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## A More Conservative Place

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# 6

## CRITICAL POETICS

### American Resources for Theorizing America

» According to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The meanest of men has his theory, and to think at all is to theorize.”<sup>1</sup> Keep this in mind when the media profitably repeats the populist cliché that George W. Bush was a manikin, a creature of Karl Rove or Dick Cheney. Keep it in mind that meanness is a human quality that always has its theory. In this case, what concerns us is a theory of America.

George W. Bush rested his national political image on inarticulate provinciality, but he did issue state documents, and these articulated a complex and highly objectionable theory of the United States, its history, and its possible futures. Furthermore, this theory contains a number of important foreign influences, which also depend upon theories of America. The most prominent of these dangerous foreign imports goes by the names Straussianism or neoconservatism. A great deal that the Bush regime represented in its theory of America involved a war against important elements of America itself. Chauvinism, nativism, and “know-nothing-ism” all came at a cost to large elements of U.S. life and memory. When the Bush regime wrote off such constituencies as the “Greens,” it testified not only to electoral logic but also to its radical animosity to defining elements of the United States itself — its people, its potentials, and its values. Radical right-wing revolutionary politics requires the destruction and suppression of American directions as a condition for its global neoimperial projects.

We need to do three types of work in the face of these facts: first, we need to do history or, if you prefer, a genealogy of the transformations that let the uniqueness of the Bush era stand out. Second, we need to do nonhistoricist analyses as well, critiques that expose, describe, explain, and judge the aims and conceptions underlying the Bush regime — this is a task literary humanists can rightly adopt, that is, to understand this regime in its own terms.

Third, and most important, we need to produce competing theories of America that stand the best chance of succeeding in a political struggle against the well-entrenched reaction. We need to think historically and imagine proleptically if we are to accomplish these aims. We must tell more complex and better — that is, more convincing — stories. There are different ways to direct desire; and to do so successfully, we must make complex judgments, based on study and anticipation. In place of exclusionary antagonism, which Edward Said called “the rhetoric of blame,” we need inclusive study of human experiences and histories. Above all, we must develop a critical imagination to offer effective alternatives to such a regime, the success of which depends largely upon both deceit and ideological surfeit.

Shadia Drury hints at a U.S.-German intersection that accounts in part for the ease with which the Straussian infection spreads in U.S. intellectual and policy circles. In other words, there are not only ideological analogues between Leo Strauss’s thinking and U.S. conservatism but also mutual entangled beginnings in the nineteenth century. In *Leo Strauss and the American Right*, Drury traces Strauss’s genealogy back through Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger to German romanticism. Along the way, she adds a brief paragraph mentioning Ralph Waldo Emerson for having “made this radically individualistic and nonconformist ethic fashionable in America.”<sup>2</sup> High points of canonical American culture are among the conditions for the possibility of Straussian influence. Moreover, the American canon contains important critiques of these preparatory traditions and, more important, suggest U.S.-based alternatives to them. In this particular case, following Drury’s hint, we see Emerson, especially in *Essays: First Series*,<sup>3</sup> advancing a U.S.-based ideological agenda that, in its limited but avowedly liberal, and more importantly anticapitalist attitudes, draws support from and resources in German traditions that also underlie Strauss’s reactionary critique of U.S. liberalism.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Emerson’s influence and status remain legendary even now. The nineteenth and early twentieth century did contain a strong anti-Emerson line that objected to his effect precisely because of its limited forms of liberalism, its antimodernism — especially its technological phobias — and its alignment with a North Atlantic cadre of reactionary anticapitalists. Henry Adams best represents canonical anti-Emersonianism as well as a robustly democratic, intellectually daring, although hardly innocent form of liberalism. I want to suggest an odd constellation worth experimenting with as a way of thinking through the situation during the Bush administration. The

principle figures will be Emerson, Adams, Strauss, and Bush. The lines of relation seem simple enough: German-American anticapital; U.S. and German stages of development, political and economic; judgments on democracy and liberal forms of life and politics; and dystopia versus democratic optimism. Historical and conceptual complexity doubles in the aesthetic and stylistic complexity of these figures. Within this or any constellation, a point of departure is arbitrarily only a first step. In this case, Adams on Emerson offers pleasure along the way to knowledge.

