telling the truth

richard nixon and american political fiction

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> "He burns to be President, you know. Don't underestimate his determination and persistence. He's dogged."
>
> "What motivates the man?" asked Martin.
>
> "I'm not sure. You always have the feeling he's driven to prove that a poor boy from the farm is better than the elite."
>
> John Ehrlichman, *The Company*

It is no surprise that John Ehrlichman's *The Company* is a disappointing novel. Good political fiction is hard to write. Even Henry James botched his several adventures in the genre. But Ehrlichman's crudely scrawled portrait of Richard Nixon is surprising. If only as relief from the tedious banality of his conspiratorial tale, we expect from Ehrlichman some understanding of the man, some interpretation of the politician, but there is none. An arrogant, rigid, furious entrepreneur, Richard Monckton in *The Company* is the familiar Richard Nixon so liberally detested and uniformly described by his political enemies. "He wasn't handsome," we are told, and then Ehrlichman maliciously specifies Monckton's receding hair, his pouched cheeks and jowls, the broad nose and dark brows. "The Presidential medal for his inaugural would be etched in profile," he concludes. "From that angle, less of the bulge of his jaw would show."[1] Yet Ehrlichman is not the first American political novelist to bungle such an opportunity. The character of Richard Nixon, if not the face, has been from the start the focus of American political fiction.

A poor boy from the farm, half Thomas Sutpen, half Uriah Heep, Nixon has always been around in this novel, kicked and savaged. At

first he appears as an illiterate Irish bogtrotter who shambles along behind the mounted Captain Farrago in Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815), a servile clown without the wisdom and tenderness of Sancho Panza who keeps his eye eagerly fixed on Farrago's place. In the Jacksonian period he turns up as Seba Smith's Major Jack Downing and Johnson Jones Hooper's Simon Suggs, a relentless office-seeker on the climb who plays his chances by always stacking the political deck. After the Civil War Mark Twain and Henry Adams indelibly construe him as the politician *sans politique,* a small driven man floundering on a large stage. Without exception in the nineteenth century, American political novelists refuse him the amenities of a mind, the probabilities of motivation, a merely human existence. Nixon exists in their fiction only to be exposed. He makes speeches. "There can be no whitewash at the White House," he says. "God bless America, and God bless each and every one of you."[2] The speech is always the same. A beleaguered Abner Dilworthy gives it to his Cattleville constituency in *The Gilded Age* (1873): "After a while the people elected him (Dilworthy) a Representative to the Congress of the United States, and he grew very famous. Now temptations assailed him on every hand. People tried to get him to drink wine, to dance, to go to theatres; they even tried to buy his vote; but no, the memory of his Sunday School saved him from all harm; he remembered the fate of the bad little boy who used to try to get him to play on Sunday, and who grew up and became a drunkard and was hanged. He remembered that, and was glad he never yielded and played on Sunday."[3] Thus the scoundrel we immediately recognize as the scoundrel (his name typically is Steadfast Dodge or Silas Ratcliffe) is shown conclusively to be a scoundrel. The extent of this revelation describes effectively the range of the political novel before and after the Civil War, a range that is at once small and bleak.

What is the point of such fiction? What is its purpose? If it exposes the false Franklin, the selfishness of the self-made man, and shows his perversion of the public trust, it also, perhaps more importantly, declares the writer's difference. The Ehrlichman who writes *The Company* is not Nixon's trusted *alter ego,* and his demeaning study of Richard Monckton carefully marks out his distance, his cool detachment. There have always been, as we shall see, two implacably opposed parties in American political fiction, those who may speak and those who can not. Ehrlichman belongs to the first party, the party of intelligent disillusionment, and he adheres to the line taken by his predecessors: Monckton's failure in political discourse, not his policies, tells the truth of his usurpation. It is indeed the maddening circumlocution of the Watergate Tapes, not the evidence they contain, that finally brings Nixon down, entwining him in spools of neurotic evasion, stripping him of the guise of rationality, and Ehrlichman unerringly drives to that issue in his narrative. Blackmailed by the Director of the CIA at the end of

the novel, Monckton responds to each insistent threat by irrelevantly indicating the scenic marvels of Camp David. The emptiness of Nixon's political significance, the fact that he stands for nothing and therefore has nothing to say, now appalls an aroused Ehrlichman. However Ehrlichman rose to his own small summit of power, and for whatever reason, it did not lead him here, to this suffocation, this awful speechlessness. In a world of fast-talking arrivistes, the stifled parvenu is the absolute other. Like Lyndon Johnson (Esker Anderson in the novel), whom he admires, Ehrlichman distinguishes the two essential discourses in American political language, the mythic speech of the poor boy who becomes President and the raw idiom of political dealing. Because Monckton/Nixon fails to speak either discourse properly, he is fated to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, fated to fall silent. If *The Company* tells us anything, it tells us this: it is Nixon's drivel, not his power, that is important.

