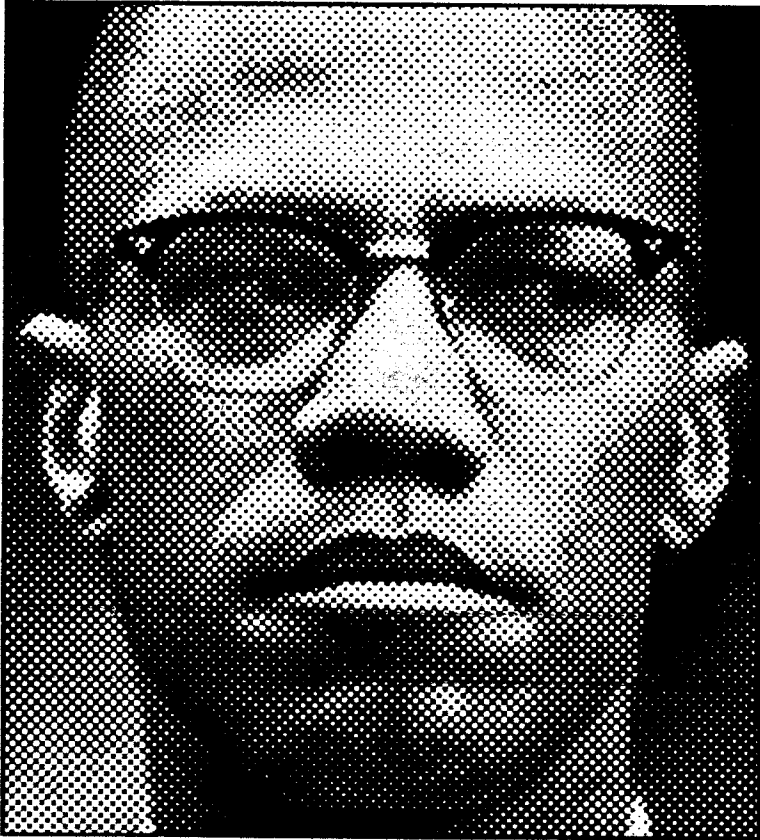


The Death and Life of Malcolm X

By Peter Goldman.
Illustrated. 438 pp. New York:
Harper & Row. \$8.95.



He would have approved

By ORDE COOMBS

In a piece called "White Standards and Negro Writing" (The New Republic, March 9, 1968) Richard Gilman states that "there is a growing body of Negro writing which is not to be thought of simply as writing by Negroes. It is not something susceptible of being democratized and assimilated in the same way that writing by Jews has been." And he ends his article with the following statement: "The kind of Negro

writing I have been talking about, the act of creation of the self in the face of that self's historic denial by our society, seems to me to be at this point beyond my right to intrude on."

Many blacks lauded the article when it first appeared. They felt that it was a confession by a leading white literary critic of his inability to judge much black writing. His confession gradually became a kind of law: Black writing was to be judged and criticized only by blacks.

I was not taken with the argument in 1968. I thought then, and think now, that any white critic who could see the "universal increments

to the literary or intellectual traditions" of say, "Education of Henry Adams," but could not see "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" in this stark light, was not worth his salt. Did blacks, I wondered, exist in a vacuum? Did our pain and our ability to survive not spring partly from the warped nexus of the West's economic, literary and intellectual traditions? And if I could "understand" Faulkner, if I could see his brilliance behind his Southern shield of intransigence, then whites, it seemed to me, should be ready to make room for Eldridge Cleaver in the same bookcase in which they displayed Genet.

Blacks jumped on Gilman's hand-wagon because they understood the codes of the marketplace. Publishing is a very insular world where friends find out what trends seem profitable and get their acquaintances to exploit those trends. When the "black market" was lucrative, many blacks felt that they should have more than a passing right to make their voices heard and their pockets heavy. And if Gilman's piece were to be accepted as the gospel, then they would at least be in that particular race. They understood, after all, the endemic arrogance of many white editors.