Adams's Emerson was a smooth but sickening temptation. Adams's integrated portrait of Emerson as a vitiating naïf whose transcendentalism inhibits needed political intellectual work helped shape *The Education of Henry Adams* just as his presentation of Napoleon as John Milton's satan structures his *History of the United States*. Emerson was, after all, part of the texture and experience of not only New England but also U.S. life and mind during much of Adams's life and especially his youth. Emerson's experiments in essay form, on transcendental thinking and living, fell upon readers (and many nonreaders) as experiences they had to weigh and judge. In *The Education of Henry Adams*, Emerson appears as early as he does and as persistently as an inadequate intellectual target of Adams's corrosive irony precisely because of Adams's understanding of Emerson's national-historical importance. Adams's rhetoric trivializes its victims, but his victims are never historically trivial targets. In this case, Adams clearly presents Emerson, from the beginning of *The Education*, as both a wrong direction of U.S. intellectual life, although rooted in the United States, and importantly a dangerous view of U.S. liberal democracy.

In the late 1850s, Henry Adams, a brilliant but bored and rebellious Harvard student found in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and James Russell Lowell possible cosmopolitan escapes from Boston provinciality: "As it happened, by pure chance, the first door of escape that seemed to offer a hope led into Germany, and James Russell Lowell opened it."<sup>5</sup> Lowell, who became a Smith Professor of Modern Languages in 1855 (succeeding Longfellow), demanded as a term of appointment a research year in Germany, where he studied European national languages and literature.<sup>6</sup> Through this open door, Adams later passed to study language and law before, during France's invasion of Italy, he made a political choice for France and Garibaldi. Lowell's Harvard door to Germany represents a common path between North

American intellectuals and Europe but also a device to form a transatlantic cadre of German-centered reactionary anticapitalists. Furthermore, at Harvard especially, the opening to Germany across the Atlantic facilitated communication with Concord transcendentalism.

Adams noted very early on not just the link between Emerson and other conservative anticapitalists but also their common interest in German intellectual resources rooted in relatively underdeveloped economic and political forms: “Lowell, on succeeding Longfellow as Professor of Belles Lettres, had duly gone to Germany, and had brought back whatever he found to bring. The literary world then agreed that truth survived in Germany alone, and Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, Renan, Emerson, with scores of popular followers taught the German faith” (775). In advanced liberal economies, political realities require new thinking rather than opportune reactionary or individualistic solutions. This cadre “turned to Germany because at that moment Germany was neither economical nor military, and a hundred years behind western Europe in the simplicity of its standards” (774–75).

Nonetheless, even the young Adams felt the pull of Concord. He never succumbed to the temptation; he never quite made it there through the door Lowell opened. It is a measure of Adams’s distaste for Emerson and his ideological allure that he assassinates Emerson with thousands of cuts. “To the Concord Church,” he writes, “all Adamses were minds of dust and emptiness, devoid of feeling, poetry, or imagination; little higher than the common scourgings of State Street; politicians of doubtful honesty; natures of narrow scope; and already, at eighteen years old, Henry[s] . . . mind rebelled . . . and he was ready to admit his unworthiness if only he might penetrate the shrine” (777).

Of course, he cannot penetrate the shrine both because he is unwelcome as an Adams and because as an Adams he is saved. What is the result? A chance to make clear the moral error of Emerson’s scorn for liberal capitalist conditions from within a prophetic subjectivism, a self-rewarding individualism, itself derived in part from esoteric sources and German idealism. Adams’s satire always forms a descendo, which in its ironic turn, provides the success of a failed experiment in education. In this case, Lowell’s open door to Germany leads away from Concord to Sicily and Garibaldi. Stepping out, *The Education* offers us something of what it means to be an Adams and more of the demonic temptation of traveling transcendentalism:

