

ALFRED KAZIN

*An
American
Procession*

MAJOR AMERICAN
WRITERS, 1830-1930

ALFRED
KAZIN



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Procession*

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I owe a special debt to my editor at Knopf, Robert Gottlieb,
who cares about books as much as I do.

Without Judith, my wife,
nothing would have happened.

1977

Preface, 1996

From my journal of 1976, as I was working on this book:

How they straggle in, the members of my procession, my American congregation. How they fall in around my typewriter to show themselves a *family*. I keep seeing Willa Cather on that train doing the long trek homeward to Nebraska, and those lonely reporters from Mark Twain to Ambrose Bierce, Hemingway and Ring Lardner, hunched down in the dead of night in small-town newspaper offices with the tawny yellow shades drawn against the one streetlight.

The excitement I felt then over the incredible American procession, twenty years ago, is much like what I felt in 1938 as I started my first book, *On Native Grounds*. Those books are the first and second parts of a trilogy—yes, I love trilogies—with the third part, on God and Americans, in progress. As Walt Whitman gave me the title for this book, Abraham Lincoln gives me the title for the next: *The Almighty Has His Own Purposes*. It seems a natural progression and, I am glad to say, the excitement continues apace—as it must for anyone who never stops being amazed by the erratic splendors of our literary culture.

Fittingly, this book begins in the 1830s, when Ralph Waldo Emerson left the church and founded a national literature: “There must be a Revolution,” he said, and little could he know that, in this revolutionary age, he himself would fire the first shot. My book encompasses the two greatest periods in our literature. The first was before the Civil War; the second, just after what John Dos Passos unrelentingly called “Mr. Wilson’s war.” In the earlier period we have the transcendental idealists (Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman) and the dark romancers (Hawthorne, Poe, Melville). The later period includes

the modernist poets, novelists, and critics—Eliot, Pound, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Scott Fitzgerald, Edmund Wilson, Kenneth Burke—who stormed the 1920s. This crucial century also encompasses the great realistic novelists in the years between the Civil War and the Great War: Mark Twain, Henry James, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser. And there was Emily Dickinson, the greatest realist in our literature of the “internal difference, where the Meanings are.”

This period of literary creation, dynamic expansion, and national promise was to Henry Adams, who lived it all from 1838 to 1918, the most eventful and decisive period in the recorded history of the west. America from Lincoln to Woodrow Wilson seemed unparalleled in its garnering of material power and the challenge this presented to the intellect. The meteoric rise of the United States was not welcomed blithely, even by those fascinated with the challenge. This concern with power on a scale previously unknown is one reason why Adams, the great observer, plays such a large role in my narrative; he was always close to the seats of power. Another reason is that Adams, the most original, imaginative, and provoking of American historians, was a bolder and more accomplished literary artist than William Dean Howells and other tame excellences of the period. High writing is what tries the imagination.

Emerson, in putting aside mere institutions, gained an individual sense of power that now seems primordial. He found the whole universe an open secret. We have certainly known more vehement and luxuriant characters in the procession of American writers since Emerson's day. He remains central, “nearer,” because the astonishing sense of self he incarnated in his early work created so much confidence in many writers that the individual in America is, all alone, equal to anything. That penetrating European observer, Alexis de Tocqueville, recognized that our democracy was founded on an unprecedented faith in the individual, both wonderful and dangerous: it could make a man forget his ancestors and trap him “within the solitude of his own heart.”

This now-legendary sense of self in America is a principal character in my narrative, along with the hopes of a “free man's worship” that came with it, before the aggressive and ever more concentrated forces of capitalism turned the sense of self into a new theology. Still, what Emerson called his own doctrine—“the infinitude of the private mind”—gave a special radiance not only to his *Nature* but to *Walden*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *Moby Dick*, a radiance that allows us to remember, if we will, “morning in America.” Some sense of self has to be sustained in a broken world. The world is always new to those who can see themselves in a new light.

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An American Procession

Prologue, 1918: *Old Man in a Dry Month*

I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

ELIOT, *The Waste Land*

It was 1918 and America was at war again. In his great house on Lafayette Square just across from the White House—for forty years the Square had been his favorite lookout on the presidents he joyfully despised—Henry Adams felt that as a survivor of the nineteenth century’s “drama of human improvement,” as a student of what he called History’s mad acceleration into “chaos,” he had come to the most dramatic moment of all. History in his century had replaced religion as the first drama of human existence. History had long been the greatest possible subject to his madly speculative mind. “That wonderful century,” as the codiscoverer of natural selection Alfred Russel Wallace had called it, “the century of progress” hailed by Leopold of Belgium when he took over the Congo, had ended at last. As usual, Henry Adams was there to pick up the pieces.