Nevertheless, I have always doubted the value of this kind of ethnocentricity—even in the short run. I felt that if it were accepted, black intellectuals who wanted, for whatever reason, to move beyond the confines of race would run into a wall of resistance to their talent. Given the current lack of moral ener-

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40

gy and love of faddism on the part of many intellectual whites, we should know that they stand in the wings ready to dismiss, on ethnocentric grounds, the black economist's treatise on the American economy or the black psychologist's interpretation of white insanity. And blacks would have to abide by this dismissal since we spelled out the inability of white people to treat black life with common sense and intellectual rigor.

I say all this because I want to praise Peter Goldman's "The Death

and Life of Malcolm X." It is a rich biography that pays little attention to Malcolm's early life, but elucidates in minute detail his last years, his death and subsequent sainthood. Goldman, white, met Malcolm in 1962 when he worked for the St. Louis Globe-Democrat and later, as a national affairs writer for Newsweek, followed the minister's career in New York. The author does not pretend to have had Malcolm's ear or friendship, but he shows how Malcolm's vision of America altered his perception of the world and forced him to abandon the blinders he had worn when confronting the enormity of this country's racial antagonism.

Because Malcolm made him see, Goldman becomes a man obsessed, and he cannot leave his mentor dead. He must seek out in interviews all the people who were close to Malcolm. (Malcolm's wife and sister would not talk to him.) He must walk Malcolm's streets and, finally, he must spend three years of his life trying to put into perspective the phenomenon known as Malcolm X, because the man's shadow — looming over him — shows him that he came into contact with a giant who briefly stood in the vortex of American history and changed, forever, the thinking of the second largest nation of black people in the world.

In the first section of his book Goldman is more interested in framing Malcolm's spirit than in writing a straight biography. He boos and weaves through Malcolm's early years and shows us his lancer-like wit, the archness of his tongue and his delight in lecturing at Harvard. We see the glory of a man growing as the fires lick around him, and it is our belief in his possibilities and Goldman's heightening of them that make us tremble at his fall.

At the end of his life Malcolm was at war with the Nation of

Islam, avoided by the civil-rights lions of the sixties, denounced as an antiwhite demagogue in the news media and, according to Goldman, slowly coming apart under the pressure. He made a pilgrimage to Mecca and announced that he had met white Muslims who embraced him unself-consciously and that all white men were not the devils he had formerly imagined them to be. (A turnabout, it seems to me, that is as unconvincing now as it was then.) Unable to get the Organization of Afro-American Unity off the ground, evicted from his home by the Nation of Islam, seeing traitors all around him, Malcolm died ignominiously at the hands of black men — denounced, as Maya Angelou tells it, through the black quarter of San Francisco.

Goldman knows that not many blacks accept the official version of Malcolm's death — three Muslims were convicted of his murder — and that many believe that the C.I.A. had something to do with the assassination of this black hero. So Goldman, detective story style, reconstructs a map of the murder, pores over the minutes of the trial and is at pains to convince us of the culpability of the convicted.

It is in the final section of his book that Goldman, shiniingly eloquent, accurately gauges the impact of Malcolm's life on a whole generation of black people. He knows that Malcolm lives today precisely because of his unflinching denunciation of the quicksand on which black people stand and face their antagonists. In a chapter, "The Malcolm Legacy," Goldman writes that "what interested Malcolm first was the decolonization of the black mind — the wakening of a proud, bold, impolite new consciousness of color and everything color means in white America."

He is right, for Malcolm saw the erosion of our spirit, as the cymbals of racism deafened us. He knew that we believed deeply that we were less than men because we could not see our beauty. And he understood that until every black man could say to any white, "Kiss my black," then there was no hope for our deliverance from white psychological bondage. But he knew, too, as Goldman points out, that "undermining the assumptions of this country's institutions was not enough. The black banner calling for sacrifice, for discipline and self-help would have to be unfurled for be-

lieving in white largesse would be to perpetuate one's dependency and dependent men never learn their own strengths."

And so if Malcolm stood today in this directionless and bewildering time, would he echo Yeats that "the best [of his people] lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity." I don't know, but he would have, I think, approved of Goldman's biography and that would have been no faint praise.

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