He never reached Concord, and to Concord Church, he, like the rest of mankind, who accepted a material universe, remained always an insect, or something much lower — a man. It was surely no fault of his that the universe seemed to him real, perhaps, — as Mr. Emerson justly said, — it was so; in spite of the long-continued effort of a life-time, he perpetually fell back into the heresy that if anything universal was unreal, it was himself and not the appearances; it was the poet and not the banker; it was his own thought, not the thing that moved it. He did not lack the wish to be transcendental. Concord seemed to him, at one time, more real than Quincy; yet in truth Russell Lowell was as little transcendental as Beacon Street. From him the boy got no revolutionary thought whatever, — objective or subjective as they used to call it — but he got good-humored encouragement to do what amused him, which consisted in passing two years in Europe after finishing the four years of Cambridge. (777)

Adams had done his own triangulation. Subjectivity, universalism, immaterialism, and self-delusion all resulted in the license “to do what amused him,” to find revolution not in German metaphysics — which was, after all, largely a counterrevolutionary project — but in Garibaldi’s nationalist and nearly anarchic rebellion. With his tongue in cheek and his knife deep in Emerson’s gullet, Adams drives the point home to his readers: the intellectual cadre to which Emerson belonged rested on antiliberal, antiseular, and antirevolutionary ideas. For the great-grandson of a founding father, an eighteenth-century republican revolutionary, and a revolutionary American democrat, Emerson was a traitorous remnant of that horrible thing “old Europe.” It would do well to recall that Napoleon made good use of this phrase long before Donald Rumsfeld, or at least so Hegel would have us believe. Hegel matters here because although he imagines America as the New World he excludes it from consideration in *The Philosophy of History*. “Thus America is the land of the future; in it, in the time lying before us, . . . the significance of world history will be revealed. It is the land longed for by all who are bored with historical armory of ancient Europe. Napoleon is reputed to have said, ‘Cette vieille Europe m’ennuie.’ But so far, all that has taken place there is only an echo of the old world, and the expression of an alien life; as a land of the future, it concerns us here not at all.”<sup>7</sup> Emersonian mythology holds to his American originality, but Adams steadily criticized

a tradition of European knowledge and thought as representing American intellectuals' belatedness, their inability to think along with American newness. He tentatively concluded that line of critique in his remarks against William James.<sup>8</sup> Adams's final explicit word on Emerson's limits is that Emerson could not recognize genius, a "great man," and that he would express horror at its nearness (848).

Adams's Emerson assumes only one element of liberalism for himself and prescribes it as a basis not only for self-reliance but also for the negative judgment of all those — including those of genius — who take the material world as real and primary. In essence, Adams despises Emerson's antimodernism, his ahistorical refusal to grasp the revolutionary fact of capitalism as the task for American intellectuals to think within and as part of the uniqueness of the U.S. democratic experiment. Adams saw Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" as a lifestyle choice, a declared ideological desire for the freedom to do whatever amuses, in the process usurping the private-public distinction of liberalism and reducing it to two false judgments. The results of Emerson's immoral desire is twofold: first, to see the United States as a continuation of European liberal capital trends and therefore a fate the American New Man can resist; and second, to believe the United States is an inherent threat to the poet-prophet whose elite knowledge, creativity, and security depends upon occult knowledge vested as in a shrine.

In "Self-Reliance," Emerson's stress upon originality narrows the field of imagination and sociotemporal responsibility. Particularly, Emerson repeats the Cartesian gesture that insists knowledge is unnecessary to truth, thinking, or creation — unless, that is, we take knowledge to be the truth of the "private heart" (259). Emerson fears nothing as much as "mediocrity," middle-class society, and, like Plato, imitation. To Emerson, the weird category of "Secondariness" is death. To be secondary even to nature or God arrests his right as a New Man. As a result, Emerson cannot differentiate between education and imitation, between knowing and enslavement. Within his tradition, of course, Emerson's injunctions are statements for poetic strength, for independence of imagination and self. Within Adams's tradition, Emerson's remarks are monomaniacal, inadequate to the newness that is the United States, and politically irresponsible. "Imitation is suicide" — who can but read this as a call for strength, for Americanness, and for originality resting upon the mystic recognition of the Soul's power? Whoso would be a man must be a

nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (261).

