Two men of letters against the machine and the mob

The Lost America—The Despair of Henry Adams and Mark Twain

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Henry Adams and Samuel Clemens are often considered to represent the polar extremes of their age. Yet, however divergent their careers seem to be, it is absorbing to watch them approaching, each in his different way, a final mood of total despair that argues concurrence rather than coincidence. Personal tragedies might be adduced to explain this: the heart-breaking death of Susy Clemens and the long drawn out agony of Livy, the suicide of Adams's wife Clover, even the humiliation of bankruptcy, which both men experienced, these certainly are contributory causes. But as one examines the conspicuous modes of this despair—a compound of comminatory denunciation and brooding, intense pessimism—one is compelled to search further afield for the prime causes. Such an investigation reveals that this despair is in a slow process of incubation from their earliest work, and that it is finally hatched by the growing discords, conflicts, and problems of the age. It is not a despair of personal bereavement but of country—ultimately of man.

Much of Adams’s despair, to say nothing of his wounded pride, is the negative residue of a constantly diminishing faith in American politics, which seemed progressively to abandon all the moral idealism that he felt that he and his family preeminently represented. His bitterness increases as it becomes increasingly apparent that such a person as himself has no part to play in the politics of his age: that such a stage of affairs should have come about clearly indicated an intolerable debasement of the whole political scene. His two early novels and the nine-volume history really have a common theme: they ask the question: What is the fate of idealism in American politics, is there any longer any meaning in the way things are going, is life moving towards any ideal end?

The Life of Albert Gallatin, as well as being a simple biography, is also an examination of political aspiration that results in failure, and it points out the fact that Republican idealism failed to establish its ideally conceived society. Democracy, written almost immediately after 1879, is an excoriating analysis of contemporary American democratic administration. The heroine, Mrs. Madeline Lee, sets out to understand Senator Radcliffe who is made
to represent the contemporary American politician in all his naked power. He proves to be selfish, hypocritical, and unscrupulous, "a naked will operating under convictions of moral lunacy." Mrs. Lee comes to consider him "diseased" and the disease is diagnosed as "atrophy of the moral sense." She had been searching for some meaning in life and had focussed on the senator as a possible provider of an ideal end for which she could work. His failure to furnish her with such an ideal induces in Mrs. Lee a mood of complete despair: for her, life is "emptier than ever now that this dream was over." She decides to "quit the masquerade" and sets out on a voyage to the Mediterranean and the Nile. The voyage, we feel, is but the first of many meaningless meanderings and it aptly prefigures Adam's own restless existence. These two novels about the futile search for some form of idealism were written while Adams was engaged in research for his great History. This work, published between 1889 and 1891, is a massive demonstration of the inevitable failure of idealism. The ideals governing Jeffersonian Republicanism are set out in the chapter called "American Ideals" and the rest of the work records the attempt to achieve these ideal goals. As George Hochfield observes in an unpublished dissertation on Adams: "The failure of that attempt—for failure it obviously was—is thus the conclusion to which the whole work tends." The attempt to establish an ideal society leads eventually to the horrors of war: this is the mute, sinister portent of the work. To phrase it thus is to slight its greatness but for our purpose it is interesting to note that Adams chose to study exactly that portion of history which would provide him with a pessi-
mistic conclusion. Even here, long before The Education, there are hints of an in-
cipient determinism, a determinism justi-
fied by this great failure of the past. As Hochfield writes: "the necessitarianism that tinctures the History is a response to the failure of idealism; it signifies Adams's conclusion that idealism must have been doomed from the start by the very nature of history." It is as though Adams unconsciously chose just that period in American history which would most warrant his incoherent pessimism. The odd thing is that Clemens chose to do exactly the same.

