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### Author

Kafka, Linus

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**Alex Zwerdling, *Improvised Europeans: American Literary Expatriates and the Siege of London*. New York: Basic Books, 1998. xvi, 383 pp. ISBN: 0306812673**

In *Improvised Europeans: American Literary Expatriates and the Siege of London*, literary historian Alex Zwerdling tracks the origins of Anglo-American modernism. His investigation examines the lives of four American literary figures whose identities – to a great extent – were formed by their connection to English cultural life. These four – Henry Adams, Henry James, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot – lived with a degree of affiliation to one another that is a reminder of the small concentric social circles in which New England patricians mixed: Adams and James were friends, James and Pound were familiars, Pound mentored Eliot.

Such connections, though interesting in their own sake, also had a great deal of significance. For Zwerdling, each of these literary figures hoped to detach himself from his American past and become allied with superior English (and European) culture. Each shared a sense of what Zwerdling calls “Anglo-Saxon panic,” an anxiety about American culture in the dawn of the twentieth century. America’s growing commercialism and parochialism threatened to render obsolete the New England mind with its adamant self-discipline and regard for tradition as a form of cultural authority. Expatriating to Europe became a way to reclaim the cultural tradition and heritage that Americans were rejecting. Theirs was an attempt to transcend American national associations and to become cosmopolitan. It was in great part the desires and beliefs of such expatriate authors that led to the development of Anglo-American modernism.

In the opening chapters and the chapters on Adams, Zwerdling traces a shift of power from Britain to the United States and addresses the great changes in American demography brought on by the influx of immigrants, especially from central and southern Europe. He construes the late nineteenth century relationship between Britain and America to be one colored by insult and contempt, with British snobbery ignoring American literary power and American political might disregarding the weakening empire. At the same time, the men whom Zwerdling focuses attention upon – all of whom came from Protestant, pre-Revolutionary families (in fact, Adams and Eliot were distantly related) – saw the force of the old order slipping and it frightened them.

This Anglo-Saxon panic was most pronounced in Adams. Disdainful of a world he saw polluted by greed and corruption, Adams felt ill at ease in the new America. Zwerdling recounts Adams' various attempts to live outside the stream of the new forces while still remaining influential – writing history, for one, or editing the *North American Review*. Or writing novels about the decline of American political life, while working behind the curtains of the very political scene he criticized. After the death of his wife Marion Adams, he spent more time in Europe (and traveling in the East) than in the States. The time he spent in London, though, declined as he surrendered to wanderlust that only heightened his sense of displacement and failure.

James, who arrived in England with letters of introduction from Adams, more successfully took to the life of the expatriate. Still, Zwerdling notes a thread between the novels of James and the sentiments of Adams regarding the overwhelming sense of failure and anxiety. For all the authors, Pound and Eliot as well, self-imposed exile in Europe allowed them to reclaim traditions that their mother-country had, in their view, surrendered to run-away capitalism and the immigrant horde. But in their desire to reclaim Europe, to wash away the multiple and conflicting American sins of provincialism, corrupt pluralism, and an uncouth avarice, the four were also attempting to universalize their work. But this attempt had its risks. In moving towards the cosmopolitan outlook these authors often mistook Europeanism for universalism. Moreover, the more successful they became in embracing cosmopolitanism, the more displaced from the roots of their American cultural authority they became. The success or failure of these authors in their displaced conditions (James remained in England; Eliot became a British citizen; Pound died in shame, a fascist sympathizer; Adams never surrendered his Washington D.C. home, but lived out his years in trans-Atlantic drift) is critical to an understanding of literary modernism.

Despite making clear their connection both to each other and to literary modernism:

The birth of Anglo-American modernism as a self-conscious movement owes a great deal to the overlap (and the shared assumptions) of these displaced Americans. They may be said to constitute a transgenerational ideological dispensation, with common assumptions about nation and culture, the role

of the metropolis, the relationship between artist and audience, and between America and Europe. (217)

Zwerdling nonetheless falls short of providing a precise definition of literary modernism. But the value of his work is still clear: in clearly linking these four to the stream of Anglo-American literary modernism, the stage is set for making inquiries into other modernisms. For Zwerdling, the perseverance of these authors' works in the literary canon is enough to justify his inquiry, but the larger question of why these works have lasted is quite another issue. The problem that themes within early modernist literature suggest retrograde conservatism – patrician heritage, anxiety about technology and corporate power, anti-Semitism, ambivalence towards progress, dispassionate detachment, and retreat into historical allusion – inform our historical understanding of modernism. More importantly, the problem of modernism is international, the main idea promoted in *Improvised Europeans*, although the focus is in on Anglo-American relations. Zwerdling presents good literary history. His theoretical model may be subterranean to his narrative about what happened in the expatriate years of literary modernism, but he uses author's texts, diaries, biographies and various primary and secondary source documents to excellent effect, providing a good model for research as well as for the approach to collective biography.

Linus Kafka

University of California, Los Angeles