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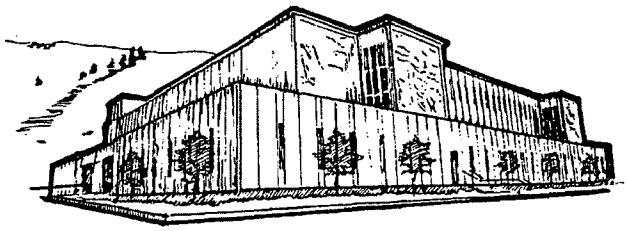

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Henry Adams and the Problem of Value in Modern America

by Laure Pengelly

B. A. Carleton College, 1977

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

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1993

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Henry Adams and the Problem of Value
in Modern America (103 pp.)

Director: David Emmons

The complexity of late-nineteenth-century elitist antimodernism as illustrated by the life and late works of Henry Adams elucidates the contemporary crisis of modernity and the categories of modernism, postmodernism, and antimodernism. Those definitions in turn clarify the meaning of Adams for contemporary historians. He helps to prove that postmodernism is not a new phenomenon but a more extreme formulation of an old reaction. In response to rationalistic, relativistic, technological, capitalist, modernity, postmodernists declare a new absolute truth of meaninglessness. Antimodernists desire transcendence, seeking a serviceable truth within the modern world of relativism.

In his life and in his three major late works: The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography, Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, and The Degradation of Democratic Dogma, Adams responded to the chaos of rapid nineteenth-century change by searching for models of unity. He studied science for models of understanding history and society, dispensing with the progressive interpretation of evolution, and drawing from the Second Law of Thermodynamics the notion of the degradation of society. His wife's suicide spurred a more intense personal quest in the Orient where Buddhism inspired a return to the compassionate, unifying Virgin of Chartres.

One lesson Adams' fascination with science reinforces for historians is that one cannot force conclusions. This study ends, therefore, with many unanswered questions. It does assert the importance of the history of ideas. Henry Adams' foray into the past was not a nostalgic escape from alienating modernity but an effort to find an idea that had been lost to society's detriment. The Gothic arch of Chartres symbolized the beautiful tension in maintaining meaning in an age of relativism. Henry Adams was a "worthy failure" who could not believe fully his own pronouncements, a formidable critic, but not a great guide. He was the "intellectual prig" he feared being. Nonetheless, he had the humility of the true student, and he sought earnestly. We can learn from Henry Adams the power of belief in belief.

PREFACE

Antimodernist historian and writer Henry Adams, fourth generation of the famous Adams family of Boston, formed the Conservative Christian Anarchists with his young friend Bay Lodge in the 1890s. He argued that the club could only have two members because any more would distract from the perfect contradiction made possible by two. In The Education of Henry Adams, he declared: "Henry Adams was the first in an infinite series to discover and admit to himself that he really did not care whether truth was, or was not, true." Such delight in perversity and apparent denial of the search for absolute truth associated with antimodernists, coupled with some startlingly postmodern pronouncements of pleasure in destruction--"To me the crumbling of worlds is always fun"--raise the possibility that Adams was a postmodernist. This image seems at odds with his typically antimodernist Boston Brahmin background and his curmudgeonly comments on the destructive course of democracy. The resolution to the dilemma of confused categories lies in acknowledging his boundless interests; his universality challenges the artificial restrictions of the categories of antimodernism and postmodernism, as well as the modernism against which they developed. A new study of Adams raises the possibility that he was a precursor with Nietzsche of the postmodernists, and points toward a redefinition of his antimodernism.

An examination of the deconstructionist technique applied by contemporary theorist Hayden White to Henry Adams clarifies the dimensions of the debate as a leading postmodernist historian deconstructs an important antimodernist historian. White's explication of The Education and Adams in "Method and Ideology in Intellectual History: The Case of Henry Adams," (1982) represents an extreme version of the reductive analyses to which the unhappy elite who tried to make sense of industrial, democratic modernity have been subjected. This determinedly

theoretical approach limits its subjects in much the same way as did such previous constructs as Freudian or Marxist theories. The critic, in order to be both fair and productive, must walk the narrow line of sympathetic but insightful analysis. White deconstructed The Education of Henry Adams, however, not to determine what Adams communicated but how, dismissing study of the content as less fruitful than the form for understanding the ideological context of the book.

Historians and literary critics have long engaged in a conspiracy to subvert the understanding of the reader, according to postmodern criticism of traditional scholarship. This conspiracy has been inspired both by the historians' propensity for selecting certain figures, usually those who write clearly and thoughtfully, as representatives of a time or a way of thinking and by the literary critics' elitist taste for classics. Both traditions operate in a hierarchical mode. The well educated (often members of yet another group at the top of a hierarchy--the upper class) have been favored over the poorly educated as objects of historical study, and Shakespeare has generally been considered more worth a reader's while than any comic book. Hayden White attempts to render this putative conspiracy lame and unfashionable, therefore impotent, by applying semiotics or deconstruction techniques to The Education of Henry Adams. The book is well suited to White's plan because it unites the two sources of his anathema: it is classic literature written both by and about a representative well-educated member of the American aristocracy.

The advantage of semiotics, according to White, is that it resolves the age-old dilemma of the relation between text and context by "questioning the referential status of any artifact."[1] He exhorts the reader to ask not what the author said and what the text means or what he meant by it, but what was going on in his subconscious before he wrote it. It is the process that

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[1] Hayden White. "Method and Ideology in Intellectual History: The Case of Henry Adams," Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives, eds. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 305.

fascinates White, not the results. "By directing our attention to the reflection of things that appear in the text, a semiological approach to intellectual history fixes us directly before the process of meaning-production that is the special subject of intellectual history. . . ."[2]

White is not a sympathetic critic; he gives no evidence of having read other works by Henry Adams to know the range of his interests and attitudes, especially the many aspects of postmodern sensibility that they share. White fails to investigate fully because his object is not the explication of text and context associated with traditional scholarship; he is after the ideological underpinnings. He exposes, for example, the "supremely egotistical" suppression of the "I" in The Education. He views Adams' use of the third person singular to refer to himself as a class-based phenomenon. The Education, which expurgates the "I" completely, demonstrates a self-consciously passive, "modern" sensibility, although White argues that Adams displays the false modesty of the upper class by hiding himself in the text in order to achieve more complete control over the reader. A close reading of Adams forces the consideration that he is both passively receptive--open to learning about his world--and actively controlling whatever parts of his world came within his power. Adams himself explained the suppressed "I" by reference to Rousseau's overuse of it, "A monument of warning against the Ego." White couches his criticism of Adams' pretended "denial of authorial ego" in a seeming concern for the loss of opportunity for conversation in such a technique: there is "no I to invoke a you."[3] He asserts that the new method exposes the old ideology, which granted authority of a most autocratic and damaging nature to the authors of texts and to analytical historians. Analytical in this negative context refers

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[2] Hayden White, p. 305.

[3] Hayden White, pp. 303-4.

to the "assertive and judgmental" rather than the "dialogistic or conversational" approach he claims to favor.[4]

White attacks not just Adams but the very notion that a classic is superior literature and a representative document of history. In what is now a classic line of postmodernism, White declares that a comic strip must be accorded the same respect due to all texts as sources of insight to a process of meaning production:

> in the interest of a scientific responsibility which must inform our work, if it is to claim an authority any larger than that of virtuoso performance, we must be prepared to grant that the comic strip cannot be treated as qualitatively inferior to a Shakespeare play, or any other classic text.[5]

White clarifies further: the difference between the comic book and the classic lies only in the quantitative degree of complexity, although he does acknowledge that those for whom complexity is a value might see a qualitative difference. That is their problem, however; the text itself does not claim any special privileges. Only meaning-production matters, and no document is any more conducive to that end than any other. The quotation above raises two issues for debate: one, that the author considers deconstruction a scientific process, and two, that the authority of a virtuoso performance can be dismissed as irrelevant. There is no point, according to White, in reading Henry Adams in order to understand an aspect of nineteenth-century antimodernism because he

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[4] White's concerns about Adams' suppression of the "I" can be better understood with reference to a recent distinction between "modernism" and "contemporary":

> The Voltairean "I" has the characteristics--rationalism, progressive politics, etc.--of the world the writer attempts to influence, whereas the modern "I" through receptiveness, suffering, passivity, transforms the world to which it is exposed. . . . The Voltairean egoists are contemporaries without being, from an aesthetic or literary point of view, moderns. What they write is rationalist, sociological, political and responsible. The writing of the moderns is the art of observers conscious of the action of the conditions observed upon their sensibility. Their critical awareness includes ironic self-criticism. Stephen Spender. Struggle of the Modern. London: Hamilton, 1963, pp. 71-72.

Spender's description of the specifically modern sensibility meshes more with the concerns of many postmodernists than with those of modernists as traditionally defined, but ironic self-criticism is not a new approach to the world. It is the defining characteristic of most of Henry Adams' writing.

[5] Hayden White, pp. 307-8.

has been "privileged." White, for example, criticizes The Education for its "mandarinlike pickiness and the preciosity of the diction," qualities of which Adams was painfully aware.[6]

The scholar who follows conventional methodology for textual analysis, "anyone wishing to assess its logical consistency or to assign points for its stylistic proprieties in its various parts," is a "naive expositor" who has mistakenly accepted the work on its own terms. White turns the tables by arguing that the flaws the conventional critic detects are "for the semiologically oriented commentator its very virtue as a 'document' of intellectual history."[7] This study joins the "naive expositors" and asserts with the example of Henry Adams that, whether "privileged" or not, certain figures are more worth exploring than others because they have more to teach. It is time to reclaim the authority of an educated, concerned, active elite; the Boston Brahmin birth and manner is not the man.

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[6] Hayden White, p. 308.

[7] Hayden White, p. 308.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii

Preface iii

Introduction 1

1. Modernism, Antimodernism, and Postmodernism: The Context of Henry Adams 7

2. Henry Adams, A Biographical Sketch 28

The Late Works of Henry Adams 46

3. The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography 47

4. Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres 63

5. The Degradation of Democratic Dogma 73

Conclusion 88

Bibliography 99

INTRODUCTION

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head. . .
. . . . . .
For the world cries your faith is now
But a dead time's exploded dream. . .

Matthew Arnold
"Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse"

In this fragment of poetry, Matthew Arnold captured the disaffection of the men and women confronting modernity in the last century. His words continue to resonate, because many men and women of the late-twentieth century feel caught again between two worlds as the now familiar modernity encounters the discomfiting challenge of postmodernism. Resonance suggests that the lessons of an earlier period apply; we have much to learn from Henry Adams and the antimodernists of the late-nineteenth century about the philosophical, historical, psychological, and social dilemmas of the current period. We can learn as well whether the present moment of postmodernism is in fact a new phenomenon or merely a more dramatic elaboration of the crisis of modernity.