Clemens of course was not so articulate or painstaking in his political opinions. He was an admirer and later a friend of Grant, and Grant's régime did not fill him with the same deep disgust that afflicted the more perspicacious Adams. Nevertheless, he is far from being blithely unaware of an unpleasant drop in the tone of American politics after the Civil war. In The Curious Republic of Gondour, written in 1871, he satirizes an aspect of American politics that we might have expected to annoy Adams rather than Clemens, for the curious thing about Gondour is that "for the first time in the history of the republic, property, character, and intellect were able to wield a political influence." In this strange land an education entitles a man to more votes than the unlettered hod-carrier, and the ignorant are not allowed to swamp the intelligent with their greater numbers. The tone is more that of an alienated aristocrat than that of a supporter of the great American dream of government by the people. Three years later Clemens gave the definitive title to his times with The Gilded Age. The book is by no means the unrelieved attack on democracy that Adams's novel was to be, but the satirical intent is clear and Senator Dilworthy invites comparison with Senator Radcliffe. Clemens was no stranger to Washington, and his stay there during the winter of 1867 was sufficient to give him as low an opinion of American politics as
Adams held. However, it is in that strangely confused book *A Connecticut Yankee*, published just before the *History*, that Clemens comes so close to echoing Adams's despairing conclusions. The book actually starts out from a point of view very distant from the omniscient retrospection of Adams the historian: the novel, as Professor Henry Nash Smith has shrewdly pointed out, is a "roman experimental" and the question at issue is whether republican idealism and nineteenth century technology can redeem society. This in turn poses the question of whether or not man can improve his lot if offered an ideal opportunity; whether, indeed, man is perfectible. Thus, it is asking the same question answered negatively by the *History*, for the ideals that are tested in that book are man's natural capacity to develop morally and intellectually, and the possibility of intelligent economic expansion. Frequently before the writing of this book Clemens exhibits a belief in natural goodness, the innately decent proclivities of the "heart" that has not been corrupted by inherited prejudice and the coercions of established institutions. Huck Finn is his supreme assertion of such a belief, and Hank Morgan is in some ways a grown-up Huck who instead of being in passive flight from society is in aggressive conflict with it. To the dark ages of sixth-century England he brings these two great gifts—a theory of amelioration based on a belief in the goodness and perfectibility of man, and the economic principles and technological means to implement a beneficial alteration of the age. But all his efforts prove wasted: the initial philanthrope gradually becomes misanthropic; the idealistic democrat shades into a scornful tyrant; hoping to bring light he ends by concentrating on destruction: people are unapt for improvement—idealism is bound to fail. As the faith in man falls, so a savage authorial anger intrudes itself: the undertaken project of reconstruction ends in a foul holocaust just as the *History* shows idealism leading inevitably to the "bloody arena" of war. Adams never had Clemens's belief in the perfectibility of man: he called it "this doubtful and even improbable principle" and proved the point by his *History*. Clemens's anger and dismay are the greater for his having once believed but the conclusions he reaches are identical. Yet we may note, as we noted of the *History*, that Clemens chose a situation in which idealism was bound to fail: established historical fact precludes all possibility of success and surely it is not excessive to see in this choice of situation a lurking, if unacknowledged, pessimistic determinism such as we discerned in Adams. (A similar unconscious fatalism clearly dictates his preoccupation with the Joan of Arc story; she is another idealistic person who comes to redeem a "sick age," and her ultimate rejection by society is even more inflexibly determined than Hank Morgan's.) It might here be argued that *A Connecticut Yankee* was an anti-English polemic stimulated by the patronizing contempt of America exhibited by Matthew Arnold, but the satiric barb of the book is aimed at contemporary America—the "dark ages" become the corrupt post civil-war years in which the great American dream was so glaringly betrayed. The Round Table, for instance, comes to have an uncanny resemblance to the stock exchange and the final civil-war is precipitated by a shady deal reminiscent of the railroad frauds of the seventies: the slave-driver in the illustrations, which were executed by the radical Dan Beard with Clemens's approval, is clearly meant to be Jay Gould; in a word, the degradation and misery of the sixth century is America's own. The years from 1873 to 1879 were years of great economic distress; the small farmers were badly off and in the cities there was widespread unemployment, while
in 1877 the first nation-wide strike led to a sinister outburst of labor rioting. In 1879 Henry George published his *Progress and Poverty*. The book opens with a statement of the expectations and opportunities of the early nineteenth century: its theme is "disappointment has followed disappointment," a theme re-echoed in Adams's historical work and Clemens's novels. If the ideals on which America was founded were being rapidly stained by political practice, so also was the paradisaical surface of the continent suffering a comparable degradation from the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the period. One would not have expected a nostalgia for the unspoiled wildness of an earlier America to have had much effect on the urbane temperament of Adams, yet it clearly does. Several amazingly passionate passages in the *Education* reveal that for Adams "the vast maternity of nature" always "showed charms more voluptuous than the vast maternity of the United States senate." And this is not to be discounted as the urban man's genteel indulgence in the country from a safe distance—this is not an age of pastoral poetry. It is definitely the profligate waywardness of an untamed nature that arouses his sympathies. When he first sees the South he is most distressed by the fact that it is "unkempt, poverty-stricken, ignorant, vicious" and yet certain aspects of it draw him as though he were hypnotized by them against his better, civilized judgment. "The want of barriers, of pavements, of forms; the looseness, the laziness; the indolent southern drawl; the pigs in the streets, the negro babies and their mothers with bandanas; the freedom, openness, swagger of nature and man soothed his Johnson blood"—a passage that Clemens would have applauded. What disappoints Adams in his later travels is that "the sense of wildness had vanished" and *Huckleberry Finn* embodies a similar lament, lyrically developed, for some lost "wildness" that is Huck's natural element. We should remember that Adams, when talking of the visible nature of trees and mountains, never calls it a chaos: the wildness of this nature gratified some deep instinct in him and he was saddened to see it vanishing from the continent. The nature he came to consider as pure chaos was an intellectual system. To maintain the comparison with Clemens we may recall the passage in which he speaks of changes on the Mississippi. "Ten years had passed since he last crossed the Mississippi, and he found everything new. In this great region from Pittsburgh through Ohio and Indiana, agriculture had made way for steam; tall chimneys reeked smoke on every horizon, and dirty suburbs filled with scrap iron, scrap paper and cinders, formed the setting of every town." In *Life on the Mississippi* Clemens records his feelings as he witnesses the changes along the river he knew so well as a youth, and the great quality of the work is a controlled nostalgia for a lost era. And yet here we must point to a difference. Just as Clemens had believed in the perfectibility of man while Adams doubted, so he was initially optimistic about the beneficence of industrialization, an optimism never shared by Adams. When Clemens sees some of those tall chimneys on the horizon he expresses great delight at the "changes uniformly evidencing progress, energy, prosperity": it was only later that, sickened by the corruptive powers of materialism, he gravitated to a mood of cynical despair.