These aphorisms represent the fulfillment of a liberal philosophy that emphasizes the unique value of the individual subject. At the same time, it is precisely that aspect of liberalism that so upsets even as liberal a German thinker as Hegel. In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel objects that liberalism can effectively undermine the rational order of the modern nation-state by opposing to it an “atomistic principle,” namely, “that which insists upon the sway of individual wills.” In essence, such a politics provides merely formal freedom and “allows no political organization to be firmly established.” Hegel charges that each drives the previous government from power since no government has legitimacy: ironically, each government can be, at best, the manifestation of a certain will — and as such, susceptible to displacement for lack of authority and legitimation. In essence, on this analysis, Emersonian-style liberalism does not just legitimate only the individual subject but also makes each government only the expression of that will — and hence, illegitimate in the face of all other wills. This liberalism, this democracy, is, for Hegel, the problematic status of modern politics: “Thus agitation and unrest are perpetuated. This collision, this nodus, this problem is that with which history is now occupied, and whose solution it has to work out in the future.”<sup>9</sup>

An outline begins to emerge of some conditions that allow for the acceptance of Straussian and neoconservative ideas and politics in the United States. On the one hand, Emersonian self-reliance embodies a critique of emerging U.S. capital formations with its industrial and middle-class standards. On the other hand, in the name of American originality, Emerson shares a conservative European evaluation of the United States as anomic and uninventive. As a result, Emerson advocates an American redemption foreign in kind and resting upon an international evaluation of the United States as a failed society. As this outline sharpens, Emerson reduces liberalism to that dreaded potentiality Hegel and others like him, rational and authoritarian to the core, see in all liberal democracies: anomie, anarchy, and mere individual will. The Emersonian solution to the German image of the United States is that very German fear, the willful subject of liberal anarchy. As this set of contradictions settles itself in culture and thinking, an easily exploited seeming paradox develops. Straussian characterizations of modern liberal democracies — whether Weimar or the United States — confirm their

judgment, drawing on both sides of Emerson's self-reliance. First, Emerson is himself an icon of that anarchic subject-centered willfulness that creates social and political instability, thereby always threatening the onset of fascism and other irrationalities. Second, the willful subject provides nothing more than a secularized simulacrum of the religious foundations Straussians believe a stable social political order requires for the many. Third, this willful subject authorizes the very sort of intellectual work, based on privacy and obscurity of reading, of occult knowledges, and of authoritarian secret groups based on master and followers that Strauss requires. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson confirms a great Straussian truth: at their best, humans are beasts. For Emerson, like a weak-minded Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "the behaviour of children, babes, and even brutes" admonishes calculating rationalists who, computing strength and weakness, oppose their own sentiment. For Strauss, like Hegel or even Heidegger, such a rational calculating culture joins with the natural brutishness of humanity and creates the technological horrors of Auschwitz and war. Emerson agrees with the conservative perception that humans, in themselves, outside of society and the state, are brutes. That he prefers brutish instantaneity as a basis for willful subjectivity merely validates the complaints against liberalism and, dangerously and ironically, grounds the neoconservative presumption that great men need to preserve themselves from the demos by governing through self-confidence. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson writes out this confused political allegory. First, he warns against the seductive modern social claim to responsibility. Then he advocates the "non-chalance of boys" — "independent and irresponsible" — "the voices which we hear in solitude," and which socialization submerges in Lethe. Society is thus a "conspiracy against manhood . . . a joint-stock company" (261).

We must remember that these simple anticapitalist attitudes not only, as so many have remarked, make possible that ideal of American individualism but also represent the preparation for a reactionary movement that accepts the Emersonian critique while exploiting the political grounds it creates to roll back precisely the liberal and especially the democratic possibilities in modernity. In particular, and here I return to my previous Cartesian allusion, this Emersonianism misnames ignorance, especially ignorance of human history, as American originality, as a necessity for subject-centered nonchalance.

