

EMPIRE

A NOVEL

GORE
VIDAL

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EMPIRE

A N O V E L



R A N D O M H O U S E

N E W Y O R K

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Preface

became less the Anglo-Saxon nation in which their backgrounds offered them pride of place, they felt more marginal and ready to leave. On the other, as Europeans became increasingly willing to accommodate what would be called "the American century," new opportunities opened up for these disaffected Americans as potential global players. Their losses at home might be recouped abroad.

Their estrangement at home was a response to what struck them as a changing of the guard, as the patricians of the eastern seaboard were supplanted both by the plutocrats newly in control and by the swelling waves of immigrants, first the Irish, then the southern and eastern Europeans who arrived in unprecedented numbers around the turn of the century. Though one threatening group was newly rich and the other still poor, each seemed to have a drive and hunger that the more established Americans could not match. Rather than competing for place in a greatly expanded arena, an increasingly attractive option for those who could do so was to withdraw—into their own privileged enclaves or to Europe, where they might safely ignore what was happening and live on their literal or figurative capital. To stay put was to be reminded constantly of loss—of vitality, cultural primacy, power, hope for the future. Many of them made for the exit, often with a bitter sense of being forced out or of becoming strangers in their own home.

By contrast London offered surprisingly easy entry to writers of their background. Their country's new importance made them welcome as ambassadors and informants, useful for the insights they might provide on the puzzling identity of their compatriots, who it seemed could no longer be treated as rusticated colonials exiled from the cultural center of the English-speaking world. As Britain took stock of the shift in power that threatened to relegate her to the status of a planet in America's orbit, the need to renegotiate the order of precedence and at least keep a semblance of parity encouraged a rapprochement between the two nations. American writers with Anglophile sympathies might act as go-betweens to reopen the dialogue and make it clear on both sides that these countries ought to be natural allies—at worst lately estranged members of one family, at best loyal confederates in what later came to be called the Special Relationship. The accidental conflation of the alienated Americans' revulsion from their own country with the British curiosity about a burgeoning United States demanding

respectful attention created an unprecedented opportunity for writers like Adams, James, Pound, and Eliot. They made the most of it, as their particular transatlantic connections and cosmopolitan experience gave them an interpretive authority denied to their American precursors and contemporaries.

Henry James called one of his stories "The Siege of London." A volume of Leon Edel's life of James is entitled "The Conquest of London." These martial metaphors pervade the accounts of American writers in London, both as they themselves tell the story and as cultural historians have written this chapter of the transatlantic dialogue. The impact of the Americans on what was once English Literature and is now Literature in English was certainly prodigious. There is a nice irony in the fact that the volume of the Pelican History of English Literature dedicated to the modernist period is called *From James to Eliot*. To many British writers what was taking place looked like a hostile takeover: A venerable, magisterial culture was forced to cede authority to intruders from abroad promulgating a new and unpalatable set of guidelines, which one ignored at one's peril. Power breeds confidence, even if it is reflected power, and a new cultural commissar like Ezra Pound, disaffected as he was from America, was not reluctant to draw on his country's new international clout. Such intruders seemed to be establishing the literary equivalent of a London-based multinational corporation, organizing and promoting the local talent, conceding a good deal by offering to work for Anglo-American unity, but nevertheless retaining firm control.

Yet this triumphalist American version of the story is misleading. It ignores the resistances, concessions, and failures on both sides. An equally plausible and pervasive metaphor for the realignment taking place is familial rather than military or commercial. Family quarrels never really end; time alters whatever accommodations have been worked out; and even the winners often feel like losers. Only by looking closely at these four linked careers as they unfold over time, by paying attention to the opportunities, triumphs, misunderstandings, and disappointments that characterized the different stages of the relationship, can we assess the achievements and the sacrifices. This is why I use not only the evidence of the works in prose and poetry that form the final accomplishment of these careers, but also as much of the bio-

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graphical and contextual material as is readily available. I hope to insert their works back into their authors' lives, and into the transatlantic negotiation that often seems to give them shape.