The concept of resonance also allows one to venture into a field that has not been completely mapped and that cannot be reconstructed with any degree of scientific validity. When one enters intellectual territory in which the strands of meaning are intertwined and ambiguous, discretion is the lesser part of valor.

The belief that ideas do matter informs this paper. It is not merely nostalgia for the lovely prose of the nineteenth century that sends one back, although that is a part of the fascination with the period and with Adams. It is important to learn from our late-nineteenth-century forebears

how they responded to the cultural crisis of their generation. Many were repulsed and frightened by the new thinking and new technology of their time. They struggled to avoid abuses of power by industrialists and by technology itself. Adams especially engaged in a desperate search for a stable truth in unstable times. A meaningful analysis should address both his successes and his failures, his wisdom and his absurdities. It should attempt to answer a slate of questions challenging today's social critics, such as where Adams and other antimodernists of the late-nineteenth century found value in a world that seemed to them to have been deprived of value; how they accommodated themselves to a world in which they had to find a new role for themselves; and how they made use of the past to build a future for themselves. As Henry Adams returned to the Middle Ages to recover the religiously centered unity his society had lost, this study is in part a return to the late-nineteenth century to find what contemporary society has lost--a belief in the possibility of transcendence.

Matthew Arnold's poem sets the tenor of this study. The angst of the antimodernists is real; it is significant historically; it means something to their late-twentieth-century counterparts who wrestle with similar concerns. Although their interests differ widely, postmodern theorists of history and philosophy do share a radical agenda to dispense with the search for truth and unity. The modern world can be defined by its denial of absolute truth, so the postmodern contribution is nothing more than the extreme insistence on the futility of the search. Matthew Arnold, like the journalist who wrote prematurely of Mark Twain's death, greatly exaggerated the death of his traditional, familiar world, just as the term "postmodern" exaggerates the end of modernity; yet Arnold's poem expresses an important emotional reality of alienation.

Postmodern thought, though certainly not monolithic, does constitute a pattern of response to the modernity of which it is a part. Nietzsche's incredible complexity allows him to serve as a connecting link to the major French theorists of postmodernism, Michel Foucault and Jacques

Derrida; he is an antimodernist contemporary of Adams, yet he initiated philosophical postmodernism. Hayden White, an American postmodernist historian, offers a fortuitous illustration of postmodern concerns and techniques applied to Adams and his most famous work, The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography. White's deconstruction of The Education, as discussed in the Preface, reveals the social and political tension between the postmodern and the antimodern despite their common antipathy toward the modern. White derides Adams as an exclusive, egocentric abuser of authorial power, qualities White inadvertently displays himself. Because the postmodernists, although they span the political spectrum, are usually associated with leftist politics, they find the often aristocratic, elitist antimodernists troublesome. They object rightly to the economic class distinctions made by many elitist antimodernists, yet their own abstruse theories and use of language guarantee an exclusive intellectual class. We begin, therefore, with an elucidation of categories. A common enemy must make some common cause between the antimodernists and the postmodernists even though the two groups draw radically different conclusions from their opposition to modernism.

This effort to understand the changing of an era will include special focus on the search for meaning by the educated, middle- to upper-class American elite who felt themselves excluded from their society and their "proper" leadership role within it by the democratization of culture that followed the democratization of politics, in part because of the effects of industrialization. Henry Adams functioned as a dominant, influential, and widely published member of this group. For this analysis of the extent to which we continue to grapple with new versions of an old phenomenon, Adams presents himself as the test case.

Because of the distance in time and the vast gulf of psychic space created by the events of the twentieth century, Adams is certainly not a representative figure of or a spokesman for the late-twentieth-century antimodernist. He offers a reassuringly familiar echo, however, and thus

the possibility of guidance, especially if we view the postmodern challenge as a continuation and reformulation of the modern challenge.

In addition to establishing the links between modernism and postmodernism, a reexamination of Henry Adams helps the contemporary reader to resolve the philosophical dilemmas posed by postmodernism. Henry Adams himself did not reach a peaceful accommodation with his world, but he left a poignant record of his attempts to do so through studies of science and religion. His Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres reveals the depths of his spiritual yearning. The Education of Henry Adams and The Degradation of Democratic Dogma, a posthumous collection of his works by his brother Brooks, relate his efforts to understand and make use of the new developments in science at the end of the nineteenth century to formulate a new unity for his society.

"For each age the truths, in all their realms, must be stated, restated, elaborated, modified and varied. . . by the great men" (Edmund Fuller). The use of Adams to test the validity of the boundaries and definitions we ascribe to various phases of history raises the issue of the representative personality. Adams' serviceability lies in his not being at all typical of any group other than perhaps his extended family. He speaks for many of his contemporaries because the extent of both his interest in the changes in his world and his ability to communicate his reactions to those changes intelligibly and interestingly was atypical. He was an outstanding critic, although he was not finally a great intellectual or an effectual cultural guide for reasons that this study will make clear.

Intellectual historians, beginning with Vico and Voltaire and culminating with Burckhardt, have argued for the validity of the concept of a spokesperson, qualified by his or her insight and erudition to express the often inchoate thoughts and feelings of his contemporaries. Q. D. Leavis

makes the general point, and inadvertently describes Adams, or at least his sense of himself, in the process of distinguishing the major novelist from the merely popular novelist as:

> a writer peculiarly sensitive to national tensions and conflicts and one who, by the accidents of his personal history, is specially qualified to feel and register the characteristic and deeper movements of the life of his time, has a true sense of values, and has the wisdom and insights which make him a warning voice for his generation.[1]

The Adams family background that served Henry both as rich inheritance and as burden would certainly qualify as "the accidents of personal history" that condition one person rather than another to speak for his time.

The concept of the representative personality prevailed during the time Adams was growing to adulthood. "A reasonably well-read American living during the second quarter of the nineteenth century would have been familiar with the thesis that the spirit or genius of a historical period can condense itself, spontaneously, in the person of a single spokesman."[2] Adams may well have imbibed the notion and consciously developed himself as the mouthpiece of an antimodern elite, but whether consciously or not he speaks for a generation of men and women alienated from modernity.

The extraordinary complexity of Adams' mind and personality and his shifting attitudes--the contrast between his almost fawning, wistful descriptions of the Middle Ages as a refuge for those lost in modernity and his eagerness to keep up with the future through the latest scientific developments--all distinguish him as a man open to changing structures of thought, at the same time that he is emotionally and ideologically repulsed by many of those changes. His pragmatic approach to the search for unity and meaning--essentially whatever works--allows him to view

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[1] Q. D. Leavis. "The Englishness of the English Novel," Modern Age, vol. 26, Summer/Fall 1982, p. 354.

[2] Mitchell Breitwieser. Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representative Personality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 1

dispassionately the issues of science and religion that confused many of his contemporaries. Yet, his passion for that search permits us to see in the same man, the scars wrought by the rapid pace of modernity.

As we consider the work of Adams from the perspective of contemporary theorists, it is important to bear in mind the traditional image of the dwarf on the shoulders of the giant. We might from our vantage point see even more clearly than did our predecessors the chaos in our universe, but we see it only because of what men like Adams saw, and, despite that advantage, we cannot always make the adjustments they made between that harsh reality and the human need for unity and meaning. As Adams summarized the problem in his paean to the Middle Ages, Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres: "Mankind could not admit an anarchical--a dual or a multiple--universe. The world was there, staring them in the face, with all its chaotic conditions, and society insisted on its unity in self-defence." Henry Adams accepted the contradictions inherent in being human; he valiantly tried to understand them, and his efforts are worth our study today.

CHAPTER 1

MODERNISM, ANTIMODERNISM, AND POSTMODERNISM

THE CONTEXT OF HENRY ADAMS

This study uses the context of postmodernism to elucidate the antimodernism of Henry Adams' life and late writings, thus a brief discussion of the two terms, along with the modernism against which they react, is in order. Antimodernism and postmodernism share scorn for modernism, which is essentially the Greek ideal of rationalism that humankind is capable of understanding nature and making progress in society. It has been the defining premise of the Western world since the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. This definition of modernity was challenged at the end of the nineteenth century by developments in industrial capitalism, the social sciences and psychology, and the democratization of culture, which inspired an often backward-looking antimodern reaction. Antimodernists such as Henry Adams championed the modernist ideal of rationalism but condemned the specific late-nineteenth-century manifestation of modernism. Others advocated a return to a traditional culture of unquestioned authority, blending with premodernism, which abhors the hubris of modernism's emphasis on individual human agency.[1]

The term "postmodern" was first used after World War II defied the claims of human rationality. Theorists bemoaned the loss of faith in modern uses of reason, science, and technology that the war and developments in the social sciences, especially psychology, had forced on a previously hopeful, self-important Western world. Because World War II seemed the "culmination of demonic modernity," any time after the war must therefore be postmodern.

[1] The American antimodernist period from the Civil War to World War I will be referred to as the late-nineteenth century.

Toynbee associates "post-Modernism"-- "irrationality, anarchy, and threatening indeterminacy"-- with the rise in the late-nineteenth century of the industrial urban working class and mass society, education, and culture.[2] This form began at about the same time and for many of the same reasons as antimodernism, but it took a far more extreme tack in response to the perceived failure of modernism. The postmodernism referred to in this study, however, is a post-1965 phenomenon that denies not just the success but the validity of the Enlightenment promise; no truth is possible. Postmodernism maintains the modern premise but pushes it further, rejecting more completely the pull of traditional authority. Despite the death knell sounded by the term "postmodernism," modernity is still the defining world view of Western society.

Modernity is most usefully defined by reference to the Enlightenment with its emphasis on reason and the questioning of authority, and its new faith in the perfectibility of individuals, the progress of mankind, and the authority of science. The modern is Western, industrial, commercial, liberal. It is secular, antitraditional, and radically critical. The Enlightenment promised autonomy, building on Machiavelli's notion that nature was to be mastered not contemplated. This modern faith in the power of mankind was strongly challenged in the mid- to late-nineteenth century as the world changed under the impact of industrialization and democratic politics, resulting in dislocation and alienation. Unlike many antimodernists, Henry Adams maintained his faith in eighteenth-century rational modernism despite his abhorrence of the specific modern context in which he lived.

