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Bové, Paul A.

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WHY THE NEOCONS HATE HENRY ADAMS

» In the *New Criterion* in 1983, Norman Podhoretz wrote, “I see little of value that would be lost by allowing [Henry Adams] to slip into the obscurity he so often boasted of wishing to achieve.”¹ In *The Bloody Crossroads: Where Literature and Politics Meet*, Podhoretz wrote at great length to link Henry Adams to the then fashionable target of right-wing intellectuals, the so-called new class, the “adversarial elite” that stood in disdainful opposition to the current state of American politics and culture.² Writing in the tradition of Talcott Parsons’s critique of intellectual leadership in creating the welfare state, Podhoretz objected to Adams and his supposed heirs in the new class for wanting to substitute leadership of educated elites for the messy politics of democratic contention. Essentially, for Podhoretz, Adams was a bad American, a traitor to its democracy and a forerunner of the leftist sympathizers, the experts from government and academia, who would dominate public policy, culture, and state institutions.³

The Bloody Crossroads insidiously implies a connection between Adams and the new class, on the one hand, and the Communist sympathizers who supported the Soviet Union not only during the Cold War but also after the 1917 Russian Revolution. Reviewing Podhoretz in the *New York Times Book Review*, Cynthia Ozick quickly sees how Adams stands in for all the political and cultural traits that Podhoretz despises: “The elitist bitterness of Adams, with his half-concealed hunger for domination, his disappointed superiority and his fastidious contempt for bourgeois satisfactions, is here almost allegorical. No doubt we are being told something about the potential for political irrelevance of intellectuals who substitute the Adams style of mechanical melodramatic national self-disgust for ordinary, often imperfect, democratic repair.”⁴ Ozick’s prose suffers a surprising weakness here: we cannot quite tell how near or far she stands to Podhoretz’s frightening display of readerly

incompetence in producing this image of Adams. No matter, however, for Podhoretz, invoking Edmund Wilson and John Jay Chapman, announces his dislike of *The Education of Henry Adams* and refuses to follow Wilson in taking Adams as an “indictment” of the capitalist debacle America had become after the Civil War and through the Gilded Age.⁵ We would be wrong to accuse Podhoretz of blind loyalty to market capitalism — although he certainly suffered from that belief; what matters in this case is Adams’ assumption of an intellectual stance against what America had become after the Civil War, a political and social form dominated by corporate interests, dehumanized practices of subject formation, and a war-based economy. As harsh as it might seem, it is Podhoretz and the neocons’ warm embrace of war, corporatism, and mystification that makes Adams a necessary adversary, an easily available bogeyman for their political visions and tyrannical populist demagoguery. Admirers and detractors both make much of Podhoretz having studied with Lionel Trilling and F. R. Leavis. Perhaps from Leavis he inherited the belief that prejudice can stand in for criticism, but surely he did not learn from Trilling how to read. The greatest Adams scholar is the poet-critic Richard Palmer Blackmur whose care for reading is legendary and whose judgments always rest on sharp evidence and close examination. Typically, Podhoretz sweeps Blackmur aside precisely because his research concludes the opposite of what Podhoretz’s prejudiced belief requires. For Podhoretz, as for all sectarians but for warmongers in particular, care, curiosity, and creativity may not obstruct the exercise of power for immediate desires.

In almost all the issues that matter here, war stands at their center and as their nexus. For the neocons, war is a good, exciting and high-purposed, legitimated by their own sense of American exceptionalism.⁶ Their hyperpatriotism, and the chauvinism of their public statements, forbids all criticism of American economic forms and their cultural political consequences. Despite their differing judgments of *The Education of Henry Adams*, Blackmur and Wilson both conclude that Adams had a good reading of American life from 1868 through the Gilded Age and that, indeed, as Blackmur put it, the United States in that period was unable “to furnish a free field for intelligent political action.”⁷ Podhoretz rejects out of hand any such criticism of American life and institutions. He follows the same line as Louis Kronenberger who, in 1939, wrote this: “*The Education* is a grand-scale study of maladjustment, of the failure of an exceptional personality to mesh with a prodigious civilization.”⁸ When America fails, when it deserves criticism, is only when it allows