These goals require a method that draws on cultural history, discourse analysis, literary criticism, and biography. The first three chapters offer an overview of the gradual shift in power from Britain to the United States, in which writers from both countries are treated as voices in an international conversation being carried on by powerful figures and the institutions they represent. I try to suggest how changing sociopolitical realities and shifts in consciousness create new literary opportunities, and also how writers help to bring those shifts about. The detailed accounts of the four careers that follow incorporate this historical material at many points but focus on the attempt by the four writers—Adams, James, Pound, and Eliot—to become significant actors in the cultural rapprochement taking place. I do not think of this as a slow but inevitable record of achievement, best surveyed from the perspective of the enduring works it produced. That may be the way we see retrospectively, but it is not the way it looked to these writers (or their readers) in the course of their lives. Rather, their careers seem more like a roller-coaster ride through alien territory, in which the major works are produced in the midst of perils, spills, and perpetual friction. Theirs was not a smooth passage to fame but generated a good deal of resistance among reviewers, editors, readers, and other writers in both countries who were indifferent or actively hostile to the cosmopolitan agenda being forced upon them.

To recapture this sense of flux, I stress process over product, the pressures of the moment rather than the view of posterity. In these career narratives, I use letters, early drafts, manifestos, suppressed works, ephemeral journalism, and other commentary both by the writers themselves and by their contemporaries. Cumulatively, this body of evidence seems to me to suggest how difficult the task they had set themselves was to achieve, and what it cost. A good deal of this material is recorded in private correspondence or remains buried in archives and unreprinted articles and reviews. Going back to these sources offers many rewards. Chief among them is the recovery of the troubled relationship between artist and audience, a clash of mentalities between the readers' expectations and the writers' methods and values.

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This tension, so characteristic of the modernist movement, is greatly aggravated by expatriation, in which the writer moves out of familiar territory into a culture working by different rules. The record of this conflict, with its alliances and quarrels, its breakthroughs and setbacks, is very different from an account that highlights the final products, the "masterpieces." By reinserting the analysis of those works into the cultural and biographical matrix of their gestation and arrival, I hope to stress the difficulty of their coming into being and to help account for their final form. The smoother kind of literary history too seldom takes these birth pangs seriously and seems to give the canonical works a sense of inevitability they did not have when they emerged.

This does not of course mean that the modernist canon has remained fixed or that writers like the four here studied are now regarded with reverence. Very far from it. In fact over the last twenty-five years the reputations of all of them, but especially of James and Eliot, have been subject to a fierce revaluation. More often than not, they find themselves in the dock, accused of propagating attitudes and values seen by contemporary readers as deeply offensive—anti-Semitism and racism, patriarchal contempt for women, hostility to egalitarian ideals. There is a good deal of evidence for the prosecution, and the charges have stuck. In point of fact the pervasive questions of race, class, and gender that dominate present-day commentary were of major concern to all these writers as they tried to choose between America and Europe. That Britain still seemed, comparatively speaking, a society in which class distinctions were fixed, men in firm control, and the Anglo-Saxon legacy not seriously threatened by other races and religions made it more appealing to these disaffected writers in their flight. They were looking for the more stable, homogeneous culture they felt they had lost, one in which their Establishment status would be honored.

I have no wish to gloss over this aspect of their work or to explain it away. There are passages in their published writings, and even more in their letters and manuscripts, which I respond to with revulsion—particularly the attacks on the "alien" immigrants from eastern Europe polluting the purer racial strain of an America I never knew. I cannot read lines like Eliot's notorious "Rachel *née* Rabinovitch / Tears at the grapes with murderous paws" with equanimity. My father was born in Poland, my mother in Galicia, I myself in Germany. We came to the

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United States as part of the wave of Jewish refugees in flight from the Nazis. America was my fourth country, English my fourth language. The last thing I would have wanted to hear was that “my kind” was undesired because unassimilable. Fortunately, it was not something I was often made to feel. It would be very easy to use these credentials as a license for revenge, to become the prosecuting attorney demonstrating with further damaging evidence that the parties in question are guilty as charged, and arguing that we are right to denigrate their works as instruments of oppression. The tone would be easy too—a mixture of irony, sarcasm, and righteous indignation, the superior stance of the enlightened examining the benighted.

