

AFTERMATH

I

I initially wrote the preceding parts of this book in 1997. Seven years later at midpoint in the presidential term of Clinton's successor—not a propitious time for the Republic—I take stock of my own history without pretending to understand its jerky course. At post-ninety, I have less to conceal than I did when I was twenty, and I look back at the years I've lived through, if not complacently, at least with relief that I've managed to escape hanging. It is no longer part of my job to be a professional "Americanist," a term until now I've always shunned. Even to pose as one in 2007 would daunt me.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the words *American* and *un-American* resonated in public speech. Such topics as the "American character" and the "American mind" slipped into academic discourse. One learned that to be an American was a "complex fate" (without quite understanding what Henry James meant by that cryptic phrase), and I wondered at times just what was so peculiarly "American" about America. The Frenchman Crèvecoeur asked that question when Americans were still British subjects but, according to him, already "a strange mixture of blood" not to be found in any other country. Did being "American" mean that one's family had to have lived for generations in the States? I knew people who believed as much. If so, how long did it take before

one was sufficiently rooted in American soil to qualify as an authentic American? Who decided? Were the superchauvinists among the recent hyphenates overcompensating for their recency? Was the quintessential “American” amalgam of all races and nations and the United States an Amazonian flood “made up of a thousand noble currents all pouring into one” (to use Herman Melville’s watery metaphor)?

Such questions no longer preoccupy me. Whether I like it or not, I am part and parcel of the country I sprouted from and lived in and studied. Although I no longer try to keep up with the prodigious amount of popular and scholarly writing published under the vague rubric of the ever-expounding and boundaryless “American studies,” I am embedded in the USA.

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin defines a “reasonable creature” as one who finds or makes a reason “for everything one has a mind to do.” As I have suggested elsewhere, my decision to follow an American trajectory may have been a reaction to the social and economic convulsions of the times. It occurs to me that the United States suddenly loomed as the last democratic bastion in the world after the German occupation of France in 1940. About then, I began to feel that it might be almost as important to understand American civilization as to preserve it. My hopes for a European reeducation and for extended *Wanderjahre* in storied places had dissolved by 1939, but I was already half convinced that given my ignorance of foreign tongues, it was too late for me to barge into nonanglophone cultures as I had once hoped to do. It says something about my state of mind in this free-floating period that instead of settling on a time-tried program of study, I would sign up for an ad hoc safari through some uncharted areas of “American civilization.”

Under the flexible requirements of Harvard’s interdepartmental degree, I could legitimately reconnoiter the byways of American social and intellectual thought without feeling pressure to become an authority on anything. The “Americanist” I invented would know something about many things bearing on American

history and society. He would compound a goulash of his civilization from old lecture notes; from books and articles on church history, geography, education, political thought, and popular culture; from conversations with representative men and women; and, most of all, from the musings of American writers, famous and obscure. This all-purpose synthesizer never materialized, but following his track opened areas new to me and, more important, gave me an excuse to hop grasshopper-fashion from one topic to another.

I left Harvard in 1939, a putative historian about to get down to writing his doctoral dissertation. The finished product was an economic, political, and cultural examination of an American community (Cincinnati, Ohio) in the age of Andrew Jackson (1819–38). It was my critique of Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” and it was an experiment to test the generalizations in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Written in what I hoped was a philosophical spirit, it reflected in essence my socio-economic biases and analyzed affirmatively a buoyant and dynamic society. When completed, it was accepted without a request for revision and without enthusiasm. Until its publication fifty years later, I didn’t know that it had been called an interlibrary-loan classic and a pioneer work in urban history.

Long before then, I had given up the expectation of developing into a proper historian, even as I continued to attend meetings of genuine historians and to hang on their table talk. To show off my bona fides (and spurred by the prospect of making some money), I coauthored an American history textbook with Richard Hofstadter and William Miller—the first a political and cultural historian and the most acclaimed of our trio, the second a tough-minded economic and business historian familiar with the nuts and bolts of the publishing industry. *The United States: The History of the Republic* (1957) took three years to write and, once written, more time to keep up to date and in good repair. Without Hofstadter’s name, I doubt if our book would have sold as well as it did. Happily, it hit the market during a lull between the old and

the new competition, and its flood of adoptions paid for the college educations of my three sons. Its opening sentence (my contribution) was “America has been discovered many times.”

Our success did not delude me into believing that I belonged to the historian’s guild. I was too distracted by the historical trees (memoirs, private letters, anecdotes, gossip, and the like)—too literary—to see the woods. During the next fifty years, I filled in some of the empty spaces on my map of America by reviewing scholarly and popular works on subjects that were often new or unfamiliar to me. I labored over the tone and style of these pieces and sometimes committed what the poet Allen Tate called the young critic’s chronic sin—intimating a knowledge he doesn’t possess. I had no agenda. I took on jobs as they turned up, with little thought of what I might be letting myself in for.