More specifically let us cite the machine and the mob as two phenomena that served to alienate these men from their age. There is a significant moment when Adams visits the great Chicago Exposition in 1893. The extended exposure to mechanical novelties of which he has no understanding completely immobilizes him. Before the array of steam engines, electric batteries, tele-
phones, etc., he "had no choice but to sit down on the steps and brood as (he) had never brooded on the benches of Harvard College. . . . The historical mind can only think in historical processes, and probably this was the first time since historians existed, that any of them had sat down helpless before a mechanical sequence." The word "mechanical," so neutral to us, should be noted, for it gradually acquires an ominous weight of meaning as Adams discovers that the world is being increasingly administered by mechanical forces of one kind or another. (His attitude is comparable to that of the writer of the Erehwonian "Book of the Machines"; "Is it not plain that the machines are gaining ground upon us, when we reflect on the increasing number of those who are bound down to them as slaves, and of those who devote their whole souls to the advancement of the mechanical kingdom?"") There is an irony in this since the eighteenth century rationalism that was so dear to Adams was based on the Newtonian conception of Nature as a divinely ordered machine. But the Great Watchmaker had decreed a mechanistic universe which was rational and explicable. As the scrap heaps and the cinders came increasingly into view mechanism gradually ceased to exemplify a rational principle and seemed to become a hideous principle of blind force. Mechanism had turned on the class and way of life that initially upheld it. Adams talks of "the whole mechanical consolidation of force, which ruthlessly stamped out the life of the class into which Adams was born."