The prospect strikes me as uninteresting. Stronger than my revulsion is my sense of astonishment. How could such patently brilliant writers—whose English I appreciated perhaps because my acquisition of the language was a struggle—have invested so much of their imaginative energy in such appalling attacks? What could account for their irrational fears, their nightmare visions of being under siege? What made these powerful figures see themselves as victims, the hunted rather than the hunters? Stronger than my indignation was my need to understand. The most urgent question was simply, Why? I have tried to answer it in this book by looking for causes and partial explanations—individual, familial, societal, historical, ideological. The larger the frame, the less idiosyncratic these writers appear, the less bizarre their words. They are of their time, of their place, of their familial heritage, even if others of the same time, place, and heritage reacted differently.

The banal formula so often invoked in such discussions—*tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*—seems to me useless and inaccurate. Understanding, by which in this case I mean an honest attempt to get at the roots of offensive attitudes and actions, has no necessary connection with forgiveness. The fear of excusing the inexcusable can act as a brake on our healthy and restless curiosity. There is something to be said for separating our desire to know from our need to judge. This is especially true when we try to grasp the centers of imaginative energy in literary creation, because the fuel that makes the engine roar is so frequently polluted at the source. Anger, hatred, contempt are as often at the heart of great works as the more benevolent feelings, and are inextricably

intertwined with their most idealistic, visionary elements. This has always been known, though not always advertised. The issue is further complicated when certain targets of satiric contempt that were once acceptable become proscribed. The Holocaust, for instance, has made *all* anti-Semitic feelings or statements seem equally dangerous and unacceptable. No comparable prohibition inhibits the most contemptuous caricatures of the rich and powerful, for example. We see with the ideological imperatives of the present and resist imagining a past different from it. This grows out of a complacency not so different, I think, from the confident assumptions of those we now patronize, even though in their time they had a similar cultural sanction. And it is unlikely, given the long historical record, that our progeny a century from now will fail to see *us* as ideologically misguided in ways that presently seem unimaginable.

For all these reasons, then, this particular chapter of our literary history deserves to be seen as it looked at the time to the actors involved, with as full and nuanced an understanding as we can muster. I try in the chapters that follow to enter into the thoughts and feelings that constituted the air these writers breathed. I want to see the world as it appeared to their eyes, even if only partially, within the limits of my powers of empathy. I must try to put my own values on hold for the duration. Consequently, this is the last time the words *I* or *my* will appear in this book outside of quotation marks.

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ONE

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THE WAR ended last night, Caroline. Help me with these flowers." Elizabeth Cameron stood in the open French window, holding a large blue-and-white china vase filled with roses, somewhat showily past their prime. Caroline helped her hostess carry the heavy vase into the long cool dim drawing room.

At forty, Mrs. Cameron was, to Caroline's youthful eye, very old indeed; nevertheless, she was easily the handsomest of America's great ladies and certainly the most serenely efficient, able to arrange a platoon of flower vases before breakfast with the same ease and briskness that her uncle, General Sherman, had devastated Georgia.

"One must always be up at dawn in August." Mrs. Cameron sounded to Caroline rather like Julius Caesar, reporting home. "Servants—like flowers—tend to wilt. We shall be thirty-seven for lunch. Do you intend to marry Del?"

"I don't think I shall ever marry anyone." Caroline frowned with pleasure at Mrs. Cameron's directness. Although Caroline thought of herself as American, she had actually lived most of her life in Paris and so had had little contact with women like Elizabeth Sherman Cameron, the perfect modern American lady—thus, earth's latest, highest product, as Henry James had not too ironically proclaimed. When Del asked Caroline to join the house-party at Surrenden Dering, deep in the English countryside, she had not even pretended to give the matter thought. She had come straight on from Paris, with a single night at Brown's Hotel in London. That was Friday, and the United States and

Spain had been at war for three exciting months. Now, apparently, the war was over. She tried to recall the date. Was it August 12 or August 13, 1898?

"Mr. Hay says that the President agreed to an armistice yesterday afternoon. Which was last night for us." She frowned. "Those roses look rather awful, don't they?"

"They're a bit . . . dusty. I suppose from all that heat."

