

HENRY ADAMS: THE HISTORIAN AS NOVELIST

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I. DEMOCRACY

Among Henry Adams's many achievements, his two novels are not usually rated very high. They were published in 1880 and 1884, when Adams was in his forties and working on the nine volumes of his historical masterpiece, the history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations (1801–16). Why, at this busy point in his life, did he write two novels? Why did he never write another? That is: why fiction, and why then? It is easy to think of the books as a mere diversion from his more serious endeavor, a temporary relaxation or escape from the heroic politics of the early nineteenth century into the more sordid or ludicrous politics of the late nineteenth century. When the novels *are* treated as more than *divertimenti*, they are usually mined for historical or biographical information. Critics look for the originals of his characters—satirical in the case of *Democracy*, with its depiction of the politics of the 1870s, and personal in the case of *Esther*, whose heroine seems to resemble his doomed wife. It is useful to trace the models for his characters, but not as something extraneous to the books' internal dynamics—rather, as aids to understanding the way each novel works. For I take them to be very fine novels, one as the subtlest of probes into the nature of ambition, the other as an incisive treatment of American religiosity.

Since Adams published *Democracy* anonymously, and *Esther* under the pseudonym “Frances Snow Compton,” many at first considered them women's novels, in that era when four dozen or so women authors were popular (many of them, like Louisa Stuart Costello or Ella Hepworth Dixon, as triple-named as “Frances Snow Compton”).¹ The

¹ George Eliot and the Brontës are now the most famous women novelists of the Victorian era, but Maria Corelli was “probably the best-selling of all Victorian novelists,” according to John Sutherland's *Stanford Companion to Victorian Fiction* (Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 658. She was closely followed, however, by Mrs. Oliphant, who wrote twice as many novels as the prolific Anthony Trollope (*ibid.*, p. 476). Other women supplying the voracious lending libraries, subscription lists, and railroad station racks included “Adeline” (Emily Frances Sergeant), Mrs. Hector Alexander, M. E. Braddon, Emma Frances Brooke, Rhoda Broughton, Lady Bury (daughter of the Duke of Argyll), Mrs. Mona Caird, Mrs. Anne Caldwell, Mrs. W. K. Clifford, Louisa Stuart Costello, Lady Dixie (daughter of the seventh Earl of Queensbury), Menie Muriel Dowd, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Mme. Duclaux, Sarah Grand, “W. S. Gregg” (Frances Mabel Robinson), “Iota” (Kathleen Mannington Caffyn), Mrs. Edward Kennard, Edith C. Kenyon, E. Lynn Linton, L. T. Meade, Emma Robinson, Frances Mabel Robinson, Olive Schreiner, Annie S. Swan, Mrs. Humphrey

Adams novels did address things associated with women's novels, such as an interest in fabrics or home furnishings, gowns, and the tasks of entertaining. Some people therefore claim (I think preposterously) that Adams's wife wrote *Democracy*—though the only reviewer, on either side of the Atlantic, who identified the real author was herself a woman novelist (and an Adams friend), Mrs. Humphrey Ward.²

Each of Adams's tales does have a woman at its center, and each describes a similar ordeal: her effort to fight off a marriage that society seems to be imposing on her—a common enough dilemma in the women's novels of the time, when a heroine's right to choose her own life was emerging from the network of obligations that had kept that choice largely out of her hands. But Adams gives this common plot-type his own twist. In some other tales, the woman must be true to her own emotion rather than submit to the mate that conventional society has assigned her. In Adams, the woman must resist her own emotions in order to preserve an intellectual integrity. Some would stereotype this as a male problem, removing Adams's tales not only from the female genre but from the emotional immediacy that is—also stereotypically—considered the real province of the novel.

Ward, Mrs. Henry Wood, "Margaret Wynman" (Ella Dixon), and Charlotte Yonge (the female associate of the male Oxford Tractarians). Other Victorian women wrote children's books: Frances Burnett (*Little Lord Fauntleroy*), "Auntie Bee" (Bertha Buxton), Mrs. Juliana Horatio Ewing, Mrs. Alfred Gatty. The leading illustrator for children's books was Kate Greenaway, a favorite of John Ruskin's. Despite the high number of women authors who used their married names, "the Victorian spinster was the most productive category of novelist, with an average lifetime output of 24 titles" (*ibid.*, p. 2). The age before the Victorian, the time of Jane Austen, had begun the explosion of women writers, led by people like Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Inchbald, Amelia Opie, Ann Radcliffe, and Charlotte Smith.

² Review of *Democracy* in *Fortnightly Review* 32 (July 1, 1882), pp. 78–93. Two months later, Adams turned the joke back on Mrs. Ward. In his jokey correspondence with John Hay, pretending that the latter was casting blame on Adams as the author though *he* (Hays) wrote it, Adams said: "That my English friends, like Mrs. Humphrey Ward, should do this sort of thing is natural, for, knowing no other American, they are bound to pitch on the only one they ever saw, but that you should do so is shocking." Adams to John Hay, September 3, 1882, in J. C. Levenson et al., *The Letters of Henry Adams* (Harvard University Press, 1982), vol. 2, p. 467.

Mary Arnold, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, was a niece of Matthew Arnold, the wife of a *Times* of London editor, the founder of centers for the poor, and author of *Robert Elsmere*, "probably the most popular novel of the century" (*ibid.*, p. 658). She was encouraged in her career by Henry James and found an admirer in Theodore Roosevelt.

A TALE OF AMBITION

In *Democracy*, the heroine, Madeleine Lee, has thrown off the roles left open to a wealthy young widow of her time—as patron of the arts, or conductor of a salon, or sponsor of deserving charities. The opening chapter depicts Madeleine’s weariness with these quadrilles of expected performance. The long first paragraph reads like a satire on social patterning, but it is really a telling, and not entirely flattering, introduction to Madeleine’s set of values, to her sense of herself. This paragraph is a technically arresting start to the book. It seems just a description by an omniscient narrator, but the terms used and the restless tossing from one task to another make it an indirect inner monologue presented in the third person—not a monologue at any one time in the narrative, but a rumination on Madeleine’s life over the five years since she lost her husband. Telling the story out of her own sense of what is important subtly conscripts us into judging other matters—and especially other persons—from her point of view. The tale’s principal characters are introduced to us colored by the way she categorizes them. What this device keeps telling us, through the early chapters, is that she is rather too good for the dreary world around her—and the unsuspecting reader can fall easily into the trap of accepting this as the simple truth.

Though Madeleine is no “light woman”—no Camille or Violetta—she has a winning air of resistance to dull morality, to what she calls “high popular ideals”:

She declared that she had lost the sense of duty, and that, so far as concerned her, all the paupers and criminals in New York might henceforward rise in their majesty and manage every railway on the continent. Why should she care? What was the city [of New York] to her? She could find nothing in it that seemed to demand salvation. What gave peculiar sanctity to numbers? Why were a million people, who all resembled each other, any more interesting than one person? What aspiration could she help to put into the mind of this great million-armed monster that would make it worth her love or respect? (pp. 3–4)

To escape the bourgeois respectability of “New York and Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston” (p. 4), she decides to plunge into the more raffish but energetic world of Washington, the world of politics. She comes, she will tell others and herself, to plumb the mystery of

democracy, how the wills of forty million people, like some wild river, are made to turn the mill wheels of popular government. But when she is being a little more honest with herself—and honesty and she are on uncertain terms with each other—she confides that she has come out of ambition. It is, admittedly, an odd sort of ambition: “Was she not herself devoured by ambition, and was she not now eating her heart out because she could find no one object worth a sacrifice?” (p. 4). This could come perilously close to the stereotype of a woman needing to submit herself to some masculine force. This would make Ratcliffe her Heathcliff, the romantic beast that a beauty cannot resist.

But Madeleine already has a good deal of masculine force herself. She is often presented to us as a commander or even a conqueror—she overcomes the chaos of the dull home she rents in Washington; she sorts out the logistical nightmare of an international ball thrown by the British ambassador; she manipulates others in the home that is her arena. She tortures them in her mind to make them own up to their real nature: “One by one she passed them through her crucibles, and tested them by acids and by fire. A few survived her tests and came out alive, though more or less disfigured, where she had found impurities” (p. 12).

Madeleine especially tortures Senator Ratcliffe, the object, initially, of her fascinated contempt: “She wanted to understand this man, to turn him inside out, to experiment on him and use him as young physiologists use frogs and kittens” (p. 20). Flattering him with half-truths in chapter 2, she makes the game of manipulating him look too easy. With her assured sense of style, she can type him by his background, as presented by the complicit narrator:

In the summer he retired to a solitary, white farmhouse with green blinds, surrounded by a few feet of uncared-for grass and a white fence, its interior more dreary still, with iron stoves, oil-cloth carpets, and white walls, and one large engraving of Abraham Lincoln in the parlour, all in Peonia Illinois! What equality was there between these two combatants? What hope for him? What risk for her? (p. 20)

Contrast that “one engraving” with the “mystical Corot” Madeleine brought back from Paris (pp. 4, 9, 103). Contrast the oil-cloth carpets and white walls with her “medley of sketches, paintings, fans, embroideries, and porcelain...hung, nailed, pinned, or stuck against the wall” (p. 9). The picture seems clear—taste against vulgarity, female stylish-

ness against male coarseness. But we should not, perhaps, be as complicit with Madeleine as the narrator is at this point. Adams had in 1875 mocked the fad for Camille Corot affected by “prigs” and had made fun of fussy décor like Madeleine’s.³

In fact, when at last (in chapter 7) a third-person inner monologue is given to Ratcliffe, we find that he too is a critic of the oil-cloth floors he grew up with:

He hated the sight of his tobacco-chewing, newspaper-reading satellites, with their hats tipped at every angle except the right one, and their feet everywhere except on the floor. He smiled his only smile that evening when he thought how rapidly she would rout every man Jack of his political following out of her parlours, and how meekly they would submit to banishment into a back-office with an oil-cloth carpet and two cane chairs. (p. 76)

We soon find the pair of them leagued to mock the gaucherie of the newly elected president of the United States, the bumpkin from Indiana. Ratcliffe plays on the president’s ignorance of Washington etiquette (pp. 84–85) and shares his assertions of superiority with an appreciative Madeleine: “He described in humorous detail his interview with the Indiana lion, and the particulars of the surfeit of lobster as given in the President’s dialect; he even repeated to her the story told him by Mr. Tom Lord, without omitting oaths or gestures...” (p. 86). After the formal ball in chapter 11, the two laugh over the way the president conducted himself there (pp. 152–53).

Madeleine is first presented to us as a skilled angler who lands Ratcliffe with flattery as if he were a 200-pound salmon (p. 19). But then we see him throwing nets of seduction over whole legions of foes, like a Roman *retiarius* in the arena, and her feat is dwarfed (p. 80). The more we watch the interaction of this initially opposed pair, the more we notice half-hidden resemblances. Madeleine, despite her initial shudder away from the people as a “million-armed monster” (p. 4), rebukes a young foreign diplomat making light of American society with this fervid bit of flag-waving (seen as such by her sister):

‘Society’ in American means all the honest, kindly-mannered, pleasant-voiced women, and all the good, brave, unassuming men, between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Each of these has a free pass in

³ Levenson et al., *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 235.

every city and village, 'good for this generation only,' and it depends on each to make use of this pass or not as may happen to suit his or her fancy. To this rule there are no exceptions, and those who say 'Abraham is our father' will surely furnish food for that humour which is the staple product of our country. (p. 25)

In the same way, when a foreign baron mocks American manners, Ratcliffe erupts: "I would like to show him our society in Peonia...he would find a very brilliant circle there of nature's true noblemen" (p. 53). By an unwitting sympathy, these opposite types begin to approximate each other, he growing more refined as she is coarsened toward him, infected with his ambition for power, with the conviction that the million-armed monster must be steered by its superiors. Already in chapter 5 we find Madeleine doing what she could not have imagined herself doing in chapter 1, admitting the logic by which Ratcliffe stole votes for the good of the country, correcting the folly of people who would have overthrown Lincoln in the midst of the Civil War (p. 55).

