of interest groups who avidly depicted them as otherworldly and apocalyptic devices. Much was at stake in public portrayals of the scientist-creators of such weapons, whose public personae could easily serve as vessels for the range of hopes, fears, and emotions culturally current in the early atomic age. David Kaiser is one of a number of scholars to note the suspicion that could and did attach itself to scientists after World War II. Kaiser argues that it was particularly easy to suspect theoretical physicists like Oppenheimer. An editorial in the *Saturday Evening Post* argued—without sounding particularly vengeful or partisan—that the decision to suspend Oppenheimer may have been correct; the editors simply noted that “atomic scientists are not as other men are” (“Was”). This was meant to justify the increased scrutiny Oppenheimer received, as well as the better-safe-than-sorry mindset that made his suspension defensible despite his deservedly distinguished reputation. The phrase can also be read literally: physicists whose stock-in-trade was the remote and inaccessible world of the atom were often viewed as simply not like “other men.” Thus, “the scientist” was a much-scrutinized figure for reasons beyond national security, and personal narrative provided a way for non-scientists to engage with and interrogate images of these newly prominent experts. In fact, personal narrative should be seen as far more central to this task—the task of legitimating authority—than to its admittedly important role in defending free expression. Honoring the freedom to dissent is an ideological position, an ideal that can be defended without recourse to judgments about a particular individual. Understanding the context of a dissenting opinion might help support the right to have it, but it isn’t absolutely necessary. On the other hand, the only way to establish a person as a trustworthy scientist is through the kind of individual judgment that a personal narrative facilitates.

Essentially, Oppenheimer’s narrative makes a moral argument. He presents himself, consciously or not, as the kind of person who is an exception to

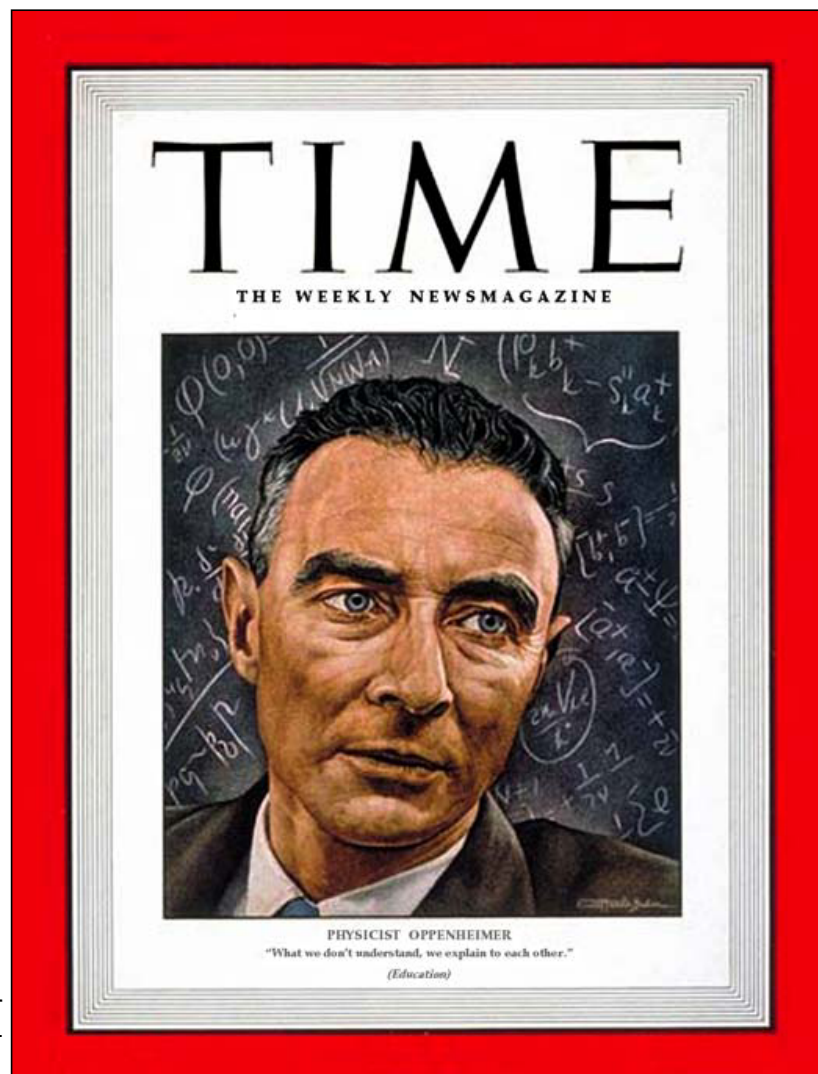
the worrisome persona of the theoretical physicist that Kaiser identifies.⁵ One principal element in this presentation is the focus on his war work and service to his country. Rachel Holloway's rhetorical analysis of Oppenheimer's autobiographical letter breaks it down into three parts: his early "eccentric scholar" phase, the left-wing political activity, and his service as a scientific advisor during and after the war (51–80). This is the basic structure, but two parts of the last section drew particular attention in contemporary debate. Those parts are his explanation for his mishandling of a potential security incident involving his friend Haakon Chevalier during the war, and his role in opposing the hydrogen bomb while chairman of the General Advisory Committee (GAC) to the AEC after the war.