Adamsesque figures to gain influence, thereby weakening American values, American confidence in its own identity, and American will to act in the world in its own interests, establishing its own rule. Therefore, in contrast to Adams, Podhoretz admires Teddy Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge whose imperial ambitions Podhoretz hides in counterpoising them to Adams's mask: they "were nevertheless able to enter public life and make a great mark on the times."⁹ Adams's letters in particular sparkle with brilliant demolitions of Roosevelt and Lodge and record serious suspicions of their abilities among other members of the ruling class, such as the secretary of state and author of the Open Door policy John Hay. Edward Chalfant's extraordinary three-volume study of Adams's life and work argues convincingly that we should consider Adams the cosecretary during Hay's years in office for his influence on and involvement in U.S. policy. In other words, Chalfant's research shows yet again what careful readers of Adams know. The "Henry Adams" against which Podhoretz rants is a literary creation, a figural device for the agony of thought and intellectual curiosity of a kind that any good reader or careful thinker would also find in such venerable classics as Thucydides, wherein the staged debates over life, death, war, and extermination create the occasion for thinking, imagining, weighing, and acting. Just as Thucydides had the courage to allow Athens to consider exterminist politics, so Adams had the courage to allow his America to throw up a Ulysses S. Grant from the chthonic depths to make us wonder if a society might devolve as species evolve. What Podhoretz and other neocons lack, of course, is intellectual courage. How easy to stand in the face of no ambiguity and so escape the fate of Samuel Taylor Coleridge! They always know what to do and never hesitate over a course of action.

Traditional American conservatives have embraced Henry Adams as often as the neocons have discarded him. In *The Conservative Mind from Burke to Santayana*, for example, Russell Kirk, the figure most responsible for the post-war renewal of American conservatism, drew this remarkable sketch in 1953:

[Henry Adams] is the most irritating person in [American letters] — and the most provocative writer, and the best historian, and possibly the most penetrating critic of ideas. The best cure for vexation with Henry Adams is to read his detractors; for against his Olympian amusement at a dying world and his real inner modesty, their snarls and quibbles furnish a relief which displays Adams' learning and wit as no amount of adulation could. A case might be made that Henry Adams represents the zenith of

American civilization. Unmistakably and almost belligerently American, the end-product of four generations of exceptional rectitude and remarkable intelligence, very likely (despite his autobiography) the best-educated man American society has produced.¹⁰

While Podhoretz and other neocons detest modernity, they locate its most dire effects in an educated elite that they claim substitutes its own judgments for those of the demos. For them, Adams is the paradigmatic figure of modernity — just because he possesses the characteristics a Burkean conservative admires. Of course, neocons openly admit their interest in directing or “allying” with movements in the demos. In a remarkably frank magazine article, Irving Kristol, the not-so-hidden godfather of neoconservatism, urges the faithful to segregate themselves from major elements within “traditional conservatism,” from especially market libertarians whose beliefs give priority to economics and Burkeans such as Edmund Burke who embody “Tory nostalgia.” By sleight of hand, Kristol leaves only “religious traditionalists” standing as fit allies for the neocons whose largely secular identity he admits. Neocon belief takes form in sectarian utilitarianism and so an alliance emerges between these strange bedfellows, “united on issues concerning the quality of education, the relations of church and state, the regulation of pornography, and the like, all of which they regard as proper candidates for the government’s attention.”¹¹ Kristol admits that the neocons are fish swimming in the waters of religious fundamentalism for the conditions of their success, of their access to power; their place within the state comes from a demos well prepared to use state power to police culture and domestic society. Kristol’s version of American exceptionalism takes a doubly bizarre form. The United States alone has a demographic base of religious conservatives, and so only in the United States is the “neoconservative potential” strong; and at the same time, although the United States is the only possible home for the neocons, Kristol admits, “It is only to a degree that neocons are comfortable in modern America.” In Kristol’s scheme, American exceptionalism exists as a mode of intensifying itself as a police state that enforces cultural and moral uniformity on a clear sectarian basis. In large part, this reformist effort aims to allow their activism throughout the world, a statism as aggressively imperial and militaristic as any in the ambitions of their admired predecessors. “And then, of course, there is foreign policy.”