Emerson's assault on consistency and memory grow from his fear of conformity, which in turn grows from his fear of learning that might judge his project as dangerous or inconsequential. Repeatedly, Emerson identified

education with imitation — as did Aristotle — and with conformity, with the burden of the past, and with the idea that nothing has value that does not come from the ruling but overgrown self. If William James cautioned against too easily accepting new knowledge or disposing of old, that is because he has an Emerson source: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds” is not merely a mandate of freedom to be one’s fate (265). It is also, paradoxically, the device for setting aside knowledge of any kind, but especially new knowledge. If Emerson believes that “no man can violate his nature,” then it follows that “all the sallies of his will are rounded in the by the law of his being” (265). What we can know we know from within, as the self, and from always. History, if it exists, is merely the tale of this coming to know. It is also the record of misunderstanding; history records how the “great men” who are history are always out of their time: “To be great is to be misunderstood” (265), or to put it differently, “we will be prepared to act apart when our interests and unique responsibilities require.”<sup>10</sup>

There is a close and defining linkage between this monomaniacal self-assertion and its antihistoricist commitment to ignorance of the human. The rhetorical paradox appears all too easily: universal values asserted represent only the most particular content. “People everywhere want to be able to speak freely; choose who will govern them; worship as they please; educate their children — male and female; own property; and enjoy the benefits of their labor. These values of freedom are right and true for every person, in every society.” George W. Bush, though, prefaced this shibboleth with the result of a Manichean battle. The Cold War resulted in only one model for life. Like Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History*, Bush believes that “decisive victory for the forces of freedom,” won by the United States over the USSR, leaves only “a single sustainable model for national success.” These words, written after the events of September 11, suggested some resistance to the very idea of U.S. victory and reproduced precisely the Emersonian contradiction and the Straussian project of domination. We would oversimplify if we asserted that the Straussian model desires to impose a global neoliberal order on the Clintonian model. Rather, like Emerson, Strauss believes in the unique willfulness of the individual and godly subject in the untimely midst of mediocre, commodified, imitative, and conforming people. Unlike Emerson, though, who seems to believe in the possibility that Americans can become New Men against historical pressures, Strauss worries that Emerson’s liberal justification for the visionary elite, those who possess a transparent eyeball,

popularly authorizes the liberal anarchism that Hegel noted. Nevertheless, Strauss worries about the threat this anarchism poses to elites, especially philosophers possessed of wisdom of the kind that multitudes cannot be trusted to see.

Keeping with Strauss's commitment to secrecy in government, deceit in statement, and occultism in wisdom goes a necessary and strong reaction against historicism as the bane of modern knowledge systems. His debate with Alexandre Kojève articulates Straussians' belief that moderns historicize and so relativize a social danger that threatens barbarism. When Norman Podhoretz, for example, accuses Henry Adams's irony of being a cause of postmodern anomie, this grandfather of U.S. neoconservatism represents the Straussian concern that the people need values and meaning rather than criticism and experiment to accept authority and so a stable political order. Anomie equates in this fantasy to relativism that, in turn, derives from historicism.

In his more academic writings, Strauss aims to show that historicism is itself a modern phenomenon and that it is wrongly applied to the study of the ancients whose own knowledge and value scheme stands outside historicism's merely human and relativizing effects. It is worth stressing that Strauss and his aids know the truth of anomie — of death, meaninglessness, and chaos — but for that very reason insist the people should not know and that culture and politics must rest on ensured lines of dogma and authority. To put it only somewhat differently, for Straussians, the human is the problem: human finitude is all there is, but wisdom demands the illusion of infinitude, of fundamentalist belief, to evade the direst effects of that liberal anarchism Hegel saw as an emerging problem.

Emerson's insistence that memory is a corpse not for dragging around makes intellectual and political life much easier. Strauss knows history — or at least he claims to know enough history to know the ancients were not historicists or moderns. Nevertheless, wisdom depends upon reading in pursuit of that which imagination cannot historicize without destroying wisdom itself and without replacing that cadre of wise men with the ordinariness of finite human life, with historically minded political and literary intellectuals. Strauss is profoundly anti-Vichian. He does not believe that knowing what man has made is worth the effort, since finally making is the domain of the plebs while philosophizing is the path of wisdom.