He was eighty years old in February 1918, and he would be dead in March. Since his stroke six years before, he could write hardly anything but his wickedly brilliant letters relating Washington political gossip and the tendency of History to fulfill the sourest prophecies of Henry Adams. But surrounded by his Japanese vases, a great Turner, his color print of Blake’s *Nebuchadnezzar Eating Grass*, his choice French impressionist works resting on chairs built to accommodate his tiny figure (he was just a little over five feet tall), his great library, and the Adams family portraits in one of the twin houses built for him and his friend John Hay by his Harvard classmate H. H. Richardson, Adams spent voluptuous hours listening to the beautiful young Aileen Tone singing the medieval French chansons to which he was still determined to find the original words. She was the last of those honorary

nieces whom he hired for their excellent French, their pleasing voices, and a disposition (marked among bright young women in Washington) to admire without limit the flashing mind and prodigious interests of this fierce little old man who was venomous to everyone but a few friends yet was strangely fascinating to many. Elizabeth Cameron, the young wife of the Pennsylvania senator and political boss Don Cameron, had become his favorite woman in the world. But even she confessed, "It is a curious faculty you Adamses have of inspiring terror; it must be because you are frightened yourself and communicate it."

After his wife's tragic death in 1885 her real nieces had attended him. As they had grown away, his determination to discover words for the medieval chansons led him to France for seven months every year. How pleasant it was to bring together his passion for the medieval and his delight in handsome, witty, elegantly well bred young women competent to assist his researches and to enjoy his wittily abrasive views of his degenerate country. He was a great appreciator of Woman—never more so than after Marian's death, when he needled his friends at dinner by announcing the superiority of every woman present to her husband. For all his contemptuous ways and doomsday notions, Adams had a gift for friendship that singled out the wives of his friends the secretary of state, the British ambassador, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. No one in the rough-mannered new century would ever approach Adams's ingratiating way of sharing with intimates a mind alarmingly superior. "There is something voluptuous in meaning well." He had no friends who were not leaders of American society and enterprise, drivers of the "powerhouse." He liked to tell them to their faces that they lacked passion. But he was too special a case—privately wealthy, obsessively exclusive, the wholly intellectual spectator of a power in which he did not share—not to know that he was an oddity in America's governing class. A senator from Wisconsin—on the floor of the Senate!—had called him a begonia.

How much did he mean his public idolatry of women? How much did he mean anything he said after Marian—"Clover"—took her life thirty-three years before? For a scholar who had virtually founded the modern historical seminar at Harvard in the 1870s, a superb critical intelligence with a particular instinct for smelling out established untruths in American history, Henry Adams had certainly become a genius, or devil, at mystifying his friends. When his *Education* was finally released to the public after his death, he continued to mystify those he most fascinated.

This unbearably proud descendant of two of the most famous public men in American history now made a point of putting his best self into letters.

He had burned his diaries and his letters to Marian after her death. *The Education of Henry Adams*, begun in 1903, completed in 1907, privately printed in just one hundred copies, and sent out, as he put it with his usual mock deference, "to the persons interested, for their assent, correction, or suggestion," would make him famous, ultimately an American classic. Mark Twain said of his *Autobiography* (unlike the *Education* it was not a work of art but a tormented man's garrulity) that "only dead men tell the truth." Dead men do not tell the truth in the *Education*. Adams was not interested in telling the "truth" about himself—whatever that was. His aim was to present himself as History.

Like the economic swashbucklers of his generation—Rockefeller, Morgan, Whitney, Carnegie—Adams said "The public be damned." He said it often. His contempt for what his brother Brooks called "the degradation of the democratic dogma" was absolute. He was snobbishly pleased because he had had to pay Scribner's to publish his nine-volume *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*. Such was the fate of the exceptional historian with a private income in a literary market dominated by mere novelists of the new American middle class.