Since the early nineteenth century, partly as a result of romanticism, "modernity" has divided into the two opposing strands that still define it: the practical bourgeois, and the aesthetic, which developed in opposition to the former and emerged as "modernist." The characteristics of

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[2] Qtd. Matei Calinescu. Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1987, p. 135.

bourgeois modernity are essentially those of the Enlightenment: a positive attitude toward science and technology, a view of time as a commodity, the cult of reason, the humanistic ideal of freedom, pragmatism, and the cult of action and success.[3] Bourgeois modernity is associated with the rise in social and economic status of the middle class so deplored by elitist antimodernists. This predominantly positive response to modernity elicited the opposing aesthetic response, which cannot be quite so neatly categorized. The aesthetic form of modernism recoiled before the bourgeois form because of its "philistine" characteristics, but it, too, welcomed the relief that modernity brought from traditional authority. The aesthetic form ranges from "rebellion, anarchy, and apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile," the last of which is a common form of antimodern reaction.[4] In a total confusion of terms, it is at the same time postmodern because it also dispenses with the modern notions of progress and rationality.[5] A spirit of "unbounded relativism" separates both the practical bourgeois and the aesthetic modernities from the premodern world of social and moral certainty supported by absolute authority. This uncertainty is "the fatal irritant of Modernism."[6] Because the modern dispenses with authority, it is intensely individualistic. Extreme delight in self precludes a complete reliance upon the authority of the Church, so many theorists have assumed that modernism is necessarily irreligious. The religious impulse is not, however, synonymous with the Church. As mid-nineteenth-century modernists explored the consequences of the death of God, they lost none of their connectedness with religion; they merely defined that relationship in negative terms, as in passionate atheism. Furthermore, the modern sensibility would not have been possible without the Christian sense of

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[3] Calinescu, p. 41.

[4] Calinescu, p. 42.

[5] Calinescu, p. 265.

[6] John Crowe Ransom, qtd. in Calinescu, p. 83.

linear time, so modernity owes its origins to the traditional world view it seeks to demonize.[7] Modernity is completely compatible with, because derived from, the Judeo-Christian concept, which is "linear, eschatological, progressive, and revolutionary."[8]

Principles of evolution as interpreted by Social Darwinists exacerbated the association of modernity with positive change; the modern is essentially the belief that today is better than yesterday, and tomorrow will be better still because human reason is sufficient to solve all problems. It was but a short leap of logic to extrapolate from improvements in understanding of the scientific world and in standards of living to a notion of superiority in aesthetics. In a development especially appalling to the antimodernists, even beauty lost its transcendence. "What we have here is a major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty."[9]

The central problem for nineteenth-century men and women was coping with change. The industrial revolution, which began in the previous century, affected the total sense of reality: industries drastically altered the appearance of the countryside; the sense of time had to develop with the coming of the railroad and amazing speed. The social and political order evolved along with the rising middle class involved in business and industry. The nineteenth-century conception of humankind had to keep pace not only with changes in occupations and social order, but also with advances in science and Biblical criticism, which undermined for many people religious faith and understanding of their proper place in the world. Freud's writings on psychoanalysis called

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[7] Calinescu, pp. 59-60, based on Octavio Paz.

[8] Robert B. Pippin. Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture. Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991, pp. 17-18.

[9] Calinescu, p. 3.

into question man's definition of himself as he entered the twentieth century. According to the German sociologist Karl Mannheim, "Two powerful currents flow together here and reinforce one another with an overwhelming pressure: one, the disappearance of a unitary world with fixed values and norms; and, two, the sudden surge of the hitherto hidden unconscious into the bright daylight of consciousness."[10]

The antimodernists' response to the trials of modernity was far richer and more complex than their negative (anti-) name and the dismissive, reductive commentary of many contemporary, and particularly postmodern, critics would imply. Like many other antimodern elites who hoped to escape the social, scientific, and aesthetic dilemmas of the machine age, Adams looked back to the Middle Ages for a model of unity, meaning, beauty, and a proper place in society for an Adams. His backward-looking stance and his opposition to his age certainly make it easy though inaccurate to dismiss him as a naive, fearful reactionary who failed to forge a constructive bond with the present.

Antimodernism arose in part because people of the nineteenth century encountered rapidly accelerated change with no complementary acceleration in their ability to understand and adjust to it. The times proved especially difficult for elitists such as Henry Adams whose sense of himself, his job prospects, and his role in society were upset by the advent of democratized culture. He had to learn to define and establish himself without the entrée his name would have provided in a more aristocratic culture. At the same time, he was further frustrated because he grasped his society's need for guidance, felt himself qualified as a critic, and could not convince his compatriots that his warnings should be heeded.

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[10] Karl Mannheim. Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Culture. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1936, p. 37.

Fundamentally, the problem was to find unity and order in an age of transition. Some, such as Edward Bellamy and the Socialist William Morris, sought unity by looking forward, proposing new philosophies and new lifestyles in order to unite with the future by renouncing the present. But, as Harvard scholar Charles Eliot Norton suggested, "To live for the future, as we are told to do, is to live on the windiest and least nourishing of diets," thus many others sought unity by renouncing the future and allying themselves with an often imaginary past.

The European antimodernists were not a monolithic group, but they did tend more toward extreme aesthetic and political solutions to their cultural dilemmas than did the Americans. The writers in nineteenth-century France reacted against the scientific, rationalistic, and secular modern world, especially as promoted by the socialists. "Even agnostic writers bewailed secularism as a threat to the sensitive apprehension of life and beauty."[11] Baudelaire spoke for many writers when he declared his disgust with the modern democratic political system: God would never be elected by universal suffrage.[12] In their rage against the triviality and barbarism of modernity, these writers exhibited "intellectual Bonapartism," combining the incredible arrogance of messianism with fear and impotence.[13] Because they saw themselves being attacked by crass materialism and felt frustrated in their bid for cultural power to stop it, they became fastidious dandies in protest, advocating l'art pour l'art and practicing a "rigidly artificial code of behavior."[14]

Henry Adams shared their concerns yet resolved to follow a radically different path of engagement in his society. Rather than viewing their excessive concentration on aesthetics as a

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[11] César Graña. Modernity and Its Discontents: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century. New York: Harper and Row, 1967, p. 65.

[12] Graña, p. 125.

[13] Graña, pp. 55, 57, 90.

[14] Graña, p. 148.

sign of defeat by the culture, these French antimodernists considered their efforts a struggle for higher values. They regarded their failure to control the vulgar society as a sign of spiritual excellence. This negative focus of aesthetic modernity had its roots in a basic conflict regarding the use and meaning of time. Did one use time to make money or to cultivate one's inner being? Class also became a dominant factor in the modernism debate. A philistine is hopelessly middle class, his tastes, attitudes, and aspirations determined by his economic circumstances.

The German example presents the equally arrogant political version of European extremist antimodernism to highlight the contrast with Adams. German antimodernists attacked liberalism and secularism, preaching national rebirth as an antidote. Disaffection with modernity rose until it "merged with the nihilistic tide of national socialism." Fascism also played on the critics' resentment of their loneliness within a culture that failed to share their traditional antimodern values.[15]

American antimodernists usually sought more innocuous solutions: they found refuge in a glorified past, especially the Middle Ages, or in the Church or the Orient; they tried to heighten their connection with their world through intense physical activity such as sports or the martial arts; they engaged in useful and aesthetically pleasing activities such as handcrafts. Although Henry Adams' antimodernism led him to seek the feminine as a refuge from the overly rational, industrialized masculine world, many antimodernists sought a masculine spiritual world in the not-yet-modernized West. Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister represent the powerful pull of the West on the imaginations of Easterners seeking escape from the "'enfeebled' present," which was "dwarfing, depersonalizing, and, worst of all, emasculating the men."[16] The

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[15] Fritz Stern. The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961, pp. xi, xii.

[16] G. Edward White. The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989, pp. 112, 118.

reaction to modernism sometimes took a destructive (and not always antimodern) turn in America as people vented their frustrations in anti-immigrant, racist, imperialist, or fascist violence, justified by Social Darwinist theories.

Henry Adams never followed his brother Brooks to the political extremes that distinguish European antimodernists from their American counterparts, but he operated in a bigger sphere than the merely national, so the limited American context does not suffice for understanding all aspects of his thought. Adams remained essentially American, however, despite his cosmopolitan interests. Even though he groused about the decline of the democratic ideal in America, he was never happier or more fully engaged than when serving as "stable-companion to statesmen," particularly for his dear friend John Hay.

It is, of course, much easier to identify causes of the antimodern dilemma than to develop workable and widely accepted solutions. The majority of elitist antimodernist writing details the concerns and complaints of people who separated themselves from a society they found distasteful or who felt themselves to have been excluded from a society that no longer valued their contributions. The democratization of culture raises the issue of the proper realm of authority just as it did in politics. When the writers did propose solutions they tended to be fanciful or extremely personal remedies that could not apply to society at large or, especially in Europe, they tended toward extreme government controls.

Antimodernism is "rooted in reaction against secularizing tendencies." Antimodernists, especially Henry Adams, made efforts to preserve "commitments outside the self" against the inauthentic prevailing currents:

> When antimodernists preserved higher loyalties outside the self, they sustained a note of protest against a complacent faith in progress and a narrow positivist conception of reality. . . . The more profound antimodernists, such as Henry

> Adams, preserved a tragic sense of life amid a national chorus of self-congratulation.[17]

The primary concern of the middle- and upper-class academics, ministers, and writers who led the American antimodern reaction was the precious, unnatural character of modernity. They did not reject the material benefits of modernity; they objected to the price extracted from their bodies and souls for those benefits. They recoiled "from an 'overcivilized' modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience supposedly embodied in medieval or Oriental cultures."[18]

Both bourgeois modernists and elitist antimodernists failed to address fully the problems of nineteenth-century society because they escaped reality with beliefs in progress and nostalgia, respectively. Nostalgia is due to a mistaken notion of human possibility: "the crucial assumption that 'idealism and faith' flourish only in a state of innocence."[19] It is just as dangerous as the idea of progress: "If the idea of progress has the curious effect of weakening the inclination to make intelligent provision for the future, nostalgia, its ideological twin, undermines the ability to make intelligent use of the past."[20] Many antimodernists valued an idealized, innocent, harmonious past that could not offer any lessons of real value; this was only occasionally the case with Henry Adams.

An elite no longer valued by society for education, breeding, and good taste had to find a new path; often they looked to their personal histories for guidance. Henry Adams, who could claim in addition to the aforementioned qualities two presidents and an ambassador among his

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[17] T. J. Jackson Lears. No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981, pp. xiii, xiv.

[18] Lears, p. xiii.

[19] Christopher Lasch. The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1991, p. 103.