In *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss articulated his antihistor-

icist dystopic<sup>11</sup> worldview that his erroneous reading of Nazism's origins only seemingly justifies — and after the fact. Not only did Strauss state his well-known hermeneutic according to which genius deceives to survive and requires reading “between the lines,” but also he justified it as one political solution to the conflict between order and anarchy. Strauss's actual hermeneutic practice was not original. His emphasis on close reading, naive historicity (the ability to discern original intention), indirection, and irony he shared with his contemporaries and some of ours. His originality stems from his anxiety-driven hysteria that anomic modern democratic politics must give way to tradition that rests upon noble lies. The best protection from the modern is the supersession of democracy in ahistoricist formalism and fundamentalist religion. While the Euro-American Left since Antonio Gramsci has taken cultural politics as its domain and its means for building alternative societies, as Stuart Hall's book on Thatcherism alerts us, the Right applied the Gramscian lessons of cultural politics. The U.S. 2000 presidential election showed how well the reaction had marched through the institutions.

While Gramsci struggled in Benito Mussolini's prisons to rethink fascism's successes, Strauss, fleeing the Nazis, migrated through Paris and Cambridge to New York and finally Chicago during which time he elaborated his reactionary antihistoricism, which dreamt of restraining democracy through an elite that diligently embodies esoteric knowledge and, having seized power, orders a polity in accord with its vision. In all senses of the word, the means to accomplish these goals is education. Against the modern tradition of political philosophy from Niccolò Machiavelli to the present, Strauss proposes — in a manner much more reminiscent of Emerson than Adams — an education radically divided between the few and many. The few learn to discover “hidden treasures” that disclose themselves only to a select number. The many, unable to deal with reason's demystification or the banality of evil, learn the dangers of reason and science while embracing the need for values imposed, if need be, by force of law. General education does not democratize learning and thinking but rather aspires to direct the masses' desires best to tolerate the secure, hidden, mediated leadership of those elites.

For Strauss and his followers — such as those figures who so powerfully influenced U.S. state policy in the Bush regime — antihistoricist elites, that is, antihumanist reactionaries, theorize education as the balance between oppression (Nazism) and license (liberal democracy). “Education, they [those liberal historicists] felt, is the only answer to the always pressing question,

to the political question par excellence, of how to reconcile order which is not oppression with freedom which is not license.<sup>12</sup> Strauss's antihistoricism would roll back social arrangements that promoted or valued historicist consciousness and the humanistic historicist conception of human experience. In the name of "impartiality," Strauss demands that historicism itself be relativized vis-à-vis its absolute and preferable other: "One cannot realize [the problematic character of historicism] without becoming seriously interested in an impartial confrontation of the historicist approach that prevails today with the nonhistoricist approach of the past. And such a confrontation in its turn requires that the nonhistoricist thought of the past be understood in its own terms, and not in the way in which it presents itself within the horizon of historicism."<sup>13</sup> This is Emerson's desire not to carry the corpse of memory writ large. What humans have done wise men must forget. Strauss's phenomenological hermeneutics are a magician's trick to deny the historical, social evolution of the species: man was and is permanently the same, despite relativist and historicizing claims to the contrary. As for interpretation and education, decontextualized ahistoricist formalism produces a system for decoding textual meanings that is thoroughly unworldly, detachably methodological, and always idiopathic. Nothing could be more opposed to humanists' worldly intellectual involvement than this Straussian neoconservatism. In place of the rich complexity of literature as the complex product of mind, will, history, and society comes the simpleminded assertion that we can find meaning in original or authorial intent. In the sphere of constitutional law, reliance upon natural law concepts — as in the case of Justice Clarence Thomas — or upon antihistoricist and supremely naive methods that supposedly discern original intent without doubt — think here of Justice Antonin Scalia — these are Emersonian and neoconservative practices and ideas. Those who hold to these gestures belong to the same family as those in the academy who, against theory, believe in intention and its recoverability — and I say this of them no matter how smartly they dress their manikins in the rhetoric of communities or the echoes of analytic philosophy.

"Bush believes he was called by God to lead the nation at this time, says Commerce Secretary Don Evans, a close friend who talks with Bush every day."<sup>14</sup> Bush's theory of America reflects both the Straussian and Emersonian lines but not that represented by Adams. An America that imposes its own particular upon the world as universal is not merely, as Edward Said insists, a repetition of old imperialisms, with democracy and freedom in place of

older French and British shibboleths about civilization and law. It is rather the mark of a peculiarly distasteful internal theory of the United States. It is a mean-spirited theory that does not trust democracy, that fears human life, and that refuses to learn or to experiment — except in the assertion of visionary power. It arrogates to itself not the wisdom of the sages but the sage arrangement of power in which governing serves the wise elite through the manipulation of the populace, the subversion of democratic practices, and the destruction of those forms of previous liberal arrangements that, at home and abroad, might sap the control of those who believe themselves entitled.