Ratcliffe is not just justifying his past actions by this point, but conscripting Madeleine into his current project, which is to make the new Republican president accept the machinery of the party, convincing him that only the party can make him effective. We get a sense of Madeleine's vulnerability to his wiles from the fact that it is only here that we learn how he was cheated out of the presidency at the last election. Just three votes shy of the Republican nomination, Ratcliffe was blocked at the last minute by rivals who put up a man of little skill or experience—a former stonemason from Indiana, presented as a simple man of the people. (We know how little that recommendation is likely to strike Madeleine.) This new man in the White House feels that he must placate but also defang Ratcliffe, since he is a power in the party, and its principal leader in the Senate, but also a disappointed rival and potential menace. The president's men decide to give Ratcliffe a post in the cabinet while surrounding him there with hostile compeers. This will at once remove him from the Senate and put him in a circle that can contain him, making any opposition on his part look like disloyalty to the administration that has given him a post of honor. Ratcliffe's counter-strategy is to hold out against the offer of a cabinet post, threatening to tie up the new administration with intraparty squabbles until he can maneuver some less hostile people into the cabinet before joining it.

The means Ratcliffe uses are entirely plausible. He fights on two fronts, successfully. While subtly undermining the president's hostile partisans, he presents himself to Madeleine as a victim of their admitted attempts to undermine *him*. Since he can present them as the aggressors, he explains his tactical responses to them and gets her reluctant approval of them. She comes to think that he is forced to defend himself against others' guile—making herself a victim of his guile. The skill of his operation is shown by its economy of means and surplus of effect. One of the ways he smooths his own path is to offer rewards to Madeleine's coterie of reform-minded friends. This at once disarms her criticisms and makes less plausible with the president the claim that Ratcliffe represents a corrupt wing of the party.

Ratcliffe also maneuvers his rival for Madeleine's attention, the Virginia lawyer John Carrington, into a foreign assignment, in a way that makes it impossible for Carrington to resist what is being done to him. In this blur of omnidirectional maneuver, Ratcliffe makes himself so necessary to the new president that he ends up distributing patronage to the man's own camp, putting words into his inaugural address, and helping him struggle clumsily through the diplomatic mazes of the British ambassador's ball. At that ball, which is itself a comic version of the personal conflicts at the heart of government, Ratcliffe's mastery is evident at last: "Ratcliffe looked the character of Prime Minister sufficiently well at this moment. He would have held his own, at a pinch, in any Court, not merely in Europe but in India or China, where dignity is still expected of gentlemen" (p. 152).

This is the moment Ratcliffe shrewdly seizes for proposing to Madeleine, at the end of the evening where they have been working as allies, when she is weakened by the strain of the whole affair. She is not interested in a love he barely bothers to express. She reflects even as he is speaking that "of all the offers of marriage she had ever heard, this was the most unsentimental and businesslike" (p. 154). He knows by now that his only hold on her is through her ambition. He says he needs her to effect his designs: "You are among those who exercise an influence beyond their time" (p. 154). She is on the verge of accepting when her sister Sybil intrudes, saying she needs to talk with her. She has to delay Madeleine's answer until she can use a letter that Carrington left with her before he departed on his foreign assignment.

Sybil and Carrington had seen Ratcliffe's proposal coming and feared that Madeleine would accept it. Their plotting together before

Carrington left backfires at first. Seeing it, Madeleine thinks that Sybil has fallen in love with Carrington. Since Carrington has made it clear that he loves Madeleine, she rationalizes her growing determination to marry Ratcliffe by telling herself that she must remove herself from Carrington's aspirations in order to clear the path for her sister. She is looking for excuses for the marriage with Ratcliffe. Madeleine takes her sister's criticism of the senator as another of those excuses, saying that she will marry him rather than be dictated to by others (pp. 132–34, 160).

But now Sybil produces the letter Carrington left with her, one he received from the woman lobbyist Madeleine met on a boat trip to Mount Vernon. The letter proves that Ratcliffe once sold his vote, not for patriotism but for personal gain. This at last awakes Madeleine to Ratcliffe's menace—not his threat to the country, but his threat to her. She must reject him now or she will *become* him. It is her own integrity that he has usurped, and he did it by a blunt honesty about the necessity of using corrupt means to good ends. She sees at last where this will lead her and flees back to the world she called superficial in the opening pages. That now looks like a cleaner world, one where she can at least look in her mirror again: “She was glad to quit the masquerade; to return to the true democracy of life, her paupers and her prisons, her schools and her hospitals” (p. 169).

THE TALE'S ARTISTRY

The plot is simple enough. It seems to have a structure embarrassingly close to that of a D. W. Griffith movie—heroine rescued at the last minute from a dastardly villain. But Adams's point is that Madeleine needs rescuing not from an outside assailant but from an internal appetite, the disease of ambition. Most critics treat her as a potential victim of Ratcliffe. Adams sees her as very nearly victimized by herself. The many ways, realistic and symbolic, he uses to show what acids are corroding her integrity would take far too long to deal with here. But let me point out three. One is a subtle symbolic touch that comes early on. When she goes to Washington, she literally “clears the field of action” by taking over a prominently placed house and spectacularly putting it in order for her campaign. The action is described as heroic and almost miraculous. In two days she overcomes “the worst confusion”

and produces a “redeemed house.” This is an act of exorcism: “Her next two days were occupied with a life-and-death struggle to get the mastery over her surroundings. In this awful contest the interior of the doomed house suffered as though a demon were in it.”

It is hard to justify this hyperbole to people who have not had the experience of Adams and his audience. His brother Charles complains of the boyhood ordeal they shared—two long sermons every Sunday in Boston or Quincy, where readings and homilies dinned scripture into them.⁴ And even someone less drenched in the New Testament, someone like me, has little trouble catching an echo from the parable told twice there, once in Mark and once in Luke (11:24–26):

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through desert places, seeking rest; and finding none, he says, “I will return to my house, from which I came.” And when he comes, he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first.

Madeleine has expelled the evil spirit of her past discontent—in this respect the purging of the house repeats the renunciations of the opening pages of the novel. Now she has a cleared new arena for action. In the next chapter, she (again almost miraculously) establishes, with effortless speed, a salon in a capital that resists outsiders—and guess how many people show up there, meticulously counted off: seven.

Of course, these are not evil spirits in themselves—they contain, for one, the most honorable person in the tale, John Carrington. They are all tempters in her desire to play their game, the game of politics. But wait a minute. There were not only seven spirits brought to the cleaned house in the gospel of Luke. An original conductor brought them there. Senator Ratcliffe is the man whom she has already seen in action in the Senate and to lure whom she sets up her salon. This eighth man is the story’s supreme tempter, the one she almost yields to.

My next two examples of artistry may seem quite the opposite—rather clumsy novelistic devices. These are the two points where the action is taken off to tourist spots near Washington, to Mount Vernon by steamboat and to Arlington Cemetery by horseback. Sightseeing is a

⁴ Charles Francis Adams (1835–1915), *Autobiography* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), pp. 14–15.

common enough ploy in novels of the time—Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* was even sold as a guidebook to all the famous places in Rome, each in turn visited reverently by the characters in the novel. Adams inoculates us against such false piety on the Mount Vernon trip by mocking the idea of pilgrimage to a shrine: the little steamboat taking the party to the plantation's tobacco-staging berth is described as "pounding the muddy waters of the Potomac and sending up its small column of smoke as though it were a newly invented incense-burner approaching the national deity" (p. 60). Actually, even before the party assembles for its trip we hear about the giddiness that affects Washingtonians during a false spring—buds coming out too early, bachelors frisking about eligible young women. The idyllic paragraph reaches its deflationary climax, however, with a reference to the false promises emitted from the Capitol and the White House, "those two whited sepulchres at either end of the Avenue" (p. 58). So much for national shrines.

The rest of the chapter will reverse that progress from the rhapsodic to the cynical. At first, to keep deflating the solemnity of pilgrimage, Adams makes Victoria Dare, the flirtatious young heiress, respond to an Irish lord's reverent claims for George Washington with a spirited send-up of the Washington myth. John Carrington, the Virginia stoic who loves Madeleine, tempers the absurdities of this description with realistic words about the debt-ridden Virginia that Washington inhabited. Lord Skye, the British host of the party, makes plausible claims about Washington's Virginia provincialism: "He might once in a way have forgotten Mount Vernon" (p. 68). Nathan Gore of Massachusetts says that Washington and New England never got along. He, nonetheless, feels that Washington's rectitude still intimidates him: "Suppose I heard his horse now trotting up on the other side [of the house], and he suddenly appeared at this door and looked at us. I should abandon you to his indignation. I should turn away and hide myself on the steamer" (p. 68).

It is at this point that Ratcliffe criticizes Washington as a man too sealed up in his own virtue to cope with the more fluid and complex world in the city named for him. His criticism is not unreasonable, but Carrington looks at Madeleine to see whether she finds a flaw in it. On one level, at least, she does. She knows that whatever Washington was, he was not a politician as she is coming to know the breed. We were in

danger of losing all sympathy with her in the preceding chapter. But we never admire Madeleine more than when she admires herself least:

Was it true, as Victoria Dare said, that she could not live in so pure an air? Did she really need the denser fumes of the city? . . . Why was it, she said bitterly to herself, that everything Washington touched, he purified, even down to the associations of his house? And why is it that everything we touch seems soiled? (p. 73)

This use of Washington as a touchstone has developed only gradually, under much banter and some necessary plot complications—it is on the steamer that Madeleine meets the woman lobbyist who will supply the letter confirming Ratcliffe's perfidy. But the whole tenor of the story is deepened as we see the characters reacting to Washington and reacting to each others' reactions. A new scale has been introduced for measuring what these people are up to. The point is made by refraction in the flippant debate on whether sundials wear out. Victoria Dare teases the traveling Irish lord with this claim: America's sundials "get soaked with sunshine so that they can't hold shadow" (p. 72). It is a sly but unwitting version of Ratcliffe's claim that the George Washington standard is obsolete. The Mount Vernon excursion, which seems to wander off from the story, is in fact driving inward to its point.

The same is true of the only other point in the tale where we leave the confines of the federal city: the horseback ride Carrington takes with Madeleine's sister Sybil, ending up at the old Lee mansion and new Union cemetery. She had wanted to cross the Potomac and see that house so visible across the river. Carrington, for good reasons, said no to her at first but finally gave in to her coaxings. They cross the bridge and canter up a slope beginning to wake from winter. But Sybil is taken aback by the rows of graves, "as though Cadmus had reversed his myth, and sown living men to come up dragons' teeth" (p. 109). She would like to flee this vision into the warmer life of the house, but Carrington says he cannot enter. While she goes inside, he continues to sit on the porch, where they had looked back at the District: "Opposite them, with its crude 'thus saith the law' stamped on white dome and fortress-like walls, rose the Capitol" (p. 10)—that is the victorious Union's hard sentence on the plantation culture of Arlington. Inside the house, Victoria finds the sign of that victory in the stripped rooms, the crude scribbles of northern tourists. She resents this intrusion into a domestic

enclave, comparing Yankee ravages to what Attila's hordes might have done after capturing Rome. Though it was Victoria's own northern armies that took this place—it is her "champions" who lie in the Union cemetery outside—her feelings are deepened by conflict, by a dim first sense of the price that was paid for the Union.

Back out on the porch, Sybil wants Carrington to help sort out her feelings for her. But he just complicates them further with his reasons for not entering the mansion: "The Lees were old family friends of mine. . . I used to stay here when I was a boy, even as late as the spring of 1861. The last time I sat here, it was with them" (p. 110).

These are emotionally charged words for Adams. In the spring of 1861 he had sat there with the Lees. Robert E. Lee's son Henry, known as "Rooney," had been a Harvard classmate and friend of Henry and his brother Charles. Charles writes of visiting Rooney at Arlington several times in the days leading up to Lincoln's inauguration—he and Henry were both there on the very night Lincoln was smuggled into town by Pinkerton agents.⁵

Carrington, moreover, is based on another of Henry's southern friends, the grandly titled Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar, who had resigned from Congress at the beginning of the Civil War and served his state in combat before going abroad as a diplomat for the Confederacy. Adams had met him in that capacity while both were in London.⁶ Lamar was a witty but melancholy man, who had lost two brothers on the battlefield. At the time of *Democracy*, he was the postwar senator from Mississippi, in which role he earned the nickname of "Great Pacificator" for his efforts to overcome sectional enmities after the Civil War. On the floor of the Senate, this southerner praised the northern champion Charles Sumner, an act that earned him a chapter in John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*. In 1887, seven years after *Democracy* appeared, Lamar became the first southerner raised to the bench of the Supreme Court since the war began.