[20] Lasch, p. 82.

ancestors, felt that he was supposed to lead because he was after all an Adams, thus born for the role.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in Democracy in America, defined and popularized the elitist strain of the antimodernist dilemma in America. Democratic politics could be accepted and perhaps even applauded, but when the concept of democracy extended from politics to culture it became more difficult to accept. Democratic culture was an unseemly development to be avoided by anyone who was smart and cultivated both because such a culture held no advantages for society in general and because the boorish majority would tyrannize the cultivated minority while depriving them of their proper role as cultural arbiters.

"Democracy historically interferes with the feeling that smart Americans have that they are better than the rest of us."[21] With such comments, many contemporary critics validate the concern of antimodernists that their search for meaning, unity, vitality, social order, and aesthetics would not be taken seriously. The main lesson Adams learned from Tocqueville is the importance of maintaining distance from society in order to gain perspective on its transgressions. Democracy and high culture require opposite and perhaps mutually exclusive stances: democracy demands compliance and participation (hence the tyranny of the majority decried by Tocqueville), whereas a proponent of high culture necessarily functions as a critic of such a society, and criticism implies superiority, distance, detachment.[22] This separation is interpreted by critics of elitist antimodernists as hubris. Walt Whitman's response to Matthew Arnold illustrates the extent of

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[21] Robert Dawidoff. The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage: High Culture vs. Democracy in Adams, James, and Santayana. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. xvii.

[22] See Alan Trachtenberg's foreword to Genteel Tradition.

the ire: "he brings to the world what the world already has a surfeit of: [he] is rich, hefted, lousy, reeking with propriety, criticism, analysis."[23]

The alienation from their society that many antimodernists felt at the turn of the century can be traced in part to the dashing of raised expectations as people realized that industrialization had not been an unalloyed good. Not only was the machine not a panacea, freeing mankind for better, more spiritual uses of his time, but it had in fact made worse the class stratification and meaninglessness of work that many had hoped it would cure. The individual life stories of antimodernists who fought that fragmentation counteract their image as precious elites, grasping ineffectually for the influence, prestige, and self-esteem that the democratization of culture now claimed as the province of every human being. By virtue of his ability to articulate his own doubts, concerns, and search for answers, Henry Adams' life and works illustrate the complexity of elitist antimodernism and its connections with postmodernism, the most recent reaction against modernity.

Partly because it is so recent, postmodernism is about as difficult for historians to assess as is the elephant for the blind man. Attitudes toward this new age or new variant of the modern age are as disparate as are the imaginations and the temperaments of its observers. "The prevalent mood of 'postmodernity' (or perhaps 'late modernity' is better) is one of uncertainty, of paradox, of lack of moral legitimacy and of cultural indirection."[24] Whereas antimodernism decries such a condition, postmodernism applauds it. Essentially postmodern thought relies on the rationality that is the hallmark of modernity to debunk reason and all other authority. As with the modernity of which it is a part, postmodernism inspires both optimism and pessimism: the dismissal of

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[23] Qtd. F. O. Matthiessen. American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1941, p. 625.

[24] John Tomlinson. Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991, p. 175.

authority is potentially liberating, but the effect on history and society if all standards of truth are dismissed is destructive.

In a seeming paradox, such negative possibilities became the basis for hopefulness among the counterculture: if the old is really dead, then anything is possible. Adams' comment that the crumbling of worlds is fun illustrates the unusual optimism of postmodernism, which plays with the possibilities inherent in complete destruction. The phenomenon began sometime between 1965 and 1972; the date varies with the historian as does the definition. It is difficult to discuss leading thinkers and branches of study in a discipline that denies the validity of such constructs, but the current meaning of postmodernism is encapsulated in the poststructuralist thought of French theorists Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida and the American historian Hayden White.

The postmodernists operate a backwards dialectic in which they are throwing out both old and new, both classic and romantic, rather than incorporating all into a new synthesis. The elephant of postmodernism might not even exist:

> . . . postmodernism, like other period terms, can easily generate its own versions of the old 'realistic illusion,' by virtue of which a mere construct of the mind or model of understanding is perceived as a hard-and-fast reality.[25]

By some accounts modernism has not failed; it is just unfinished. Its death might just be a rumor inspired by the wishful thinking of bored and restive cultural anarchists.[26]

Postmodernism is not, as its name implies, a distinct entity from modernism, but rather a continuation with some new elements.

> Postmodernism. . . is not a new name for a new "reality," or "mental structure," or "world view," but a perspective from which one can ask certain questions about modernity in its several incarnations. . . . among the faces of modernity

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[25] Calinescu, p. 287.

[26] Calinescu, p. 139.

> postmodernism is perhaps the most quizzical: self-skeptical yet curious, unbelieving yet searching, benevolent yet ironic.[27]

Modernism led to postmodernism through the modes of avant-garde, decadence, and kitsch.[28] The avant-garde stretched modernism to the logical extreme and tried to invent rather than just accept the crisis of change associated with modernity. "Aesthetically, the avant-garde attitude implies the bluntest rejection of such traditional ideas as those of order, intelligibility, and even success. . . ."[29] Perhaps Henry Adams' insistence on his failure--he protested that he had never learned how to play the new bourgeois modernist game and, against the evidence, that he had been a failure as a history professor--in The Education could be a reflection of avant-garde influence. The avant-garde movement shares with many postmodernists the notion that standards are elitist. The "joyfully self-destructive" avant-garde led inexorably to the death of Man. In a perfect illustration of the Hegelian dialectic, dehumanization followed the romantic exaltation of man. It was a natural progression from the death of authority to the death of God to the death of Man (and in postmodernism, the death of truth).[30]

Like many other intensely felt beliefs, the avant-garde led its believers to subvert their own cause and become even more conformist than the enemy bourgeois. Baudelaire expressed disgust for his countrymen's "passionate predilection for military metaphors. In this country every metaphor wears a mustache."[31] It is significant that postmodernism, also a French development, bristles with militant frontal attacks on truth and purveyors of truth. The avant-garde movement

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[27] Calinescu, p. 279.

[28] Avant-garde presents the typical difficulty with terms; it is used differently in each country and at different times. In America it is used as a synonym for modernism as opposed to romanticism, Calinescu, p. 118.

[29] Calinescu, p. 124.

[30] Calinescu, pp. 124-5. See Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling it as you like it: Post-modernist history and the flight from fact," The Times Literary Supplement, No. 4672, Oct. 16, 1992, pp. 12-15.

[31] Calinescu, p. 110; Baudelaire qtd. p. 110.

followed Bakunin's dictum: "To destroy is to create," rather than destroying in order to create. Ironically, the movement died of too much success; there is no longer an official culture against which to rebel.

The avant-garde retained some semblance of a belief in progress, albeit a progress achieved through destruction. As the faith in progress waned, the world took refuge in the nonbelief of kitsch. Beauty has ceased to be essentially the equal of truth in Keats' famous phrase; if beauty is gone, truth cannot be far behind. This concern as it shaped itself in the late-nineteenth century is certainly part of the animus behind Adams' Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.

The loss of transcendent truth and beauty coupled with modernity's failure to produce autonomy resulted in disillusionment; the Enlightenment had promised "an individually and collectively self-determining life"--and an essential betterment it could not deliver.[32] Humankind's rising expectations of itself were dashed by a realization of the smugness of the Enlightenment ideal. Postmodernists responded to the disillusionment by giving up the search for transcendence, whereas antimodernists continued to seek the promise in other avenues.

Umberto Eco's definition of postmodernism argues for renovation rather than complete destruction or innovation: "The postmodern reply [to the avant-garde]. . . consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently."[33] Eco accounts for the necessary lack of innocence in this renovation through "irony, playfulness, parodic and self-parodic nostalgia."[34] These descriptions of postmodernism, by ignoring the most extreme truth denyers of the field, Foucault

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[32] Pippin, p. 3.

[33] Qtd. Calinescu, p. 277.

[34] See Donna Merwick. "Postmodernism and the Possibilities for Representation." Version of a paper read at the biennial conference of the Australian and New Zealand American Studies Association meeting, 1991.

and Derrida, reverberate more with Adams' searching, ironic antimodernism than with the outer limits of modernist thought. The historical consequences of postmodern thought are far more destructive than benevolent. Irving Howe clarifies the extreme antirationalist, antihistorical element of postmodernism:

> We are confronting, then, a new phase in our culture, which in motive and spring represents a wish to shake off the bleeding heritage of modernism. . . . The new sensibility is impatient with ideas. . . . It breathes contempt for rationality, impatience with mind . . . . It is bored with the past: for the past is a fink.[35]

As one path out of the confusion of definitions, Brian McHale offers a helpful set of questions to distinguish modernist writing, which is epistemological, from postmodernist writing, which he deems ontological. The modernist asks: what is there to be known? who knows it? how do they know it and with what degree of certainty? how is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another and with what degree of reliability? The postmodernist asks: what is a world? what kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?[36]

The aestheticist model of postmodernism that Allan Megill provides in Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida (1985) illustrates how those ontological questions were answered by theorists of the late-nineteenth-century crisis mentality and its twentieth-century resolution. He approaches his analysis of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault from the vantage point of Derrida, who ends the development toward postmodernism by deconstructing the crisis mentality that is an essential precondition for it. All four do share, however, another component of postmodernism, "a disabused attitude toward any 'given'

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[35] Qtd. Calinescu, pp. 137-138, from "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction," Partisan Review.

[36] Qtd. Calinescu, p. 306.

order."[37] In addition, each of them is an aestheticist for whom the aesthetic embraces the whole of reality. They deny the Enlightenment interpretation of knowledge as truth and "reinterpret knowledge as a form of aesthetic fiction or creativity."[38] Nietzsche began the separation of man from scientific or religious reality that is associated with the crisis mentality, and Derrida finished the project.

Whether or not a solid world of external standards had ever really existed, the crisis thinkers (including Henry Adams) felt that the late-nineteenth century spelled the end of such powerful guides for living. They reacted in anguish. They suffered, writes Megill, "the loss of the transcendent dimension. . . . loss of authoritative standards of the good, the true, and the beautiful to which reason has access, coupled with loss of the Word of God in the Bible."[39] The tight linkage of the good, the true, and the beautiful had sustained mankind's souls since classical times. Now that the individual units as well as the linkage itself were being subjected to tough questioning, people had the choice of reaffirming their commitment to achieving the classical ideal or declaring it null and void and trying to find a new one or adjusting to a bleak postmodern reality without ideals. Megill contends that the crisis mentality arose not so much from loss of religious faith or the rise of consumer culture with its tacky standards but from the "collapse of historicism and faith in progress."[40]

The personal marginality of these figures links them with many of the more extreme antimodernists and denies Derrida's argument that there is nothing outside the text. Nietzsche's

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[37] Allan Megill. Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 255.