Kristol insists the neocons have no beliefs in foreign policy, merely a

set of attitudes, derived from “historical experience” and their favorite text (made so “thanks to professors Leo Strauss of Chicago and Donald Kagan of Yale”), Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Kristol enumerates these attitudes as theses, admittedly mocking Marx. Here are the highlights of neocons attitudinizing:

1. Patriotism is a natural and healthy sentiment both private and public institutions should encourage.
 - a. Precisely because we are a nation of immigrants, this is a powerful American sentiment.
2. World government is a terrible idea since it can lead to world tyranny.
 - a. Americans should regard international institutions that point to an ultimate world government with the deepest suspicion.
3. Political leaders should . . . have the ability to distinguish friends from enemies.
 - a. U.S. statesmen were not sufficiently anti-Soviet or anti-Communist.
4. The “national interest” is not a geographical term.
 - a. A larger nation has interests that are more extensive.
 - b. Today, the United States’ “identity is ideological” like the USSR of past years.
 - c. The United States must advance its ideological interests.
 - d. The United States should support democracy wherever its survival is threatened, as in Israel.
5. Behind all of the above: the incredible military superiority of the United States vis-à-vis the nations of the rest of the world, in any imaginable combination.

Kristol ends this little manifesto with an oblique reference to a slightly earlier piece by Podhoretz, “Neoconservatism: A Eulogy,” which argues that the movement had fulfilled its historical destiny. “This is not a time,” Podhoretz writes, “for mourning or for apprehension or for anxiety, but a time for satisfaction over a just war well fought, and a time for rejoicing in a series of victories that cleared the way and set the stage for other victories in the years to come. In those victories of the future, I believe that the legacy, and the legatees, of neoconservatism, now zestfully thriving all around us, will play as indispensable a part as did the neoconservatives themselves in achieving the victories of the past.” Podhoretz believed neoconservatism had won in

setting limits to the size of the welfare state, in ensuring the defense of Israel, in defending capitalism from critique, in defeating the Soviet Union, and in overturning the counterculture of the anti-Vietnam protest era. “Finally,” he writes, “there was the realm of culture. If anti-Communism was the ruling passion of the neoconservatives in foreign affairs, opposition to the counterculture of the 1960’s was their ruling passion at home. Indeed, I suspect that revulsion against the counterculture accounted for more converts to neoconservatism than any other single factor.”¹²

We must grasp the clear outlines of the neocons’ very simple agenda: to make use of irrational politics among the American people, exploiting Americans’ inherited commitment to faith-based institutions and belief systems; weaken the public educational system; and demagogically attack intellectual and scientific institutions to delegitimize government and universities as the locales of elites’ action in society. Once prepared, this demos formed within the GOP controls state power to further remake U.S. culture, closing down the American mind, denying intelligence free play within politics or culture, and having seized the state to extend American empire as far as the force of arms allows.

High journalism records the conventional opinion that the neocons set out in rebellion against the countercultural developments of the antiwar, civil rights, and women’s rights movements of the 1960s and beyond. Analyses that are more thorough reveal longer traditions behind the movement, finding U.S. roots in the first wave of capital globalization in the 1890s and in the European experiences of Weimar and decolonization, especially the end of the British Empire. James Mann’s best-selling report *The Rise of the Vulcans*, is a fine example of the standard line:

The neoconservative movement that arose within the Democratic party was made up of intellectuals, scholars and party stalwarts who had originally been strong supporters of the party’s New Deal traditions. . . . In the late 1960s and 1970s these Democrats grew increasingly unhappy with the party’s drift toward the political left. . . . The older intellectuals in the movement were joined by rising young foreign policy hawks such as Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz. All of them believed in the importance of American power; all hoped to revive the assertive, internationalist traditions under which the Roosevelt and Truman administrations had fought World War II and the cold war.¹³

Just how they grew from these discontents to the control of expansive raw power in the state itself and state-related institutions is the subject of another best-selling work of high journalism, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*, which details the machinations and ambitions of a small group of not very impressive minds: “The neocons are indeed a cabal with a mission. At home, they want to reform welfare and end affirmative action. Abroad, it comes down to two things: asserting American power in a more unilateral way, shorn of the pragmatic (and, in their view, enfeebling) entanglements of multilateralism, and using that power to redraw the map of the world and spread liberal democracy.”¹⁴

“Reforming welfare” and “ending affirmative action” code various forms of prejudice, but only in the rightmost wing of a right nation do these prejudices dare speak their name. No doubt for many they imply the desired outcome of a white again, male again set of entitlements that rest primarily upon an unequal distribution of wealth, income, and social access that it routinely invokes in the memory of the Gilded Age of the 1890s. Not coincidentally that too was a period of intense intellectual and state commitment to imperialism, to the priority of state power over other forms of power, and to the value of war as the vehicle of American interest and identity.