It astonishes me now how casually I entered into the risky, time-consuming assignment of editing the diary of Arthur Crew Inman. Roughly twelve to fifteen million words in length and packaged in over 150 typed manuscript volumes, it took six years to reduce it to less than a tenth of its original bulk. I was well paid, but I quickly regretted my decision, depressed by the sheer magnitude of the task and by the spoiled, prejudiced, manipulative, sadomasochistic, self-pitying author. Sequestered for a good part of his life in the heavily curtained room of a seedy Boston apartment hotel, Inman spent decades chronicling the history of his times and himself for posterity. Newspaper items, books, and radio broadcasts furnished part of what he called his “diary fodder,” but mostly he fed on the life stories of the hundreds of men and women who answered his advertisements for paid “talkers” (he had plenty of time and money) willing to submit to his relentless interrogations.

Many reviewers of my two-volume abridgement were so put off by Inman’s outrageous racial and religious prejudices that they did less than justice, I thought, to the self-defined “bastard gazetteer” and his four-decade report of the American scene. The detestable sick soul had his mitigating decencies, and I felt a cer-

tain obligation to show him at his literary best. My haphazard excursions into American history and literature (not to mention the fact that Inman's diary covered a period of years in my own lifetime) made me, in my own eyes, a legitimate interpreter of the man and the moment. Editing the diary helped me to put into perspective "the long foreground," as Emerson would say, of my own career. It widened the scope of my camera eye and added something strange and novel to the American canon. In the end, I treated it as a challenging exercise, rather like uncovering an unusual specimen buried in acres of shale, but of no less importance to me than the three books that preceded it and that drew me further into native grounds: *Men of Good Hope* (1951), *Writers on the Left* (1961) and *The Unwritten War* (1973).

Men of Good Hope was gently received and qualifiedly commended for its style and "valuable contributions," but some reviewers found it hard to believe that "prophetic agitators" as diverse as Emerson, Theodore Parker, Edward Bellamy, William Dean Howells, Henry Demarest Lloyd, Thorstein Veblen, and Brooks Adams could share a common social outlook. What united them despite their differences, I argued unpersuasively, and what compelled my intense interest in them was their belief in the possibility of a cooperative society, their trust in the voting masses and in middle-class decencies, and their hatred of plutocracy. This was a hard sell, even for me. To many in the 1950s, the terms *middle-class* and *radicalism* connoted contrary values, so my brief for "progressivism" as a blend of utopian theory, Protestant theology, and pragmatic realism that eschewed any sentimentalizing of the proletariat probably puzzled or disconcerted a portion of my limited audience. Richard Hofstadter wrote me that I had confirmed his "liberal-conservative-elitist-ethical brand of private socialism" and gotten "the ethical-utopian element back into the center of things." David Riesman gave *Men of Good Hope* a thoughtful and penetrating appraisal, and Mary McCarthy, somewhat to my surprise, wrote to me that she fancied my chapter on William Dean Howells. But the book had small appeal for

most professional historians or teachers of American literature. Most of my middle-class reformers, as Riesman observed, had “sunk nearly out of general circulation.” An irregular in the ranks of the non-Communist Left, I did not fit neatly into any political party and had no taste or talent for polemics.

Writers on the Left was published six years after the decline and fall of Senator Joseph McCarthy. His ghost still haunted the hearts of his victims and his minions, none more so than Arthur Inman, who had grieved when he learned of McCarthy’s death. Yes, Inman conceded, McCarthy was a rough fellow, even a demagogue, but then weren’t FDR and Truman—even Abraham Lincoln—demagogic at times? My episodic study of American literature and Communism was welcomed in some quarters as a message to harassed ex-Reds that at last they could come out of the cold without fear of retribution. I had no such thought in mind when I wrote it, but apparently a number of veterans of the Communist movement had been surprised and relieved by its nonaccusatory tone. There are no villains in *Writers on the Left*; no unbridgeable gulf divides “them” from “us.” The radicals in its pages range from old-stock rebels, reformers, anarchists, and progressives to the children of recent immigrants. I gave examples of what I took to be their solemn and ridiculous zealotries, but mainly I chose to show them as citizens of an America still open to dissent and with a permeable class structure. I wanted to single out some of the artists, writers, and public figures, past and present, who belonged to my company of nonconformists and who exemplified what I liked best about the American radical tradition. So to me, at least, *Writers on the Left* is a patriotic book.

The same could be said for *The Unwritten War* (1973), my covert offering to the America I constructed from books, to the American landscape, and to the writers and critics and teachers who educated and befriended me. It probably would have remained unwritten had not the energetic historian and biographer Allan Nevins invited me to contribute a volume to a series he was planning on the social and cultural impact of the Civil War.

A voluminous reader of English and American literature, he was particularly keen on having the literary responses to the war fill a major slot in his project. His death before my book was half done shut off a flow of learning of great importance to me, but while he lived, I profited from our intermittent walks and talks.