Though Rooney Lee and Lucius Lamar and Charles Francis Adams never met on the battlefield, they might have. Henry worried during

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

⁶ Adams was glad that the South had not pitted Lamar against his father in the London assignment: "London society would have been delighted in him; his stories would have won success; his manners would have made him loved; his oratory would have swept every audience" (*Education of Henry Adams* [Library of America, 1983], p. 890). Clover later confirmed his gift for conversation: Marian ("Clover") Adams to her father, March 5, 1883, in Ward Thoron, ed., *The Letters of Mrs. Henry Adams, 1865–1883* (Little, Brown, & Company, 1936), p. 426.

the war that he should be fighting in the Union cavalry with Charles, rather than serving in his father's diplomatic mission to London. But the horror and degradation and nobility on both sides of that conflict, reflected in the Arlington part of *Democracy*, do what the Mount Vernon episode had done—raise the stakes of the political game being played. Arlington speaks, across the Potomac, to the dome of law, revealing the human consequences of plans like those that Ratcliffe forms. This is not a simple matter, easily sorted out. One of Ratcliffe's illegal schemes had, after all, helped reelect Lincoln. The reader's sympathies should be growing as confused as Sybil's.

Sybil suddenly matures in the company of a man with the terrible memories of Carrington. Later, as they ride through the still-barren trees of Rock Creek Park, she hears how he held his dying brother in his arms on a battlefield. In one long tour-de-force sentence, the girl becomes a woman, giving her life a new and darker meaning as the numbing procession of phrases spirals down:

She felt quite sure, by a sudden flash of feminine inspiration, that the curious look of patient endurance on his face was the work of a single night when he had held his brother in his arms, and knew that the blood was draining drop by drop from his side, in the dense, tangled, woods, beyond the reach of help, hour after hour, till the voice failed and the limbs grew stiff and cold. (p. 125)

Carrington is the one man in the novel with no political ambition. Tragedy has made him what Graham Greene would call “a burnt-out case,” more an observer of life than a participant in it. It is significant that Adams makes him a Virginian. Lamar, his model, was from Mississippi.⁷ In fact, Virginia haunts the novel. Both the trips that give the story a broader significance are into Virginia. Carrington, the anti-type to Ratcliffe's corruption, has a sense of Virginia honor.

Madeleine is herself a Lee, since she married a Virginian who had gone to New York after the war. Above all, George Washington, the touchstone of the republic, was a Virginian. Washington is the one figure in American history for whom the often skeptical Adams showed unflinching reverence: “Washington's breadth defies me, and his balance

⁷ Lamar was born and died in Georgia, and he attended Emory in Atlanta, where he married a daughter of the college's president. When that president, A. B. Longstreet, accepted the presidency of the state college in Oxford, Mississippi, Lamar followed him to teach there and practice law, was elected to Congress from that state, wrote its secession document, and is buried in Oxford.

passes comparison.”⁸ Despite the common misconception that Adams wrote his great nine-volume history of the Virginia presidents with a New England grudge against them, he considered himself a southerner, since his favorite relative, his grandmother, was from Maryland. He showed a preference for Virginia, even giving another man he admired, Albert Gallatin, a suspect Virginia provenance.⁹ He always felt that the worst and the best elements in the formation of America, the crucial features, were Virginian, setting our destiny.

In making Carrington a burnt-out case, Adams was giving a touch of the sublime to his own melancholy withdrawals from various hopes, academic and political and social. He, too, liked to pose as more an observer of life than a participant. He kept telling others and himself that he had no ambition. But certain slips in that construct appear at times, as when he tells the best friend of his youth that “*except for very high office, I would take none*” (emphasis added).¹⁰ It was from his own experience of the insidious, unconscious way ambition works that he drew his subtle portrait of Madeleine. Carrington is what Adams tried to be before outsiders. Madeleine is what he feared, inwardly, he could become. There was a sense in which his first novel was written, as he said of his second one, “in one’s heart’s blood.”¹¹ He knows Madeleine so well because he was dangerously acquainted with an ambition like hers.

THE CHARACTERS’ MODELS

It is the importance of ambition in Madeleine that makes nonsense of the claim that she was modeled on Adams’s wife, Clover. He certainly would not have turned to her as a type of that corrosive trait. Though there are touches in Madeleine’s salon of the select company Clover entertained in Washington, Clover’s meetings were not experiments in political ambition—and she escaped the Corot fad. But the most obvious difference between Clover and Madeleine pertains to the central

⁸ Adams to Owen Wister, March 20, 1908, in Levenson et al., *Letters*, vol. 6 (1988), p. 128.

⁹ Henry Adams, *The Life of Albert Gallatin* (J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1879), p. 59: “he regarded himself as a Virginian, and seems to have been regarded as such by his acquaintances.”

¹⁰ Adams to Charles Milnes Gaskell, July 1869, in Levenson et al., *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 41.

¹¹ Levenson et al., *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 34.

plot device—the danger of a marriage accepted to win power. Clover did not have a prior husband she loved, only to accept a new one without love for the thrill of experiment.

The other original most often suggested for Madeleine is Emily (Mrs. Bigelow) Lawrence, who, as Adams wryly said, “will die convinced that she was meant as the heroine of that scandalous work.”¹² She has three principal recommendations for this role. She was a fashionable widow. She had a younger sister (Fanny Chapman) who accompanied her everywhere. And according to Clover Adams, she would have set her cap for James G. Blaine, the presumed model for Senator Ratcliffe, if she could: “It was thought last spring [1882] here that if Blaine had been a widower she would not long be a widow.”¹³ But there’s the rub. First, this rumor arose two years after *Democracy* appeared. And second, Blaine was and remained securely married, lacking the main plot function of Ratcliffe. The intellectual quest of Madeleine has no resemblance to Mrs. Lawrence’s butterfly existence; and Emily Chaw can hardly figure in the matter if, as is certain, Madeleine’s sister was based on another person altogether, Emily Beale. Besides, as we shall see, it is too simple to say that Ratcliffe “is” Blaine.

That Madeleine was formed on a specific model is likely, since most if not all the other characters are based on people within Adams’s acquaintance, not only in this novel but in the second one as well. Most came from the group of his close acquaintances. I have already treated Senator Lamar as the source of Carrington. And the flamboyant Virginia Dare, as I just noted, was drawn from Clover’s friend Emily Beale, a neighbor on Lafayette Square, the daughter of millionaire General Edward Beale, who lived in the elegant house that Benjamin Latrobe built for Stephen Decatur. Emily Beale in her unmarried days was so vivid that she also figures as a character in Frances Burnett’s *Fair Barbarian*.¹⁴ With her gift for “outrageous” comments, Emily told Clover (whom she suspected of writing the novel) that *Democracy* was “a horrid, nasty, vulgar book, written by a newspaper man not in good society.”¹⁵

Nathan Gore, the man from Massachusetts, is a scholar waiting for a

¹² Adams to Elizabeth Cameron, August 21, 1901, in Levenson et al., *Letters*, vol. 5, p. 280.

¹³ Marian Adams to her father, January 31, 1882, in Thoron, *Letters*, p. 339.

¹⁴ Ernest Samuels, *Henry Adams: The Middle Years* (Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 442. On her marriage, Emily Beale became Mrs. John Roll McLean.

¹⁵ Marian Adams to her father, January 31, 1882, in Thoron, *Letters*, p. 339.

foreign service appointment—a dead giveaway for Adams’s old mentor and friend and rival, John Lothrop Motley. Adams had little respect for Motley’s massive history of the Netherlands, but he gives his character as Gore the best speech in favor of democracy (pp. 40–41). He had been amused by Motley’s being appointed minister to England, rather than secretary of state, because President Grant disliked his dandy’s tailoring, pompous monocle, and hair parted in the middle.¹⁶ Baron Jacobi, the Voltairean old minister from Bulgaria, is a direct portrait of a fixture in the Adams household, Aristarchi Bey from Turkey. Clover wrote to her father: “Aristarchi Bey comes often in the evening and tells us more of politics in Europe than a dozen newspapers.”¹⁷

An embarrassment to some modern commentators on the novel is Hartbeest Schneidekoupon (“Coupon-Clipper”). Ernest Samuels, who was rightly concerned about Adams’s anti-Semitism, does not even comment on him when listing the models for the novel’s characters in his biography, though he does give an identification of the original in his notes to the Library of America edition of *Democracy*. The prototype was Perry Belmont, son of August Belmont, the American representative of the Rothschild banking empire, who was the American minister to the Netherlands under President Franklin Pierce. Like Belmont in 1880, Schneidekoupon is thirty years old, a great promoter of the gold standard and high tariffs. Schneidekoupon is known for sporting extravagance with his yacht (p. 22)—a reference to the Belmont family’s huge investment in horse breeding and racing (the source of the Belmont Stakes and Belmont Park racetrack). One may wonder, reading *Democracy*, how the son of this Jewish financier can be aspiring to the presidency (p. 22). Admittedly, Benjamin Disraeli was prime minister in England; but America in the nineteenth century was hardly free of anti-Semitism.

Belmont, however, was known as much for his maternal as his paternal forebears. Baptized in childhood as an Episcopalian, Perry Belmont took his first name from his mother’s family, of patriotic naval fame. Perry’s great-grandfather fought as a privateer in the Revolution. His grandfather was Commodore Matthew Galbraith Perry, who opened the door to trade with Japan. His great uncle was Oliver Hazard Perry, hero of the war of 1812, who issued the famous dispatch: “We have met the en-

¹⁶ *The Education of Henry Adams*, p. 972.

¹⁷ Marian Adams to her father, March 12, 1882, in Thoron, *Letters*, p. 364.

emy and he is ours.” This family connection meant that he was a relative of Adams’s friend John La Farge, the artist who married the granddaughter of Oliver Hazard Perry. The Perry connection with naval affairs makes all the more appropriate Schneidekoupon’s interest in his yacht.

More than all this, Perry Belmont was Adams’s history pupil at Harvard; and, like Adams, he went after graduation to study civil law in Germany. He remained a close friend of the Adamses from those school days. Given this background, it is impossible to think Adams was being cruel to Perry under the name of Schneidekoupon. With the insensibility of the time, he no doubt thought it was just pleasant joshing to refer to his friend’s ancestral roots. Madeleine’s sister Sylvia, who is a good friend of Mrs. Schneidekoupon in the novel, expresses *admiration* for her defiant performance before a boor when she says, “You know, Madeleine, the Schneidekoupons are descended from all the Kings of Israel, and are prouder than Solomon in his glory” (p. 24). In the year the novel appeared, Belmont was elected to the House of Representatives, a blessing for the Adamses, since it meant that he left New York for Washington, where he became a regular guest at their H Street home. Clover invited outgoing company to compensate for the fact that Perry was “very solemn.”¹⁸ He would later join the army for service in the Spanish American War and (despite his age by that time) in World War I.

The fact that the cast of characters was recruited so heavily from the people who circulated through the Adams parlor and dining room gives *Democracy* the air almost of home theatricals. Intimacy with Henry and Clover was nearly a requirement for inclusion. That was reflected, of course, in the suspicion that the book must have been written by one in their circle. The odd thing is that Henry was the least suspected person—Clover, Hay, and King being the chief suspects. The latter two were known as more “creative” writers than Henry, Hay for his dialect poems written in his newspaper days (1870–71), and King for the humorous touches of character and incident he added to his *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1872). Hay would write his own political novel three years after *Democracy* appeared (*The Bread-winners*, 1883), just confirming the view of those who thought he wrote the earlier book, too.

¹⁸ Marian Adams to her father, December 18, 1881, in Thoron, *Letters*, p. 311. Six months later Clover gave him a wooden monkey jumping on a string, to cheer him up (*ibid.*, p. 380). He was cheered by dating the famous Lillie Langtry (*ibid.*, p. 402). When Aristarchi Bey was recalled by his country, Perry Belmont gave the speech at the farewell dinner for him, and he spoke “very well” according to Adams (*ibid.*, p. 448).