As early as 1792, in rural western Pennsylvania, Brackenridge recognized the menace of the Nixonian sentence and fiercely, for most of his life, attacked its pretension. *Modern Chivalry* is the *Ur*-text in American political fiction. For all its brilliance, Gary Wills's *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* only extends and elaborates the thesis developed in *Modern Chivalry*. There are essentially three characters in Brackenridge's long rambling novel: Farrago, the Electorate, and Teague O'Regan. Because he focuses Brackenridge's anger and confusion, Teague dominates the novel. Abandoned at one point and replaced by a Scottish immigrant, Teague is eventually restored to the narrative, returned because Brackenridge soon recognized that he was the embodied crux of his satire. The landscape through which this strange trio moves is a landscape of political issues and events (the debate over the Federal Constitution, populist attacks on the judiciary, the Whisky Rebellion in western Pennsylvania) and in each episode, each issue and event, a ritualistic drama is enacted. The Electorate is confused, it distrusts legal rhetoric and the slow work of reason, it seeks instead radical and simplistic solutions to complex problems, and in the ruckus of this feeling, threatening always to become a mob, it turns inevitably to Teague, an illiterate blank, and creates from the soft clay of his featureless character the appropriate image of its desire. Farrago's function is to demonstrate their folly and show them, often obstinately, the right man to elect, the right policy to adopt. Yet given this choice (Farrago or Teague), the Electorate repeatedly makes the wrong choice, preferring itself through Teague. Thus Brackenridge assembles the *dramatis personae* of nineteenth-century American political fiction in this now obscure novel and binds them to a mythical plot that endlessly generates the same unresolved act. Wherever we look in this fiction, whether before the Civil War in James Fenimore Cooper's *Home as Found* (1838) or after the war in Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age* and Henry Adams' *Democracy* (1880), this narrative structure is

relatively intact, even in lesser works such as John Pendleton Kennedy's *Quodlibet* (1840) or John W. DeForest's *Honest John Vane* (1875). Blessed with nine lives, supple, inarticulate, greedy, Teague makes his way in the New World while Farrago, the man of intelligence and sensibility, is thrust aside. And by the slightest of turns into history we confront on a different stage Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams, and in our own time Richard Milhous Nixon and Archibald Cox.

Brackenridge's title describes the problem before him: how to recognize the man who is qualified to govern in a society that spurns all the traditional symbols and emblems of that designation, the prerogatives of family and rank—how, in short, to modernize chivalry, reconstitute "natural" hierarchies, and enable the "natural" aristocrat, who is neither "purse-proud" nor angrily poor, to assume rightfully the duties of public office. In *Modern Chivalry* we are treated to the spectacle of Brackenridge's solution. Language, the power of speech, distinguishes the true democratic chevalier from the false, the authentic leader from the usurper. And by language Brackenridge means the right mastery of classical discourse, knowledge of Greek and Latin, knowledge of good and evil, and beyond that the supreme knowledge of irony. Who possesses language in the United States? Only those who are educated, and among these primarily lawyers. Brackenridge himself, the legal rhetorician. Teague speaks in a barbarous Irish brogue and in each incoherent utterance proclaims himself unworthy of speech, defines his place in the world. Thus the question of who may rule is preceded by the question of who may speak. Indeed *Modern Chivalry* begins with the wry disclaimer that Brackenridge is only interested in manifesting a correct style, not at all in political commentary, but the opposite, of course, obtains: a correct style and good politics are powerfully linked in his mind. In Part I of *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1797) these distinctions are rigorously maintained. Farrago is the speaker, Teague his foil. Using now Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*, now Cervantes' *Don Quixote* as his models, Brackenridge moves crisply and efficiently in his satire to unmask Teague's arguments as gibberish and compel his silence, but in Part II (1804-1815) the paradox of Farrago's constant failure to communicate those revelations to the Electorate (which has not read Cicero or Thucydides) begins to weigh heavily on Brackenridge's narrative. Teague engages in his mimicry of knowledge, his impersonations of a philosopher, a professor of language, a politician, soldier, natural scientist, and Farrago insistently exposes him. Each exposure, however, serves only to divert Teague into a new scheme, a new guise. We begin to fall through satire into the realm of the bad dream—or worse, the nightmare world of total inversion.

Increasingly the theme of isolation and madness figures in Brackenridge's narration. Farrago comes upon a mob that intends to burn down the local college and church, these twin pillars of civilized society, and when he attempts to prevent them, a spokesman for this mob steps

forward. "We wish to abolish these, and have nothing but our own commentaries. Are we to be drawing our proofs from under a monarchy, and referring to tracts and essays published in Great Britain? Have we no sense of our own to explain texts of Scripture, and apply doctrines?" Against this outburst of nationalism, this fear of the European past, Farrago places a question that has suddenly become fragile: "Why then do we use the English language?"[4] There is no response. We are, in effect, in bedlam. Diverted from the church, the mob turns to pillage an apothecary shop because the labels on its drug-bottles are in Latin. The assault on institutions by the radical democrats becomes finally an attack on classical learning, language as the sign of class privilege. Here then Farrago is at last directly menaced. For classical discourse is memory; the writer binds the past to the present in his writing—he conserves. And this discourse assures Farrago his difference, his identity, in this tumultuous place where all social distinctions seem blurred. Yet to the Electorate (the farmers in western Pennsylvania) Farrago's allusive discourse resembles the mystification of the script found in contracts and mortgages. It is the language of oppression, of "high-flyers" who exploit the ignorance of the unlettered, and to that extent the Electorate is prepared to grant Farrago his difference.