The neocons’ desired program has roots much deeper than the activism of Roosevelt and Harry Truman. As I have shown elsewhere, especially through a study of Paul Wolfowitz (one of the key intellectual figures in neoconservatism), their militaristic form of American adventurism repeats almost verbatim the foundational imperial statements of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the so-called Father of the American Navy and the founder of the Naval War College. In this tradition, as Mahan and Wolfowitz insist, state intellectuals must convince Americans that war is a good and peace is not; further, they must argue that economy is secondary to state power and absorbed to the state’s purpose through logistics, what Dwight Eisenhower named the military industrial complex. Above all, Mahan explicitly and Wolfowitz by inheritance accepted the necessity for the extermination of populations in the name of great power, that is, American interests.

Since Podhoretz in particular makes Henry Adams and other opponents’ characters and values fit subject for careless mockery, and since as human beings we need to understand how to stop the formation of such creatures as these neocons, we must hear their words to feel their characters and morals. In 2004, at the height of their power, they rarely hid any of their sentiments;

pride comes before the fall. In a *Washington Post* article, Corey Robin, a sympathetic writer, recounts his interviews with two dons of the movement, William F. Buckley Jr. and Irving Kristol.

“The trouble with the emphasis in conservatism on the market,” Buckley told me, “is that it becomes rather boring. You hear it once, you master the idea. The notion of devoting your life to it is horrifying if only because it’s so repetitious. It’s like sex.” Kristol confessed to a yearning for an American empire: “What’s the point of being the greatest, most powerful nation in the world and not having an imperial role?”

But because of its devotion to prosperity, he added, the United States lacked the fortitude and vision to wield imperial power. “It’s too bad,” Kristol lamented. “I think it would be natural for the United States . . . to play a far more dominant role in world affairs . . . to command and to give orders as to what is to be done. People need that. There are many parts of the world — Africa in particular — where an authority willing to use troops can make . . . a healthy difference.” But not with public discussion dominated by accountants. “There’s the Republican Party tying itself into knots. Over what?” he said. “I think it’s disgusting that . . . presidential politics of the most important country in the world should revolve around prescriptions for elderly people.”¹⁵

One can easily imagine how, in the face of such attitudes, values, and characters, Henry Adams, as Podhoretz laments, would think American society, morals, and politics in need of lucid exposition and loving criticism.

Henry Adams worries Podhoretz and the other neocons not because of his political positions — against the Philippine War, the occupation of Cuba, the tariff, and so forth — nor does his critical attitude worry them as such. Podhoretz goes out of his way to disgrace Henry by citing his great-grandfather, John Adams, against him — making Henry into a lost sheep, a prodigal departing from the American founding, outside the filiative line of proper descent. Given that Podhoretz and Kristol regularly stress their immigrant, lower-class Jewish origins, one should be a bit distressed that Podhoretz cynically attacks Henry Adams for failing the mandarin inheritance of his own family. What matters, of course, is not Henry’s departure from his fathers but his departure from the paternal line of Americanism that the neocons claim as their own birthright. Stepping aside from what

America had become after the Civil War first to reform it and then to expose and criticize it are the unforgivable gestures of a prodigal.

The neocons direct us politically to the question of education and formation, and to discuss these questions in the U.S. tradition requires some attention to *The Education of Henry Adams*. Podhoretz makes the effort to lessen its status because it proffers the best account of how one educates oneself in the United States in order not to say such things as Buckley and Kristol feel at home to say.

Famously, Henry Adams insists that he never found the education he needed, yet as Kirk so clearly puts it, Adams was probably the best-educated and learned person in U.S. history. Set aside, please, all the relativizing clichés that come to mind in the face of such a statement and consider its rhetorical political value in our context. The neocons will not tolerate any human formation that produces a hostile criticism of American culture, society, or politics. (This is why, I think, they place themselves within Mahan's school that advances exterminism as a legitimate form of policy.) "Formation," as my colleague Ronald Judy always points out, is as much a matter of *Bildung* as it is social context. Indeed, these are inseparable.

Adams launches *The Education* retrospectively. He was aware that the estranged circumstances of his birth — an eighteenth-century person born in 1838 on the verge of the twentieth century — disqualified his character, Henry, from playing a major public role in the United States. It did place him — Adams — however, in the perfect position to stand athwart what the United States would become, able to compare it by study and experience to other societies and forms, expose it, think about it lucidly, and offer judgments on various forces and elements. He does all of this while loving the country and its democratic experiments, even while struggling with various contradictory tendencies within his own feelings on its development.

