In the Archives
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In the Archives

Sometimes their handwriting was just a damn scrawl, like email full of typos; they wrote so many letters, little notes, whipping off a dozen in a morning, and the mail delivered several times a day. You have to guess at some of the words; the transcripts leave blanks. Or they refer to things there's no record of, like an automobile accident Isabella Gardner had in France before she met up with Henry Adams in the summer of 1906. A collision perhaps, a mishap on the road that had great drama when it happened but no consequences for the story that can be told about her because there is no story, no record. *Mrs. Gardner has come suddenly back from Dinard with an automobile accident . . .* It's not even clear to whom this news was addressed. And to another (also unknown) correspondent: *Mrs. Gardner is here with a chapter of accidents but has escaped them, apparently, and is helping to amuse La Farge . . .* That chapter so lightly ironized by Adams is gone; all there is to do is leaf on to La Farge and the amusements of the French summer. Still, someone has penciled in the margin a question about it.

Telling their stories, there's so much to imagine, trying make them compatible, or to decide against them because they were so impenetrably upper class, so repugnantly rich. Hugh Brogan (whose opinion eighty years on shares the jumbled file folder) recoils from Adams: "What leaps to the eye nowadays," he says, "is that this rich and cultivated gentleman never seems to have felt that he owed his fellow men any service. He lived across Lafayette Square from the White House for 40 years or so, sneering at every President in turn, dabbling in a little political intrigue when he could and coddling his sensibilities." Self-righteous, uncharitable, intellectually perverse, anti-Semitic . . . Deep disapproval of this neurotic citizen of an earlier world, although, he adds, "the *oeuvre* is impressive, and its continuing vitality demonstrates the needlessness of biography"—for a man whose life was so apparently uneventful, he means. Where is the national drama of Henry Adams?

Adams himself wondered this, but the historian was also skeptical of the shape of all stories; the pen is a blind man's cane, he said, to keep us out of the gutter of meaninglessness. Theories dissolve as quickly as we construct them, come apart into unintelligibility as they proliferate—his included, even as they are spun out in the later chapters of *The Education of Henry Adams*. He's like a cartoon character erasing the road he's walking

on as he goes. His path as a historian, he says, was *blocked by the scandalous failure of civilization at the moment it had achieved complete success.* He means the Roman Empire, but also the way success and failure knot themselves together, a phenomenon not restricted to the classical past that keeps choking his unfolding narrative. Even worse, history, in its mania for "events," misses the central drama, i.e., the encounter between the human mind and the forces of Nature. *That* history, he predicted, would be a dynamic of relentless progress that nevertheless never moves off the dime. The American of the year 2000, he said, imagining us (although probably not specifically Hugh Brogan), *would need to think in contradictions . . . the new universe would know no law that could not be proved by its anti-law.* As context and complexity expand, there is no way of telling a straight story. With such insights does this neurotic serve (or fail) his country.

So, here's a complex moment, found in the same folder, for *us* to imagine. In the spring of 1908 Loulie Hooper, one of Adams's nieces, sent a copy of his *Education* (privately printed) to Isabella Gardner. "I have been wanting all along to get it for you," she says, "& to slip you in before one or two other applicants who have a previous promise. This is what I am doing for you." Then she offers a few hints as to the desired response. "Most people take the book more personally than H. A. intended. Of course it is many-sided like himself, & he is baring his personal experience in order to explain the steps up to his favourite 'Dynamic Theory of History.' Most people pass over that chapter as unintelligible and irritating." (Brogan: "a sea of confusion.") "To him," she explains, "it sums up the result of his study of History, & the book is shaped with that chapter in view. He says that few take in what he's driving at. He gave me this clue & I hand it on to you," she continues artlessly, "but don't tell on me if you write to him after reading. Say that you made me lend you the book etc." Adams's nieces, of which there were many, adored him. Loulie wanted his friends to praise the book, and to praise it correctly. There was no way for her to know how important a life the book was to have, no way to see into the future—she was concerned with the living uncle and his feelings. The Americans of the year 2000 were not on her mind, that is, nor was the drama of Henry Adams entirely hidden from her.

Mrs. Gardner, then, on the 20th of June, wrote to Adams, saying she had made "that dear girl Loulie Hooper" lend her the book and what a pleasure it was. "Every chapter more interesting than the one before, & at last all culminating in the 'Dynamic Theory of History' and the 'Law of Acceleration'—it has set me whirling at such a rate that I am burning!" Isabella, too, was very fond of Henry Adams. They were almost the same age, had lived through the same times. They shared an aesthetic outlook, although he said of her (again, that summer of 1906, France, unrecorded

correspondent), *She is wonderfully strong and fresh in feeling. On the whole, she is quite the most remarkable woman I ever met, and yet she has no reason. Tant mieux!* In his late sixties and feeling in physical decline, he was impressed by her robustness, her unabating liveliness. Reason be damned, then, if the trade-off was freshness continuing into one's seventh decade. Did he believe her delight in those late chapters, in which he riffs on energy and history, force and motion, speed and change and the continual subversion of all stability? She was already and always a whirler and if his book was just caught up in the energy already engaged, *tant mieux*.

But Isabella: what in fact did she find in her friend's book? You can read the letter as shameless flattery, good manners, self-delusion. In the context of Loulie's instructions it seems to be following orders to the letter, but does that mean she did not in fact enjoy the *Education*? Her final paragraph is a somewhat digressive attempt to pick up the idea of constant movement. She was sitting as she wrote, it seems, beside a fireplace on the chimney of which was the motto "*Motu et Lumine*," and she segues to "the Light—you have often flooded me with—for which I am always thankfully yours." It does lack reason, but perhaps not sincerity. The drama of Isabella Gardner, finding her own meaning, finding herself in history's dynamic, is partly written before the post went out that vanished June day. Now there is the amusement of finding these two letters gathered in the same file. Now Henry and Isabella and Loulie and also Hugh Brogan have fallen into the hands of the future, where the laws of friendship may be easily disproved (or disapproved of) by the anti-laws of storytelling. The Americans of the year 2000 turn over the contradictions of progress, every chapter more interesting than the one before, accidents and instability becoming the story as the June days circle around them. Digressive, unsorted, lightly penciled: the ghostly dynamic of the past is transformed into an archive of illegible histories. Still we fill in the blanks with our busy pens, drawn to and drawing drama, shape, and law.