Shortly thereafter Farrago visits a hospital and finds a lunatic confined there who imagines himself a moral philosopher: "I am shut up here as a mad man, in a mad place, and yet it appears to me that I am the only rational being amongst men, because I know that I am mad, and acknowledge it, and they do not know that they are mad, or acknowledge it." And here, too, there is a mad poet who has been travestying his travels, who is overjoyed to see Farrago because the Captain is "the hero of his Poem."[5] Brackenridge does not push these ironies, Farrago still understands the place of reason and the place of unreason, but his hold on that understanding is soon severely tested. He returns from his wandering to his native village and there proves so intractable in his opinions, so obdurate in his principles, that at length his own community turns upon him. Why does he burlesque the Electorate and satirize democracy? Why does he oppose the will of the majority? His response is poignant, momentarily without sardonic edge, and through it we can hear Brackenridge himself, the spurned politician, failed journalist, and harassed justice. "Why should I undervalue democracy; or be thought to cast a slur upon it; I that am a democrat myself. What proof have I given you of this; *My works shew my faith.*"[6] But Farrago's works are not those political acts that provide what are now called "services," the adjustment and amelioration of conflicted interests in a constituency. His work instead is the labor of education, a condescension that requires a subtle and carefully inflected rhetoric. Farrago has, moreover, committed the fundamental error of inventing an ideal Electorate (an informed, morally uplifted Jeffersonian citizenry) which the actual Electorate fails to be—the result of which is that Farrago ultimately speaks

only to the issue of his disillusionment. His works (Brackenridge's increasingly irate novel) do not show his faith. Troubled by these complications, and not fully understanding them, Brackenridge brings his forlorn hero into the midst of this stunning reversal: the discourse that should distinguish Farrago as the true democrat condemns him as a reactionary aristocrat, the false democrat, and it is he, not Teague, who falls silent. He is put on trial and when it becomes apparent that this paragon of democratic virtue, wholly misunderstood, will be lynched, an old servant comes forward to rescue Farrago: "Ya need na' mind the Captain . . . for he's no right in his head."[7] Thus the American Quixote is unseated, the true chevalier excluded and sent into exile. But there, in a new settlement, all the old problems return: Farrago is frustrated anew in defining himself to the Electorate, he fails to persuade them that he is the rightful arbitrator of their destiny, and as the novel at long length comes to its exhausted close the Electorate is again desirous of having the indefatigable Teague as its governor. Here Brackenridge bitterly takes his leave:

> But I hope I shall not be considered as resembling that Spaniard in taking a windmill for a giant; a common stone for a magnet that can attract, or transmute metals. It is you that are the Don Quixottes in this respect, madcaps, and some of you from the madcap settlement, Thady O'Connor and several others, tossing up your caps at every turn, for a new constitution; not considering that when a thing gets in the way of changing, it will never stop until it gets to the end of liberty, and reaches despotism, which is the bourne from whence no traveller returns. Do you take me for *Jefferson*? You are mistaken if you think I have so good an opinion of you."[8]

But where does this bitterness leave Brackenridge? If the ideology of democracy no longer sustains him, what other ideology is there, what other reading of political affairs? A democrat who no longer respects the judgment of the people, a political satirist whose discourse becomes an embittered soliloquy, he falls silent. This new ceaselessly changing society belongs to the faceless and incomprehensible Teague O'Regan, belongs to those who understand that in this new place it is good to be shifty. Because he lacks education and therefore language, Teague does not know wrong from right, he can not manage a line of thought, and yet, though speechless, incapable of thought, he does seem to know certain things, or at least feel them. He knows that in this new country, in a "free" society, he is expected to rise, to become someone, to change, and that this rising, this becoming, somehow constitutes being itself. It is the only motive Brackenridge ascribes to Teague who remains otherwise psychologically unreal throughout the narrative. Even in this regard, however, he seems an activity rather than a person, a desire to be that contents itself with the show of being, an office or a position, but which never becomes a being, never becomes human.

In retrospect, given the intellectual intensity of the *Federalist Papers*, the successful ratification of the Federal Constitution and the eminent presidential succession of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and John Quincy Adams, the drama recounted in *Modern Chivalry* seems curiously shrill, if not hysterical. Yet because he was outside the centers of political power in the United States, isolated in western Pennsylvania, Brackenridge, it might be said, was in fact closer to certain political realities in American society than either Adams or Jefferson. He had accurately described the forthcoming tumult of the Jacksonian period and in Teague O'Regan shaped the model of Jacksonian Man, that exemplary figure who would stride upon the scene as Steadfast Dodge, Aristabulus Bragg, Middleton Flam, Agamemnon Flag, Birdofredum Sawin, Jack Downing, Simon Suggs, Orpheus C. Kerr, Petroleum V. Nasby, Honest John Vane, Patrick Ballymolloy, Ananias Moffitt, Abner Dilworthy and Silas Ratcliffe. A legion. Brackenridge had also recognized an emphasis that would rapidly develop first in the Antimasonic party and then in all succeeding populist organizations —namely their suspicion that lawyers belonged to a closed and secret circle and that all spoke in a shared code. In the Jacksonian period this *frisson* of paranoia in *Modern Chivalry* would flare into a fever.