The nameless president of the novel is the great exception to the rule that Henry drew on people he knew personally. This truly is a type, since it combines the traits of two men he had met but did not know personally—Presidents Ulysses S. Grant and Rutherford B. Hayes. The president's wife in the novel is also drawn from those men's two wives. Madeleine's visit to the White House, where she incurs the enmity of the president's wife, follows closely Adams's encounter with Mrs. Grant, as described to his English friend, Charles Gaskell:

At last Mrs. Grant strolled in. She squints like an isosceles triangle, but is not much more vulgar than some Duchesses. Her sense of dignity did not allow her to talk to me, but occasionally she condescended to throw me a constrained remark. I chattered, however, with that blandness for which I am so justly distinguished, and I flatter myself it was I who showed them how they ought to behave. One feels such an irresistible desire, as you know, to tell this kind of individual to put themselves at their ease and talk just as though they were at home.¹⁹

Compare Madeleine's words:

"The sight of those two suffering images at the door [the president and his wife] is too mournful to be borne. I am dizzy with looking at these stalking figures. I don't believe they're real. I wish the house would take fire. I want an earthquake. I wish some one would pinch the President, or pull his wife's hair. (p. 47)

If people are right in making James G. Blaine the archetype of Ratcliffe, that would be another person Adams took from outside his circle of intimates. He did not know Blaine personally, though his friends Clarence King and John Jay did. Blaine himself thought the novel was attacking him, and he cut off further social contact with King, on the misconception that he had written it. Hay remained a friend and defender of Blaine. But Adams despised him for what he considered a betrayal of the Republican party's reform efforts and considered him corrupt. Clover hated him even more thoroughly. Blaine was, like Ratcliffe, a senator (though from Maine, not Illinois), a plausible charmer, and a powerful Senate orator. But the principal piece of evidence adduced for identifying him with Ratcliffe is that Ratcliffe is exposed in

¹⁹ Levenson, *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 56.

Madeleine's eyes by a letter relayed to her by Carrington, to be used privately against Ratcliffe and then destroyed. This is said to be based on letters produced in public by a man named James Mulligan, alleging that Blaine had struck corrupt bargains with a railroad. Blaine went to Mulligan, demanded the letters, read part of them on the Senate floor, and suppressed the rest. Blaine went on, as secretary of state, to become an architect of American empire (a cause Adams favored). In *Democracy*, there is no public scandal over a letter; Ratcliffe does not get the letter from Madeleine; nor does he have to give a public account of it. The parallels are not very close, especially when we remember that revelations contained in a letter are a stock mode of revealing skullduggery in Victorian melodrama.

Another candidate for Ratcliffe's origin is Roscoe Conkling, the New York senator who tried to get Adams's father as a running mate for Grant, should Grant be persuaded (as Conkling hoped) to run for a third term in 1872.²⁰ Adams was, if anything, more contemptuous of Conkling than of Blaine, but there are no major traits from one that could not be derived from the other, though Conkling might be a source for Ratcliffe's "principled" argument against reform. Both Conkling and Blaine, however, lack the key feature necessary for Adams's plot—neither is an older senator trying to arrange a marriage with a woman twenty years his junior (Ratcliffe is fifty in the novel, Madeleine thirty). Conkling—though he conducted a famous affair with the politically manipulative daughter of Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase—had a complaisant wife who kept him off the marriage market.²¹ Blaine, too, was secure in a long marriage. It would make better sense, in searching for Ratcliffe's original, to look for a senator with a powerful state machine and great influence in the Senate who had just married, or was trying to marry, a younger woman. Was there such a man?

Yes: Senator James Donald Cameron (always called Don) had been married in 1878, two years before the novel's appearance, to a woman twenty-four years his junior. Cameron was the heir to the Pennsylvania machine of his father, Simon Cameron, Lincoln's corrupt secretary of war. The family was already a target for satire. Twain had referred to

²⁰ Martin Duberman, *Charles Francis Adams* (Stanford University Press, 1960), pp. 500–501.

²¹ Kate Chase married the alcoholic millionaire Senator William Sprague, at whose eighty-room mansion Conkling was chased with a shotgun by the aggrieved husband. David M. Jordan, *Roscoe Conkling of New York* (Cornell University Press, 1971), pp. 309–14.

the father as “Senator Simon,” known for “Simony,” in *The Gilded Age* (1873), a novel Adams was well aware of (it contained some of the same characters treated in his book, including Aristarchi Bey).²² Adams and his wife knew the young woman Don Cameron married, since she was Elizabeth Sherman, the favorite niece of two famous Sherman brothers who were part of the Lafayette Square set—John Sherman, the secretary of the treasury, and William Tecumseh Sherman, commanding general of the United States armies. Clover saw General Sherman frequently and was favored by him with a dinnertime reenactment of his Civil War “march to the sea,” with knives and forks marching across the table.²³ And her husband was keenly scrutinizing his neighbor, the general’s brother, in 1878, since John Sherman was being promoted as a presidential candidate for 1880.

As a teenager, the vivacious Elizabeth Sherman rode with General Sherman—“Uncle Cump” to her—on a four-month survey of western military posts, going into areas of combat with the Indians. The next year she went west again to visit her sister at the post in Montana where her brother-in-law was on active service against marauding Indians. The steamship that she took upriver for part of the journey was the *Don Cameron*, named for a man she had not met at that point. When that ship foundered, they were rescued by another ship called the *General Sherman*.²⁴ Upon Elizabeth’s arrival in Washington in 1877, she was an instant social hit. She stayed with General John in the Lafayette Square neighborhood and became a friend of Emily Beale, the Virginia Dare of the novel, who lived in the Decatur House. There was much stir of matchmaking around Elizabeth, which she submitted to passively, because her parents had broken off an engagement to a young man she was deeply in love with. The social ambition of her mother ruled that man out as too little distinguished. Mother and uncles connived at hooking the powerful and wealthy widower, 54-year-old Don Cameron. It was a loveless marriage, but it gave Elizabeth a social niche in which she would shine the rest of her life.

²² Mark Twain, *The Gilded Age* (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 143, 434. In Twain’s book, Aristarchi Bey becomes Blacque Bey (*ibid.*, p. 357). Adams refers to Colonel Sellars from *The Gilded Age* in *The Education of Henry Adams*, p. 975.

²³ Marian Adams to her father, December 10, 1882, in Thoron, *Letters*, pp. 406–7.

²⁴ Arline Boucher Tehan, *Henry Adams in Love: The Pursuit of Elizabeth Sherman Cameron* (Universe Books, 1983), pp. 211–23.

After the death of Clover, Adams would foster a masochistic worship of the unattainable Elizabeth Cameron for the rest of his life. Since he was not yet devoted to the young bride in 1879, she is not usually considered the model for Madeleine Lee. But she would have posed a puzzle for Adams particularly suited to his purpose in the book. Why would such a young and bright beauty, bold and energetic, submit to an arranged marriage with a soiled political boss twice her age? Though he may not have heard the gossip about Elizabeth's blighted young love, he could see the results in her calculating submission to a marriage with power. Adams already had enough sympathy and admiration for her to make her marriage a study in the insidious workings of ambition. Elizabeth, even at twenty-one, had the curiosity and social deftness, initiative and sense of style, of Madeleine. And she was a stunning beauty, a magnet to men's attentions.

Elizabeth is not normally considered in the running as the original of Madeleine, since she did not become a close friend of the Adamses until slightly after the book's appearance. But she was the subject of surmise and speculation for the three years before its publication, and Adams had seen enough of her to take what he needed for the portrait of a young marriage motivated by ambition. Madeleine's marriage is averted at the last minute. Elizabeth would soon come to wish hers had been; but she continued to reap its benefits long after husband and wife had taken their separate ways.

Don Cameron is not often spoken of in connection with Ratcliffe, since Adams did not have the strong hatred for him that he nursed for Blaine or Conkling.²⁵ He would in time have to cultivate Cameron in order to see Elizabeth, riding in the private railroad cars and staying in the Paris apartments that Cameron paid for. But we are misreading the novel if we make Ratcliffe nothing but a stage villain. He is corrupt but complicated. So was Don Cameron. He even had the virtue, in Adams's eyes, of having helped block Blaine's bid for the presidency in 1876—a service he would repeat in the year when the novel came out.²⁶

If the novel had come out twenty years later than it did, there would

²⁵ But Brooks Mather Kelley thought that Ratcliffe might be based on *Simon Cameron*: "A Machine Is Born: Simon Cameron and Pennsylvania, 1862–1873" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1961), pp. 75–76.

²⁶ James A. Kehl, *Boss Rule in the Gilded Age: Matt Quay of Pennsylvania* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), pp. 39, 46–50.

be no doubt that Elizabeth was Adams's model, since by that time his own relationship with the original would be precisely that of Carrington to Madeleine—loving her from a distance, relied on by her for guidance, supplying books and information, rewarded with genuine fondness but with no reciprocation of his own sexual devotion. He could not know that this would be his role when he wrote the novel in 1879; but he had already become fascinated with the woman who was a source of joy, wonder, disappointment, and agony for the last half-century of his life.

DEMOCRACY AS SATIRE

One reason *Democracy* has been underestimated as a novel is its usual assignment to the category of a "satire on Washington." This makes readers look for polemical purpose or political cartooning. Even Ernest Samuels says that, in *Democracy*, "Adams allowed his political thesis to drive him into caricature."²⁷ There are certainly passages where Adams seems carried away by satirical exuberance. Take the spoofing of the president, the old "Granite Splitter" of Indiana:

He had begun his career as a stone-cutter in a quarry, and was, not unreasonably, proud of the fact. During the campaign this incident had, of course, filled a large space in the public mind, or, more exactly, in the public eye. "The Stonecutter of the Wabash," he was sometimes called; at others, "the Hoosier Quarryman," but his favorite appellation was "Old Granite," although this last endearing name, owing to an unfortunate similarity of sound, was seized upon by his opponents, and distorted into "Old Granny." He had been painted on many thousand yards of cotton sheeting, either with a terrific sledge-hammer, smashing the skull (which figured as paving-stones) of his political opponents, or splitting by gigantic blows a huge rock typical of the opposing party. His opponents in their turn had paraded illuminations representing the Quarryman in the garb of a state-prison convict breaking the heads of Ratcliffe and other well-known political leaders with a very feeble hammer, or as "Old Granny" in pauper's rags, hopelessly repairing with the same heads the impossible roads which typified the ill-conditioned and miry ways of his party. (p. 80)

²⁷ Samuels, *Henry Adams*, p. 73.

But it is hard to overstate the gaudiness of nineteenth-century politicking. Here, for instance, is a scene from the 1860 Republican convention in Chicago, in the words of the great political reporter (and Adams friend) Murat Halstead:

The curiosity of the town—next to the “Wigwam” [convention hall]—is a bowie-knife seven feet long, weighing over forty pounds. It bears on one side the inscription, *Presented to John F. Potter by the Republicans of Missouri*. On the other side is this motto: *Will always keep a “Pryor” engagement*. This curiosity is gaped at almost as much as Greeley, and it is a strange and dreadful-looking concern. It is to be formally presented to Potter at Washington by a committee from Missouri.²⁸

It is not just for peripheral figures that such shenanigans were staged. The winner at that convention, the original Rail-Splitter, had his own theatrical boosters:

The “Old Abe” men formed processions and bore rails through the streets. Torrents of liquor were poured down the hoarse throats of the multitude. A hundred guns were fired from the top of the Tremont House. The *Chicago Press and Tribune* office was illuminated. The paper says: “On each side of the counting-room door stood a rail—out of the three thousand split by ‘honest Old Abe’ thirty years ago on the Sangamon River bottoms. On the inside were two more [rails], brilliantly hung with tapers.”