[38] Megill, p. 265.

[39] Megill, p. xiii.

[40] Megill, p. xiii. He refers to his own work as historicist and acknowledges the paradox inherent in applying to these thinkers "the very canons of logic that they attack." p. xiv.
See Christopher Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 1991.

madness, Derrida's background as an Algerian Jew, and the homosexuality of Foucault, as well as antimodernists George Santayana and Henry James, makes them outsiders; Henry Adams' difficult personality kept him separate. Society is unsatisfactory for them in part because of the distance inherent in being different. As Jacob Burckhardt noted, all contexts are constructed: none is simply given. The intense intellectual context of post World War II and especially of 1968 France cannot be ignored in any discussion of postmodernism. Megill cites the "interpretive audacity" of Kabbalism at the time of the Jews' expulsion from Spain as evidence that postmodernism's radical approach to interpretation is a response to crisis such as personal or cultural marginality or the disruptions of the twentieth century.[41]

These four thinkers perform a very neat four-way dialectic of response to the human dilemma. In the face of change one can choose an imaginative, activist, future-embracing acceptance such as that with which Megill credits Foucault; one can follow Heidegger in more antimodern passive nostalgia for the past (nostos, return home; algos, pain); one can synthesize the two as did Nietzsche (and Adams); or one can reject both as did the arch radical, Derrida.[42] The crisis thinkers could not find hope in the alternative Romantic formulation in which art is truth.

"The world is a work of art that gives birth to itself." According to Megill, Nietzsche's "crucially original" but still religious view that God is dead has reached fruition in Derrida's irreligious assertion that there is "nothing outside the text." Nietzsche does not advocate a despairing nihilism in response to his realization, but rather joy at the opportunities: "Instead of drawing back from the void, we dance upon it."[43] By all rights humankind should experience

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[41] Megill, p. 317.

[42] Megill, p. 115.

[43] Qtd. Megill, p. 34.

relief from the end of the modern era because it has been stuck trying to "uncover a Man or Culture or Nature or History underlying the flux of surface experience," whereas postmodernism dispenses with the effort and "holds these erstwhile realities to be textual fictions."[44]

Foucault is more destructive than Nietzsche but not radical enough to bring any useful change.[45] "Overall, Foucault has been predominantly concerned to provide a critical retrospective of the hidden role that regulation, control, imposed limitation and restriction have played in the development of a supposedly liberal and enlightened cultural environment."[46]

In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault claims that his goal and the essential task of the new history is to free the last truth, the history of thought, from its subjection to transcendence.[47] He argues that intellectual historians (such as Adams) have struggled at least since the nineteenth century to protect the sovereignty of the subject against onslaughts by early deconstructionists such as Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In the introduction and conclusion of The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault develops his argument against transcendent histories:

> My aim was to analyse this [intellectual] history, in the discontinuity that no teleology would reduce in advance; to map it in a dispersion that no pre-established horizon would embrace; to allow it to be deployed in an anonymity on which no transcendental constitution would impose the form of the subject; to open it up to a temporality that would not promise the return of any dawn. My aim was to cleanse it of all transcendental narcissism; it had to be freed from that circle of the lost origin, and rediscovered where it was imprisoned; it had to be shown that the history of thought could not have this role of revealing the

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[44] Megill, p. 2.

[45] See E. M. Henning. "Archaeology, Deconstruction, and Intellectual History," Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives, eds. Dominick LaCapra and Steve Kaplan. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, pp. 153-196.

[46] Henning, p. 186.

[47] Michel Foucault. The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, p. 203.

> transcendental moment. . . despite the efforts that have been made to find it here.[48]

The danger inherent in following Foucault too closely is that his anti-transcendental world conceals the "ordinary," the "world of natural and social human needs and of commonplace, rather than miraculously creative, work."[49] Foucault perceives no utopian new order, only an endless attack on whatever system comes to power.

Like a fourth step in a waltz, Derrida disrupts the dance by tripping the dancer and declaring there is no music. He ends the path toward postmodernism that Nietzsche began by deconstructing the crisis mentality. He does not concern himself with truth or the end of truth; he declares that there is nothing outside of the text. Derrida does not provide a reason for the writing and reading of texts, even his own, other than simple pleasure unconnected with a larger search for knowledge or truth. His aim is the "systematic dismantling of message-sending structures. . . disguised as merely the dismantling of a canon."[50] Derrida represents the end of the end. His deconstruction of crisis rhetoric does not, however, do away with the human struggle.[51]

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[48] Foucault, p. 203.

[49] Megill, p. 247.

[50] Megill, p. 332.

[51] Nor is Derrida's the first effort to attack the structures of meaning in Western society. Ironically, the nihilist language of the postmodernists echoes the language of the philosophes who originally redefined our world as modern, rationalist, and secular. If we follow the prescriptions of many postmodernists and examine the words of the Discours préliminaire (the introduction to the eighteenth-century Encyclopédie) without reference to their context, d'Alembert and Diderot could blend easily with the opposition of Foucault and Derrida to "totalizing." As the two philosophes reworked Bacon's and Chambers' schemas for ordering knowledge, they realized that the problem lay in the nature of the task itself, not in the incompetence of previous schematizers:

> But how could there not be arbitrariness? Nature presents us only with particular things, infinite in number and without firmly established divisions. Everything shades off into everything else by imperceptible nuances. And if, on this ocean of objects surrounding us, there should appear a few that seem to break through the surface and to dominate the rest like the crest of a reef, they merely owe this advantage to particular systems, to vague conventions, and to certain events that have nothing to do with the physical arrangement of beings and with the true institutions of philosophy." [Qtd. Robert Darnton. "Philosophers Trim the Tree of Knowledge: The Epistemological Strategy

Postmodernist philosophical and historical theory uses the rational tools praised by modernists to dispense with the rationalist notion of truth. Postmodernist aestheticism is characterized by its lack of faith in the ability of art and literature to provide a vision of an ordered universe.[52] This is not a passive, irreligious agnosticism but an active, religiously motivated atheism. The new certainty does not allow the true believers to find such meaning as art and literature or belief in human reason can provide. They could benefit from the model of Henry Adams at Chartres--open before the graces.

Modernity is unsatisfactory to postmodernists because of its emphasis on human agency and to antimodernists because of its failure to achieve the control such a definition promises as well as the loss of transcendence to an overriding relativism. The progressive modern and the value-laden traditional worldviews are not mutually exclusive, however: "The rationalist concept of progress is by no means incompatible with the belief in the universal and timeless character of values."[53] Friedrich Nietzsche affords a gauge for the precision of categories of modernism.

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of the Encyclopédie," The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History. New York: Vintage Books, 1985, p. 195.]

The philosophes' writings exude disdain for the religious belief systems of the time, although they hide the full extent of their disbelief to avoid political censure. A certain amount of bravado pervades the insistence on the world as an "ocean of objects." D'Alembert recounts the heroic role in which the philosophes cast themselves, a role made plausible by the police surveillance of writers, the awesome power of the Church, the lack of public support for subversive ideas:

> Descartes dared at least to show intelligent minds how to throw off the yoke of scholasticism, of opinion, of authority--in a word, of prejudices and barbarism. . . . He can be thought of as a leader of conspirators who, before anyone else, had the courage to rise against a despotic and arbitrary power. . . . [Qtd. Darnton, p. 207.]

The postmodernists may not cast themselves as heroes, but they employ the same images of solitary figures doing battle with the blind and therefore destructive truthmongers of the modern world. All borders are dangerous. Pushing beyond the borders of human social and mental constructs such as truth and history leads either to individual madness as in Nietzsche's case or to societal chaos. The eighteenth-century French philosophes share that pushing of borders with the postmodernists, even though the quintessentially modern Enlightenment figures share little else with their postmodern detractors.

[52] Megill, p. 322.

[53] Calinescu, p. 31.

His claim that "facts are interpretations" certainly resonates with postmodernism, and yet he is the "most antimodern of modern philosophers."[54] The life and late works of Henry Adams provide another test for these categories, just as these fundamental structures of thought provide the essential context for understanding Adams or any modern intellectual.

[54] Calinescu, pp. 272-3.

CHAPTER 2

HENRY ADAMS, A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Henry Adams was a complex, ironic man and writer whose life and opinions do not admit of a definitive interpretation even by himself. His good friend John Hay furnished an indication of the problem by describing Henry as half angel, half porcupine. Nonetheless, as Henry himself would say, one must begin despite the prospect of failure. A completely sympathetic critic who closely identifies with Adams believes that American society erred and continues to err in failing to make more use of Adams, especially the "incandescence of the open, enquiring, sensitive, and skeptical intelligence. . . ."[1] It is possible to discern patterns and tendencies in Adams' thinking even if they are not consistent, and, in the process of learning about this contradictory thinker, achieve an education that is at least a shadow of his own.

The most comprehensive and still the most useful source on Henry Adams is Ernest Samuels' massive three-volume biography on which all other biographers rely, complemented by R. P. Blackmur's analysis of Adams' writing and various collections of Adams' letters. One of the most impressive aspects of Samuels' biography is that he avoids both the hero worship of Brahmins, which was characteristic of his time, and the current swing of the pendulum toward elite-bashing. He provides for the reader the wide spectrum of seemingly contradictory beliefs and attitudes toward democracy and democratization of culture that characterize Henry Adams. Samuels exhibits admirable ease with Adams' complexity. The biography helps to correct the gloomy image that Adams established for himself in The Education: "Almost every account of his career has been colored by the ironic hindsights of The Education, and the note of self-mockery has long discouraged the prosaic spadework out of which a sounder understanding of his

[1] R. P. Blackmur. Henry Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980, p. 3.

accomplishment must come."[2] The "dust and ashes" mode of The Education followed a long effort by Adams to put his idealism into practice in American politics.

Adams was a passionate student of subjects ranging from religion to finance, who tried to incorporate his learning with personal and family principles in a concerted attack on the corruption and confusion besetting American society. His criticism veered from the politely constructive to the unmitigatedly vituperative, falling mainly in the category of cantankerous but truly concerned. Adams learned from James Russell Lowell, one of his Harvard professors, "the interesting possibilities of sheer opinionativeness."[3] Ironically, this man who devoted most of his public life to recalling mankind from its foolishness began his public career invoking the absurdity of such attempts. As club orator of the Hasty Pudding, Harvard's theatrical club, he exhorted his listeners to avoid the "folly of impractical idealism which sought 'to regenerate the world and call it back from the hard, selfish juggernaut track upon which it has trodden for these three thousand years.'"[4] Years later he would argue the case of his hero, John Stuart Mill, that "one person with belief is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests."[5] In a letter to his brother he wrote of his plan to bring together several distinguished young men "with belief" to effect the transformation of American society: "We want a national set of young men like ourselves or better, to start new influences not only in politics, but in literature, in law, in society, and throughout the whole social organism of the country--a national school of our own

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[2] Ernest Samuels. The Young Henry Adams, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948, p. viii.