Here we can begin with a specific event. On January 9, 1825, the door to John Quincy Adams' study opens and Henry Clay, the most devious and durable politician in the nineteenth century, enters. He has astutely recognized that this will not be the year to make his run for the presidency and so he has come to deal with Adams. Three candidates, William Crawford, Andrew Jackson and Adams, are in contention for the office. Clay intends to throw his support to Adams, but first:

> The time had now come at which he might be explicit in his communication with me, and he had for that purpose asked this confidential interview. He wished me, as fast as I might think proper, to satisfy him with regard to some principles of great public importance but without any personal considerations for himself. In the question to come before the House between General Jackson, Mr. Crawford, and myself, he had no hesitation in saying that his preference would be for me.[9]

Unfortunately this interview was not taped. We do not know what this jump in Adams' diary conceals, but we do know that the line Clay drew between "principles of great public importance" and "personal considerations" in his career was not always distinct, and that after the election he promptly became Secretary of State in the new administration. Whether or not Adams did strike an unsavory bargain is not, however, the point here. The point is that he desperately wanted to succeed Monroe and did not know how to do it without showing in an unseemly fashion the naked extent of his desire. After all, his father had held the office, he had an ambitious mother, and because of his own diplomatic

and administrative experience John Quincy Adams was perhaps the most superbly qualified presidential candidate in our history. In his heart, then, he must have felt that the office should seek him, but it would not, that he recognized. Jackson was a military hero with a considerable following, Crawford possessed an established and reliable constituency, and Adams, with only New England assured him, could not merely sit in his study and trust in the good judgment of the electorate. Because he had in hand the votes Adams required, Clay's "communication" was undoubtedly tempting, and yet Adams' readiness to "satisfy" Clay, whether fairly or not, clouded his tenure as President. Jackson and his supporters made this mysterious pact an issue and presented it to the electorate four years later as an illustration of Adams' aristocratic dislike of the democratic process. Indeed in both elections Adams found himself in the quandary that perplexes Farrago in *Modern Chivalry*. How does one designate himself as the true democratic knight? How does one speak to the electorate? A rationalist in politics, a gentleman of the old school, Adams refused to bend in his language to emotional appeals and self-dramatization, an inflexible stand that swept him and his principles from office in 1828. "I began reading the Third Phillippic of Cicero," Adams wrote in his forced retirement, "and consulted in Plutarch the lives of Cicero, of Antony, and of Brutus for the co-temporary facts. Looked likewise into Shakspeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*."[10] Jackson, on the other hand, took office convinced that he had at last wrenched the presidency from the clutches of a pompous and moneyed clique of patricians.

In his reticence, his extensive learning and Hamlet-like hesitations, John Quincy Adams was the end of a line, the last significant political figure in the United States to belong to the Enlightenment. John Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe had all shared by way of their classical education a body of texts that informed their discourse. They spoke and wrote in the language of John Locke and Edmund Burke, the language Brackenridge employs in *Modern Chivalry*. They considered themselves philosophers, they were interested in political history and social theories which they expressed forcefully in their writings, and they had all striven, somewhat unevenly, to make politics an art and a science. Perhaps because the presidency still carried with it regal implications (Jackson would quickly become "King Andrew"), each had, at least publicly, adopted the Washingtonian stance of reluctance, considered the office a duty, yearned for the freedom and ease of their private life, and in every possible way signified to the electorate that they were *not* interested in pursuing and seizing political power. They were, in brief, the disinterested and reflective chevaliers Brackenridge had described. Yet by 1828 this political stance had become suicidal. The tactical skills of a new breed of party managers, notably Martin Van Buren and Thurlow Weed, imposed a new *modus operandi* on American politics that involved radical changes in the way politicians

presented themselves. In *Quodlibet* Kennedy parodies the florid style that Adams had refused to employ in his campaign. "I see before me," Agamemnon Flag declares, "a vast concourse of free citizens—the solid, substantial, durable, permanent, everlasting pillars of free government. The honest, upright, pure, hard-handed, horny-fisted Democratic yeomanry of the country are here—not the flesh and blood of the country, for that is the pampered aristocracy—but the bone and sinew surround me."[11] The electorate itself had undergone a geographical and economic displacement, an ambitious bloc of entreprenurial capitalists from the trans-Alleghany West had entered political life in the United States, and even the discourse of law (Farrago's last bastion) was in the process of transformation, as Perry Miller indicates in *The Life of the Mind in America,* shedding the classical virtues of concision and clarity for the oratorical flourishes of the Websterian mode.[12]

Two generations of Adamses would examine obsessively the defeat in 1828, take these factors into account, add to them the somewhat biased opinion that Jacksonian policy enhanced the power of the slaveholding South, and inevitably return to Jackson as an archetype, the "materialization" of the worst impulses in a democratic society. Writing in 1908, Brooks Adams observes:

> Like Moses, and a host of other idealists and reformers, John Quincy Adams had dreamed that, by his interpretation of divine thought, as manifest in nature, he could covenant with God, and thus regenerate mankind. He knew that he had kept his part of the covenant, even too well. In return, when it came to the test, God had abandoned him and had made Jackson triumph, and to Adams, Jackson was the materialization of the principle of evil. Jackson was, to use Mr. Adams' own words when he was asked to attend at Harvard when the University made Jackson a Doctor of Laws, 'a barbarian who could not write a sentence of grammar and hardly could spell his own name.' And more than this, Jackson embodied the principle of public plunder, which Adams believed to be fatal to the hopes of posterity as well as to those of his own generation.[13]

Neither Brooks nor Henry Adams, it must be said, accepted the notion that God had defected to the other side, but their own view was no less apocalyptic. They attributed their grandfather's failure to an inherent flaw in democracy. The political system in the United States engendered economic opportunities for all and thus set in motion frantic competition, not cooperation. It created a society that was not the planned community John Quincy Adams had envisaged but a disarray of social factions and economic interests in perpetual contention.

