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***“Un mondo nuovo? Mito  
storico e tragedia umana  
alle origini del Nord  
America”***

***a cura di  
Arthur Quinn***

To speak of the <sup>historical</sup> origins of North America is to speak of peoples and a struggle. Of people whose fate or relentless longings drove them from their homelands and propelled them to North American shores. And of a struggle, their struggle to ~~make~~ <sup>find</sup> for themselves a new life in this new world, in this new world to make of themselves a new people. It ~~was~~ was a struggle that compelled them to endure many crosses and trials, and compelled them too - or so they thought - to dispossess the native people they found already there and then to fight among themselves over the spoils.

Did they think rightly? Did so noble an end require such ~~such~~ <sup>such</sup> consciousness? Is history so perverse? If so, then the settlement of the ~~coasts~~ <sup>coasts</sup> of America ~~and~~ - by French, English and Dutch on the East - and by Spanish on the West and the gradual emergence of a continental American republic was <sup>little more than</sup> ~~as if~~

## Psychic vectors for the human spirit

~~I do apologize for the title of this lecture. It is ambiguous. You may have come here tonight expecting a narrow to history is quite different from that usually taken by a specialist; if so, you will be disappointed. My approach to history is more that of a man of letters. History simply happens to be my preferred genre. My own narratives are in spirit really just personal essays, or meditations.~~

~~This presents problems for me when I address, as I frequently do,~~  
 by specialists whose technical labors are devoted to determining what really happened. <sup>(ad lib.)</sup> The best I can do to explain the difference between their interest in history and mine is to quote from a letter of the most revered American historian of the early twentieth century, Henry Adams:

I have no object but a superficial one, as far as history is concerned. To me, accuracy is relative. I care very little whether my details are exact, if only my ensemble is in scale. You need to be thorough in your study and accurate in your statements. Your middle-ages exist for their own sake, not for ours. To me...the middle ages present a picture that has somehow to be brought into relation with ourselves. To you, there is no difficulty in transferring ourselves into the middle-ages.... Our two paths run in a manner parallel in reverse directions, but I can run and jump along mine, while you must employ a powerful engine to drag your load.

So Henry Adams once wrote in a letter to Henry Osborne Taylor. For me Adams is the most infuriating of major American writers--always the same self-deprecating, self-serving irony. How can anyone like a writer who has



vinegar in his veins? Nonetheless, here, as so often elsewhere, Adams has managed to pickle an important truth, this time about the practice of history, and perhaps the study of the humanities generally.

Both Taylor and Adams had taught medieval history at Harvard. Both had produced a classic work on the middle ages. Taylor's Medieval Mind, I presume, is still being assigned in American graduate seminars. (I vaguely recollect a new edition of it being put out on the anniversary of its original publication.) And I expect it presently holds up about as well as any scholarly synthesis of that generation--that is, barely at all. It is now visibly becoming obsolete, and eventually the community of medieval scholars will be oblivious to it entirely, except as a monument to be occasionally nodded at with phrases like "a significant contribution in its day." Sic transit gloria mundi--at least the glory of the world of serious scholarship.

Adams' glory and Adams' world are quite different ones. His Mont Saint Michel and Chartres is of a piece with his autobiography, The Education of Henry Adams. In fact, a recent interpreter has argued, convincingly to me, that these two volumes constitute a single work and were designed to be read as such. I doubt if Adams' Mont Saint Michel is still assigned by medievalists, except perhaps to undergraduates who are not yet ready to tackle serious scholarship. And that is as it should be. Adams' book, despite his feigned diffidence, is a book that calls out to be read by everyone. The middle ages is only its ostensible subject. Its real subject is our blessed rage for order. And its power derives not from what it says definitely about medieval architecture, but from the implied portrait of its author, someone who has despaired of ever having that blessed rage for order satisfied except vicariously, as he looks back with nostalgia at an age that seems to him

at once more fortunate and more deluded than his own. So Mont Saint Michel is ultimately not so much a piece of scholarship, as a cry from the heart, albeit a heart that has become wizened with disappointment.