I would like to call attention to other parts of that third section, parts that flesh out the personal narrative of the post-1942 years. In addition to talking about the "Chevalier incident" and his H-bomb advice, Oppenheimer included an extraordinary amount of detail about his wartime and postwar service. Significantly, he emphasized many aspects of his role on the GAC other than the hydrogen bomb advice, most of which involved strengthening the American nuclear arsenal. He notes, for example, the GAC's advice to the AEC "that one of its first jobs would be to convert Los Alamos into an active center for the development and improvement of atomic weapons" (Stern, *In the Matter* 17). Other recommendations included suggestions for ways to make work at Los Alamos attractive to potential recruits, to develop "a strong theoretical division for guidance in atomic weapons design," and to "make the best use of existing stockpiles and those anticipated."

It would be difficult to read Oppenheimer's account of the committee's work and reach a conclusion other than that he was extraordinarily influential in helping to develop "the great arsenal that we now have" (Stern, *In the Matter* 17). Of course, this does not necessarily exonerate him on the controversial charges raised in the security hearing. But the personal narrative format allowed him to present everything that he had done, rather than to simply respond to the specific charges about the hydrogen bomb. In this context, Oppenheimer's policy dissents had to be seen as moderate, not radical. There is a big difference between a dissenter on military policy who has a strong record of building up a nuclear arsenal and one who doesn't. And one who does is an easier figure to admire: the moderate dissenter. By providing a natural way for Oppenheimer to detail his many services, the personal narrative format allowed him to present as this more moderate figure.

Oppenheimer's personal narrative was not the first public depiction of him that concentrated on making him seem like an admirable atomic scientist—it was not even the first time that a biographical narrative had been used

to do so. In 1948, *Time* magazine published such a narrative, amid a spate of hagiographic publicity about Oppenheimer, who was the subject of a number of magazine features from 1947 to 1949.⁶ These articles are marked by two features: the construction of a mythic, Einstein-like persona for Oppenheimer, and the prominence of non-scientific attributes (among which were his love of horseback riding, poetry, expensive meals, cars, and the New Mexico desert) to create that admirable image (Hecht). But *Time's* cover story is particularly notable because it structures its hagiography around a coming-of-age narrative similar to the story that Oppenheimer himself would tell six years later.⁷ The early sections of this article deal prominently with the struggles of the young Oppenheimer, juxtaposing his brilliance with bouts of depression and an impatience born of both immaturity and intellectual superiority. He had to learn,



Oppenheimer, on the cover of *Time* in 1948, as a less culturally controversial icon.

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according to the article, “to put a check-rein on his galloping mind” to allow others to follow (“Eternal Apprentice” 72). Between the extensive accounts of his early years (one section is called “Science and soul-wrestle”), the article briefly addresses his radical politics in the 1930s. Oppenheimer is quoted making the exact same case that he would later make in his autobiographical piece: “Most of what I believed then now seems complete nonsense, but it was an essential part of becoming a whole man” (“Eternal Apprentice” 76). He even suggests that, as a learning process, it was indispensable to making him the sort of person who successfully led Los Alamos. The final section, about Los Alamos and his postwar works, both celebrates the high achievement to which he led the laboratory and establishes his social conscience about the bomb. The *Time* article contained his famous comment that “physicists have known sin,” and that sense of sin, according to the article, is what led Oppenheimer to work for the international control of atomic energy. This depiction is similar to the idea of the “moderate dissenter” that would characterize his image a few years later. *Time*’s Oppenheimer does not rail against the bomb, its use, or the country that produced it. But his awareness of “sin” depicts him as a scientist capable of serving his country while making eloquent reference to the moral ambiguities of the work.