Driven into Brackenridgean exile, the Adamses variously rehearsed this exoneration of their role in American politics. Yet this retelling of the unfortunate fall of the democratic chevalier becomes increasingly surreal in the nineteenth century. Those who study the political novel in

this period typically begin with the assumption that it failed to explore and express its subject. In fact there are no Julien Sorels in this fiction, the question of slavery appears only peripherally, the struggles in Mexico, in Missouri and Kansas, the Civil War itself, are not significantly discussed or realized, and where, then, so the argument runs, is its relevance? Writers who undertook political topics failed, Irving Howe suggests, because they were congenitally unable "to see political life as an autonomous field of action; they could not focus upon politics long and steadily enough to allow it to develop according to its inner rhythms, for it bored or repelled them even as it tempted them."[14] Indeed writers like Cooper and Henry Adams belonged to a patriciate that had lost its political sinew in the Jacksonian period and the hauteur that stifles their fiction derives in part from this deeply felt resentment, but this judgment does not explain the particular character of their fiction nor does it reveal adequately enough the full extent of their motives.

The home found by Eve Effingham in *Home as Found* is the same home Madeleine Lee discovers in *Democracy*—a despoiled country sacked by unscrupulous adventurers and opportunists, men like Steadfast Dodge and Silas Ratcliffe. In their innocence both heroines initially declare that they will contemplate the meaning of their country in this exemplary figure and thus establish these reborn Teagues as the subject of their narratives. In centering these characters, Cooper and Adams work very much like Brackenridge in *Modern Chivalry*. Steadfast Dodge and his comrade, Aristabulus Bragg, like Ratcliffe, exist only to be unmasked, to be shown (as broadly as possible) as false representatives of the Jeffersonian yeoman, perversions of the meaning of democracy. Adams, of course, is cynical where Cooper is earnest. Mrs. Lee "wanted to see with her own eyes the action of primary forces; to touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society; to measure with her own mind the capacity of the motive power. She was bent upon getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government."[15] She is led directly to Senator Ratcliffe who is hard-voiced, she is told, hard-mannered, "Hard all through." Cooper is massively ensconced in his rectitude throughout *Home as Found.* At Templeton, the Effingham manor, Bragg is remorselessly quizzed by his contemptuous hosts. How does he feel about the sanctity of place, ancestral seats, old things, the past itself? "I have found some trees much pleasanter than others," he responds, "and the pleasantest tree I can remember was one of my own, out of which the sawyers made a thousand feet of clear stuff, to say nothing of the middlings."[16] In both novels political issues fade into the background when the Braggs and Ratcliffes mount the stage—they are the issue—and they are similarly revealed not as men of action in the world but as states of consciousness barefaced in language.

The point of *Home as Found* and *Democracy* is thus a careful distinction of identities on the only ground possible in a democratic society. For the Coopers and the Adamses were not opposed by Luddites or

Levellers, anarchic mad-caps bearing red flags, but by men who either belonged to their propertied class or were striving to get into it. The struggle between John Quincy Adams and Jackson represents an intra-class struggle, a clutching for the federal purse-strings that culminates in Jackson's seizure of the deposits in the United States Bank, and party labels are not always useful in discriminating who belongs where in this competition. John Quincy Adams' opinion of Van Buren, a Democrat, does not differ from Cooper's judgment of Weed, a Whig. To the world and to themselves, Cooper and Adams had therefore the unhappy task of distinguishing themselves in a crowd, defining their American character against that of another American character who looked like them, dressed like them, but did not and could not think and speak like them. So it is that the slanted colloquy constitutes the central action in both novels, conversation that turns from topic to topic to reveal satirically the distance that obtains between Farrago and Teague in American life. For in the Effinghams' drawing-room and in Mrs. Lee's salon the actual power of the Jacksons and the Blaines is tamed and diminished. Through the ironic intelligence of the narrator who manipulates question and response, we see the spiritual emptiness of these usurpers, the crudity of their imagination, the simple lust that animates their lives. Bragg, we are told, "felt a secret confidence, that, right or wrong, it was always safe in America to make the most fearless profession in favor of the great body of the community."[17] And in *Democracy*, while Adams is content to send up Mrs. Lee on her chosen petard, an outraged European, Baron Jacobi, is given in effect the right of summary, the swipe of an aristocratic cane that strikes the silenced Ratcliffe. We are indeed close in the punitive temper of this fiction, if not in its fantasies, to the revel that surrounds the publication of the Watergate tapes, the exhilaration of at long last fixing Nixon in his essential Teagueness, trapping him in his speech, his own language. For there in the maundering, often incoherent ruminations of the President of the United States the nonsensical voice of Brackenridge's idiotic bog-trotter again speaks, or so it seems. But to what end? His empty rhetoric finally exposed in *Democracy*, Ratcliffe is backed to the wall by converging moralists who know that if his political cynicism (everyone does it) can not be answered, they have at least managed to corner this particular rat.