[3] Samuels. Young Adams, p. 31.

[4] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 38.

[5] Qtd. Samuels, Young Adams, p. 138.

generation. . . ." These national treasures preferably would be located all over the country for better coverage, "but the deuce is that there are so few distinguished Western men."[6]

Other early writings and speeches reveal a profoundly earnest and idealistic young man grappling with the conflicting whirl of opinions held by himself, his family, his professors and fellow students, and the world of the literati. He concluded a college essay on Saint Paul and Seneca by asking if the world were not "infinitely better and happier [in the nineteenth century] than it was [in the first century A.D.],"[7] a far cry from the blistering attacks on the notion of progress that characterize his disillusioned later works. His Class Day oration at Harvard derided crass materialism in the righteous tones of a true idealist: "Some of us still persist in believing that there are prizes to be sought in life which will not disgust us in the event of success. . . ." This attack on money-grubbing later became transformed into a snarling anti-Semitism. He also attacked mechanistic views of the universe with hints of romantic yearning: "though man has reduced the universe to a machine, there is something wanting still. . . ."[8] He later lost the sense with which he began his career that this was the best of times. The effect of the machine age on human relations fell prey to his sarcasm, although the sting is almost lost in the witticisms he lobs at the relations between men and women:

> The French say that there is always a shade of ridicule in the position of husband. I am getting to think there is more than a shade of ridicule in the position of male. The American man is--a--chump! Luckily he will never be clever enough to know it, and the American woman seems likely to be clever enough to hide it from him. As long as he can run a machine he will never concern himself about a human, and naturally he takes the easier job.[9]

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[6] Qtd. Samuels, Young Adams, pp. 145-6.

[7] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 48.

[8] Samuels, Young Adams, pp. 49-50.

[9] George Monteiro, ed. The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams, 1877-1914. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1992, p. 25.

The early Adams was a religious, deeply troubled man, intent on replacing with faith the failed promise of reason and science. This willingness to dispense with the authority of the modern world as defined by the twin pillars of the Enlightenment shows that antimodernism and postmodernism are joined by a common enemy. Although Adams questioned the authority of science, he could not entirely loosen its hold on his imagination. He dabbled with other young men in amateur geology and entered the debates that raged regarding evolution. In 1862 he wrote to his brother Charles a frighteningly accurate prediction of the destructive potential of science:

> Man has mounted science and is now run away with. I firmly believe that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control. Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world.[10]

Adams' own scientific pronouncements reveal his concern with finding a connection between the laws governing animate and inanimate nature, especially in the essays of The Degradation of Democratic Dogma. Always he sought a "systematic conception of it all" at the same time that, as an historian, he insisted on being an artist and, therefore, not systematic.

Although he was actively idealistic early in life and a warm friend to his intimates, the dark persona of The Education has been for most of his reading public Adams' salient feature. He was pessimistic by virtue of heredity, constitution, his frequent battles with dyspepsia, premature balding, lost idealism, and family tradition long before the tragedies of his later life.[11] He told his brother Charles, "I always was a good deal of a sceptic and speculator in theories and

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[10] Qtd. Samuels, Young Adams, p. 130.

[11] According to his brother Charles: "My mother took a constitutional and sincere pleasure in the forecast of evil." Qtd. Samuels, Young Adams, p. 93.

think precious small potatoes of man in general and myself in particular."[12] His friend Henry James wrote in 1891: "I like him, but suffer from his monotonous disappointed pessimism. Besides, he is what I should have liked to be--a man of wealth and leisure, able to satisfy all his curiosities. . . ."[13]

Much of Adams' pessimism can be attributed to his loss of religious faith. He continued to cling to a philosophy of "quasi-idealism" and "mild deism"; he did not replace religion with a philosophy of naturalism or scientific materialism, perhaps because he continued to desire belief. Adams did succeed in "recapturing the religious instinct even if he did not recapture a tolerable theology to which to attach it."[14]

Being a member of the powerful Adams family presented Henry with a mixed inheritance, with a special conflict between the aforementioned pessimism and very high expectations of life. High standards and the means to reach them through education and political or literary opportunities went hand-in-hand with a certain isolation from the world with its lower standards. Even Henry James, who was not exactly notable for his ease with the everyday world, found the Adamses to be too separate from society: "Henry Adams is as conversible as an Adams is permitted by the scheme of nature to be."[15] The more sympathetic R. P. Blackmur credits the entire family with a devotion to truth and morality that pushed them almost to madness as they confronted a less than pure society:

> Jefferson's epitaph for John applied to them all: as disinterested as his maker. If the odds grew heavy against an Adams he resorted to an access of will-- or, if you choose to call it, a wall of stubbornness, which is merely will grown

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[12] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 148.

[13] Monteiro, p. 17.

[14] Samuels, Young Adams, pp. 17-18.

[15] Monteiro, p. 1, 1893 letter to Robert Louis Stevenson.

> hysterical. But acts of will or stubbornness are merely the last resorts of minds compelled to act scrupulously against the unintelligent or unintelligible.[16]

Each generation of the Adams family believed it had to consider what contribution it could make to building a virtuous republic; Henry's generation felt a special challenge to work with the imperfect materials available in a world of machine politicians and economic corruption. "They had tried to elevate the electorate with dignified appeals to reason and morality rather than to self or class interest."[17] Henry knew early that he preferred a literary and artistic life with possibilities for disinterested but influential statesmanship to the rough and tumble world of party politics. He said that he was not interested in any office except high office, perhaps partly because he doubted his abilities and feared to taint the family name with the brush of mediocrity. His brother Brooks declared that Henry, rather than waiting to be begged to lead the country in the tradition of his ancestors, "would not have touched office in any form, had it been offered."[18] Henry wanted social not political consideration, and he desperately wanted the literary honors that he never quite achieved. "Axiomatic in his writing is the continuing surprise he felt that it did not suffice to be Henry Adams."[19]

Brooks thought that Henry carried his joke or pose of being a failure and a disappointed man too far since he was in fact neither. He was, however, not so successful as he could have been. Samuels contends that Adams began by acting on the family expectation of political contribution but ended as a somewhat ineffectual philosopher. "Unwilling to apply scientific method to devise an efficient political system for the new industrial order, he was to drift steadily

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[16] Blackmur, p. 6

[17] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 295.

[18] Henry Adams. The Degradation of Democratic Dogma, ed. by Brooks Adams. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1920, p. 6.

[19] Robert Dawidoff. The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage: High Culture vs. Democracy in Adams, James, and Santayana. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 35.

into the camp of the philosophical idealists who denounced the reality which their ideas disabled them from changing."[20] This was the very fate Adams strove to avoid; he dreaded becoming that "most odious of Boston prigs, an intellectual prig." In typical Adams fashion, he both did and did not avoid that fate. Much of his strength lay in his honest, unflinching appraisals of his society. He knew full well the priggishness that framed many of his pronouncements, but he never transcended his personality or his upbringing to become a more widely accepted and respected guide to his society.

Despite his occasional protestations to the contrary, Henry Adams coveted the social distinction to which he was accustomed as an Adams in America; he recoiled therefore from the more exacting requirements of English society during his sojourn there as his father's private secretary in the early years of the Civil War. Samuels notes that "the exquisite cruelties of British exclusiveness" shocked Henry into some of his more cutting comments. He admitted that the "invidious distinctions and feudal protocol of court society" elicited both revulsion and fascination.[21] This is not an uncommon admission for self-professed democrats, but Henry Adams had to reconcile his yearning for social distinction with his desire to distinguish himself as a member of the proudly democratic Adams family. He mocks his own "foolish weakness for combining social and literary success," but does not ever overcome it. Henry James digs at both Henry and his wife Clover by commenting that the Adamses liked Washington better than London because "they are 'someone' here."[22]

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[20] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 296. See John G. Sproat. "The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

[21] Samuels, Young Adams, pp. 100-101.

[22] Monteiro, p. 7.

During his travels in Italy, the Boston Brahmin form of Henry's democratic thought kept him from seeing clearly the social divisions that beset Europe. Samuels claims that he excused the callous behavior of the nobility and scorned the misbehavior of the mobs he witnessed because of his "passion for order and propriety." One explanation but certainly not an excuse for Adams' seeming insensitivity is that

> Being a member of a society dedicated to abstract moral principles and provincial gentility, he could not without violence to his heritage identify himself with the desperate aims of the European masses, nor could he reconcile those aims with his belief in the inevitable--and gradual--progress of mankind. . . .[23]

In the field of education, however, Adams displayed more natural democratic sensibilities. He complained, for example, of the social distinctions and the emphasis on money prevalent at English universities and praised the superior spirit of American universities. Adams' approach to teaching his Harvard history classes provides some insight into his true nature as a democratic Brahmin. He overturned the status quo of Harvard teaching techniques and became first among many learners with his students. A student recalls that with Adams "all was wholly unacademic; no formality, no rigidity, no professional pose." A telling detail supplies the corrective to this portrait of the modern student's ideal professor: "He did not allow friendliness to degenerate, however, into undue familiarity so that even in the intimacy of his seminars he smoked his cigar and sipped his vintage sherry serenely aware that such privileges were not for students."[24] In education as in politics, Adams was a true idealistic democrat. He believed in plunging in with his companions to achieve the best understanding, analyses, or policies that effort and intelligence could manage. He did not intend thereby to give up the social distinctions due a man of his taste and family background and position.

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[23] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 74.

[24] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 216.

His career as an author and editor offers another corrective to the picture of Adams as an elitist. As a contributor of articles, he meekly accepted the changes editors recommended in his texts; as an editor he expected his authors to accept his criticisms no matter how drastic. He viewed authority as a natural and positive principle for organizing society whether he found himself on the giving or the receiving end.

As usual, each bald statement about Adams must be countered with an equal and opposite assertion to account for the complexity of his nature. He may have valued authority, but he considered his student scholars at Harvard, rather than the authorities of faculty or administration, the first concern of the university; he also valued the questioning of authority, especially as an instructional technique. The most avid deconstructionist, although not at all akin to Adams in other matters, might nod approvingly while Henry Adams, as any good scholar would do, urged his students to "dispute and overthrow if they could every individual proposition" in the law text he assigned them to read for his course on medieval institutions.[25] He wrote to a friend about his enthusiasm for the project: "The devil is strong in me, and my rage for reform is leading me into open war with the whole system of teaching. Rebellion is in the blood, somehow or other. I can't get along without a fight."[26] The original inspiration for his employment was based on his being "new blood." This opinion of a contemporary makes the frequent labeling of Adams as a backward looking, tradition-clinging antimodernist appear to be a case of misguided judging by standards of the present. Harvard's President Charles Eliot had undertaken the task of revamping the teaching of history by hiring "teachers of active, comprehensive and judicial

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[25] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 211.