One reads Taylor's Medieval Mind to learn about...the medieval mind. One reads Adams' Mont Saint Michel to spend some time with our sad bitter friend Henry Adams.

Taylor versus Adams personifies, for me, a central tension within the humanities ~~itself~~. It is a tension, for instance, that can be found within renaissance humanism itself. The revival of classical learning had both a scholarly and rhetorical aspect. You had to recover the ancient texts in their historical purity; but you also had to explore their relevance to the present. Of course, these are complementary, not contradictory, activities. There is the Erasmus of his New Testament scholarship and the Erasmus of The Praise of Folly. There are all those who contributed to the recovery of the work of Sextus Empiricus and the rest of the Pyrrhonist Tradition and there is Montaigne sitting in his tower writing his Essays.

And it is in this rhetorical spirit that I have been drawn back to materials of early American, first to the materials of the early history of my own native region (California), then to the materials of the early American colonies, both English and French, of eastern North America. After my little book on California, Broken Shore, was published, I was talking to a childhood friend of mine who is now a distinguished poet. <sup>(AD LIB.)</sup> He asked what I planned to do next, and I told him I was planning to write a short history of colonial North America, particularly the struggle between the French and English colonies. He reacted with laughter. He said, "That's like telling me you

are writing a short novel about a white whale."

His response was perfectly apt. If there is an equivalent to Moby Dick among the historical narratives of the American Romantic period, it is undeniably Francis Parkman's <sup>MONUMENTAL</sup> history of New France and the struggle with New England and the other British colonies that doomed it. Why would I want to play Ahab or Ishmael to that great white whale?

And that is exactly what I intended to do. I wanted to come to terms with Parkman--and, to tell the truth, with Henry Adams as well. Let me start with Parkman. Why re-write Parkman?

Certainly not just to bring Parkman's scholarship up to date. To be sure, there has been much excellent scholarship in the generations between Parkman's time and our own. Specialists have uncovered new evidence and sifted through the old with new questions; as a result, many of Parkman's most cherished generalizations and characterizations have been called into question, if not simply rejected. But this was not a sufficient reason for me to want to re-tell the history that he had made his own.

I wanted to precisely because Parkman was our greatest Romantic historian and ~~because~~ we now live in a post-Romantic world. I was curious what his New France would look like through modern eyes. Why this should seem important itself requires explanation.

The Romantic movement, as M.H. Abrams has argued so convincingly, was an attempt at a secular theodicy. A crucial part of this theodicy was the justification of the ways of history to man. For the Romantic historian: what was, was what had to be; and what had to be, was what should have been. So for Parkman, the struggle between France and Britain over control of



eastern North America was fundamentally a struggle, as he put it, "of the past against the future; of the old against the new; of moral and intellectual torpor against moral and intellectual life; of barren absolutism against a liberty, crude, incoherent, and chaotic, yet full of prolific vitality." Parkman, whatever his transient sympathies for the French and the Indians, could have no doubt where his (and his readers') ultimate loyalties should be.

Parkman's clarity of vision was equalled by the other American historians of the Romantic period, as they narrated other struggles. No one could doubt where Prescott stood in the struggle between Aztecs and the Spanish, or Motley in that between the Spanish and the Dutch, or Bancroft between the British loyalists and the American revolutionaries. They were always on the side of the future, of history itself. As Motley put it, "There are little eddies and side currents which seem to run up hill; but the onward course of the mighty mass of waters is as certain as the law of gravitation." And to think that this direction was anything other than for the best would be for Motley to make the study of history "contemptible."

The narratives of Parkman and his contemporaries are, therefore, of a piece with the great romantic historical philosophies of Hegel and Marx. Indeed, the central issue of Parkman's own history is given perhaps its most compelling general statement in Hegel's famous introduction to his lectures on the philosophy of history.