The political novel in the nineteenth century thus resolutely avoids political analysis to pursue instead the dubious rewards of an amateurish, prejudiced Tocquevillean sociology—the purpose of which is to declare a difference in the American sensibility, to define *us* against *them*. In the numerous novels that attack political bosses and machines in the postwar period *they* are not always distinguished with Adams' ironic skill, but *they* remain nonetheless the focus of this fiction—*Solid for Mulhooly* and *Big Kennedy* are some of the titles—and in sum the Brackenridgean juxtaposition is maintained. It is a fiction as psycho-

logically intricate and socially complex as Thomas Nast's celebrated cartoon of Boss Tweed. Yet Tweed was a symptom, not a cause, and we look in vain for the novel that widens the scope of this narrow understanding of American politics. Henry Francis Keenan's *The Money-Makers* (1885) begins this enterprise but ultimately strangles itself in a melodramatic plot that topsy-turvy at the last moment turns a malevolent industrial baron into a chastened benefactor. Writers like Keenan are driven by the logic of their examination to dire conclusions which are then dutifully avoided either by some turn of plot or a feeble call for some measure of institutional reform. Yet given our own obsession with the character of Nixon throughout the Watergate scandal, and the great stress placed on the style of all those Bragg-like Rebozos, we ought not judge too harshly the failure of nineteenth-century political fiction. For we, too, have preferred the easy access of caricature and inadequately unraveled the lines that lead outward from the scandal toward the corporate structure in the United States, toward ITT and the shadowy figure of Howard Hughes. Revealed in his speech and then dramatically dislodged from office, Nixon in the flesh offers us the historical realization of what was tirelessly dreamed in the political novel throughout the previous century. A public exorcism, the banishing of a democratic demon, an end to the bad dream. The spectacle is seductive. But certain problems remain, problems that nagged Adams and Mark Twain. How does one separate the subversive, Nixon, from the system (that large and capacious term), a system that effectively created and nurtured him? To return briefly to Brackenridge: how to denounce and exclude Teague without also renouncing one's faith in the Electorate?

There is obviously no solution to this problem so long as the question is posed from within the system. American writers cling to the bad dream, it might be said, because it is, after all, still a part of *the* Dream. Their moral approach to politics thus serves as a convenient prophylactic in their interpretation. It shields them from the social and human complexity of a Teague or a Ratcliffe and enables them to address the Electorate as though it were a single entity, an audience, not a swarming mass of conflicting desires and interests. The "system" works, villains are caught, false democrats revealed, but only in the fictive manner of the political novel, only if political struggle is stated in the mythic terms of a morality play, only if *system* means *myth*, and not the actual processes of democratic government. This transference occurs repeatedly in nineteenth-century political fiction and it reappears in the drama of Watergate. Exposed, humiliated, Nixon is driven from office. An honest yeoman succeeds him and proclaims the "nightmare" over. The Dream resumes its dreaming. Life, in this instance, imitates poorly conceived art. In his extemporaneous farewell address given on the morning of his departure for California, Nixon had the opportunity of stating once more his innocence in terms of the system. He had said all along, through various mouthpieces, that what he had done had

always been done (that is, the systematic abuse of the system), and that in the sphere of *realpolitik* his performance had been splendid. This truth (spelled out, elaborated) would not have saved him, it would have sent him to prison, but it would have at least educated the political novelist, if not the Electorate, and given him at least the eloquence of demagogic speech. Instead he clutched at the myth (I was a poor unknown boy, I worked hard, I became President), deranging and mangling it with the same incoherence he revealed as President in the tapes. He showed himself, in short, what his simpleminded enemies had always declared him to be, merely a hypocrite. If there is satisfaction in this spectacle (Nixon weeping), there is no catharsis. Kicked around in 1962 and kicked out in 1974, Nixon thus will not go away, can not go away, but instead persists in our consciousness, that glowering Herblockian face.

Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age* and F. Marion Crawford's *An American Politician* (1884) provide unique and provocative resolutions to the Brackenridgean paradox. Both writers begin with the implicit assumption that American politics is a sideshow, a mimicry of power, that it is not in fact to be taken seriously. Crawford proposes in his novel the idea that a triumvirate based in London anonymously dictates important decisions to its selected "leaders" in American government. In *An American Politician* these judicious Hamiltonian elders are principally concerned in securing the election of John Harrington, a responsible and recognizably patrician would-be senator. But an irresponsible and thoroughly venal politician, one Patrick Ballymolloy, seemingly stands in Harrington's way. Crawford's version of the deliberations of X, Y and Z seems lunatic in Crawford's context, but when these deliberations are transferred to Leland Stanford's boardroom or J. P. Morgan's inner office they ring with unmistakable authenticity. Z asks: "Now the question is, who owns Patrick Ballymolloy? Anyone know?" A laconic response is soon forthcoming: "Whoever can pay for him, I expect."[18] The triumvirate has at hand an extensive system of files, they have been in business for a long time in American politics, and they have carefully watched Harrington's budding career. Crawford's grasp of his material is far from sure and yet in his moral confusion, his simpleminded longing for stability, he catches with exactitude the mentality of many nineteenth-century capitalists who wished to organize and make efficient their contribution to American politics. "We do not like buying," X declares, "and we only do it in very urgent cases, and when we are certain of the result. To buy without certainty is simply to begin a system of reckless bribery, which we want to put down."[19] *The Gilded Age,* which Mark Twain co-authored with Charles Dudley Warner, works its way toward a similar view of American politics, but its methods, its approach, and its problems make it by far a more imaginative and significant novel. For in Mark Twain's conception Jacksonian Man is rendered from the inside, his character split into aspects and parts. Dilworthy is

sharply focused in the traditional mode, he is a cunning Suggsian rogue, but Colonel Sellers, whose fortunes are linked to Dilworthy's schemes, is a different creature. And a good deal of the novel's strength depends on the poetic ambivalence with which Mark Twain approaches this character.