Of course, the *Time* article aimed to provide a heroic portrayal. Even Oppenheimer’s youthful impudence and radical politics are seen as part of the process of creating a modern American hero: a horseback riding, poetry quoting, urbane physicist on the cutting edge of the most powerful science and technology in the world. This is a reification that depends on demystification. Oppenheimer can only be revered if he is admired through accessible and familiar frameworks as well as the rarified ones of atomic science. Such humanization, perhaps important in many public images, is particularly so in the case of atomic scientists—personages who many historians have noted appear as modern alchemists, with all the attendant mystery, fascination, and suspicion attached to those figures.⁸ Biography—particularly that which did not hide Oppenheimer’s human flaws—was a particularly good means to do this. And the *Time* hagiography did so in tones appropriate to the cultural context of 1948, when the nuclear preeminence of the United States made it feasible to view “the father of the atomic bomb” as a storybook hero. Some reassuring gestures to his interests outside science, to his eloquent expressions of the moral dilemmas of modern science, to the fact that even this great man struggled early in this life were sufficient, in 1948, to create a trustworthy and admirable public depiction of an atomic scientist. The establishment of such a trust was also a desired effect, six years later, of Oppenheimer’s own letter to Nichols. The two narratives—one biographical and one autobiographical—had parallel cultural functions. But the means through which these two texts

accomplished these functions were distinct, highlighting what a personal narrative could provide in the particular political context in which Oppenheimer found himself accused. One significant difference is tone. Oppenheimer used a far more restrained voice than was apparent in the *Time's* article. He presented his narrative as a very matter-of-fact account, not as a celebration of a cultural icon. Different content choices were made as well. Oppenheimer's later account goes on at much greater length about his radical activities in the 1930s, but otherwise focuses much less on the prewar years, and sticks more to specific detail when recounting his postwar government advising. Oppenheimer's own account also contains much less explicit interpretation. His letter is distinguished by the wealth of detail provided, and its tendency to let that information exonerate him (or not) on its own.

Several obvious factors—such as authorship—present themselves as explanations for these differences. And one such factor, namely a greatly changed political context, is particularly telling about the role of personal narrative. In the intervening six years, both the Cold War and American anxiety had heated up considerably. The first Soviet nuclear test had ended the US nuclear monopoly, both superpowers had tested thermonuclear devices, China had become Communist, revelations of atomic espionage had shaken the country, the Korean War had been waged, and McCarthyism pervaded the culture. In this atmosphere, it is hard to imagine any nuclear physicist achieving the easy acclaim that *Time* gave to Oppenheimer in 1948. His personal narrative in the *New York Times* did not trade in easy images. It was notable for Oppenheimer's honesty, thoroughness, ability to admit error, and willingness to throw his life open to scrutiny. These traits may have made him somewhat less than the Olympian figure of the previous decade, but gave his readers exactly what they wanted to hear—and what was necessary to make Oppenheimer an admirable atomic scientist in the cultural context of the mid-1950s.

A COMFORTABLE IMAGE

It is always difficult to measure the direct cultural impact of a particular document or article, and Oppenheimer's letter is no exception. Fortunately, some sources do comment on its cultural reception, suggesting some of the ways that readers internalized its particular messages. Certainly, the personal narrative that Oppenheimer presented in the *New York Times* resonates with many other favorable interpretations of him from during and after 1954, and the prominence of Oppenheimer's own words suggests that the narrative itself had an impact that was significant, if difficult to quantify. The letter was published in the *Times* on the very day that the paper broke the story, a result of some deft reporting by James Reston and prior negotiations with Oppenheimer.⁹

The cover story contained numerous excerpts from the letter, thus making his words accessible to those readers who may have chosen not to read the entire lengthy piece, which appeared elsewhere in the paper. Moreover, a reading of Nichols's letter and Oppenheimer's response opened the hearing, and consequently the hearing transcript that was published in 1954, which Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin have identified as facilitating (though not immediately) public support of Oppenheimer (546–47). Several later narratives, both fictional and historical, seem to use details or images that originated with the letter.¹⁰