[26] Qtd. Harold Dean Cater. Henry Adams and His Friends: A Collection of His Unpublished Letters, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947, p. xxxviii.

mind. . . . young men and men who never grow old."[27] Eliot overcame Adams' objections that he was unqualified by assuring him that he met those more important qualifications. One of Adams' students drew a conclusion from Eliot's hiring principles that he probably had not intended: "any 'cultivated gentleman' could teach European history."[28] Further evidence that Adams lacked the respect for institutions and authority associated with the fully traditional personality lies in his irreverent reaction to faculty meetings: he averred that he would just as soon scalp "the old buffers" to relieve his boredom. On the other hand, this behavior did follow a tradition of a sort, a family tradition of irreverence and trouble-making. Henry followed in the footsteps of "my contentious precursors."[29]

The irreverence proclaimed more than a family pattern of cantankerousness; in Henry's case at least, it signified a colossal ego. By his own account, he was one "whose pleasure is to work as though he were a small God and immortal and probably omniscient." Adams was without question an intellectual; he sought to use his skills and proclivities for his own benefit and that of his society, even though society did not always appreciate his efforts. He could not, therefore, have toiled successfully at any nonintellectual labor, thus his work did not finally depend on its acceptance by society. Perhaps he felt a certain perverse pleasure in being a lonely and excluded member of the always heretical Adams clan. Perhaps he shared the sense of martyrdom William James expressed to his brother Henry: "All intellectual work is the same,--the artist feeds the public on his own bleeding insides."[30] In his own letters to Henry James, Adams

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[27] Qtd. Samuels, Young Adams, p. 205.

[28] Qtd. Samuels, Young Adams, p. 205.

[29] Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed. The Letters of Henry Adams (1858-1891). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930, p. 284.

[30] Qtd. Monteiro, p. xi.

seems to argue a much less messianic version of his own efforts and those of his peers, whom he accuses of a "thinness" of feeling and perspective.

Some critics construct a more sympathetic case than Adams himself does for the phenomenon of the isolated intellectuals as an inevitable response to an insufficiently appreciative or observant society:

> Thus it is that many great men, if seen as examples of intellectual biography, seem either sports or parasites upon the society that produces them. They were compelled to act against or outside it; and our sense of radical connection and expressive identity is only re-established in the examples of their works aside from their lives.[31]

In sharp contrast to the critics who write Adams off as a frightened, nostalgic antimodernist, Blackmur views Adams as a truth-confronting heroic figure: "That was how Adams stood out. . . eccentric and lonely; but within him, as within others in their degrees, was an intelligence whose actions were direct, naked, and at their best terrifyingly sane."[32] The most outstanding characteristic of Adams' mind, "the single heroic and admirable quality of the modern and skeptical mind as such" is scruple. This is the agent of integrity for which the family stood as avatars: John, John Quincy, and Charles Francis in the political realm; Henry in the realm of imagination in the service of the public life. The etymology of scruple is scrupulus, Latin for a small sharp stone, which can be any uneasiness or doubt that worries as a small stone might.[33]

Henry Adams' antimodernism stemmed from an intense moral concern. He predicted the "violent tests," the twentieth-century calamities his world would encounter, and he knew humankind would have to develop a moral strength not prevalent in the modern world to face

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[31] Blackmur, p. 6.

[32] Blackmur, p. 6.

[33] Blackmur, p. 6.

them. Like many antimodernists, Adams was anti-Semitic and favored war as a means to strengthening society, but he cannot be dismissed as a racist imperialist. He was just as adamantly anti-slavery, and he opposed the destructive Indian policies of his time. He had "a genuine liberal's distaste for either scorn or pride of race."[34] His history of Burr's conspiracy in which he writes, "a circle of well-born, well-bred, and well-educated individuals, whose want of moral sense was more proof that the moral instinct had little to do with social distinctions," proves that Adams did not equate moral strength with his own circle of society.[35]

Even though he dismissed class as a guarantor of moral responsibility, Adams never questioned the assumption that a natural aristocracy of outstanding individuals should guide public opinion and that its members should guide it through appealing to "the limited number of cultivated minds." His concern for the power of the individual led him to applaud the merits of "uncivilized" societies:

> Samoa and Fiji are both of them almost pure communisms where private property is either unknown or disregarded. I found the system rather a pleasant one. On the whole, it suited me better than our own. It is intensely aristocratic, and gives enormous influence to the individual; it is indolent and pleasure-seeking; and it is perfectly indifferent to everything except women and war.[36]

Whenever he found the direction of politics distasteful, which was often, he wrote forcefully, with the impetus of a sense of mission. Early in his life he believed so completely in the power of lucid argument to affect political action that during the Civil War, while his father served as ambassador to London, he risked destroying his own and his father's reputations by publishing anonymous reports in an American newspaper to influence public opinion in favor of the policies his father was trying to develop. Such a dangerous, foolhardy tactic reveals fully the

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[34] J. C. Levenson. The Mind and Art of Henry Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957, p. 224.

[35] Qtd. Ernest Samuels. Henry Adams: The Middle Years. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958, pp. 377-8.

[36] Ford, p. 510, 1891 letter to Henry Cabot Lodge.

extent to which Henry respected the power of public opinion and the lack of respect he accorded its content if it were not influenced appropriately by an Adams or someone of similar erudition and reason.

Reason may have become the stumbling block of modern man in keeping him from the religious sensibility that alone could offer a saving sense of unity with the world and other human beings throughout history, but it remained for Adams a glorious and essential component of his eighteenth-century view of government. "Representative government did not sanction the tyranny of a mere numerical majority; it derived its authority from reason and justice as exhibited in appropriate political capacity." Adams opposed absolute power, whether wielded by a monarch or a numerical majority.[37]

The "reasonable" minority of like-minded thinkers with whom Adams communed provided support for lonely fellow exiles from their democratic society, which they believed had deteriorated into a tyranny of the majority. The importance of this sense of kindred thought and shared sensibility pervades the communications between Henry Adams and Henry James, especially later in life as they faced the deaths of friends and family, the shock of World War I, and the approach of their own deaths. In this intellectual family, Henry Adams functioned as patriarch: "a philosophic father to us."[38]

The early letters show them mocking each other's self-importance, hypochondria, and "thinness," or failure to engage life fully. Adams dismissed both Henry James' melancholia and

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[37] Samuels, Young Adams, p. 29. See Jon Roper. Democracy and Its Critics: Anglo-American democratic thought in the nineteenth century, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

[38] Henry James, qtd. Monteiro, p. 23.

his brother William's heart trouble as symptoms of hubris: "I fear that both of them take themselves seriously and have an idea that they are somebodies which accounts for it."[39]

In another letter, Adams includes himself in the category of the supercilious and superficial: "we are all now social luxuries, and, as for myself, I am much flattered if regarded as bric-à-brac of a style,--dix-huitième by preference, rather than early Victorian. Nothing matters much! Only our proper labels!"[40]

After declaring that the superficial middle-class of Britain "must be exterminated without remorse," Adams prescribes essentially the same fate for himself and his peers. In a dark moment, he sees himself as his angriest detractors see him, as an empty windbag. He reflects upon reading James' biography of the sculptor, essayist, and poet William Wetmore Story that the generation to which he (and Adams and James) belonged had lived lives that were superficial and, at the last, "how thin."[41] In November 1903 he wrote to James about how the biography of Story had affected him:

> Verily I believe I wrote it. . . . The painful truth is that all of my New England generation, counting the half-century, 1820-1870, were in actual fact only one mind and nature; the individual was a facet of Boston. We knew each other to the last nervous centre, and feared each other's knowledge. We looked through each other like microscopes. There was absolutely nothing in us that we did not understand merely by looking in the eye. There was hardly a difference even in depth, for Harvard College and Unitarianism kept us all shallow. We knew nothing--no! but really nothing! of the world. . . . Type bourgeois-bostonien! . . . God knows we knew our want of knowledge! the self-distrust became introspection--nervous self-consciousness--irritable dislike of America, and antipathy to Boston. Auch ich war in Arcadien geboren! . . . Improvised Europeans, we were, and--Lord God!--how thin! . . . After all, the greatest men are weak.[42]

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[39] Monteiro, p. 28.

[40] Monteiro, p. 77.

[41] Monteiro, p. 23.

[42] Monteiro, pp. 60-61.

Adams admits to having discerned as much thirty years earlier and kept quiet about his discovery.

With the onset of personal calamity, the tenor of their exchanges shifts dramatically to wistful yearning after an earlier and unappreciated unity. Adams writes to James in January 1911 regarding the death of William James: "We all began together, and our lives have made more or less of a unity, which is, as far as I can see, about the only unity that American society in our time had to show." With each death he sees "a limb of our own lives cut off." James replies: "I greatly appreciate your kind letter & respond gratefully to what you say about our so full & proved & tested, our so felt contemporaneity, our so prolonged intercommunications of consciousness. . . ."[43]

Adams' stroke in 1912 brought with it more somber reflections on the state of his life and the world: "it brings one blessing--it wipes out the future, and leaves precious little of the present."[44] Recovering in Paris during June 1913, Adams wrote to a friend about his appreciation for Henry James as a standard-bearer:

> It is a wierd [sic] and unearthly effect to us who have things on our minds. To me it is at times incredible. At about three in the morning I wobble all over the supposed universe. A little indigestion starts whole flocks of strange images, and then I wonder what Henry James is thinking about, as he is my last standard of comparison.[45]

A year later, Adams wrote to James in a baffled tone that anticipates a postmodern sense of the isolation of events rather than the totality of meaning:

> it is just a year since I again woke up, after an eternity of unconsciousness, to this queer mad world, ten times queerer and madder than ever, and what a vast gulf opened to me between the queerness of the past and the total inconsequence of the present. The gulf has not closed: it is rather wider today than a year ago; but

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[43] Monteiro, pp. 78-9.

[44] Monteiro, p. 32.

[45] Monteiro, p. 30, letter to Elizabeth Cameron.