There are two stories told in the novel. One embraces the world in which historical forces operate in a meaningful and progressive manner. Ruth Bolton attends medical school, Philip Sterling digs in a coal mine, scientific research is undertaken, investment risked, courtships initiated, business transacted. It is the real world, the industrial North, and here things get done. Then there is the surreal world of American politics, the stripped and impoverished South (Hawkeye) and a theatrical (crazily Southern) Washington where tired pigs doze in the shadow of half-built monuments. Here things rarely get done. Money is exchanged, speeches delivered, plans drawn up, appropriations solicited, bribes given and blackmail threatened, but for the most part it is all talk. Investigations of political corruption present findings that surprise no one and change nothing. The country gets on thanks to the Sterlings and Boltons. What happens in Washington is irrelevant and farcical. A single clasp holds this story to the other. At the end of the novel, their dreams smashed, Colonel Sellers and Washington Hawkins ruefully examine their failure. "We might all have been prosperous, now," Hawkins reflects, "we might all have been happy . . . if we had accepted our poverty at first and gone contentedly to work and built up our own weal by our own toil and sweat—."[20] It is elbow-grease, plucky know-how, and history itself that distinguishes Philip Sterling's mining venture in Ilium from Colonel Sellers' Columbus River Navigation Scheme. The former will send trains steaming across the nation and drive the pistons in its factories, the latter is mired in Jacksonian thinking—canals, real estate. Sterling's energies are directed at the concrete, externalized; Colonel Sellers' energy is turned upon the abstract, turned inward to inflate an unknown impossible self. "All his own schemes took larger shape and more misty and majestic proportions; and in this congenial area, the Colonel seemed even to himself to expand into something large and mysterious."[21] This insatiable desire to become "something large and mysterious" is, of course, Teague's passion in *Modern Chivalry*, and we have seen how strenuously Farrago pursues Teague in each attempted role, but in *The Gilded Age* the analyst and the dreamer are not always so clearly delineated.

Mark Twain's contempt for the irrationality of American politics is variously and strongly stated in the novel. He attacks with Brackenridgean ire the capricious ignorance of juries, the bestial credulity of the good folk in Cattleville who nod and swallow whole Dilworthy's large hypocrisies, that swarm of parvenus in Washington, latter-day Teagues who have altered their Patrick O'Reilly to Patrique Oreille, and through them he reveals in large the passive face of an inert and indifferent electorate. Yet Mark Twain's indignation mellows considerably when he

records the dreams of Colonel Sellers. And what are these dreams? And how do they differ from the dream of an O'Reilly to become an Orielle? The Colonel envisions himself as the "Grand Lama" of the United States shedding opulence on his relatives and friends, he sees himself as a grandiose contractor creating towns and prosperous cities in a yet unreconstructed South, but in those dreams, all of which are ultimately generous, we see also a poor and specific self trapped in the provincial squalor of Hawkeye, compelled to transmute boiled turnips into savory meat, a candle in a lantern into a roaring fireside, in order to assert its dignity. Colonel Sellers complicates the formal symmetry of *The Gilded Age,* diminishes our interest in Sterling's golden future, and thoroughly vexes the novel's moral composure. For he, too, signifies that restless desire to rise and escape the restrictive past (a bleak nameless peasant past) that springs Teague loose upon the political landscape in 1792, the desire that corrupts the Colonel and makes him Dilworthy's accomplice. Yet when he speaks, he is poignant, if not beautiful, in his grotesque innocence.

> Now do I look like a man who—does my history suggest that I am a man who deals in trifles, contents himself with the narrow horizon that hems in the common herd, sees no further than the end of his nose? Now you know that that is not me—couldn't be me. You ought to know that if I throw my time and abilities into a patent medicine, it's a patent medicine whose field of operations is the solid earth! its clients the swarming nations that inhabit it! Why what is the republic of America for an eye-water country? Lord bless you, it is nothing but a barren highway that you've got to cross to get to the true eye-water market! Why, Washington, in the Oriental countries people swarm like the sands of the desert; every square mile of ground upholds its thousands upon thousands of struggling human creatures—and every separate and individual devil of them's got the ophthalmia! It's as natural to them as noses are—and sin.[22]

In the Washington of Jay Gould and Jim Fisk (Risk and Fould in Keenan's *The Money-Makers*), Mark Twain thus beheld the wreckage of Jacksonian politics, the loose, laissez-faire world of Quodlibet blown up to national scale with all of its flaws luridly distended. The second thoughts of Kennedy's chronicler in *Quodlibet,* Solomon Secondthoughts, come to this: human nature is not suited to the "as you please" philosophy of Jacksonian democracy, not all men are equal, an 'open' society is an unbalanced, incessantly ruptured society, deficit spending defrauds posterity, the undiscriminate printing of paper money impoverishes everyone, bonanza-thinking is at once immoral and ahistorical, freedom inheres in the acceptance of one's past, one's place and one's work. In all this we see the closing sphincter of classic American conservatism, the retention that at once attracted and tortured Mark Twain who had himself sought gold in Washoe and who would again seek it fruitlessly in