How provocative and contemptuous Adams was in publishing his own pseudonovels. *Democracy* (1880), a satire on Washington society, was issued anonymously. *Esther* (1884), a story of New York society and his particular friends the artist John La Farge and the geologist Clarence King, was published under a feminine pseudonym. Adams encouraged rumors that his friend John Hay, and possibly others, had written each of the romans à clef. His favorite pose was to stay behind the scenes. Even when elected president of the American Historical Association in 1894, he managed to avoid delivering his presidential address, "The Tendency of History," by addressing it from Mexico. President Charles William Eliot of Harvard was exasperated by Adams's refusal to appear in person for an honorary degree. He thought Adams an overrated man and was the only one among Adams's hundred "friends" to return his copy of the privately printed *Education*.

Yet this immensely private, proud, unfathomably touchy person—"angelic porcupine" his friends called him—was the most public recluse in Washington. Living in his famous house opposite the president's, he knew everybody who in his considered opinion was worth knowing. He had been the closest friend of Secretary of State Hay during the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations and was supposed to have been Hay's secret advisor. Compared with grandfather John Quincy Adams and great-grandfather John Adams, Henry was just a rich eccentric scholar with mystifying inter-

ests in everything from Paleolithic art to the craze for a "science" of history. But this most superior and forbidding person so easy to dislike was Washington's most informed political gossip. Through the friends he had made in England during the Civil War as private secretary to his father the American minister, through his family connections and his all-important friends in politics, science, and literature, he was an informed and informing intelligence office. He had learned very early that Washington "usually had more to do with compromise than anything else." This made society interesting. No other American intellectual of the time was so much at the center of things while pretending to despise it. And he was at the heart of Washington power without any official position whatever.

Even as he approached eighty, Adams had a special grasp of the old century's struggles among the European powers, a grasp that after he took us into the war those struggles led to, Adams's fellow historian Woodrow Wilson was the last to admit. As usual, with his sharp intuitions of historical "acceleration" (his favorite theme), Adams expressed approval of nothing but the working out of a blind process. The nineteenth century was the "century of hope," Alfred North Whitehead was to say, because it invented invention. The release of new productive forces was almost beyond calculation. Adams was spellbound by inventions like the famous dynamo he virtually "prayed" to at the Paris Exposition of 1900. But he was less interested in their social use than he was in the emergence of new forces. At eighty he had lived long enough to see "a new universe of winged bipeds . . . British airplanes sailing up and down under my windows at all hours." That was not progress, just a new item to weigh in the scale of history.

In his "scientific" theory of history Adams emphasized the "law" of acceleration and the tendency of modern societies to go mad under the pressure of multiplicity. He grandly took the second law of thermodynamics to mean that in industrialized society, entropy signified a hemorrhaging of vital energy. The centralization vital to modern technology and politics would crack. He had long prophesied an uncontrollable explosion of energy expanding to reach the whole planet and likely to tamper with it. He was a better guesser than most Victorian prophets because he suspected that the system's call for ever more power was uncontainable, but it hid a death wish. America of the nineteenth century, the America that had made nonsense of the "eighteenth-century" Adams tradition of political reason in control of a wholly new society, now stood in Adams's mind for mechanical energy alone. It was *the* powerhouse. In 1917, with the once-provincial colonies about to rescue the British Empire—but not for long and certainly not for Britain's sake—Adams saw what he had guessed in England during the Civil War:

"Our good country the United States is left to a career that is positively unlimited except by the powers of the imagination." That "Maryland school-master type" Woodrow Wilson, whom Adams hardly bothered to despise (Adams's own circle hated Wilson to the point of frenzy), was morally overwhelmed by this power. Wilson talked nonsense about saving for democracy a world that for the most part had never known democracy.

We shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest to our hearts,—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own Governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion or right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.

Wilson wept over the young men he sent out to die and trusted that the worst war in history would end war forever. Bad as William II sputtering *Gott mit uns*, Wilson was overheard at Paris saying, "If I didn't think God was behind me, I couldn't go on. . . ." For his own reasons Adams had gloated over Wilson's call to war. He had long sought a great Atlantic alliance. "It is really a joy," he wrote to an English friend, "to feel that we have established one great idea even though we have pulled the stars out of their courses to do it."