Again in the Exposition: "As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines he began to feel the forty-foot dynamo as a moral force, much as the early Christian felt the cross." But at least there had been a Christ on the cross: the dynamo is completely impersonal in its divine power. It is non-human and therefore inhuman, non-moral and therefore immoral, or rather amoral. And it is that dynamo which really unfixes Adams's mind. Clemens's career affords us a comparable symbol although his antipathy to the machine is the result of a long process of disillusionment rather than the sudden bewilderment felt by Adams. His relationship with the Paige typesetter symbolically foreshortens this disillusionment. An initial enthusiasm gradually gives way to a profound despair as the machine heartlessly robs him of a fortune and mockingly refuses to arrive at the hoped-for perfection. A concomitant of Adams's reaction to the dynamo is a feeling that just as the world is coming to be dominated by impersonal forces so also are the inhabitants of this world becoming as impersonal, mechanical and inhuman as the forces that guide them. The mob was making its appearance in America and although in many ways these people were the victims of the machines that Adams deprecated, their impersonal violence disturbed him as much as did the dynamo. In his youth, he recalls, he was once involved in a snow-ball fight: the sides were the Latin school versus the rest of the local boys. The account of the fight reads like a parable. At first the Latin school dominate the others, but then as night comes on the tide turns. "A dark mass of figures could be seen below, making ready for the last rush, and rumor said that a swarm of blackguards from the slums . . . was going to put an end to the Beacon Street cowards forever. Henry wanted to run away with the others, but his brother was too big to run away, so they stood still and waited immolation. The dark mass set up a shout, and rushed forward." It ends as all children's games should, but throughout the extended description one feels the terrible threat of the dark forces who come swarming up against the Latin school (which very easily

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can be made to represent the aristocratic element in society) threatening total annihilation. In its way it is like a small Dunciad and the idea that “universal darkness” will eventually “cover all” is a theme which grows throughout the book until that last apocalyptic description of New York in 1905 which ends: “A traveler in the highways of history looked out of the club window on the turmoil of Fifth Avenue, and felt himself in Rome, under Diocletian, witnessing the anarchy, conscious of the compulsion, eager for the solution, but unable to conceive whence the next impulse was to come or how it was to act. The two-thousand-years failure of Christianity roared upward from Broadway, and no Constantine the Great was in sight.” Although Clemens had a ready sympathy for the strikers so brutally suppressed under Cleveland, he also came to hate “the mob.” Colonel Sherburn’s scornful arraignment of the brutality, pusillanimity, and cowardice of the lynching crowd is an overt piece of authorial intrusion: Hank Morgan who came to save the people finds himself admiring their king and despising them as “muck,” and it is the ungrateful mob that allows Joan to be burned after she had devoted herself to their liberation. Adams’s patrician heritage helped to enforce his antipathies on him and although Clemens certainly enjoyed no comparably cultured environment as a child yet he also recalls that “the aristocratic taint was in the air.” His Virginian father, John Marshall Clemens, was a type of aristocrat in his insistence on the proud, austere, dignified bearing proper to “a man”; an Andrew Jackson, perhaps, rather than a John Quincy Adams. If Adams inherited an aristocracy of class, then Clemens certainly inherited an aristocracy of character, and this must not be ignored in any attempt to account for their disaffiliation from the age of the common man. Mobocracy, like “dollarocracy” and “machineocracy” (if we may coin a word) aroused bitterness, contempt and despair in both men. It remains to examine this despair.