And the train back from Chicago to Washington was greeted, at every stop, by “boys carrying rails.”²⁹

It was hard to exaggerate the political vulgarity of the Gilded Age, as Twain found out in his novel foisting that name on the era. His fictional Senator Abner Dilworthy seems like a fantasist’s gargoyle; but a scholar looking carefully into all the points where he corresponds with his real-life model, Senator Samuel Pomeroy, could argue that “the more closely one studies Pomeroy’s career, the more clearly one sees that Twain’s account in *The Gilded Age*, far from being overdrawn, is a surprisingly exact copy.”³⁰ What is a poor satirist to do when reality refuses

²⁸ William B. Hesseltine, *Three against Lincoln: Murat Halstead Reports the Caucuses of 1860* (Louisiana State University Press, 1960), p. 177.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³⁰ Albert R. Kitzhaber, “Mark Twain’s Use of the Pomeroy Case in *The Gilded Age*,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 15 (March 1954): 42.

to be outrun? Yet both Adams and Twain were accused of creating a biliously distorted picture of American politics, one prompted by a contempt for democracy. Newspapers called *The Gilded Age* “an outrageous libel” and a textbook from which the reader “will learn to despise his country.”³¹ It is true that Twain, with characteristic hyperbole, had written his brother, on one visit to Washington, that “this is a place to get a poor opinion of everybody in.”³² And when he does confess a love of the city, it is for its vulnerability to ridicule. For his purposes, he wrote his wife, the city “is a perfect gold mine.”³³

Adams, too, had a love-hate relationship (and a far more intimate one) with Washington. But some early readers of his novel saw only hatred in it. It was “a cruel libel,” according to the *New York Tribune*; obvious in its “bias and misrepresentation,” according to the *Nation*; a “most deceptive book” said the *Atlantic*. Even Adams’s friends, not in on the secret of his authorship, denounced the novel. His brother Charles amused Henry (without knowing it) by describing the book as “crude,” with “coarse, Nast-like caricatures” in the *Nation*.³⁴ Clarence King, in London when the book was released, felt that the writer did not really know Washington.³⁵ The Boston *Transcript* agreed. It was said that it showed such hatred for America that only a foreigner stationed there could have written it. James Bryce, *the* British authority on American democracy, feared that readers would be misled by the book.³⁶ Theodore Roosevelt said that it “had a superficial and rotten cleverness, but it was essentially false, essentially mean and base,” and Adams’s old pupil, Cabot Lodge, concurred, saying the novel was “extremely sordid in the view which it took.”³⁷

The Gilded Age and *Democracy* prompted similar outcries because they touched on similar things in similar ways. Samuels at one time thought that Adams did not read *The Gilded Age*, because he does not re-

³¹ *Graphic*, February 28, 1874; *Independent*, January 1, 1874.

³² Mark Twain, *Letters*, edited by Albert Bigelow Paine (Harper & Bros., 1917), vol. 1, p. 150.

³³ Mark Twain, *Love Letters*, edited by Dixon Wecter (Harper & Bros., 1949), p. 155.

³⁴ Letters to the Editor, *Nation*, January 21, 1884. Charles also concluded that the author “was once in the army.”

³⁵ Clarence King to John Hay, August 15, 1882, cited in Edward Chalfant, *Better in Darkness* (Archon Books, 1994), p. 445.

³⁶ Samuels, *Henry Adams*, pp. 887–88.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

fer to it in writing—a shaky proof.³⁸ Twain's book was a runaway best-seller both in England and in America. It dealt with people Adams knew and liked or disliked, with Aristarchi Bey as well as Simon Cameron. Knowing about such "in" jokes was something both Henry and Clover reveled in, along with John Hay, who was a good friend of Twain and would have known the novel well. Twain's subjects are Adams's—women lobbyists, senatorial religiosity, purchased votes, railroad speculation, congressional investigations as cover-ups, Washington's social etiquette. The president in *The Gilded Age* is Grant, openly identified (and pictured by the illustrator) as keeping the undignified company of Colonel Sellars.

One way to see the subtlety of Adams's effects is to contrast the way each author treats a subject. The first and most obvious difference is between Twain's expansiveness and Adams's economy. In referring to the social etiquette of Washington, Twain produces a humorous disquisition on the calling-card ritual. Since Washington was both a small cluster of political sects, friendly and hostile to one another, in a city still fairly raw in its setting, a careful system of approaches and avoidances was instilled. Twain deals for two witty pages with the way calling cards were marked or turned down at corners to signal different degrees of intimacy desired or returned. "It is very necessary to get the corners right, else one may unintentionally condole with a friend on a wedding or congratulate her upon a funeral."³⁹

Adams brings up social ritual only indirectly, to serve the story's purpose. Ratcliffe, for instance, shows his contempt for the president by sending a verbal rather than written response to a summons, and he "felt a little regret that the President should not know enough etiquette to understand that this verbal answer was intended as a hint to improve his manners" (pp. 84–85). Several times we are told that Madeleine has defied the rules for declaring herself at home to company, so that her chosen friends come by informal assurances that only they know of, outside the accepted dance of courtesies. Two times only are calling cards mentioned in connection with Madeleine's home. The woman lobbyist Mrs. Samuel Baker is an outsider who sends in her card but breaks decorum by following it into Madeleine's presence, rather than letting a

³⁸ Ibid., p. 442.

³⁹ Twain, *The Gilded Age*, p. 297.

return card signal acceptance (p. 102). The other time is when C. C. French, the disappointed reformer, coldly leaves Madeleine's inner circle by leaving a P.P.C. (*pour prendre congé*) card instead of giving her a personal farewell (p. 101). The use of ritual serves dramatically to underline personal relations.

Both Twain and Adams mock the pretensions of people trying to impress others with foreign words or airs. Twain gives us a comic sketch of the family of Patrique Oreillé, who was Patrick O'Riley before he became "a wealthy Frenchman from Cork."⁴⁰ Adams simply brands the young congressman from Connecticut, C. C. French, when he has him refer to his own "badinaige" (p. 22). Both men use direct attacks on revered institutions, but Adams almost always has a plot purpose for his witticisms. When he refers to the Capitol and the White House as "those two whited sepulchres at either end of the Avenue," he is setting up a contrast with the plain shrine at Mount Vernon. Each man is good at creating suspense about the *peripeteia* of his tale—the contents of the letter in Adams, the twin climaxes of Senator Dilworthy's bill and Laura's trial in Twain. But Twain has to have some fun along the way. The senator needs to learn quickly of his bill's progress in New York:

He could not wait for the papers themselves to crawl along down to Washington by a mail train which has never run over a cow since the road was built, for the reason that it has never been able to overtake one. It carried the usual "cow-catcher" in front of the locomotive, but this is mere ostentation. It ought to be attached to the rear car, where it could do some good; but instead, no provision is made there for the protection of the traveling public, and it is not a matter of surprise that cows so frequently climb aboard that train and among the passengers.⁴¹

Both novels have a corrupt senator at the center of their plot machinery; and both pretend they strike their deals for virtuous motives. But Ratcliffe has some plausibility when he says that he stole votes to ensure Lincoln's reelection. Dilworthy pretends that his sale of overpriced Tennessee land will benefit freed slaves by giving them work. His excuse is not only fraudulent but has the disadvantage in our eyes of discrediting Republican efforts at reconstruction. Twain was not as sophisticated, politically, when he wrote this first novel as he would later become.

I am not trying to say that Twain's is a bad novel and Adams's a good

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 301–10.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 391–92.

one. I think the Twain novel is very good of its kind.⁴² It is simply different in kind from Adams's. It is "a satire on Washington" in ways that *Democracy* is not. Adams is not satirizing ambition in Madeleine but analyzing it, and everything else in the story serves that purpose. Twain's tale has several classes of characters, the ignorant and duped, the scheming and corrupt, the virtuous but ineffectual. As the story progresses, Laura moves from the first category to the second, but most other characters stay where they were first placed. The characters in Madeleine's salon fit none of those categories. They are all fairly admirable, with flaws that do not condemn them in our eyes. Even the woman lobbyist is treated by her author with more sympathy than Madeleine can muster for her. There are no unequivocally bad characters in the book, not even Ratcliffe. The only unequivocally good person on display is Carrington, and he has been wounded by tragedy, leaving him only partly animated. Neither author is the cynical hater of democracy that he was accused of being by early reviewers. Sympathetic characters survive the infected air of Washington in both cases. But the infection is there.

II. ESTHER

Esther is shorter than *Democracy*, and some would call it slighter. It has certainly received less attention than the earlier novel. For years, in fact, it was out of print altogether. Adams would not have agreed with this judgment on his own work. He said he treasured it more than all his other books, since it was written in his life's blood. It is easy to dismiss this as sentiment, connected with the fact that *Esther* is, in important ways, a portrait of his lost wife. But the book is significant for reasons having nothing to do with Adams's marriage. I think it one of the more profound reflections ever written on American culture, and especially on American religion.

⁴² I refer to the novel simply as Twain's, since I am convinced by Bryant Morey French's analysis that he had the principal responsibility for plot and characters: see *Mark Twain and "The Gilded Age"* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1965). Actually, the collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner gives this novel a strength lacking in his other ones. Twain's stories usually have a picaresque quality, wandering along in a single track. By having to coordinate sets of characters in different locales, whose actions converge on the double climaxes, in New York and Washington, the authors convey the sense of great national actions affecting the lives of people in different places. In that regard, it is a tale of politics that transcends "the Washington novel."

THE SEARCH FOR AN AMERICAN RELIGION

The configuration of characters in this novel resembles that of the earlier one. Again the heroine has a younger woman she feels responsible for and a strong older man she relies on for guidance. Again she must resist the suit of a man whose power over her she resents but almost succumbs to. But the character of the suitor could not be more different. Ratcliffe in *Democracy* was a politician ultimately rejected because he was corrupt. Stephen Hazard, the Episcopal priest of this novel, is rejected not because of any personal flaw but because his very principles would cause Esther to be untrue to herself. She is resisting the man not despite what he professes but because of it. Hawthorne was much on Adams's mind as he wrote this novel; but Hazard is not a hypocrite, like the minister in *The Scarlet Letter*. He is a threat to Esther precisely because he is *not* a hypocrite, because he believes in the creed he preaches. It is his creed that Esther must fight.

The focus on Hazard's religion begins in the very first pages. The opening scene is like the one where Carrington takes Madeleine to the Senate to hear Ratcliffe shine in oratory. Here George Strong, a witty professor of geology, takes Esther to hear Hazard preach for the first time in his new church on New York's Fifth Avenue. In both cases, the woman and her companion express some doubt about the performance; but Hazard's sermon, unlike Ratcliffe's demagogical display, is a serious religious statement, an epitome of theological liberalism at that time:

The hymns of David, the plays of Shakespeare, the metaphysics of Descartes, the crimes of Borgia, the virtues of Antonine, the atheism of yesterday and the materialism of today, [are] all emanations of divine thought, doing their appointed work. It was the duty of the church to deal with them all, not as though they existed through a power hostile to the deity, but as the instruments of the deity to work out his unrevealed ends. (p. 190)

Adams is true to his prototype for Hazard, Phillips Brooks, the pastor of Trinity Church in Boston (the model for "St. John's" in the story). In an early writing, which Adams could not have known since it was published posthumously, Brooks had said:

Christianity, if it claim to be a complete not a partial system for the redemption of our life, must come with its central truth broad

enough and true enough to embrace and save it all.... Looking to this divine simplicity of the scheme of life, to Christ that saves, to God that blesses, no study is profane.... Books become sacraments, schools are temples, and the mental life grows holy....¹

This gospel, which seems so open and accepting, is resented by Esther and Strong for its imperialism. It lays claims to everything for the church. It asserts a “right of property” to all poetry and art and thought, and therefore to everyone’s soul and body. Esther and George also find something false about the church as a work of art, something theatrical, as if they were attending an opera (p. 193). Yet the church’s program, its architecture, and every bit of its iconography have been deeply considered by the scholarly Hazard and his artist friend, Wharton (who is modeled partly on Adams’s friend John La Farge).

Wharton—who has completed the new church’s stained-glass windows but is still working on the huge mural paintings of prophets and saints—tells Hazard he is not satisfied with his work. It is not only out of accord with the worst of the congregation at this first service held there, with the wealthy “first-nighters” who vie with the church decorations for display. It is just as discordant with the best of those who have shown up for the church’s opening—and Wharton takes that best to be Esther Dudley: “If she belongs to any besides the present, it is to the next world which artists want to see, when paganism will come again and we can give a divinity to every waterfall” (p. 200). Already a waterfall is involved in the novel’s thinking.