"When we look at this display of passions, and the consequences of violence; the Unreason which is associated not only with them, but even (rather we might say especially) with good designs and righteous aims; when we see the evil,

the vice, the ruin that has befallen the most flourishing kingdoms which the mind of man ever created; we can scarce avoid being filled with sorrow at this universal taint of corruption: and, since this decay is not the work of mere Nature, but of the Human Will--a moral embitterment --a revolt of the Good Spirit (if it have a place within us) may well be the result of our reflections. Without rhetorical exaggeration, a simply truthful combination of the miseries that have overwhelmed the noblest of nations and polities, and the finest exemplars of private virtue--forms a picture of most fearful aspect, and excites emotions of the profoundest and most hopeless sadness, counterbalanced by no consolatory result. We endure in beholding it a mental torture, allowing no defense or escape but the consideration that what has happened could not be otherwise; that it is a fatality which no intervention could alter. And at last we draw back from the intolerable disgust with which these sorrowful reflections threaten us, into the more agreeable environment of our individual life--the Present formed by our private aims and interests. In short we retreat into the selfishness that stands on the quiet shore, and thence enjoys in safety the distant spectacle of 'wrecks confusedly hurled.' But even regarding History as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized--the question involuntarily arises--to what principle, to what final aim these enormous sacrifices have been offered."



Anyone who knows anything about Parkman's personal life knows that he was not unfamiliar with mental torture. And the greatest <sup>MC's</sup> of Parkman's history lies, at least in part, in his genuine struggle against hopeless sadness and intolerable disgust, his struggle against these as he recounts the enormous sacrifices that had to be offered, usually involuntarily, so that Britain might take its rightful place as the dominant power in eastern North America. Parkman knows that he should regard this as a sufficiently consolatory result, for he is convinced that without this earlier British victory a successful American Revolution would have been impossible--and he is convinced, too, that a free America is the latest best hope of Mankind. Therefore, Parkman struggles to enable his readers to find hope and satisfaction in the history he narrates. The only alternative would be to see history as inherently ironic or tragic--or, as Hegel put it, "find gloomy satisfaction in the empty and fruitless sublimities of that negative result."

The effort required of Parkman to affirm the goodness of history was truly heroic, the literary equivalent of the military feats he so much admired. Nonetheless, for us of the twentieth century it is all too apparent that his struggle was futile. Parkman and the other Romantics have been brutally betrayed by their god of history. No one today can seriously contend that the horrors of twentieth-century history have some sufficiently consolatory result. Any philosophical principle that could justify the millions upon millions of our innocent dead must be dismissed as satanic, fit for use only by a Hitler, a Stalin, or some new Grand Inquisitor.

For us the mistake of the nineteenth century, as Simone Weil so well put it, was to think that by walking in a straight line we could rise to heaven.

We cannot believe that the historical victors somehow deserve their victories, for we have seen too many victors who clearly did not. Where a Parkman could envision a higher unity, we are left with an irreconcilable duality. What had to happen and what ought to happen, what is true and what is good, the real and the ideal simply belong to different realms. This sense of distance between the two realms is central to the tragic vision of our post-Romantic world.

The necessity of recognizing this distance, and therefore of not being seduced by the romantic vision of history, is the central theme of my narrative on California history. For this reason I purposely focussed my narrative on a small peninsula, and treated the broader forces of California history from that perspective. That narrative would end with the bridging of the peninsula with the greatest city of California, San Francisco. I can then let the greatest Californian poet of the day, George Sterling, have his romantic say, before having mine.

The Golden Gate must be bridged; the two peninsulas must become a single isthmus. A Golden Gate Bridge would stand as witness to "a faith in man that is within us, and to our devotion to that faith." It would, it will stand as an assurance that "the race of man shall endure into the ages." So George Sterling thought.

And perhaps history really does look like this to those who think they see in its whirling forces the elements of an empire for themselves. Perhaps history as a whole does look like the progressive building of a bridge.

But it will not look like this to anyone who, rather than seeking empire, simply attends to the detailed history of a small and unimportant place, like the Marin Peninsula. To see forces of history acting here is to see them acting on a human scale. Here, human faces are not lost in the shadows of monumental inevitabilities. Here, those displaced in the name of higher communions can still be heard before their leaving, heard more clearly than they can amidst the noise of a larger place.

From such a perspective history looks less like the progressive building of a bridge than it does like the irregular growth of the chaparral, a growth renewed only through general conflagrations to human eyes at once horrifying and beautiful.