The Education is an account of a life dissolving into chaos. Adams construes his life as a series of false starts—a continual failure to learn anything. Everywhere he looks he can only see a world “both unwise and ignorant” and full of contradictions among intelligent people; “from such contradictions . . . what was a young man to learn.” Continually he says “the horizon widened out in endless waves of confusion,” and we should note that sea image: it is one that will recur. On the moral level he never finds anything he can trust. In London diplomatic circles he loses all confidence and when Russell, Gladstone, and Palmerston seem to be double-dealing he makes it a crucial test: “could one afford to trust human nature in politics . . . for education the point was vital. If one could not trust a dozen of the most respected private characters in the world . . . one could trust no mortal man.” When they fall short of his idealistic standards he just gives up, blaming it all on “the sheer chaos of human nature.” Such moments recur: as he makes his way through political life he seeks out something he can hold fast to, some one facet of human nature that will never let him down. He is almost adolescent, almost child-like in his search for goodness in the world. One can see him as conducting on an international urban level the search that Huck carried out down the Mississippi, and in the course of this search he confesses “he had wholly lost his way.” He is always making another “leap into the unknown” and after working near the Grant administration for a while he emerges with the comment by now only to be expected from him. He “had made another total misconception of life—another inconceivable false start.” Like Huck he is lost
and always passive. He “drifted into the mental indolence of history” and wherever he goes he says that knowledge absorbs him—“he was passive.” Like Huck he often appears as “a helpless victim” with no defense or means of attack and he feels “at the mercy of fools and cowards”; even when he takes a job as a teacher his morbid comment is: “he went on, submissive.” Again like Huck he is continually on the move. Feeling unfitted for Boston “he had to go”: shocked by McKinley’s ways he says “once more, one must go!” He is well aware of this nomadic aspect of his life since he adds: “Nothing was easier! On and off, one had done the same thing since the year 1858, at frequent intervals.” Very early on in the book he recalls: “Always he felt himself somewhere else . . . and he watched with vague unrest from the Quincy hills the smoke of the Cunard steamers stretching in a long line to the horizon . . . as though the steamers were offering to take him away, which was precisely what they were doing.” It is important to note how purposeless Adams makes all his voyaging seem—both the actual travel and the larger voyage towards knowledge. He is always “drifting” with some unspecified current. The sea imagery is prolific throughout the book. It starts when he is writing of the civil war: “On April 13 the storm burst and rolled several hundred thousand young men like Henry Adams into the surf of a wild ocean, all helpless like himself, to be beaten about for four years by the waves of war.” But there was no ebb of the tide for Henry Adams. As the end of his first year in England approaches he writes: “His old education was finished; his new one was not begun; he still loitered a year, feeling himself near the end of a very long, anxious tempestuous successful voyage, with another to follow, and a summer sea between.” Success would seem to consist merely in keeping afloat—a success not always permitted him since he elsewhere talks of “sinking under the surface.” In 1871, he writes, “his course had led him through oceans of ignorance” and the ocean seems limitless. In the chapter entitled “The Abyss of Ignorance” the final stage of passivity is reached. “After so many years of effort to find one’s drift, the drift found the seeker and slowly swept him forward and back, with a steady progress oceanwards.” He doesn’t let go of the image even when talking of smaller matters, of his attempt to study “race and sex” he writes: “Even within these narrow seas the navigator lost his bearings and followed the winds as they blew.” That he sometimes wishes this sea of ignorance to turn into something more soporific, something to rock him back to unconsciousness again, is shown by one remarkable passage. “Adams would rather, as choice, have gone back to the east, if it were only to sleep forever in the trade-winds under the southern stars, wandering over the dark purple ocean, with its purple sense of solitude and void.” Images of the sea as a fearful void are supported by images of darkness. He refers to himself as being “lost in the darkness of his own gropings” and after King’s death “Adams could only blunder back alone, helplessly, wearily, his eyes rather dim with tears, to his vague trail across the darkening prairie of education, without a motive, big or small except curiosity to reach, before he too should drop, some point that would give him a far look ahead.” This “darkening prairie” later becomes “mountains of ignorance” where the “weary pilgrim . . . could no longer see any path whatever and could not even understand a signpost.” One tends to forget the almost phantasmagoric nature of his accounts because of the tempered, elegant detached tone, but the accounting voice is a neutral, almost blank, one and its purpose is to direct attention to the pitiful figure strug-
gling down on earth. "Never had the proportions of his ignorance looked so appalling. He seemed to know nothing—to be groping in darkness—to be falling forever in space." The images of sea, space and darkness blend for one moment when he tells of the significance for him of Karl Pearson's writing: "At last their universe had been wrecked by rays, and Karl Pearson undertook to cut the wreck loose with an axe, leaving science adrift on a sensual raft in the midst of a supersensual chaos" and now Adams finds himself "on the raft." He might have found two companions on the raft—Huck Finn, and that hapless narrator of The Mysterious Stranger, Theodore Fischer. In one sense the voyages of these two boys complement each other. Huck is afloat in America in search of a destination. He is an Odysseus without an Ithaca. Like Odysseus he is "never at a loss" and knows how to disguise himself or manufacture a tale in order to get himself out of trouble and continue on his way; but that way is no longer clear. The frontier to which he finally heads is too vague to be a definite destination—it is the geographical location of the great unknown. But still, there is a feeling that out there all things are possible. Huck, we feel, stands a chance. But not Theodore. The ending of The Mysterious Stranger reads like a more hysterical and total version of Adams's own despair. Here is a part of Satan's last speech. "In a little while you will be alone in shoreless space, to wander its limitless solitudes without friend or comrade forever. . . . It is true, that which I have revealed to you; there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream—a grotesque and foolish dream. Nothing exists but you. And you are but a thought—a vagrant thought, a useless thought, a homeless thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities!"