The most direct evidence for its impact, however, comes from fan letters written to Oppenheimer. During and after his security hearing, he received hundreds of letters of support. While not representative of the whole country, these letters were effusive in their praise, and provide some indication of why those people who choose to admire Oppenheimer did so. Many of them specifically mentioned Oppenheimer's letter. One called it "a very frank, honest, and truthful reply" ("IK").¹¹ Another deemed it "excellent, intelligent, literate, and restrained" ("PK"). Still another said that it was "an extraordinary document which speaks an intellectual honesty all-too-rarely found in high circles" ("DR"). Some writers clearly indicated that Oppenheimer's letter was central in establishing their admiration for him. One correspondent, for example, wrote that "your letter in reply [to Nichols] bears the inherent marks of authenticity and sincerity" ("WD"). The identification of personal traits—honesty, integrity, courage—was a staple of the letters, equaling or even eclipsing statements of agreement with Oppenheimer's politics. Such ideological agreements were mentioned often, certainly, and are implicit throughout. But the prominent mention of personal attributes in the letters suggests that one function of this discourse was to call attention to Oppenheimer as an individual, not simply a political figure. Some writers explicitly noted the coming-of-age quality of his letter. One correspondent called it "a beautiful portrayal of the developing of an inquiring mind from young manhood to maturity" ("ML"). Another said that the letter was perfect—that "the classic autobiographies are not better" ("EB"). Oppenheimer's admirers clearly understood the sort of information they were receiving in this personal-narrative-as-letter format, which redoubled their admiration for him.

Most of Oppenheimer's fan mail seems to have come from correspondents who were already inclined toward his politics. In these cases, the personal narrative seems not to have changed opinions, but to have influenced how and why like-minded Americans chose to lionize him. An array of possible influences comes to mind: deepening an existing admiration, providing language for a previously felt position, introducing an argument to a receptive but previously unaware reader. It should be noted, however, that not all the traceable influences of the letter were of this nature. In at least a few cases,

and perhaps more, Oppenheimer's narrative had the power to change minds. Writing from Texas eight days after Oppenheimer's letter was published, one correspondent identified the autobiographical account as a central reason for his admiration of him. This writer told Oppenheimer that he had initially assumed the physicist was guilty, but that,

I now confess to you that I have been swayed by your persuasive arguments. Unless the statements made in your letter to General Nichols are disproved, I shall remain one of your staunch supporters in the belief that what I previously considered to be "sins" were merely "indiscretions." ("PC")

A clearer statement of the effects of personal narrative is hard to imagine. "Sin" is a judgment, whereas "indiscretion" implies a narrative: it suggests both a more trivial kind of transgression as well as a completed learning process that has already left such youthful misjudgment in the past. This writer's change of heart was not brought on by a compelling political argument. He still thinks the actions in question were mistakes. Nor was it occasioned by any challenges in Oppenheimer's response to factual claims in Nichols's letter. Rather, the writer became a newly "staunch" supporter of Oppenheimer's because he came to understand problematic actions in a new and less damning light—exactly what the "whole man" approach of the personal narrative was designed to do. The form rather than the content conditioned this change of heart.

Such dramatic reversals are significant, but one must be wary about assigning significance to the personal narrative based solely on how many such changes of heart it prompted. For one thing, influences on discourse within one "side" of a debate can be just as important as those that occasion noticeable fluctuations in the numbers of people who hold certain positions. Particularly given McCarthy's downfall in the spring and summer of 1954, the role of the Oppenheimer case—and its prominently featured personal narrative—in emboldening and shaping ascendant political voices is not to be overlooked. Moreover, Oppenheimer's autobiographical words suggest what the interaction of such narratives and such emergent politics might be. Oppenheimer's personal narrative was a very conventional and moderate document, as shown most obviously by its content. Oppenheimer was no pacifist. He emphasized his many contributions to building a nuclear arsenal, and this self-presentation emphasized his concordance with postwar atomic policy far more than his dissents. Additionally, Oppenheimer takes care to label left-wing ideology as foreign to his thinking. His repudiation of his past politics is done without pleading; its matter-of-fact style works to increase the dismissive tone with which he rejects such ideas. These moderate politics made Oppenheimer a fairly easy figure to admire. His narrative did not challenge—nor did it ask readers to challenge—any fundamental tenet of the reigning Cold War consensus.