Of the character, "Henry," Adams writes repeatedly that he experimented and failed at education. Mostly, each thing he carefully learns ends up being late, and "Henry" exists belatedly, as a figure always behind the world in which he lives and in which, by definition, he can never learn. To create such a character, so carefully posed against that for which education can never arrive, Adams has to occupy the position he denies his character — how else is he to know what education denies?

Adams's own formation threatens the neocons. *The Education's* narrative shows that the proper intellectual formation for living in and lucidly grasp-

ing the United States requires a double turn. First, there is the inevitable discovery that “America” always moves too fast for even recently acquired education to fit the circumstances one needs to understand or lead. Second, there is the necessary discovery that measuring the failure of education provides proper access to that which we need to learn. Adams’s modernity consists first in how he forms himself. Emphasizing as many do the privileged traditional nature of his development misses the point. Privilege is a mark of any socially stratified society; with a figure as intelligent and critical as Adams, it is not definitive.

Adams is modern as Karl Kraus was modern, at least on this point. Walter Benjamin, in his definitive 1931 study of Kraus, notes how essentially agonistic educational formation must be if it is to serve the individual and by creative critical work the society. Like Adams, who studied his Wordsworth, Kraus had an uncanny ability to imagine “each fiber of childhood with all its manifestations so intensely that the temperature is raised.”¹⁶ Near the opening of *The Education*, Adams recounts how one morning at the ancestral home in Quincy, he rebelled against his mother and refused to go to school. His grandfather, hard at work in his second-floor study, silently and without explicit judgment took the boy by his hand and, defying all odds, walked him safely to school, preventing his escape into Tom Sawyer–like games and warmth. The world insists on schooling the boy, but the boy, retrospectively as it were, learns from his rebellion a lesson in education no schooling could provide — lessons about power, forbearance, mental and emotional balance, the gendered nature of domestic power, and so on — but most important, he learns that education comes from being firmly against schooling. Benjamin puts it nicely when discussing Kraus: “He never envisaged the child as the object of education; rather, in an image from his own youth, he saw the child as the antagonist of education who is educated by this antagonism, not by the educator.”

In 1858–1859, just twenty years old and a recent Harvard graduate, Adams set out on a grand tour of Europe that began with a visit to London but had study in the Humboldt University in Berlin as its supposed goal. There, Adams was to read law and observe the most advanced research university in the world. Surprised by his difficulties with German — a language that always eluded this polyglot intellectual — Adams attended a gymnasium to acquire the language like a pupil. He wrote articles for American newspapers on German education and in *The Education* summarized the general lesson

learned: “All State-education is a sort of dynamo machine for polarizing the popular mind; for turning and holding its lines of force in the direction supposed to be the most effective for State-purposes” (792). Berlin provided education, of course; it came from theater, opera, ballet, and beer halls. “The curious and perplexing result of the total failure of German education [for Henry Adams] was that the student’s only clear gain, his single step to a higher life, — came from time wasted; studies neglected; vices indulged; education reversed; — it came from the despised beer-garden and music hall; it was accidental, unintended, and unforeseen” (793).

The educated human subject could not result from the planned application of force through state institutions. The alternative to state institutions is not, of course, so-called private education at university or charter schools. We know these all to be what Louis Althusser long ago called “ideological state apparatuses,” their independence from the state an illusion generated by mediation. The alternative to state education is also not civil society or the formal aesthetic institutions. These are rather possible fields for an active intellect, for a concerned imagination, a critical mind. The basic opposition for Adams is state directed and “accidental, unintended, and unforeseen” — for they each imply a differently formed subjectivity and political processes of subject formation.

The Education insists that anticipatory intelligence is rare, especially in America. I have argued elsewhere that Adams’s thinking about intelligence is similar to Aristotle’s notions of active intelligence and so to various Arabic followers who build on his work. There are two reasons it is so rare in America, and they are opposite signs of the same coin: first, America changes rapidly as the principle place of modernity and cannot catch up to its own formation; second, as a formation, it values neither the education that might ameliorate that belatedness nor the intelligence that might understand and exposit. Being accidental, however, the resulting education is better suited to regard, study, and question than a directed education that creates subject at home, placed within systems and processes it cannot understand and, more important, sees no need to understand.