One can add comparable evidence from Clemens's last period that he became increasingly preoccupied with images of chaos, darkness, purposelessness, the passivity of man before the dark forces of the world and the complete lostness of man. In some of his late, unfinished scraps of fiction there is a measure of unwarranted horror which one might expect from a writer more devoted to symbolism than Clemens at any time showed himself to be: there is a feeling of living in a symbolic universe to which man has lost the interpretative key, thus leaving the writer with an accumulating emotion that finds no satisfactory deciphering expression. Just to mention the three sea stories among these late papers will reveal something of this process, and the preoccupation with purposeless voyages which end in horror is one which seems to mirror something that was going on in Adams's mind. (It is interesting to recall that Emerson employed images of voyaging and water to enforce his optimistic view of man's effortless relationship with a benign nature. "Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats, and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right and a perfect contentment." And again: man "is like a ship in a river . . . he sweeps serenely over a deepening channel into an infinite sea.")

For Twain and Adams that "infinite sea" turned into pure nightmare. The Enchanted Sea Wilderness is the story of a ship which wanders into a great area of the ocean where the compass suddenly goes berserk and loses all value as a means of steering and plotting direction. First it runs into a terrible nine-day storm which the sailors nickname "the devil's race track" and then it emerges into a deadly calm or "the everlasting Sunday." Here they slowly drift until they see what they take to be a fleet on the horizon: full of hope they
row towards it but it turns out to be a dead fleet which rotted away years ago leaving only the deceptive shells on the surface to mock all who find them with an image of their irrevocable fate. In all this “universal paralysis of life and energy” the only active thing is the compass which is whirling around “in a frenzy of fear.” Out of this morbid but pregnant predicament Clemens makes nothing and we are left to wonder how the narrator lived to tell the tale.

A more suggestive story is An Adventure in Remote Seas, where once again a ship gets lost but this time arrives at a strange island. Half the crew go ashore to catch penguins and find, implausibly enough, a vast hoard of gold: this turns the captain’s mind and the men are employed in weighing and counting it. Strikes and labor disputes arise and there are some satirical references to the question of adopting the silver standard, on which William Jennings Bryan was campaigning at the time. All thought of the original purpose of the voyage is given up, and those on shore start to forget the ship and cease to worry about their location. Suddenly they realize the ship has gone—and here the story breaks off. This has all the inchoate lineaments of an allegory. The unknown island which they discover could be America and the penguins (who are so docile and friendly while the sailors cut their throats) might well be the original inhabitants, the Indians. The frenzy aroused by the money is Clemens’s comment on what the Industrial Revolution was doing to men and the final situation seems to symbolize contemporary America: busy scrambling for money while the one chance of salvation, the ship, is finally lost, leaving the men abandoned in a nameless ocean with only a meaningless wealth for consolation. Again this is not brought to anything; it remains formless and crude, merely indicating a desire to express a bitter comment on the crisis of mankind.

The long story to which De Voto applied Clemens’s phrase “The Great Dark” is a more prolonged, though scarcely more successful, attempt to find a fitting parable to carry his feelings. A man named Henry Edwards dreams that he embarks on a long trip across the drop of water that he had been studying under the microscope shortly before falling asleep. The “blind voyage” across this unknown ocean moves from dream to nightmare. At first it is constantly dark: no one knows where they are but try and conceal the fact from others; the charts and compass prove to be utterly useless since none of the expected landmarks seem to exist; fantastic animals flounder in the sea, occasionally attacking them giving the impression of a Bosch-like apocalyptic chaos. Hideous surreal incidents multiply and the story spirals to a pitch of phantasmagoric insanity: the sea dries up, fighting and brawling (again over a useless treasure) gradually account for all the characters except Edwards who, like Theodore Fischer, is left alone in an arid eternity. The terrible dream turns out to be the true reality—a favorite theme of the aging Clemens.

