

WRITER TO READER

On February 16, 1896, Samuel Butler wrote to his father, “If I had a friend to advise in early life, I should say, ‘change your name to Aaron,’ and you will be pretty safe to head all alphabetical lists.” That happened to be mostly true in my case, save on the rare occasions when I was bumped out of alphabetical ascendancy by a stray Swede or Korean. I gained no advantage from my surname, God knows, and quickly learned to distinguish the alphabetical “Daniel Aaron,” usually assigned the first seat in the first row of the schoolroom, from his erratic and subterranean double.

In this narrative, I am the Americanist, who gradually evolves into a practitioner of things American. I liken him to a Christian child planted by his Turkish captors into an elite corps of Janisseries; or to an animal who has survived by protective mimicry; or to an anonymous character who has seeped into the minds of his friends, associates, and enemies. Perhaps traces of him can still be found where he once lived or spoke or visited—places as diverse and far apart as Tulsa and Beijing, South Bend and Helsinki, Carbondale and Sao Paulo; as Hokaido, Montevideo, Warsaw, Sydney, Delhi, and Belfast. He is snagged in a thousand snapshots and, like Whitman, feels himself to be a part of the unconscious scenery of a thousand more. Although he can’t, as Whitman could, project himself back to the time when he was an egg carried in the mouth of a dinosaur, he does insinuate himself into a web of history that extends from Greece and Rome to George

W. Bush. He is the familiar “I” and the voices of the following other selves:

The naïf—pockmarked by the events he has lived through in the last century but with only a limited comprehension of the economic and scientific machinery that has transformed the world since his birth. In this respect he is like most of his countrymen. Unlike many of them, however, he hasn’t outgrown an adolescent simplicity and is easily bamboozled.

The young man—on occasion solipsistic, sentimental, ironical, scornful, arrogant, rebellious, and operatic, though seldom so in public. Orphaned at an early age, he is a father seeker, hungry for acceptance, eager to slough off his Jewish identity and to melt into the larger America. The worldliness and sophistication he affects (Leopardi’s pessimism, Anatole France’s ironies, Huysmans’s decadence, Nietzsche’s paganism) are at odds with an abiding social timidity. His pretensions are cosmic/comic.

The national representative—designated mouthpiece for his country in foreign parts, expounder of its history and literature, and (in the nomenclature of the Soviet Union) a “cultural imperialist.” He pays short and lengthy visits to Western and Eastern Europe and to Japan and China, the Middle East, Latin America, Australia, India—his subject being American literature and society. Far from concealing the blemishes of the United States on these tours, he feels morally obliged to tick them off, convinced that candid disclosure constitutes the soundest diplomacy.

The public character—a familiar to an unspecified number within and outside his academic habitat: tradespeople, medical doctors, Democratic Party pols, policemen, poets, journalists, letter carriers, lawyers, editors, groundskeepers. He has reached the point where, as Goethe says, a person becomes historical to himself, and “his fellow human beings become historical to him.” In the course of a relatively long life, the narrator, Daniel Aaron, materializes into a type of native son neither estranged from the collective American family nor unreservedly clasped to its bosom.

A FEW BACKGROUND NOTES

When I was growing up, the word *American* was an antonym of the word *foreign*. Everyone knew, of course, that America was a “nation of immigrants” and that all Americans should be proud of their respective ancestries, but by adolescence I had run into people who made invidious distinctions between earlier and later arrivals to the United States and between their countries of origin, which is to say that if you were white and middle class and Protestant or the right kind of Roman Catholic and if your family had been living in America for a long time, you were more likely to “fit in” with less friction than did poor people of vague ancestry with dark skin and funny accents.

Over the years, I learned quite a lot about the imperfect workings of the “melting pot.” Clearly it took longer for immigrants from exotic places to shed their foreign markings and to dissolve into their new homes than it took immigrants from Northern Europe, but no matter where they came from, new Americans weren’t automatically treated as “family.” The hyphen in Italo-American, Polish-American, Mexican-American, and so on drew the line between a qualified and a full acceptance. Theodore Roosevelt, with the German-Americans in mind, gave a special twist to the term *hyphenates* during World War I: he meant the foreign-born who retained old allegiances. Nathaniel Hawthorne was thinking “hyphenatically” in the 1850s (he was then American counsel in Liverpool) when he angrily expostulated, “I do hate a naturalized citizen; nobody has a right to our ideas, unless born to them.”

Such sentiments were common before the age of correctness dawned. Ugly racial epithets (*nigger*, *kike*, *spic*, *greaser*, *chink*, *wop*, and the like) were still part of the vernacular. Only if you looked and talked and dressed like everyone else were you likely to escape contumely on the street and playground. These were the givens and to be expected. In my schoolboy days, it would never have

occurred to me to challenge unwritten conventions; I modeled myself on my fellows. In adolescence, sensing that some of the boys I played with and competed against had arbitrary notions about who belonged and who did not, I grew more calculating. So far as I can tell, I suffered no permanent psychic bruises and was never barred from places where I wanted to be or from persons I wanted to meet. Just the same, there were moments when I felt myself to be an outsider disguised as an insider.

My early childhood was spent in relatively unchartered Los Angeles, and by my tenth year, both of my parents were dead. Two years later, in 1924, I returned to my birthplace, Chicago, uneasy in what seemed to me now foreign surroundings, hedged between the “gentile” world at large and the Jewish microworld of kith and kin of which I had never felt a part. Thereafter, a long, slow, and haphazard exploration of America culminated in 1943 with a doctorate in Harvard’s new program in the history of American civilization, which signaled my merger with the USA and my dehyphenation.

I was now lumped with what the Frenchman Crèvecoeur called (in 1782) “this promiscuous breed, that race now called American,” and I was acting the role of licensed practitioner of American studies in the United States and elsewhere. But there was still something of the outside observer in my disposition, a felt affinity with Thorstein Veblen’s “renegade Jew,” one of “these aliens of the uneasy feet.” Like Emerson, a guiding spirit, I was just as comfortable with cranks, prophets, dissenters, utopians, and nonconformists as I was with their conservative opposites. Temperamentally a watcher and recorder, I never tried or wanted to be “leader.”

Scattered through *The Americanist* are backward glances at fourteen “presidentiads” (Whitman’s coinage for presidential terms of office) that spanned my lifetime. These interpolations are too biased and fragmented to pass as “history” and say more about me than they do about occupants of the White House. Some of the comments and judgments herein, many of them drawn from

old journal entries, lack historical dignity and weight, and not all of the “facts” cited here are certifiable. But they do record my feelings and opinions close to the moments I entertained them, so they can be said to have an apocryphal validity and serve as signposts for my dash through the twentieth century.

When I first became aware of them, presidents were majestic eminences but fashioned out of common clay. National myth assured us that anyone with the right stuff (girls excepted, of course) could rise to the highest office of the land. None of my friends ever confessed to me that he wanted to be president, and I remember being startled years later when the grandson of Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes confided to me during a long car ride that he had always taken it for granted that he might be president one day. Of course I never gave Negroes or Jews any chance to be chief magistrate when I first began to consider such matters. Presidential elections recurred like national holidays and, for a long time, seemed of less moment to me than heavyweight title fights or the World Series. Only after the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 did I regard them as crucial contests that could well determine the future of the Republic. All the same, my friends and I always saw presidents as emblems of power and authority. Hence, we would challenge one another, “Who do you think you are, president of the United States?”