the quick strike of the Paige Typesetter. The dazzling vistas that stretch forth in Colonel Sellers' expansive talk are indeed poetically enthralling. An ophthalmic Asia. We stand silent on a peak in Hawkeye. In *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1853), Joseph G. Baldwin is similarly beguiled by the extravagant lies of Ovid Bolus, at once horrified and fascinated by the baroque excesses of that feverish Jacksonian Southwest, excesses he particularly traced in its legal discourse. To the lawyers and politicians who arrive like wolves in the various boomtowns, truth is incidental to effect. They are there to make careers, not sense, to make themselves, and Baldwin, a Whig in sentiment, registers his disapproval. Yet he, too, was seduced by the green light that dances in the eyes of Ovid Bolus, and when we last see Baldwin in American letters, he is in San Francisco, having gone the full route.

In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Mark Twain would resume the Colonel's discourse in Hank Morgan's voice, reformulate and rephrase the substance of Colonel Sellers' dreams, and finally drive "the Boss" as mad as "The Grand Lama" becomes at the end of *The Gilded Age.* The political novel Brackenridge invented in *Modern Chivalry* reaches a full and complex development in Mark Twain's puzzling-forth of Colonel Sellers' fate. Divorced from reality by the shattering of his expectations and by now estranged from his roots in the South, the Colonel hesitates only a moment when Washington Hawkins invokes the ethic of honest work. "I've seen enough to show me where my mistake was," he asserts. "The law is what I was born for. I shall begin the study of the law."[23] But who, then, in the iconography of nineteenth-century American political fiction is this figure? His liberal motives do not sufficiently distinguish him from the Teagues and Dodges. He, too, is relentlessly on the make, a confidence man, but in Mark Twain's mind the Colonel is nonetheless different. He has confidence in his own fictions and when he speaks, unveiling his bizarre projects, he poetically transcends their craziness by mounting into the ecstasy of hyperbole. It is in fact this eloquence that distinguishes Colonel Sellers. His discourse is the only discourse in the novel that matters. Through its grandiloquence we see the pathos of his ambition, the pity of his lust for recognized being. *I am what I say I am.* As long as Colonel Sellers can believe he persuades others of this, as long as Washington Hawkins agrees that the boiled turnip is beef, that the improbable canal scheme is possible, the Colonel possesses being, he is the Colonel, a man of affairs, but when this consent is withdrawn, when young Hawkins refuses to believe, then the Colonel's precarious self cracks as a work of art and becomes an act of madness.

As we have seen, this denouement is rigorously avoided in American political fiction. Yet madness is the omnipresent *unspoken* in the political novel, the human feature in Teague's incoherent speech, the dark side of the Colonel's poetic invention, and the final episode in the story of Watergate. What did Nixon say to the portraits of former Presidents

when he spoke to them? *I am what I say I am.* The aim of the nineteenth-century political novelist (and the goal of all those numerous investigations into the Watergate conspiracy) is simply to say, echoing Captain Farrago: *He is not what he says he is.* Only Mark Twain seems to have understood the cost of being a Teague, a Dodge, a Ratcliffe, a Nixon, that awful expense of human energy, and realized the consequences. In the *Connecticut Yankee,* having introduced the liberating technology of the machine gun and the electrified fence to Arthurian England, Hank Morgan is at last forced to confront the meaning of his self-chosen title, The Boss. Alone on a hill, inside a fortress, he becomes in the name of justice and progress a mass-murderer. Had Nixon read Mark Twain instead of Theodore Roosevelt (whom Mark Twain cordially despised) on the eve of his departure, he might have chosen a larger role for himself in American history. He could have politely requested, in the lunatic fashion of Colonel Sellers, that he be appointed to the Supreme Court, or, in the fierce style of Hank Morgan, he could have announced the bombing of Harvard University. Or, like Huck Finn, told the truth, mainly. In any case, he would have freely spoken, torn his mask aside, and made impossible the dreary writing of John Ehrlichman's bad novel.

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footnotes

1. John Ehrlichman, *The Company* (New York, 1976), 162.
2. *The Presidential Transcripts* (New York, 1974), 691-693.
3. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age* (New York and London, 1906), II, 239-240.
4. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Modern Chivalry,* Claude M. Newlin, ed. (New York, 1937), 370.
5. *Ibid.,* 386.
6. *Ibid.,* 506.
7. *Ibid.,* 508.
8. *Ibid.,* 783.
9. *The Diary of John Quincy Adams, 1794-1845,* Allan Nevins, ed. (New York, London, Toronto, 1929), 335-336.
10. *Ibid.,* 392-393.
11. John Pendleton Kennedy, *Quodlibet* (Philadelphia, 1840), 123.
12. Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America* (New York, 1965), 117-156.
13. Henry Adams, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma,* introduction by Brooks Adams (New York, 1920), 77.
14. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York, 1957), 159.
15. Henry Adams, *Democracy* (New York, 1880), 10.
16. James Fenimore Cooper, *Home as Found* (New York, 1904), 24-25.
17. *Ibid.,* 209.
18. F. Marion Crawford, *An American Politician* (London, 1885), 194.
19. *Ibid.,* 197.
20. *The Gilded Age,* II, 330.
21. *Ibid.,* 89.
22. *Ibid.,* 1, 99.
23. *Ibid.,* II, 330.