The war itself did not move him one way or another. All his life this perfect spectator had studied war and narrated war; he had supposed himself, from his family intimacy with power, capable of calculating the direction of war and the future of national power. The habit of "exclusion," which he said he had learned as a literary style at Harvard (it was in fact a family trait), had become his only style for life and thought. If Henry Adams felt anything in particular about the 116,708 Americans who were to die in the war, he left no word. The greatest American historian of his crucial century, the most versatile imagination among American scholar-historians, would have agreed with Randolph Bourne (had he bothered to hear of Randolph Bourne) that "War is the health of the state." He would not even have noticed Bourne's lonely protest against America-in-the-war; it was not in Adams's character or in his philosophy to worry over the two thousand prosecutions under Section 3 of the Espionage Act.*

*"And whosoever, when the United States is at war, shall willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny or refusal of duty in the military or naval forces of the U.S., or shall willfully obstruct the recruiting or enlistment services of the U.S., to the injury of the service of the U.S., shall be punished with a fine of not more than \$10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both."

On the other hand, Henry James's hysterical espousal of England must have seemed to Adams uninformed. James, since 1876 settled in England, had in gratitude for "Europe" as the best vantage point for fiction taken England as the dream country of his eloquent heart and mind. In 1914 James almost died of shock, but before he did die in 1916 he became a British subject in order to show that *he* was in the war. On the outbreak of war he wrote to Howard Sturgis:

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton feat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to have been, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for any words.

He was to wish he had not lived on "into this unspeakable give-away of the whole fool's paradise of our past." This idealization of England, this total surprise that great-power rivalry could lead to war, would have made Adams laugh his death's-head cackle. Henry James may have had the "imagination of disaster," as he claimed of himself; the lasting disaster of the war was beyond his comprehension. Thomas Hardy, in his notes to *The Dynasts* on August 1914, wrote, "The human race is to be shown as one great network or tissue which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider's web if touched." That was more to the point of 1914, that onset of all our woe, when crowds in London and Berlin shouted "We want war! We want war!" D. H. Lawrence described the enthusiasm for war as "sensational delight posing as pious idealism."

Had Adams lived into the 1920s, he might have been able to read "Geron-tion," the imaginary monologue of "an old man" composed by a thirty-year-old poet from St. Louis, now living in England, who had scornfully reviewed *The Education of Henry Adams* and then borrowed images from it for his poem. Unlikely as it is to imagine Adams recognizing his connection with the poem, he was certainly—like Eliot—another figure wasted by history in which he had played no part.

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,
Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.
I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain
Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,

Bitten by flies, fought.
My house is a decayed house,
And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,
Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,
Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

With his deadly gleefulness Adams once noted that he and his even more catastrophe-minded younger brother Brooks had discussed "the total failure of the universe, as usual, and especially of our own country, which seems to afford even more satisfaction." If there was no war, he wrote just before the war, the Middle West, all "stomach, but no nervous center,—no brains—would overwhelm America like an enormous polyp." War, he had argued, was necessary in order to institute "an Atlantic system," including Germany, from the Rocky Mountains to the Elbe, since this was "the energy center of the world." And the war, or at least a future war, might well be against a still-disorganized Russia before it was able to industrialize Siberia. When Adams reached England from France safely in August 1914, Bernard Berenson congratulated him: "I trust that you are satisfied at last that all your pessimistic hopes have been fulfilled."

Adams was not disheartened by the outbreak of hostilities. Henry James in Rye, on the Channel coast, constantly looked toward France as though he could share the war. Edmund Gosse:

The anguish of his execration became almost the howl of some animal, of a lion of the forest with the arrow in his flank, when the Germans wrecked Rheims Cathedral. He gazed and gazed over the sea southeast and fancied that he saw the flicker of the flames. He ate and drank, he talked and walked and thought, he slept and waked and lived and breathed only the War.

Yet no less than James, and no less than the thirty-year-old expatriate from St. Louis who had been prevented by the war, by his marriage to a distraught Englishwoman, and by his own growing "aboulie" from sailing home to defend at Harvard his dissertation on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley, Adams plainly projected his solitariness, his sexual sorrow, and his special dryness of heart and mockery onto a world at war. It had fulfilled all his anticipations of what nineteenth-century power struggles could lead to. He was a man so totally acid, embittered, enraged, that his dislike of the contemporary world had become a kind of ecstasy. In the 1890s he had thundered to his adored Elizabeth Cameron:

I expect troubled times for many years to come. On all sides, especially in Europe and Asia, the world is getting awful rickety. In our country we shall