This impulse to conventionality also manifested itself in the form of his narrative. Matching his moderate politics were rhetorical choices that relied heavily on familiar and comfortable narrative conventions. Errors and misjudgments are chalked up to youth and growing pains. While dealt with only briefly, Oppenheimer's awakening to the political challenges of the 1930s has the feel of a conversion moment. His painstakingly detailed account of left-wing activities and associates from before World War II resembles a confession—not so much in admission of guilt, but in its zeal to be thorough and to depict a closed chapter in his life. These narrative strategies—conversion, confession, and coming-of-age—are familiar, even classic, rhetorical moves in autobiographical accounts. Oppenheimer's style would not confound readers' expectations any more than his claims would.

Another powerful indicator of the letter's fundamentally conservative nature is from the obvious effort Oppenheimer put into its composition. The labor required to recall so many events and people in such detail suggests a real confidence that his words would get a fair hearing. Oppenheimer seems to be a man with real faith in the appeals process to which he availed himself.¹² And the length of the letter, together with its seemingly endless recounting of names and dates, mitigates against polemic. Its dry, informational style may have suggested accuracy, but also ensured that this autobiographical sketch was anything but a political manifesto.

Far from being an inexplicable feature of his personal narrative, however, this conventionality seems to have been the very thing that gave his account its cultural and political weight. The spring of 1954 saw a slight easing of cultural anxiety over anti-communism, as well as hints of the changing views around nuclear policy that were to emerge later in the decade. Oppenheimer's moderate politics—amply reinforced by a conventional, heavily detailed, somewhat tedious personal narrative—made him an easy icon at such a cultural moment. But the very conventionality of the narrative allowed it to make one radical claim: Oppenheimer's insistence that “the charges against me *cannot be understood except* in the context of my life and my work” (my emphasis). This disarmingly simple statement was hardly self-evident at a cultural moment in which anti-communist anxiety and commitment to an arms race were almost hegemonic in their function. Far from allowing cultural space for various personal visions and narratives, such norms standardized interpretations of people and events. Oppenheimer's insistence on personal narrative as not just relevant, but essential, strongly countered this discourse. But this insistence was structurally central to his otherwise conventional story. In fact, this insistence on the political necessity of personal narrative—at the highest levels of national security concerns—constituted a rare element of radicalism in the construction of Oppenheimer's public

image. Ironically, it may have been that only a cautiously written tale by an establishment figure could have sent such a message at one of the Cold War's most anxious peaks.

NOTES

1. Letter to K. D. Nichols, March 4, 1954. This and all subsequent citations to Oppenheimer's autobiographical account are taken from Philip M. Stern's edition of the trial transcript, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer*.
2. For an account of Strauss's role in orchestrating the Oppenheimer hearing, see Bird and Sherwin.
3. This number is difficult to establish with precision. Many of the items are related to each other, and some of the items presented as single entries are in fact composites of several different points. The key point is that the letter presented a significant number of examples, replete with detail.
4. Nominally, the hearing was supposed to be an inquiry, but it quickly took on the character of a trial. While not officially a prosecutor, Roger Robb nevertheless played that role.
5. Kaiser points out not only the preponderance of theoretical physicists among those who came under suspicion of disloyalty, but also the fact that a high number of those suspected had professional connections to Oppenheimer.
6. Other articles appeared in *Life*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Science Illustrated*, and *Reader's Digest* (a condensation of the *Time* piece).
7. In fact, Oppenheimer had some influence on this portrayal as well, having been interviewed for the *Time* story and being frequently quoted in it.
8. See, for example, Weart.
9. For the full story of the letter's publication, see Bird and Sherwin.
10. These include Peter Wyden's *Day One*, Jim Ottaviani's *Fallout*, and Haakon Chevalier's *The Man Who Would Be God* and *The Story of a Friendship* (Chevalier, however, knew Oppenheimer well, so there were other possible origins for the details in his books).
11. I use initials rather than full names in citing all private letters to Oppenheimer.
12. The letter itself certainly suggests this to a reader who has no knowledge of Oppenheimer's thoughts prior to the hearing, and it is fair to say that such faith in the hearing process is part of the public image projected by the letter. The underlying reality is more complex, and remains somewhat ambiguous. It is clear that Oppenheimer was not optimistic about the chances that the suspension of his security clearance would be reversed. But he still seems to have felt that the process of submitting himself to such scrutiny had value, although scholars have differed as to what combination of political, personal, and public relations motives he may have had for this.

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