The nation acts abroad according to the same conception as the government acts domestically in relation to its own democratic institutions. As power requires no historical knowledge of foreign customs, so governing requires no respect or support for those who struggle to make their lives in the complexity of their experiences. The knowledge gained in those struggles has neither value nor permanence. Assured of one's own fundamental proximity to the godhead and, thus, in private, of one's wisdom despite one's ignorance, Straussians like George W. Bush conform to one of the highest Emersonian ideals of what they think Americans might best be. Just before Emerson calls on his readers to enter a state of war “and wake Thor and Woden, courage and constancy in our Saxon breasts” (273), he builds to one of many rhetorical heights:

When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn.

And now at last the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid: probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition. That thought, by what I can now nearest approach to say it, is this. When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the foot-prints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name; — the way, the thought, the good shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude example and experience. (271)

We need to avoid endless hermeneutical exercises upon what these terms mean and what this all signifies. Take this constellation of Emerson, Bush, and Strauss as an experimental alignment that makes it harder not to think this question: what is there about the United States that has made this reaction

possible. Consider, too, that this constellation, limited as it is to harassing some of our easy conceptions, comes from the vantage of another canonical figure, Henry Adams, whom recent academic politics banished to the wastebin of history. Adams is an example of a cosmopolitan and democratic American intellectual beyond the limits of liberalism, and one who neither succumbs to the enshrined secrecy of the occult nor the seeming anomie that meaning mongers fear. Rather, he is a historical political intellectual whose work departs from the far side of the sort of political intellectual contests that Emersonian, Straussian, and Bushian figures embodies.

Emerson and Strauss is each an end-of-history thinker, albeit in different ways. They do not tolerate the ambiguities or uncertainties of time, experience, or human evolution. John Keats spoke of poets having “negative capability” as a form of poetic courage that could stand in the face of the uncertain and incomplete. Keats’s enormously generous imagination is not self-reliant for it has indolence rather than immature ignorance and the style of nonchalance as its marker. Certainty, whether of self, God, or wisdom — all of these represent a lack of courage in imagination and politics. They reflect hatred of the human, deep misanthropy, and frustrated distance from the avowed God whose ever-increasing distance at birth — clouds of glory — gives us either the madness of hearing voices or the tyranny of elites whose wisdom forces the demos to accept not noble but ignorant lies.

Against such ignorance, poetic weakness, and political madness and tyranny stands another tradition, well represented in Henry Adams. This greatest reader, Richard Palmer Blackmur, derived a very different set of virtues from Adams’s work and from his exemplary status as an intellectual. Unlike those Straussians who cannot manage but by certainty in their own sagacity — their license to deceive and dominate — or those Emersonians who begin by loathing all of America except that liberalism of lifestyle that lets them be all that they want to be, Blackmur’s Adams embodies human courage. Adams’s academic detractors have allies in Norman Podhoretz. Blackmur, that most careful reader of American poetry, opens a door not to Germany but to human experience, writerly complexity, historical knowledge, and the demands of finitude. Blackmur’s phrase for Adams’s virtue is “distraught endurance,” an attitude of mind, curiosity, thinking, and politics that does not give way to Straussian despair about the demos or the Emersonian afflatus.

Henry Adams once wrote a novel, a roman à clef, called *Democracy*. In it, he musters an extraordinary defense of U.S. democracy as the most valuable

modern political experiment. He has no certainty about the outcome, but he has great commitment to the experiment. In a way, Adams's *Education* is the record of that experiment. It sets out from history, from the other side of knowledge; it commits itself to experiment; it takes risks; and it embodies the only line of political development he can imagine as adequate to the evolution of population and technology. Straussians, of course, believe they know that the experiment failed and, in the name of God, on behalf of their wisdom, they must help ensure its ending. Such a statement opens another chapter within the same conundrum: how exporting democracy by state power is one essential means to its destruction. That chapter requires another time and another place.