Esther’s mere presence at the church’s opening is taken by Wharton as an indictment of it. “The thing does not belong to our time or feelings” (p. 200). Wharton believes in a religion of suffering, ecstasy, and otherworldliness, just as Hazard believes in one of accommodation and assimilation. The church’s program is torn between these two, neither of which passes the Esther test. Neither addresses the doubts of a modern person of intelligence and goodwill. Wharton’s reference points are all too European, while Hazard’s are too universal. The real America slips between these opposite visions. Can there be an authentic expression of an American religion? Raising a Romanesque cathedral in the canyons of Fifth Avenue is not an answer to that question.

¹ Phillips Brooks, “The Centralizing Power of the Gospel,” in *Essays and Addresses* (E. P. Dutton & Company 1894), pp. 2–3.

What Wharton believes is beyond his art Hazard cannot accept as beyond his religion, since that religion is inclusive of everything in creation. If all good things belong to the church, then so should Esther, who seems very good indeed in Hazard's eyes. He begins a campaign to claim this prize. He is thirty-five, from a wealthy background, widely read and widely traveled. She is twenty-five, an aspiring artist who has been kept close at home by her father, a rich but chronically ill lawyer whose health was shattered by service in the Union army. Esther admires her father's intellect and tends his sickness. This father is notorious, in the New York social world, as a religious skeptic, yet the cultured and charming Hazard sets about winning the father's confidence as well as the daughter's. He does this by entering sincerely into their interests (they are all emanations of the deity, after all). He is successful at this project, even though he cannot cancel the father's hostility to religion. To prevail even thus far disarms Esther. She does not know how to cope with a preacher (of all things) whom her father rather likes. The father, who is clearly dying, has concluded that a preacher will have no harder time with his daughter than any man will: "Poor Esther, she has been brought up among men, and is not used to harness" (p. 206).

Hazard shows special interest in Esther's art. He soon has Wharton using and teaching her in the completion of the mural scheme of saints in the church. She is to paint St. Cecilia, the patroness of music. Esther fears that she is not up to the "masculine" demands of Wharton's mystical religion of sacrifice, and her attempts to become worthy are undermined by the arrival of Catherine Cortright, a young charge of her aunt's, for whom Esther is asked to share responsibility. Catherine could not be more different from Esther. She comes from Colorado, where she was raised in a Presbyterianism she discards without a qualm. While Esther was brought up in the male and urban world of her widower father's friends, Catherine grew up in a woman's world, tended by a widowed stepmother and stepsisters. Prompt with instinct and self-will, Catherine is as thoughtless as Esther is pensive. Catherine can laugh at and circumvent the certitudes of Hazard, but she is drawn almost maternally to the doubts and moods of Wharton.

There is a New World vs. Old World flirtation between the sunny American girl and the gloomy European-trained artist. Esther is as worried about this liaison as others are about her growing intimacy with Hazard. But she is rather relieved that Catherine, who has an easy skill

for getting her way, cajoles Wharton to give up his nagging attempts to make Esther paint St. Cecilia in accord with his own mediaeval ideas of the spiritual. Catherine, in fact, breezily proposes herself as the model for Esther's St. Cecilia, and Wharton lets the older woman try to paint the younger woman as an American vision of fresh nature, a saint of the Colorado plains, on the walls of Hazard's dark Romanesque church. The exercise shows how inauthentic is the whole enterprise. The possibility of a genuinely American religion becomes ever more remote as this oddly mixed company tries to reach a joint conception of the task facing American believers.

While Esther grows more fearful of her attraction to Hazard, Catherine is fearless in resolving to dispel Wharton's past, which comes to haunt him in the form of a bohemian wife he had married in his youthful days in Paris, a woman who was always disreputable and is now venal in seeking money from the man she deserted. Esther's uncle, a tough American lawyer, bribes the woman to seek a divorce and leave Wharton alone; but her bitter attacks disturb Wharton's attempt to find redemption in his art and undermine his hope of living with the uncorrupted America he finds in Catherine. The scaffold that Hazard and George Strong visit frequently, to watch Esther painting Catherine under Wharton's supervision, has become a cat's-cradle of emotions, spoken and unspoken, making a further muddle of the religious vision they are trying to embody in their work. Past and present, instinct and science, faith and skepticism, art and commerce tug in various directions the people who climb about the temporary and rickety structure that upholds them, mocking the promise of eternal unity and solid peace they hope to conjure up from their interconnections.

At this point, the death of Esther's skeptical father leaves her fortress of unbelief as flimsy as the structure of faith she dwells in and paints. In the collapse of these opposite ideals, she becomes vulnerable to Hazard's plea that he needs her. When Esther says that she will shock his church's more censorious members by her unbelief, he says that he can accept that unbelief. But she knows there is a catch in this. How, after all, can one give up a religion that claims to be behind everything, even irreligion? His very surrender is a form of capture. Nonetheless, she agrees to marry him while delaying the announcement of their engagement. She is stalling for time, putting her heart on hold. She still fears the insincere outward gestures she has found in all the religions that have been proposed for her. Even Hazard's humane warmth and geniality demonstrate

how hard it is to live up to the demands of religious sanctity, whether on a church's walls or in its pulpit:

The strain of standing in a pulpit is great. No human being ever yet constructed was strong enough to offer himself long as a light to humanity without showing the effect on his constitution. Buddhist saints stand for years silent, on one leg, or with arms raised above their heads, but the limbs shrivel and the mind shrivels with the limbs. Christian saints have found it necessary from time to time to drop their arms and to walk on their legs, but they do it with a sort of apology or defiance, and sometimes do it, if they can, by stealth. One is a saint or one is not; every man can choose the career that suits him; but to be saint and sinner at the same time requires singular ingenuity. For this reason, wise clergymen whose tastes, though in themselves innocent, may give scandal to others, enjoy their relaxation, so far as they can, in privacy. (p. 231)

Esther does not want to be relegated to the position of such a "relaxation," kept away from the scrutiny of Hazard's congregation. Yet she is having trouble sorting out her motives for rejecting him.

In her perplexity she appeals to George Strong, who is not only her cousin but a friend from their childhood days. She hopes that his scientific certainty can undermine Hazard's theological assurance. But Strong, professor of geology, can offer no competing certitude. He is as latitudinarian in his skepticism as Hazard is in his faith. It is the overlap of these latitudinarianisms that has kept *them* together since their college days. Strong tells Esther that she cannot escape the need for faith, no matter where she turns. There is no escape from the irrational into pure rationalism. Science begins with postulates accepted in order to work on a problem, though that acceptance is itself a blind act of trust. Strong anticipates what Thomas Kuhn has said about science in our time. He says to Esther: "I tell you the solemn truth that the doctrine of the Trinity is not so difficult to accept for a working proposition as any of the axioms of physics" (p. 285).

This is not an empty paradox for Adams. It is the position he later worked out for himself in the chapter of the *Education* called "A Grammar of Science." Science offers no simple answer to Esther's questions. It does not engage religion on the same level, where one of them can defeat or cancel the other. Once again Esther is stranded between conflicting visions, with no clear way of resolving their differences. Strong tells her

to build freely on any faith she wishes to accept, even though one is building only on air. That is how he gets to the processes he employs in his own scientific work, without worrying over the postulates on which he is operating. This does not satisfy Esther, who has no practical work to do but a spiritual existence she has to justify.

Strong has simply made her less sure of her grounds for resisting Hazard. Since she has no principle for acting on her opposition, the struggle is reduced to a mere question of power between them. Where there can be no reconciling of different values, one party or the other must simply follow the other's lead—must, in effect, submit. Hazard cannot understand why she will not just submit to him, as he has submitted to the tenets of his creed. But she finds submission on such terms an insult to the human spirit. When he tries to explain to her that the submission will entail no real price, that too is an affront to her sense of self. If religion costs nothing, what good is it? The problem with Hazard's religious imperialism is that in claiming all things it ends up accommodating all things. Too aggressive in its first urge outward, it is too passive in its acceptance back of whatever it encounters. It combines maximum effrontery with deepest passivity.

By this point, Esther has been stranded midway between all the forces at play in the society, large and small, around her. She hovers between the claims of religion and of disbelief, the claims of the two men she loves, Hazard and her father. She is equidistant, as well, from the headlong instincts of Catherine and the brooding self-consciousness of Wharton. She cannot accept the science of her cousin or the conventional religion of her aunt. She responds to all these aspects of life around her without being able to be at home in any of them. This is the American situation as Adams experienced it—a radically new departure from all available options, with no goal beyond departure. What would an authentic response to all this be? Is there a form of belief that is natural and unforced for the American conscience?

Esther's aunt Sarah, who is the most commonsensical person in the novel, knows intuitively that her favorite niece's marriage to Hazard would be a disaster, so she connives with Strong to spirit Esther off on a distracting jaunt to Niagara Falls. On the train speeding north through a winter night, there occurs the most astonishing scene of the book, two pages of external description that enact an internal crisis and its passing. Gazing out the window of her sleeping berth, Esther undergoes the first

real religious experience of the novel. She surrenders the community life glimpsed as receding from her. This is a dark night of the soul, demanding a motiveless renunciation of the self. Only she who loses her life can save it. The inner activity suggested by external event is so delicately presented that some have mistaken the two pages as mere descriptive landscape, a filler to transfer us from one scene to another. You be the judge. Is that an adequate account of this passage?

They were already far on their way, flying up the frozen stream of the Hudson, before she was left alone with her thoughts in the noisy quiet of the rushing train. She could not even hope to sleep. Propping herself up against the pillows, she raised the curtain of her window and stared into the black void outside. Nothing in nature could be more mysterious and melancholy than this dark, polar world, beside which a winter storm on the Atlantic was at least exciting. On the ocean the forces of nature have it their own way; nothing comes between man and the elements; but as Esther gazed out into the night, it was not the darkness, or the sense of cold, or the vagrant snow-flakes driving against the window, or the heavy clouds drifting through the sky, or even the ghastly glimmer and reflection of the snow-fields that, by contrast, made the grave seem cheerful; it was rather the twinkling lights from distant and invisible farm-houses, the vague outlines of barn-yards and fences along doubtful roads, the sudden flash of lamps as the train hurried through unknown stations, or the unfamiliar places where it stopped, while the tap-tap of the train-men's hammers on the wheels beneath sounded like spirit-rappings. These signs of life behind the veil were like the steady lights of shore to the drowning fisherman off the reef outside. Every commonplace kerosene lamp whose rays struggled from distant, snow-clad farms, brought a picture of peace and hope to Esther. Not one of these invisible roofs but might shelter some realized romance, some contented love. In so dark and dreary a world, what a mad act it was to fly from the only happiness life offered! What a strange idea to seek safety by refusing the only protection worth having! Love was all in all! Esther had never before felt herself so helpless as in the face of this outer darkness, and if her lover had now been there to claim her, she would have dropped into his arms as unresisting as a tired child.