On the broken shore now called the Marin Peninsula has been acted out the glory and folly of the human experience; here, as elsewhere under the sun, has been revealed the vanity of human wishes. It has been the stage and setting for the rise and fall of empires, whether that "empire" be the dream of one man, the gains of one group, or the course of a nation. The aboriginal village, the Spanish mission, the Mexican ranch, the American small town--each was here, each changing the land and changed by it, each considering itself the stable, secure end of historical development, and each in turn swept away, all finally historical spindrift. "One generation passeth away and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever."

Where are to seek the resolution of human history? How can its changes seem to us at once both beautiful and horrifying? Can this paradox be resolved? *Ad Lib*

Some might look to nature for resolution, to the earth which abideth forever. Perhaps there things are at peace, and will reveal it if only we can find the right question to ask. Perhaps.

The Marin landscape itself suggests a question to ask of it. It is a place broken, set against itself as if reflecting this paradox of human history; it is two peninsulas, strangely juxtaposed, apparently at cross-purposes. How did the Marin Peninsula and Point Reyes ever become parts of the same place? The geologists of today think they know, and the story they tell involves the whole earth--and even then says more than they intend, for it shares in part the shape of a myth.

(Ad lib.)

Point Reyes will not remain next to Marin forever. It is being moved, moved by forces of inhuman might, away from the continent, back to the sea, where one day it will be an island, or an anomalous bank, or perhaps nothing noticeable at all. Marin is geologically a temporary thing, in the process of being rent.

Between Point Reyes and the Marin Peninsula proper there already exists a depression in the land, the southern half a valley, the northern a finger-shaped bay. This depression bears witness that whatever attempts to bridge these contrary peninsulas will eventually be rendered unto dust.

The coyote waits for its freedom, for the return of its head to the open sea.

And so we need to rewrite histories like Parkman's for far deeper reasons than that our bibliographies are larger than his. Parkman's romantic justification of the ways of history to man needs to be replaced by a fully informed historical tragedy that refuses such consolation and yet retains hope.

"And yet retains hope"--there is the problem. The characteristic response of so much twentieth-century literature is to refuse the romantic consolation and then to despair. History becomes a nightmare from which we are trying to awake, but never will. We can only achieve an aesthetic or ironic distance from the horrors around us. The uncrowned philosophical king of so much Modernist culture is not Hegel or Marx, but Schopenhauer, who bids us to recognize the ultimate futility of our existence as individuals and to reject the demands of the species upon us. What is left? What was left for many writers was an aestheticism that was well captured by Edmund Wilson when he compared them to molluscs who excrete their beautiful iridescent shells in order to withdraw from the world.

In this broad cultural movement of Modernism, the Americans, for once, were at the vanguard. Among the Enlightenment and Romantics we may have been following out the leads of others, but the horrors of our own civil war gave us a good look at what the modern age held in store for us all. The civil war, fought for the highest of ends (what could be purer than the abolition of slavery?), produced the kind of mindless destruction and efficient butchery that Europe only saw in the twentieth century. One young man, whose own sense of order and meaning were shattered by this experience, became one of the first thoroughly Modernist of historians, and in the American literary



canon he is the chief rival to Francis Parkman for preeminence in historical narrative--he is Henry Adams.

Adams' major historical works are devoted to making his readers recognize the opposition between the true and the good, between things and persons--and then to recognize that things are fundamental to history and individual moral agents--persons--are irrelevant. So Adams' own history of early America is an ironic commentary on the nineteenth-century efforts to use these same materials to invigorate us, to give confidence and purpose and dignity to human life. As Adams puts it, "History is simply social development along the line of weakest resistance, and in most cases the line of weakest resistance is found as unconsciously by society as by water."

The greatest individual in Adams' history is Thomas Jefferson who strives his whole life to make the early United States into a unified nation. In Adams' treatment, it becomes a unified nation, but despite him. Jefferson, the best that politics can offer, is really an anti-hero who commands the river to flow downstream.