Alienation effects achieve real education, but in nature, they direct the subject toward aesthetics, toward mere beauty and the fringes of power. Travel brought the young Henry to a critical insight about the state and its plans for subject formation; travel carried him through “tropical islands, mountain solitudes, archaic law and retrograde types” (1040). No matter

what these taught inevitably, they drew the traveler back to consumption, to aestheticization, and to unsatisfying mere sensuality. They left “a certain intense cerebral restlessness” that deceived Henry into imagining that mathematics and science would satisfy where the aesthetic did not.

The young man who found education in beer halls and operas, in the accidental, as he aged, sometimes lost track of his own discovery and planned his efforts, constantly exploring and hoping to find education rather than letting education happen, letting it emerge as it might. So, Henry moves, predictably, from the aesthetic to the mathematical, hoping for clarity, certainty, and solutions, and “taking for granted that the alternative to art was arithmetic” (1040). Bad readers constantly mistake, often willfully mistake, Henry’s experiences and attitudes for Adams’s just as they stupidly insist *The Education* is an autobiography. Kronenberger, for example, carries on a tradition that reads *The Education* as an “autobiography” of a prosaic and narrow intellectual ambition to education. “Adams,” he writes, “self-consciously sought to channel his experiences and to convert them into education. . . . [As a result, his work] was never much more than brilliant dilettantism.”¹⁷ Such evident commonsense claims are inevitably misprisions. In this scene, Henry is a figure of normal intellectual and social life among a certain class of people in the United States; independently wealthy, he travels, indulges, exoticizes, consumes, and like his character Madeleine Lee in *Democracy*, he lives an effete intellectual and sociopolitically irresponsible, unimaginative life. As important, such a type as Henry comes to be an all-too-familiar sort of intellectual, precisely the prophet of doom and decline that Norman Podhoretz, ideologically and technically incapable of reading, believes Adams himself to be. More important, Henry is a mockery of the emergent type, in Europe and America, of those intellectuals, such as Walter Benjamin and Edmund Husserl, who in their profoundly different ways build massive intellectual projects on the belief and experience of ruination. What does Henry conclude when he discovers math provides no better answers than art? “Nothing came out as it should. . . . Anyone could set up or pull down a society. One could frame no sort of satisfactory answer to the constructive doctrines of Adam Smith, or to the destructive criticisms of Karl Marx.” For a character such as Henry, the unthought affective response to these failures in normal and directed education is simple but horrifying: “One revelled at will in the ruin of every society in the past, and rejoiced in proving the prospective overthrow of every society that seemed possible in the future; but meanwhile these

societies which violated every law, moral, arithmetical, and economical, not only propagated each other but produced also fresh complexities with every propagation and developed mass with every complexity” (1041).

Adams knows the psychological allure, the melancholic desire of the self-justified apocalyptic intellectual. Note carefully that the apocalyptic imagination is indulgent, lacks empathy, and is smug. In his late work “On the Concept of History,” Walter Benjamin epitomizes the stance of the apocalyptic intellectual in relation to history, producing the twentieth century’s most influential European image of accumulated ruin: “This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky.”¹⁸

This glorious image, the starting point for powerful reflection on history and capital especially, enables a vast critical enterprise that expresses contempt for history as a domain of domination and licenses a corresponding intellectual judgment that ruins all human achievement as always already fallen. Indeed, enterprise and judgment sustain themselves by reveling in an attitude that makes history worse than worthless as an imaginative and human domain.

As a student and young man, Henry Adams was once a catastrophist, a follower of Louis Agassiz at Harvard in a reaction against Darwin and evolution. Benjamin says that the historical process of ruination that blows back the angel’s wings is progress. Like the comic Henry, who has to learn there is no progress, no direction to history, and no amelioration within its forms and formations, Benjamin tragically, melodramatically, revels nihilistically in a seeming human fate whose logic he sees as demanding or affording only destructive discontinuity, rupture, as the permanent basis of his antihistorical allegory. As Adams learned to leave Agassiz and other catastrophists behind and to love Darwin and evolution, he learned to live in and imagine life for historical processes that offer no guarantee of perfection but demand responsibilities for willful human action. Erasing God and the residues of God discourse from his imagination and writing, and knowing that evolu-

tion embeds the human organism within the erratic and uncertain processes of selection, Adams realistically draws his mind and imagination to human responsibility for the future and to the need for critical judgment of human action. This historicist approach is more nuanced, more difficult, and more loving than the easy ecstasies of esoteric nihilism or militarist ambition.