As the night wore on, the darkness and desolation became intolerable, and she shut them out, only to find herself suffocated by the imprisonment of her sleeping-berth. Hour after hour dragged on; the little excitement of leaving Albany was long past, and the train was wandering through the dullness of central New York, when at

last a faint suspicion of dim light appeared in the landscape, and Esther returned to her window. If anything could be drearier than the blackness of night, it was the grayness of dawn, which had all the cold terror of death and all the grim repulsiveness of life joined in an hour of despair. Esther could now see the outlines of farm-houses as the train glided on; snow-laden roofs and sheds, long stretches of field with fences buried to (their top rails) in sweeping snow-drifts; in the houses, lights showed that toil had begun again; smoke rose from the chimney; figures moved in the farm-yards, a sleigh could be seen on a decided road; the world became real, prosaic, practical, mechanical, not worth struggling about; a mere colorless, passionless, pleasureless grayness. As the mystery passed, the pain passed, and the brain grew heavy. Esther's eyelids drooped, and she sank at last into a sleep.... (pp. 308–10)

This spiritual death is followed by a resurrection. The fact that the night's experience has altered her is evident from the vivacity of Esther's waking perceptions, through which the steady thunder of the Falls runs, filling all the last part of the novel with its rough music. Here at last Esther finds a spiritual energy that demands nothing of her, rewards nothing, explains nothing, but raises her spirit to a sense of pure being. She has at last found something worthy of her faith, but only because of the self-emptying that she underwent in the dark night of her soul. The train scene, so little treated in comments on this work, is the key to the whole. Because of it, the Falls offer the second spiritual experience of the novel, one that depends on her having undergone that first experience of self-emptying. As she rightly says, the Falls offer her something entirely different from what they would offer Hazard:

She felt tears roll down her face as she listened to the voice of the waters and knew that they were telling her a different secret from any that Hazard could ever hear. "He will think it is the church talking!" Sad as she was, she smiled as she thought that it was Sunday morning, and a ludicrous contrast flashed on her mind between the decorations of St. John's, with its parterre of nineteenth century bonnets, and the huge church which was thundering its gospel under her eyes. (pp. 314–15)

It is out of this new personhood that she can make her final renunciation of Hazard. When he pursues her to Niagara (having delayed long enough to perform the Sunday service at St. John's), she goes to the heart

of her resistance to him. He says that it is not profitable for her to separate herself from all religious communions, and she answers:

“If you will create a new one that shall be really spiritual, and not cry: ‘flesh—flesh—flesh,’ at every corner, I will gladly join it, and give my whole life to you and it. . . . I can see nothing spiritual about the church. It is all personal and selfish. . . . you thrust self at me from every corner of the church as though I loved and admired it. All religion does nothing but pursue me with self even into the next world.” (pp. 332–33)

Esther knows all this not because she does not love Hazard, but despite the fact that she does. He is saying that religion demands that she sacrifice herself to him. She knows that she must sacrifice *him*. She sees something closer to her new experience in the geologist Strong’s delight in truth for its own sake. But she expresses her new creed, on the basis of his half-confessed one, with a personal intensity that staggers him:

“Does your idea mean that the next world is a sort of great reservoir of truth, and that what is true in us just pours into it like raindrops?”

“Well!” said he, alarmed and puzzled: “the figure is not perfectly correct, but the idea is a little of that kind.

“After all I wonder whether that may not be what Niagara has been telling me.” (p. 321)

Strong’s academic discipline is not irrelevant. Earlier, as they explored the Falls, she asked about their geological formation. Her faith does not preclude that kind of material knowledge. Adams is suggesting that the real spiritual expression of Americans, beginning with that of Native Americans, is a kind of nature mysticism. We have no genuine religious art except the expression of awe at our new world—less the transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson than that of the Hudson School of painters, or of Ansel Adams’s West, or even the celebration of Monument Valley by John Ford, the awe before giant redwoods of Raoul Walsh. Painters were especially drawn to Niagara Falls, about which there was a great nature mysticism.

It becomes easier to understand this if we reflect that the Falls were more stunning in both size and noise in the nineteenth century than they are now. Only half of the water pouring toward the Falls is now allowed to reach them (only a quarter of it at night). The rest is diverted to power stations in order to keep the Falls from eating away the cliff

they leap over—a process that went on unheeded in the past. Now the Falls are not allowed to move slowly off from their present site. The full surge of water cannot be released again, even for a day, or it would sweep away much of the built-up environment below. The scale of the Falls in Esther's time there—winter—would be especially impressive, when high ice barriers formed below and were penetrated by the immense surge of the waters.

It was the ceaseless roar of so much energy that awed Adams and his contemporaries. A selfless wonder at something so beyond one's personal pettiness is what Adams would feel beside the dynamo at the Paris World's Fair, the closest he felt he could come to worship of the Virgin in a world where authenticity and devotion were at one with the social framework. Only a year after Esther appeared, Nikola Tesla would harness Niagara to his generators, uniting the two icons of Adams's science-mysticism. Adams already knew in the 1880s what Chartres cathedral would come to stand for in his mind, and the great indictment of St. John's on Fifth Avenue is that it tries to feign what was a reality to those raising Chartres. The Gothic church was a perilous experiment with statics, a "senseless" defiance of gravity, full of tensions—but they were the tensions binding society together, just as counterforces upheld the groined and buttressed arches. Chartres was all one giant scaffolding in which people worked toward a common vision beyond them, unlike the rickety structure on which Hazard's artists scramble, working at odds with the thing they are trying to perfect.

What Esther finds in the Falls, and Adams in the dynamo, is an infinity near yet distant, impersonal yet eliciting a personal expression of delight in great things beyond one's scope. It is the mystery of energy revealed to Job in Leviathan and Behemoth. It is Job's comfort of not needing comfort, of enjoying a wonder that is uncalculated, not tradable in any known market. Wharton felt dissatisfied with his own paintings, in the first chapter of this novel, because they did not pass the Esther test. It is the measure of this novel's greatness that it can persuade us that all religious experience in this country should be submitted to the Esther test. Is it really honest with itself? Does it meet her standard of authenticity, of selflessness, of devotion that is not a disguised worship of oneself or one's society?

The only genuinely American religion, in Adams's eyes, is a venture into the unknown. That is the American gospel as he understood it. He could not say whether this was an ideal to be aspired to or a fate to be

submitted to. He knew only that any substitute for this is somehow bogus. It is out of an experience like Esther's that he will write his own religious poetry, to the dynamo, to Buddha, to the Virgin. For him, the Virgin of Chartres was not a mere instrument for her son to use in dealing with humankind. She had, in effect, a dynamo in her womb, expressive of a useless but not costless freedom of spirit:

Help me to feel! not with my insect sense, —
 With yours that felt all life alive in you;
 Infinite heart beating at your expense;
 Infinite passion breathing the breath you drew!

The novel is as complete a revelation of Adams's own faith as he ever penned. His later prayer to the Virgin is just a reenactment of Esther's prayer to the Falls.

THE CHARACTERS' MODELS

If the characters of *Democracy* were drawn mainly from Lafayette Square in Washington, those of *Esther* are from a similar small group of Adams's friends and acquaintances who worked together in the 1870s to create the ambitious Trinity Church in Boston (which becomes St. John's in New York for the novel). Trinity was the first colossal building to be built in the recently filled-in Back Bay—though an earlier home for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was going up across from it on what was known then as Art Square, which is now Copley Square. The church's heavy costs led to controversy. It had to be seated on 4,500 piles driven into the tricky new soil, 2,000 of them packed as closely together as possible under the heavy central tower.² Adams had watched this project with interest, not only for the people involved in it but for the artistic philosophy behind it. He lived near the construction site, at 91 Marlborough Street, and was teaching mediaeval history at Harvard while the pseudo-mediaeval church was rising near him.

Adams no doubt looked at the vast interior scaffolding that drew so much attention when the painters were working high on it to create the art on its ceiling and walls—a bit of engineering that drew attention to

² Jeffery Richardson Brackett et al., *Trinity Church in the City of Boston* (Printed for Trinity Church, 1933), pp. 185–86.

itself. The church's commissioning pastor, Phillips Brooks, Adams's cousin, dined at Marlborough Street while the building was going up.³ Adams's time as a student at Harvard (class of 1858) had overlapped not only with that of Brooks (class of 1855) but with that of Trinity Church's architect, Henry Hobson Richardson (class of 1859), who would later build his home in Washington. Modern scholarship, in fact, has raised the possibility that Richardson was touring England with Adams in the 1860s when he saw a possible prototype for the church in Cheshire.⁴

Adams's brother Charles (class of 1856) was especially close to his cousin Brooks and delivered the eulogy when Brooks died. Brooks also wrote of Richardson in the *Harvard Magazine*, commemorating the Harvard buildings that Richardson had returned to put up (Sever Hall and the Law School).⁵ Brooks and the Adams shared a source of their prosperity, the wealth of Peter Chardon Brooks, Phillips Brooks's great-uncle and Charles's and Henry's great-grandfather. Peter Brooks was at his death the wealthiest man in Boston, and Henry grew up in one of his houses. A whole network of family ties, local interest, and professional concerns connected Adams with Trinity Church.

Phillips Brooks also had distinguished forebears on his mother's side—the Phillips family founded the Phillips Academies at Andover and Exeter and put up a large part of Dartmouth's original endowment. The union of learning and piety in that family led three of Phillips Brooks's brothers to join him in the priesthood. Phillips was the most successful of the four brothers, the most prominent Episcopal leader of his day. His fame and importance are registered in three statues of him—one (by Augustus Saint-Gaudens) in Trinity Church, one on the façade of St. Bartholomew's in New York, and one at the divinity school he attended (Virginia Theological Seminary).

Brooks was an immensely popular preacher, a fact registered in the prominent pulpit that Richardson designed for him in Trinity Church. To improve the acoustics for his sermons, Brooks altered Richardson's design in one respect, lowering its western wall.⁶ The oddity of Brooks's

³ Raymond W. Albright, *Focus on Infinity: A Life of Phillips Brooks* (Macmillan Company, 1961), p. 180.

⁴ Margaret Henderson Floyd, *Henry Hobson Richardson: A Genius for Architecture* (Monacelli Press, 1997), p. 47.

⁵ Brooks, *Essays and Addresses*, p. 488.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

position, theologically, is that he favored a highly humanistic and “low-church” theology in a high-church Anglo-Catholic setting. He spoke like a Unitarian, taking a humanistic view of the person of Christ, while his church was Trinitarian. He was an Episcopalian who said that *episkopoi* (bishops) were not necessary to the church—and to crown the paradox, he allowed himself to be made a bishop late in his life. It was a mark of the time that Brooks could combine a rich liturgical setting with broadmindedness. He attended other churches and invited their members to receive the sacraments at his.

Episcopalians in Boston during the last half of the nineteenth century adopted cultural styles in vivid contrast with the plainness of Boston’s Congregationalist churches. Anglo-Catholics there were quick to support the new arts and crafts movement, the interest in stained and painted glass, the schools of design fostered by William Morris, the cult of the Middle Ages encouraged by John Ruskin, the taste for costume balls and theatrical events flavored by Walter Scott’s tales, and the harbingers of fin-de-siècle aestheticism.⁷ Artists contrasted the “masculine” Romanesque with the “feminine” Gothic. Ralph Adams Cram, the architect for the Gothic St. John the Divine in New York, praised Richardson’s Romanesque Trinity Church for its “masculine scale... there was neither grace nor sensibility but there was power”—just the terms Adams would use to describe the male Mont Saint Michel, as opposed to the feminine Chartres.⁸ But Cram himself, though an advocate of modern Gothic, knew the danger of not being true to one’s time. He wanted to “work steadily and seriously towards something more consistent with our temper and the times in which we live.”⁹ And Ruskin feared the use of Gothic for operatic effect, far from real religion—just as Esther did in the opening chapter. He denounces

the dramatic Christianity of the organ and aisle, of dawn service and twilight revival, the Christianity which we do not fear to mix the mockery of (pictorially) with our play about the devil—in our Satenellas, Roberts, Fausts—chanting hymns through traceried

⁷ The milieu of Anglo-Catholic aestheticism in fin-de-siècle Boston is well described by Douglass Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bobemia, 1881–1900* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995). Men’s and women’s religious houses were opened, church furniture and vestments elaborated, schools of stained and painted glass developed, styles of Gothic differentiated.

⁸ Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bobemia*, p. 274.

⁹ Ralph Adams Cram, *Description of the Proposed Church of All Saints* (1892), cited in *ibid.*, p. 118.

windows for background effect, and artistically modulating the “Dio” through variation on variation of mimicked prayers.¹⁰

Trinity Church was constructed according to the canons of mediaeval masonry.¹¹ Brooks toured the Auvergne before its commission, studying different examples of Romanesque architecture.¹² Its stained-glass windows and murals were created by John La Farge with a new technical device for suggesting ancient effects. Esther is right to recoil from the operatic air of Hazard’s church, where the preacher plays a role like that of the Prophet in Giacomo Meyerbeer’s opera of that name (p. 193). George Strong says that Hazard’s sexton should be wearing a mediaeval costume, to match the church’s claims.