The title of *The Unwritten War* provoked reviewers. How could a war said to be “unwritten” have inspired libraries of books and have remained uninterruptedly a national obsession? *The Unwritten War* got good notices, but its argument that the Civil War was not so much effaced as unfaced and that our writers failed to acknowledge the centrality of racial fear (not slavery itself, but black slavery) as the root cause of the conflict, didn’t find many takers. One taker was Ralph Ellison, friend, author, and neighbor, who read *The Unwritten War* before its publication and accepted its burden tout court. As he put it, “with few exceptions,” American writers “sought to escape the artistic and philosophical challenges” posed by the war. For Edmund Wilson, however, race was a peripheral issue. We had often discussed Civil War literature and history at the time when a spate of his essay reviews of books touching directly or indirectly on the war were appearing in the *New Yorker*. Eventually, he incorporated these pieces (“dress rehearsals,” he called them) in his masterpiece *Patriotic Gore* (1962). Had he lived long enough to read my book, he would have disputed its thesis, for he was riding his own hobbyhorse—namely, the notion that the American Civil War was a “biological and geological phenomenon” and the consequence of a national mania and repulsive enthusiasms. I took this to be the burden of his rather explosive *Patriotic Gore* introduction, which seemed simplistic and far-fetched on first reading and which Stuart Hughes and I urged him to omit or to publish separately. Four decades later, I find Wilson’s withering comments on the contrast between national words and actions to the point and in keeping with his prickly patriotism, with his disdain of “warlike cant” and of the “God bless America” brand of national piety.

II

I started life as an exemplary "American boy," unrebelling and cheerfully receptive to everything I was taught or read. I honored the statesmen and soldiers and inventors looking out of my schoolbooks or featured in *The American Boy* or *Boy's Life*. I chanted the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States (the "under God" provision had yet to be tacked on) and recited the Boy Scout Oath, with its injunction to be brave, clean, and reverent. Yet even during this interlude of cultural indoctrination, I was steeped in the lowbrow and irreverent popular culture that washed around me. The distance between them had narrowed by the time I enrolled in Harvard's program in the history of American civilization, and I was already seeing myself as an extra in a history pageant of my times. Like the child in Whitman's poem, I "went forth" every day to incorporate myself in the unfolding land, and although I never thought of myself as a "kosmos" or as emerging from a sequence of Edens and compost heaps, as Walt did, I could and did respond in my own fashion to the landscapes in *Leaves of Grass*. The Walt I latched onto was a double man: the patriot exhorter of "These States" and the ironical realist, veteran of public and personal disasters.

I associated the first Walt with young America at takeoff point and with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century promoters who hyperbolically advertised the New World's lush fertility. He took immense satisfaction in American plenitude, and so did I. I remember my quiet joy when I found in an 1823 issue of *Niles Register* a list of reasons for the inevitable glory of the Republic: we were blessedly independent of all foreign nations; our government was the freest and most liberal that ever existed; our national debt was paltry, our citizenry untrammled, and our territory spacious enough to contain "all the superfluous population of Europe."

I thought the second Walt downplayed the idyll of a democratic Cockaigne. The United States he surveyed and diagnosed

in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) was suffering from a “deep disease.” In that jeremiad, the loving but stern physician lists the symptoms of civic corruption at a moment of unprecedented “materialistic advancement”: the late war has secured the Union, yet society in the United States is “canker’d, crude, superstitious, and rotten”; a plethora of churches and sects (“dismal phantoms,” he calls them) “usurp the name of religion.” Whitman likens business (an “all-devouring word”) to the “magician’s serpent” that has gobbled up the other serpents and remains “sole master of the field.” He maintains that the “depravity of the business class” is much greater than supposed and that “the cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism.” According to the Whitman of *Democratic Vistas*, democracy in the United States, purportedly destined for greatness, could turn out to be “the most tremendous failure of our time.”

I analogized Whitman’s darker America in the scenes of social misery that I had observed during the Great Depression and in the culture of dissent I fed on. But it is likely that reading American literature and history most affected my social vision, as I gathered facts and figures on the origins of great American fortunes, on racial bigotry, on labor struggles and political corruption, and on the wasteful exploitation of national resources. I reacted almost viscerally to chronicles of ecological disaster—carrier pigeons slaughtered to extinction, buffalo herds exterminated, lakes and rivers polluted, hardwood forests scythed, prairie topsoil (which had taken centuries to accrue) blown away in storms of dust.

An English friend of long duration once offered me a gloss on my pained reaction to these stories of nature vandalized. As an American of recent immigrant origin, I was making a claim on what he called “a retrospective birthright.” He reckoned that I had spent a good part of my life in search of a “cultural genealogy” and for ways to attach myself to those parts of the American tradition that I valued and respected; and so I had. He might have added, but didn’t, that my social dissensions hadn’t been “radical” in the

root-and-branch meaning of that word and that I had never committed myself unreservedly to the principles and programs of the titans I wrote about.

Now I find myself a citizen of two Americas. One of them is the country of Uncle Sam, an America, in the words of Herman Melville, “intrepid, unprincipled, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in the externals but savage at heart.” The other is its blssed double, home of heroes and clowns and of the cheerful and welcoming democratic collective—“the place where I was born.” For all of my romantic satanism and the satisfaction I took and still take in the doctrine of original sin, it is this second America to which I feel culturally and temperamentally attuned.