This unrelenting vision of life as chaos is, in essence and conclusion, not very different from that of Henry Adams. Whence this similarity of vision? Both of them had ceased to believe in God but both retained something of that Calvinistic intensity of vision common to believers of previous ages. It is their inability to disburden themselves of the mental framework which accompanied belief that makes both determinists of one kind or another. God had either fled or been diminished to a thing—

a deus absconditum,

but the feeling of predestination lingered on just beneath the surface of the conscious mind. To this we can trace the persistent image of the voy-

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age in so much nineteenth century American literature, but now what was the destiny to which man had been predestined? The compasses were not functioning, the chart of infallible absolutes was completely useless on these novel seas of dissolving belief. It seems that without the one all-solving deity the world collapsed into an amorphous, inexplicable mess before which the only reaction was one of sterile horror. Not that either man wanted the old God back, but they were equally dismayed at America’s failure to provide any substitute ideal purpose or explanation: (they are both, at one time or another, extremely sardonic about evolutionary optimism).

At first both Clemens and Adams had credited man with some degree of free will: in the History there is such a thing as moral responsibility and decision, while Huck is a superb example of man’s ability to argue with, challenge, and finally rebuff the circumpressure of environment and heredity. By the end of their lives they were both convinced that free will was completely illusory. In the Education Adams decides that people involved in politics are simply “forces as dumb as their dynamos” and this interpretation gradually extends over all mankind. One sentence intimates the large shift in conviction. “Adams never knew why, knowing nothing of Faraday, he began to mimic Faraday’s trick of seeing lines of force all about him, where he had always seen lines of will.” Very quickly man becomes “a feeble atom.”

1898 was a bad year for Clemens, a year in which he sought some relief from Susy’s death and his bankruptcy, in a prolonged spell of uninterrupted work. He not only wrote The Mysterious Stranger but he also completed a work which he had been toying with for eighteen years—What Is Man? It is entirely apt that the very first subtitle should read: “a. Man the Machine.” This book has been almost entirely ignored by subsequent generations and for good reason: yet Clemens was so apprehensive about the scandal he thought it would cause that he would only print it anonymously and privately for a few friends in 1906. It is a jumble of half-pursued thoughts and improperly defined terms the whole upshot of which is that man is “an impersonal machine . . . he is moved, directed, commanded by exterior influences—solely. He originates nothing, not even a thought.” And then there follows that notorious simile—Shakespeare is merely a “Gobelin loom” compared with the sewing machine which is the average man. Of course it wasn’t subsequent generations who were shocked—it was Clemens himself. He was terrified by his own conclusion (and note how his “exterior influences” have taken over the imperious authoritarianism of the Calvinist God). There is something unnerved and frenzied about his insistence that man is a completely irresponsible object at the mercy of forces that he cannot understand and he is almost vengeful in his efforts to humiliate and degrade mankind.

It is interesting that he seeks out the most ignoble animals with which to compare man (in personal dignity, for instance, man is on the same level as a rat) for Adams continually chooses to compare himself to animals: and such animals—the small, the helpless, the ones that crawl. For example he likens himself at various times to a mosquito, a maggot, a worm, a firefly, and a horseshoe crab. More interesting is his simile for Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. In a letter to Tilden in 1883 he wrote: “they appear like mere grasshoppers kicking and gesticulating on the middle of the Mississippi River . . . they were carried along on a stream which floated them, after a fashion, without much regard to themselves.” One can see here an unconscious preparation for his later attitude toward the predicament of man: this image
conjoins just those two themes which later he consciously exploited. Man is as helpless as a trivial animal: his life is a brief floating on the endless waters of chaos.

As a boy Adams was impregnated with truths that were rigid, absolute, and transcendent: it is only natural that when he embarks on his search for some new truth he should search for some inflexible, theoretic and timelessly true principle. His search for unity is actually a yearning for some inviolable, transcendent principle of unification such as Aquinas had postulated. But along with everything else the philosophic climate was changing. Absolute systems of philosophy tended to be reactionary, to justify the old status quo that brought them into being; they inhibited reform, they imposed a mental vice on a world which was breaking its boundaries in every direction. A new philosophy was needed to control and discipline the new directions man was taking without closing off any avenues to him—the philosophy was pragmatism. Pragmatism kept truth open and searched for useful instruments rather than final answers; it turned away from a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes: it turned towards facts and was not dismayed by their improvident multiplicity.