This irony then turns back upon the historian Adams himself, as he makes plain in his autobiography (actually his most widely read book today in America), The Education of Henry Adams. It is an ironic education, an education away from any notion of order that would make human life meaningful. The process of human history is but an extension of Darwinian evolution, an evolution that defies our deepest moral convictions. In the end he contrasts his view of history with what he regards as the traditional view which he celebrated in his work on the Middle Ages--he regards history as governed by the impersonal forces that are harnessed by the dynamo. He feels nostalgia for the older view that saw history governed by forces at

once personal and benign, epitomized for him in the medieval devotions to the Blessed Virgin.

Adams, as he himself would be the first to admit, represents a dead end for the secular humanism of the eighteenth century, the very humanism so warmly embraced by the founding fathers of the American republic. The Romantics sought to avoid ~~it~~<sup>the dead end</sup>, and failed. It was left to Adams to embrace it. *As I was working on my California notes I found a* The view of his history of Adams and other Modernists *is for me the best* *depressed expression of the modernist despair of the Californians* summed up by the American poet Robinson Jeffers:

*poet, Robinson Jeffers:*

It

is certain the world cannot be stopped nor saved.

It has changes to accomplish and must creep through agonies

toward a new discovery. It must, and it ought: the awful

necessity

Is also the sacrificial duty. Man's world is a tragic music and is not

played for man's happiness,

Its discords are not resolved but by other discords.

*I found this*

The powerful poetic response to this historical despair ~~are~~<sup>is</sup> the lines directed to Robinson Jeffers by Czeslaw Milosz:

Better to carve suns and moons on the joints of crosses  
 as was done in my district. To birches and firs  
 give feminine names. To implore protection  
 against the mute and treacherous might  
 than to proclaim, as you did, an inhuman thing.

Romantic or Modernists--we need a third way. That is why writers like  
 Milosz or Dostoevsky or T.S. Eliot or Simone Weil who seem to point in another  
 direction should be cherished, and tested against materials most familiar  
 to us as individuals. For me the guiding light has been Czeslaw Milosz,  
 particularly those books in which he continues to proclaim the human against  
 the mute and treacherous might he witnessed operating in Central Europe.  
 I think particularly of his two novels--Issa Valley, a loving recreation  
 of the rural Lithuanian life that would be brutally destroyed by Stalinist  
 collectivization; and Seizure of Power, on Warsaw under the Nazis. Seizure  
of Power, in particular, is not regarded as one of his better works. <sup>(GAL)</sup> Yet  
 one character from that novel keeps coming to mind as I do my own work--  
 Professor Gil with whose post-war meditations Milosz begins and ends the novel.

Gil has lost everything during the war, including his wife and only  
 child. He now perseveres by translating Thucydides, the Athenian historian  
 who narrated the destruction of most of what he himself valued. As Gil  
 translates, it is not in his power to save Pericles or Athens, any more than  
 it had been in his power to save his own family. His power is the power of  
 imagination and collective memory--and so he spends himself trying to recreate  
 "the gestures of a sorrowing Athenian woman, the expression on the face of a



man looking at his dead son, even the shape of fingers holding a jar of wine"just before it drops. If he can do this, then time would be, at least partially, overcome. "There would be only a great coexistence of a countless number of separate human beings, who had been and who were yet to be each communicating to the other the same complaint" against the *futility* of this world.

"He who would be equal to the human condition must collect blood in a basin without spilling a single drop--not to display knowledge, nor to transform heartbreak to indifference--but rather to preserve the gifts of anger and unbreakable faith." While Gil translated, he sometimes felt that all who once were, were somehow now near him--and he was warmed by their breath and communion with them brought peace."

I have thought about Gil often these past few years as I write my own history of colonial America.

For me, to relive, however remotely, the suffering entailed on all sides in the development of the American colonies, is to find an unwanted question being raised involuntarily *the very question which I raised at the beginning of the lecture* was the American republic really just a pyrrhic victory for the human spirit? Adams would say yes; Parkman no. *And I must turn my face and think of other things.* But I think of the starving time in Virginia; ~~six months in which famine~~ *I think of the famine caught up in the process, about* reduced the colony from 500 to 60 and to a wretchedness greater than any human being could *think to bear.*

And I find myself thinking about Therese Oionhaton. She was a young Indian girl, a Huron, whose existence we know of only because she is mentioned in the Jesuit Relations, the reports the missionaries sent back to France. Historians scarcely mention her, if at all.