So Adams stays close to his model, Phillips Brooks, when describing Hazard’s church, preaching power, and theology. But that seems as far as the comparison can be stretched. Certainly Hazard’s ardent pursuit of Esther is out of character for Brooks, who remained a bachelor and had intense male friendships but no known love affair with a woman. Douglass Shand-Tucci says that Brooks manifested a gay sensibility (whatever his genital activity), but Shand-Tucci casts a fairly wide net for identifying gays.¹³ John F. Woolverton makes a careful assessment of Brooks’s sexuality and can say only *non liquet* to the question whether he was gay.¹⁴ The needs of Adams’s plot, not Brooks’s history, impel Hazard where Esther is concerned. There is no sign in the papers of either man to indicate that Brooks ever read the novel based on his church’s decoration.¹⁵

The painter Wharton is not so much based on John La Farge as connected with him. The connection is direct, since La Farge executed for Trinity Church the murals with large-scale saints that Wharton is shown painting in the book. Even before he had begun work on the

¹⁰ John Ruskin, “Of King’s Treasuries,” in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin* (George Allen), vol. 18 (1905), p. 95.

¹¹ Brackett et al., *Trinity Church*, p. 191. For the condemnation of iron used in stone buildings, see John Ruskin, “The Lamp of Truth,” in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in Cook and Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 8 (1903), pp. 66–70.

¹² Alexander V. G. Allen, *Life and Letters of Phillips Brooks* (E. P. Dutton & Company, 1901), vol. 2, pp. 254–55.

¹³ Shand-Tucci, *Boston Bobemia*, pp. 281–84.

¹⁴ John F. Woolverton, *The Education of Phillips Brooks* (University of Illinois Press, 1995), pp. 59–62.

¹⁵ Albright, *Focus on Infinity*, p. 181.

interior, he sent Richardson photographs of a tower in Salamanca that were useful in creating the Trinity tower.¹⁶ But Wharton has only a few of La Farge's personal qualities. Both studied in France, were moody, and had a reputation as mystically wise. But La Farge was not reclusive like Wharton. He was a brilliant conversationalist, treasured by friends like Adams, Hay, Theodore Roosevelt, and others. He was an ingenious experimenter, an aggressive (not always successful) entrepreneur, and a litigious competitor with Louis Comfort Tiffany, whom he accused of stealing his stained-glass techniques. Wharton is married to a black-mailing reprobate, but La Farge had a devout Catholic wife who suffered his neglect heroically. When La Farge's son realized that his father was a philanderer, his patient Catholic mother told him that one must make allowances for genius.¹⁷ Adams would later spend three months touring Japan with La Farge and a year and a half with him in the South Sea Islands. But that close friendship came after the novel, and the only reason for bringing La Farge into *Esther* was his actual connection with Trinity Church.

The third important male character, George Strong, had nothing to do with the church in Boston; but Adams needed a scientist to be a control on the religiosity of Hazard and the doubts of Esther. The scientist most immediately at hand for Adams was his admired friend Clarence King, the geologist who surveyed the West, taking Adams along with him on one expedition. Adams calls his novel's character "Strong" because he was bowled over by King's charisma and energy, which were, however, deceptive. Under the boisterous confidence there was a mental instability and desperation. The wise passivity of the character in the novel is unlike the unsatisfied ambition and secret life of King, who had a common-law wife and children hidden from his friends and who speculated wildly, driving himself deep into debt. The only points that matter for the depiction of Strong are a sudden impulse to travel and a breezy confidence about geological theory.

The characterizations that matter most are the ones about which people are most certain. Esther and Catherine are uniformly said to be Clover Adams and Elizabeth Sherman Cameron. There are undoubted points of resemblance, but too much should not be made of them. Take

¹⁶ Floyd, *Henry Hobson Richardson*, p. 49.

¹⁷ John La Farge, *The Manner Is Ordinary* (Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1954), pp. 29–31. La Farge's son, also named John, was a Jesuit pioneer in racial relations in America, asked by Pope Pius XI to write an encyclical attacking anti-Semitism.

Catherine first. Elizabeth Sherman was from Cleveland, and she had ridden the West with her uncle “Cump” Sherman. But she was hardly “the spirit of the prairie” that Catherine is in the novel. Even at nineteen, on her first incursion into Lafayette Square, she was sophisticated and stylish. Elizabeth did not lose her father, grow up under a Presbyterian stepmother, or break free from her family when she came east—far from it. Her close family was what pressured her into marriage with Senator Cameron. Catherine in the novel does not marry at all. She flirts with a somewhat older Wharton (who could not be more different from Don Cameron). Aunt Sarah, who knows best, says that nothing will come of that flirtation. We are left with no important point of similarity between Catherine and Elizabeth but a vaguely western background. Adams knew Elizabeth much better in 1884 than he had in 1880, when he used her situation opportunistically, uninhibited by a growing fondness for her.

Esther, however, is a different matter. There are important resemblances to his wife, Clover. Esther’s closeness to her ailing father reflects the almost pathological dependence of Clover on her father. And the fictional parent is clearly modeled on the real-life one. Catherine’s father is a lawyer wealthy enough not to practice his profession when, after losing his wife, he devotes himself to raising a favored daughter. Edward Hooper, Clover’s father, was a doctor in precisely the same situation. There is, besides, what seems to be a candid portrait of Clover in Wharton’s description of Esther. Adams had told his best friend that Clover was no beauty, though she had an intellectual distinctiveness. Here is Wharton describing Esther:

In the first place, she has a bad figure, which she makes answer for a good one. She is too slight, too thin; she looks fragile, willowy, as the cheap novels call it, as though you could break her in halves like a switch. She dresses to suit her figure and sometimes overdoes it. Her features are imperfect. Except her ears, her voice, and her eyes which have sort of brown depth like a trout brook, she has no very good points.... Her mind is as irregular as her face, and both have the same peculiarity. I notice that the lines of her eyebrows, nose and mouth all end with a slight upward curve like a yacht’s sails, which gives a kind of hopefulness and self-confidence to her expression. Mind and face have the same curves. (pp. 199–200)

We cannot verify Wharton’s description in the obvious way. Clover was too embarrassed by her appearance, with her close-set eyes, to allow

a clear frontal photograph of her to be made. But what evidence there is makes Wharton's presentation seem accurate. Esther is an amateur painter, as Clover was an amateur photographer; and Clover, like Esther, resisted going to church. But there the resemblances end.

The whole plot of the novel turns on Esther's rejection of marriage to a clergyman, since that would be a betrayal of her integrity. Clover, by contrast, is married, and not to a clergyman; Henry was the last one to say that marriage to him was a sacrifice of integrity. There is no evidence that Clover was on the kind of spiritual quest that Adams gives to Esther—that is his own quest. He gives it to Clover as a way of keeping the women's novel format. Elizabeth Cameron had been a front for his own ambition in *Democracy*, and Clover is a front for his own doubts in *Esther*. He could not know that Clover was already headed for the suicide that followed on her father's death. When that occurred, a year after the novel's release, friends who were in on the secret of his authorship thought that Adams's presentation of the crisis on the trip to Niagara foreshadowed her death. In fact, when John Hay said that he should have made Esther jump into the Falls, Adams guiltily agreed. But that betrays the novel's spiritual point. Esther takes strength from her dark night and breathes in life from the Falls. The spiritual journey of Esther has nothing to do with the psychological problems of Clover.

Nonetheless, the mere suspicion that the two could be confused made Adams even more secretive about *Esther* than about *Democracy*. He worked to have the first novel reprinted and widely distributed. He did the opposite with *Esther*. In fact, I believe that the unforeseen and unintended connection of Esther with Clover is one of the reasons, if not the most important one, for his giving up the novel form altogether. He had written two very good novels, and he would seek imaginative experiments in the future, especially with *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. But he had taken some heavy risks in the way he turned real people into his fictional characters, and one risk had backfired in a horrible way. *Esther*, his best work in fiction, had therefore to be his last one.

ART AS A CULTURAL INDEX

In this novel, Adams uses art as a spiritual indicator of the condition of a society. The church is disjunct from the true religious impulses of the people it pretends to be serving. This use of art may be criticized, but it

was fairly common in the late nineteenth century. The immense popularity of John Ruskin had something to do with it. The massive three volumes of his book *The Stones of Venice* advance the thesis that Venetian art had been healthy, sincere, and life-giving in the Middle Ages but perverse, feigned, and deathly in the Renaissance. It was a thesis to which not even he could remain faithful. He loved artists like “John Bellini” (as he always called him) and Jacopo Tintoretto, who came at the “wrong” time to exemplify his thesis. But the movement of Ruskin from art criticism to social analysis made many people try to “read” a people, a nation, a period, a political crisis, in terms of the art being sponsored in its name. (Jakob Burckhardt was doing the same thing in Switzerland, but he was not as well known in America as Ruskin.)

Adams, like all educated people of his time, was aware of Ruskin. His own acquisition of Turner watercolors was probably motivated in part by Ruskin’s championship of the painter, as was Clarence King’s devotion to Turner. “He [King] preferred Turners above all other British pictures in his possession; indeed, he had favored Turner since the days in Greenwich Village when he had read *Modern Painters*.”¹⁸ King had bought his finest watercolors from Ruskin himself. He had earlier been a member of a group in New York calling itself the Society for the Advancement of Truth in Art, referring to “The Lamp of Truth,” a chapter in Ruskin’s *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*.¹⁹ Adams bought Ruskin’s books while he was in London during the Civil War, and he may have read them in the Gothic priory where his good friend Charles Gaskell entertained him.

Adams used a Ruskinian approach in his *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904), where the warlike Norman style and feminine Gothic reflect the soul of periods that put themselves under the protection of the warrior angel St. Michael or of the queenly Virgin. He called these a study in unity, since the society reflected in the art was at one with its artistic expressions, and he contrasted this with his *Education*, as a study in multiplicity. The scheme is too simple, even though Adams makes room for the divisions between feuding scholastics and churchly critics of the Virgin’s permissiveness. But he makes a better case when he employs the mediaeval style as symbol of cultural self-delusion in *Esther*. And the proper comparison is probably not the most obvious one, with

¹⁸ Thurman Wilkins, *Clarence King* (Macmillan Company, 1958), pp. 294–95.

¹⁹ Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840–1900* (Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 169–70.

Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, but with the tour-de-force opening chapters of the first volume of his history, where he tries to describe “the intellect” of the various regions of America in 1800. This pioneering work of social history blends geographical, economic, academic, religious, and sexual data to argue that America was still divided and backward at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Adams’s judgment on the Boston of *Esther* (lightly disguised as New York), that its religion is a pretense, dissipating rather than channeling energy, reflects what he had said of New England eighty years earlier, when its religious leadership “had lost the secret of its mysteries, and patently stood holding the flickering torch before cold altars.”²⁰ He approaches the matter first through statistics—Harvard and Yale, established to train candidates for the ministry, were turning out fewer men, and fewer of those were being ordained, and those who did hold religious office were commanding less agreement with their policies. Then he looks at the failure of vitality in the principal artistic product of the time, the prose strained through prosody that posed as poetry.

If this is a study of multiplicity, the treatment of the Middle States offers, in contrast, a secular unity. Adams considers Pennsylvania the most authentically American and future-oriented part of the union, welcoming infant sciences and establishing progressive institutions for treatment of the sick, prisoners, or insane. It did not have the plague of great old families, the theological oligarchs of New England, the Dutch patroons of New York, the plantation owners of Virginia. Its newspapers were slanderous but lively and varied. Its literature was original: Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s *Modern Chivalry* “was more thoroughly American than any book yet published.”²¹ In place of a dying religiosity like that of New England or Virginia, it had the diffused tolerance of Quaker ethics. Between the inhibitions of New England and the undisciplined extravagance of Virginia, leading Pennsylvanians struck a modest balance of industry and ingenuity. In terms of the novel, New England is the world of Hazard, full of religious pretense. Pennsylvania is the world of George Strong, secular and balanced. *Esther*, discontented with both, must seek a more ecstatic life of new insights.

If we are to seek the bond between the first volume of the great history, which was printed for friends in 1884, and *Esther*, published the

²⁰ Henry Adams, *History of the United States in the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (Library of America, 1896), p. 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

same year, I think it is here. Adams is trying to assess the resources, intellectual and spiritual as well as material, of America in his own day, on the model of the various indicators he had used to assess the state of mind in different parts of America as the nineteenth century began. He finds much that is false or flimsy; but Wharton is there to point out that the mere presence of Esther on the scene suggests future possibilities that will be more authentic, more integral to the entire American experience. The view in 1884 is less jaundiced and self-pitying than it would be in his *Education*. The discipline of writing the history kept Adams closer to American fact, and the question of an American identity is more sensitively registered in *Esther* than in any of his works outside the history itself.