"Heat!" Mrs. Cameron laughed, a fairly pleasant sound so unlike the stylized staccato screech of a Paris lady. "You should try Pennsylvania this time of year! My husband has two places. Each hotter than the other, with mosquitoes and gnats and something very small and vile that burrows like a mole under your skin and raises a welt. You would make a good wife for Del."

"But would he make a good husband for me?" Through the tall windows Caroline could see her co-host, Don Cameron, on the grassy lower terrace. He was driving a buggy, drawn by a pair of American trotting-horses. Senator Cameron was a red-faced, heavily moustached but modestly bearded man, older by a quarter century than his wife. As she could not abide him, she treated him with exquisite courtesy and deference; just as she treated in a rather cool and offhanded way Caroline's other co-host, the equally ancient Henry Adams, who entirely adored her as she entirely accepted him. According to Del, the trio had struck Henry James, who lived a few miles away at Rye, as "maddeningly romantic." When Del had repeated this to Caroline, both agreed that although antiquity might indeed be instructive, exotic, even touching, no couple so aged could ever be romantic, maddeningly or otherwise. But then the celebrated expatriate Mr. James was like some highly taut musical string of feline gut, constantly attuned to vibrations unheard by cruder ears.

Yet old as Mrs. Cameron was, Caroline could not help but admire the slender waist, which seemed unstayed; also, the heat had so flushed her cheeks that she looked—Caroline finally capitulated—beautiful, at least this morning, with naturally waved, old-gold hair, cat-like blue eyes, straight nose and straight mouth, framed by the square jaw of her celebrated uncle. Had Caroline not been so recently and so arduously finished at Mlle. Souvestre's Allenswood School she might have offered herself as an apprentice to Mrs. Cameron: "Because I want to live forever in America, now that Father's dead." Caroline heard herself say rather more than she had intended.

"Forever is a long time. But if I had forever to spend somewhere it wouldn't be there, let me tell you. It would be Paris."

"Well, since I've spent most of my life—so far—in Paris, home looks all the greener, I suppose."

"May you find it so," said Mrs. Cameron vaguely, her attention now distracted by the cook, an elderly woman who was at the door, with the day's menus to be discussed. "Oh, Cook! What a triumph last night! Senator Cameron admired—and couldn't stop eating—the sweet potatoes."

"Impossible things he gives me to prepare." In a long white dress, the cook looked like an abbess in a novel by Scott.

Mrs. Cameron laughed without much joy. "We must do our best to please. All of us. My husband," she turned to Caroline, just as Don Cameron made a second appearance on the lower terrace, waving a whip, his trotting-horses busily trotting, "hates English food. So he sends home to Pennsylvania for everything we eat. Tonight we shall have corn."

"But which is it, ma'am?" The cook looked desperate; the abbey besieged.

"It is green and cylindrical and should be shucked of its covering and boiled, but not too long. We'll have the watermelon with the other fruits. I trust you with the rest, dear Cook."

"But . . ." The abbess wailed, and fled.

Mrs. Cameron sat on a sofa beneath a Millais portrait of a lady of the previous generation; and looked, in her yellowy-white lace, as if she, too, belonged to that earlier time, before the new era of loud clattering railroads, sinister silent telegraphs, garish electric lights. Caroline noticed a delicate line of perspiration on her hostess's upper lip while a vein at the forehead's center pulsed. Caroline thought of goddesses as she gazed upon Mrs. Cameron; thought of Demeter's long search for her daughter Persephone in hell; thought of herself as Persephone and Mrs. Cameron as the mother that might have been. On the other hand, was she herself in any sense in hell? And if she was, would Mrs. Cameron rescue her? But Caroline was quite aware that she had never really known anything except her life just as it was; yet she also knew enough of metaphysics to realize that it is often a condition of hell *not* to suspect the existence of any alternative to one's life. Caroline had gone from nuns to a freethinkers' school. From one concentric ring of hell, she now decided, to another. Yes, she was in hell—or Hades, at least, and though regnant over the dead, she eagerly awaited the earth-mother goddess to free her from Death's embrace and restore—oh, the glamor of Greek myth!—springtime to all the frozen world above.

A shaft of bright morning light suddenly made Mrs. Cameron's face