All of Adams's attention is on the human, on action and will. Henry needs to learn to attend, and Adams shows us how he turns to human history albeit after reveling in ruination: "Nothing had so confused the student as the conduct of mankind in the *fin-de siècle*." Random education leads to hard but necessary judgments, the aim of which is not the Arnoldian loosening of categories but rather the application of severe insight into the consequences of categories made too loose: "No one seemed very much concerned about this world or the future, unless it might be the anarchists" (1041).

Adams's task, all along, since he announced this *Education* as a book meant to form or cultivate the young — in his frame, young men in particular — had been to reveal the necessity for judgment of human historical action from within the full historicity of subjectivity capable of particularized, nonesoteric, historicist judgments.

[Henry] was kept alive by irritation at finding his life so thin and fruitless. Meanwhile he watched mankind march on, like a train of pack-horses on the Snake River, tumbling from one morass into another, and at short intervals, for no reason but temper, failing to butchery, like Cain. Since 1850, massacres had become so common that society scarcely noticed them unless they summed up hundreds of thousands, as in Armenia; wars had been almost continuous, and were beginning again in Cuba, threatening South Africa, and possible in Manchuria; yet impartial judges thought them all not merely unnecessary but foolish, — induced by greed of the coarsest class, as those the Pharaohs or the Romans were still robbing their neighbors. (1041–42)

Podhoretz, Kristol, Wolfowitz, and their predecessors, Mahan, Roosevelt, and Lodge could not be of the same mind as Henry. Servants of the state they wanted to direct to their own visionary ends; they saw nothing wrong with war or massacres. Insistent that education, that *Bildung*, that formation, should only serve their purposes — the purposes of great power organized as the counterpoise to the nihilism of Benjamin's angel — they too hate the

history they claim to embody and destroy the historically human species that might live its life without the crimes of their nihilism.

The proper counterpoise to both nihilisms follows from this remark in *The Education*: “The woman who is known only through a man is known wrong” (1042). Neocons and Benjaminians alike have no place for women in their stories of desire and failure. Therefore, they turn away from history wherein, as Adams mockingly reminds his (male) readers, they may find women. Were there sufficient time, we would trace Adams’s staging of Henry’s discovery of women to the conclusion that through women’s “eyes the old problem became new and personal”; the effect was to expel “archaic law and antiquarianism once for all,” leading to “a new sense of history” (1044).

Podhoretz tried to mock Blackmur’s claim that something had to be wrong with the United States because it did not provide a political space of free play for such intelligence as possessed Henry Adams. We see, to the contrary, that the United States could be such a space but that its openness requires the imaginative practice that learns from the hidden openness, the chances of historical time and being, and, in turn, that keeps that space open. Podhoretz and others like him practice imagination but not with responsibility to throw off the greedy and archaic, not just to support the primitive accumulative impulses of the market and the state, but to preempt the possibilities of poesis that reside in the erotic discovery of women outside the assertive ignorance of male nihilisms. Esoteric truth revels in nihilism, erasing history as it erases women, and substitutes the abrupt, explosive discontinuities of catastrophe for the embedded reproduction of selection that allows historically human beings to emerge without a desperate fear of life in time. Erotic knowing — the formation that opens the field of free play — depends on and allows critical judgment, creating subjects not swarmed by the dogmas and powers of state and market, superseding the allure of empire and commodity alike. The essential vision of the neocons is antihistoricist nihilism. It is a disease of the age, so to speak, and Adams (perhaps with Michel Foucault — pace Richard Rorty whose American apologetics thought they were an unnatural liaison) lets us speak in a way that embraces the judgment, the anger, and the clear-cut condemnation. Moreover, it does it in a learned embrace. *The Education* never mentions his dead wife, Clover. Yet always and everywhere, women and sexuality saturate *The Education* as the wisdom of evolution, of the species, of effort, of action, of openness, and of emergence — all these against the warmongering archaic impulses that ruin life and murder peoples. Poetic

formation is all; properly done, there is nothing outside it. The species is not first political or rational but poetic. To think otherwise, to embrace ruin and ruination, is a nihilism aimed not at “man,” as in many antihumanisms, but at the “human,” a nihilism against love, creativity, possibility, and species, and of course, historicity itself. As self-exterminist, such nihilism aims to weaken the imagination, putting in its place the finality of apocalypse, falsely offered as inevitable and redemptive. Thus, against the neocons lies an end to great powers and promises instead great poems.