*to her family and the good marriage.*

She had been sent the long distance from Huronia to Quebec to be educated at a convent school. The school up to that point had largely failed in its intention. Separated from their families and villages, forced to live in a convent setting European girls found constricting, the Indian children languished. The meager results the nuns gained were hardly commensurate to the dangers the children faced in their continual exposure to European contagions.

But all this was different with Therese Oionhaton. She loved the nuns, and their life. She learned her lessons easily, and soon amazed skeptical Europeans with her reading and writing. She thrived. And perhaps the nuns hoped she would stay with them forever. But such pious reveries were impractical. Therese was an important Huron. And the Jesuits were eminently practical men. They had the task of converting Huronia, the whole people, not just the isolated individuals like Therese. Individuals had to be placed where they could save their souls to the greatest advantage of Christendom. For young Therese that meant returning to Huronia to give witness among her people. A Christian woman, a Christian marriage, a Christian family--these were examples much needed in Huronia. Therese's family and the Jesuits agreed; she was to return to make a good marriage.

The decision was met with grief and resignation at the convent. As she waited to embark, Therese sent back to her Mother Superior a brief note: "My good Mother, I am about to leave. I thank you for having taken such care of me, and having taught me to serve God well. Do I thank thee for a small thing? I shall never forget it." The canoe convoy taking her back was intercepted along a remote stretch of the Saint Lawrence River by an Iroquois

raiding party. Once the fighting was over and twenty-two of the Huron party taken captive, Therese was out of danger. As a pubescent girl (she was fourteen at the time), she would certainly be adopted by the Iroquois. When the captives reached the Iroquois villages, she did have to watch the hideous torture deaths of some of the Huron warriors, including perhaps the greatest of his time, Ahatsistari. And Ahasistari did prove himself worthy of his reputation; he retained complete composure to the end; with dead comrades on both sides of him he had shouted in his last breath "Arise someone from our bones as avengers."

Shortly after this, Therese seems to have been sent to a village away from the other captives. Subsequently when negotiations took place between the French and the Iroquois, her name was brought up by the French as a captive who should be returned to them, to be reunited with her family and her people. But she was never among the prisoners exchanged during truces. The Iroquois diplomats would ignore the request. And the French would not insist; more important things were at stake than the fate of one girl.

But the person of Therese Oionhaton does not immediately disappear from the Jesuit Relations, as one might expect. Rather, she haunts them like a ghost, appearing suddenly, unexpectedly, and then as suddenly dissolving back into obscurity. One missionary sees her for a few moments. She assures him she is remaining true to her Christianity; she says the rosary using rocks; she looks "exceedingly sad"; she says to him, "Alas, if the virgin sisters could see me in this condition among these wicked Iroquois, how they would pity me." Later, another sees her, and she now has a baby. Does she want it baptized? No, she has taken care of that herself. She had recited



over the baby, "Jesus, take pity on this child, I baptize thee, my little one, that thou mayest be blessed in heaven." This is not exactly the prescribed form, but the Jesuit is sure it will do.

Finally, in 1655, well into her second decade of captivity, Therese Oionhaton disappears from the pages of the Jesuit Relations altogether. The apparitions stop. This one ghost is gone from history. And perhaps just as well. By that time her people, the mighty Hurons, once 30,000 strong, had themselves virtually ceased to exist, destroyed by disease from the Europeans and war with the Iroquois.

So just as well? No, she should not be allowed to rest in peace. For it is the most precious and fragile duty of the historian--not to celebrate the monumental inevitabilities of history as a Francis Parkman would have it, nor to use these to mock human aspirations as a Henry Adams would--~~but~~ to call back such ghosts, and by giving a little of his blood to allow them to speak once again.

*duty is rather*

*as Therese Oionhaton*

*his most precious of pages*