William James, attacking a conservative professor, writes in a way that seems almost like a direct answer to the morbid despair of Adams and Clemens with all their images of oceans of chaos and fruitless voyages. He writes: "These critics appear to suppose that, if left to itself, the rudderless craft of our experience must be ready to drift anywhere or nowhere. Even tho there were compasses on board, they seem to say, there would be no pole for them to point to. There must be absolute sailing directions, they insist, decreed from outside, and an independent chart of the voyage added to the 'mere' voyage itself, if we are ever to make a port. But is it not obvious that even tho there be such absolute sailing-directions in the shape of pre-human standards of truth that we ought to follow, the only guarantee that we shall in fact follow them must lie in our human equipment. . . . The only real guarantee we have against licentious thinking is the circumstance of experience itself, which gets us sick of concrete errors, whether there be a trans-empirical reality or not."

As the recurrent imagery of their late work reveals, both Adams and Clemens felt profoundly uneasy without a set of "absolute sailing directions."

It is strange that Adams and Clemens never seem to have met. They had many mutual friends—Clarence King, John Hay, and most notably William Dean Howells, and they both spent many years in New England, yet we have no record of a meeting. There is a strange moment in What Is Man? when Clemens suddenly cites one "Henry Adams" as a (presumably fictional) example of the unhappiest man he knows: he must certainly have known too much about Adams to have used the name quite innocently and perhaps this is a covert way of intimating that he considers himself at an extreme temperamental remove from such a man. Had they met they would probably have found themselves at odds, yet they are two of the most notable alienated figures of their age. They never felt quite at home anywhere, never quite settled down, never really found themselves. At one point Adams imagines describing himself to his father and finds that all he could say of himself would be: "Sir, I am a tourist!", and when he later calls himself "a historical tramp" we are reminded of that habitual tourist who punitively names himself in A Tramp Abroad. Both these international hobos spent many years of their lives wandering around the world and beneath the successful exterior
of the one and the cultured veneer of the other one can indeed discern the lineaments of that recurrent American image—the tramp. Devious and unpremeditated as their wanderings may seem they were both on the same road, not to anywhere but away from a society with which they could no longer identify themselves and which seemed to offer no answering image to their own deepest hopes and ideals.

If these two were alone in their disillusion and despair one might be inclined to put it down to a personal perversity of vision. But the evidence is all the other way. One can trace a spectrum of complaint throughout the age. Whitman, although he had faith in democracy—"the unyielding principle of the average"—conceded "the appalling dangers of universal suffrage in the United States." Committed to loving all men he was yet sufficiently offended by the progress of post-civil war America to write that "society," despite or because of "unprecedented materialistic advancement . . . is canker'd, crude, superstitious and rotten." A man less like Adams than Whitman never lived and yet the former would have supported Whitman's complaint that "the element of the moral conscience, the most important, the vertebrae to State or man, seems to me either entirely lacking, or seriously enfeebled or ungrown."

Brooks Adams, in his significantly titled The Law of Civilization and Decay, developed an adventurous cyclical interpretation of history and the lesson he reads in the past is the inevitable disintegration of a society in which the economic type had gained total supremacy. As determinist as his brother Henry he maintained that Nature operates on the human mind "according to immutable laws"—a theory which endorses pessimism but slights man's ability to learn from the past. Consequently he saw in the exaltation of the new materialistic middle class a portent of inevitable doom. Henry James fled to England to avert his eyes from the new generation of Americans dedicated to the "great black ebony God of business": in the last scene of The Bostonians Basil Ransom dismisses the middle class mob at the lecture hall as "senseless brutes" and it is difficult not to feel that he speaks with the author's approval.

Near the turn of the century Henry Adams, perspicacious enough to see that the future of society might lie in the directions of state-socialism, pronounced it a "future with which I sincerely wish I may have nothing to do." Clemens, more angry because more humane, composed this "salutation speech from the 19th century to the 20th" (subsequently withdrawn) in which he bitterly arraigns the imperialistic greed of the West.

"I bring you the stately matron named Christendom, returning bedraggled, besmirched and dishonoured from pirate-raids in Kiao-Chow, Manchuria, South Africa and the Philippines, with her soul full of boodle, and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap and a towel, but hide the looking glass."

But middle-class America was to receive a more disturbing turn-of-the-century salutation. In 1899 Thorstein Veblen published The Theory of the Leisure Classes in which the pecuniary fanaticism of the nouveau riche received its most mordant, sardonic analysis. His evidence must be taken as conclusive. It remained for later scholars such as Vernon Parrington to clarify the phenomenon which had so distressed men like Clemens and Adams: namely, "the emergence of a new middle class" which in the second half of the nineteenth century subdued American "to middle class ends."