> I wake up every morning and I go to sleep every night with a stronger sense that each day is an isolated fact, to be taken by itself and looked at as a dance.[46]

Their losses and their illnesses contrive to make Adams and James kinder to each other than their witty perspicacity had allowed in their youth. Henry James writes to Adams: "I make one [a friend] of you thus according to my sense of your rich & ingenious mind & your great resources of contemplation, speculation, resignation--a curiosity in which serenity is yet at home."[47] No one who spent much time with Adams would have credited him with much serenity, but he was a loyal, loving friend, and James allowed his imagination to fill in the gaps in his friend's character as a charity due to distance and waning health.

James' letter to Adams in March 1914, perhaps influenced by the tension of the impending war, foretells one of the leading attitudes of postmodernism that all writing has an intensely personal and individual meaning if it has any meaning.

> I have your melancholy outpouring of the 7th, & I know not how to acknowledge it than by the full recognition of its unmitigated blackness. Of course we are lone survivors, of course the past that was our lives is at the bottom of an abyss--if the abyss has any bottom; of course too there's no use talking unless one particularly wants to. But the purpose, almost, of my printed divagations was to show you that one can, strange to say, still want to--or at least can behave as if one did. . . . I still find my consciousness interesting--under cultivation of the interest. . . . Why mine yields an interest I don't know that I can tell you, but I don't challenge or quarrel with it--I encourage it with a ghastly grin.

James closes his letter with a bow to his own artistic sensibility, which is all that keeps him going, and to Adams as a much needed kindred spirit. He still has reactions because he is

> that queer monster the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexhaustible sensibility. . . . It all takes doing--& I do. I believe I shall do yet again--it is still an act of life. But you perform them still yourself. . . . There we are, & it's a blessing that you understand-- I admit indeed alone--your all-faithful /Henry James"[48]

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[46] Monteiro, p. 87.

[47] Monteiro, p. 82.

[48] Monteiro, pp. 88-9.

The war struck both men hard, cementing an impression they shared that their generation had failed to preserve the world from such mindless destruction. James called the outbreak of war "the funeral speech of our murdered civilization."[49] In August 1914, a mutual friend told of the need the two friends expressed for each other's support as they felt their world crumbling about them. She tells of "the encounter of the two Henrys, how they threw their arms around each other as if bridging a great chasm."[50]

If one can discern the lonely isolation beyond the rarefied atmosphere in which these intellectuals lived, then Adams' response to James' death seems a poignant cry for true companionship rather than the whine of the spoiled elitist: "I must speak to some one, and here I have no one Jamesian to talk to, except Wendell Holmes."[51] With due skepticism for the emotions of close relatives on such an occasion, we can appreciate the sentiment of the young woman who attended him at his death in March, 1918 and wrote to one of his favorite nieces: "If ever there was a temple of the Holy Ghost, it was his mind."[52]

Just as many critics such as Hayden White have found it difficult to wend their way through the rhetorical snobbery and the porcupine prickliness of Adams to his true civic concern, so do many critics of antimodernism find it difficult to discern the importance of his reconnaissance mission to the medieval past. Horace Traubel of the Arts and Crafts movement argued that when civilization went backward for something it had lost, it was not retreat but "another sort of advance."[53] To an unsympathetic observer, the blind worship of an imaginary,

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[49] Monteiro, p. 30.

[50] Monteiro, p. 31.

[51] Monteiro, p. 32.

[52] Cater, p. 779.

[53] Qtd. Daniel Rodgers. The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 81.

unrealizable past society looks much the same as the more realistic and constructive form, which like Petrarch's cult of antiquity did not value the past for its own sake but acknowledged the benefits of modernity and maintained belief in the future. Henry Adams, his rhetoric notwithstanding, wanted to revive the spirit and not the empty shell of the past. His comment on a deteriorating political situation stands for his generally pragmatic philosophy: "As usual the pessimists talk of the end of the world. I confess to being more interested in the practical working out of the situation."[54] Even as he himself spoke of the impending destruction of society, his tireless efforts especially in his late works, reveal hope for its future if only it could be made to learn some important lessons from the past. The Education of Henry Adams is his best-known and most comprehensive effort to teach those lessons he considered essential.

[54] Ford, p. 305, 1878 letter to Henry Cabot Lodge.

THE LATE WORKS OF HENRY ADAMS

Clover Adams committed suicide on December 6, 1885. From that day until his death, Henry Adams claimed to be leading a "posthumous existence." It was out of his grieving process and the search for spiritual renewal that he produced the three works examined here. Because The Education is the most complete synthesis of Adams' thought and because it elaborates on the biographical sketch already provided, it serves as the starting point for understanding him even though he wrote it later than the account of his religious ideas in Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres and some of the contributions to The Degradation of Democratic Dogma on his scientific concerns. All three works can be read with new insights and appreciation in the context of the modernist, antimodernist, and postmodernist concerns raised in the introduction. Hayden White's interest lies particularly with The Education, but his analysis of Henry Adams can apply to all three works.

CHAPTER 3

THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS; AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"Henry Adams was the first in an infinite series to discover and admit to himself that he really did not care whether truth was, or was not, true." Henry Adams

Adams wrote The Education near the end of his life and had about one hundred copies privately printed in 1907. The work concerned the years from his birth in Massachusetts in 1838 through 1905, minus a twenty-year period (1872-1892) during which he married (1872) and his wife committed suicide (1885). He wrote as an individual of "sensitive and timid nature," as a member of the Adams family, as an amateur scientist, as a culture critic, and as an historian. He was not, however, writing an autobiography even though publishers later added that misleading subtitle.

The Education is an account of how Henry Adams learned to "bear his own universe" in a world he did not understand. Reared to a sense of responsibility and naturally curious, he put aside his carping disappointment that the world for which he was properly prepared no longer existed and set about educating himself in the ways of the new world. He provides a fascinating account of seventy years' study of that alien world from childhood through a busy retirement, pretending even as he details his active involvement that he watched from the sidelines: "As it happened, he never got to the point of playing the game at all; he lost himself in the study of it, watching the errors of the players. . . ."[1]

Adams' education included everything that struck his watchful eye from the beauty of dogwood to the tragedy of the Civil War, from particular family concerns to universal issues of

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[1] Henry Adams. The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918, D. W. Brogan, 1961 ed., p. 4.

science and religion. In addition to the traditional education of Harvard College and European travel, he absorbed the discouraging lessons of local and international politics, diplomacy, and investment panics. He credits friends John Hay and Clarence King with a far more beneficial influence on his Education than his Harvard teaching career: "In the want of positive instincts, he drifted into the mental indolence of history."[2] The tone ranges from the ridiculous indulgence of prejudices ("the impenetrable stupidity of the British mind") to his profound childless fixation on the maternal as the one unbroken sequence in history. He began his education with "what the world had ceased to care for," and ended by trying to understand "what the mass of mankind did care for, and why." Despite his offhand dismissal of his efforts as "ridiculous" and "a failure," he believed especially in the importance of his attempt to understand the lessons of science and religion: "he would risk translating rays into faith."[3]

The Education is difficult to categorize. His biographer, Ernest Samuels, suggests that The Education is an inaccurate and incomplete autobiography but that it also fails as the work of philosophy Adams intended: "A Study in Twentieth Century Multiplicity" was his proposed subtitle. The Education attempted too much according to his brother Brooks, but Blackmur assures the reader that Adams was "right to make the effort"[4] despite the problems associated with such a huge undertaking.

Adams did not trust the public to understand his monumental effort, especially after his friend Bay Lodge's Heracles failed to receive the notice he felt it deserved. "Even more than Henry James, Henry Adams narrowed the possibility of readership to the Napoleonic demand that

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[2] Adams, The Education, p. 36.

[3] Adams, The Education, pp. 352-3.

[4] R. P. Blackmur. Henry Adams. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980, p. 49.

his personal point of view be shared."[5] He therefore sent The Education only to those friends who could be expected to appreciate his unusual new book. His note to Henry James expresses his disgust with the American reading public:

> Society no longer shows the intellectual life necessary to enable it to react against a stimulus. My brother Brooks insists on the figure of paralysis. I prefer the figure of diffusion, like that of a river falling into an ocean.[6]

In an earlier letter to James, Adams indicated that he wrote The Education to forestall biographers: "The volume is a mere shield of protection in the grave. I advise you to take your own life in the same way, in order to prevent biographers from taking it in theirs." He also confided to James his intent to make it a "completion and mathematical conclusion from the previous volume about the Thirteenth Century,--the three concluding chapters of this being only a working out to Q.E.D. of the three concluding chapters of that."[7] James' response to The Education offers apologies for a delay in writing and dives with Adams into his sea of metaphor:

> I speak of the reasons of my ugly dumbness as many, but they really all come back to my having been left by you with the crushing consciousness of far too much to say. I lost myself in your ample page as in a sea of memories & visions & associations--I dived deep, & I think felt your extraordinary element, every inch of its suggestion & recall & terrible thick evocation, so much that I have remained below, as it were, sticking fast as an indiscreet fly in amber. Which is a figure but for saying that no reader of your band will have lived with you more responsively. . . .[8]

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[5] Robert Dawidoff. The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage: High Culture vs. Democracy in Adams, James, and Santayana. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 34.

[6] George Monteiro, ed. The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams, 187701914. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1992, p. 77, September 1909 letter.

[7] Monteiro, p. 73, to Henry James, asking for marginal comments on The Education, May 1908.

[8] Monteiro, p. 76.

James' brother William, on the other hand, mustered considerably less enthusiasm: "Parts of it I find obscure, but parts of it (as the curate at the Bishop's table said of the egg) are excellent, superlatively so."[9] William's view sums up the criticism of the book since--obscure, excellent.

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"What could become of such a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the twentieth century?"[10] Adams opens his reflections in The Education with this dispirited question and closes with an answer of restrained pessimism, hoping against the evidence that the human mind will be able to make the leap required to build a new unity in a world shattered by the discoveries of science and the trauma of industrialization. He prays that the centenary of his birth, 1938, will "find a world that sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shudder."[11] It is ironic that the man who so gloomily predicted for 1912 the cataclysm that took the form of World War I in 1914 should have selected a year so close to World War II (1938) for the fulfillment of his hope. The quotation poignantly expresses the discomfiture of the displaced, those who by virtue of personality, upbringing, profession, or personal expectations were unable to adjust easily to the changes wrought by the late-nineteenth century.

Many other critics propose vastly different explanations for the intense alienation Adams professed to feel for his culture, but by Adams' own estimation the world of his ancestors was split off from the world in which he grew to manhood by dramatic developments in technology. All the cultural changes he addressed stemmed from these scientific advancements.

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[9] Monteiro, p. 26.

[10] Adams, The Education, p. 4.

[11] Adams, The Education, p. 505.

> No such accident had ever happened before in human experience. For him, alone, the old universe was thrown into the ash-heap and a new one created. He and his eighteenth-century troglodyte Boston were suddenly cut apart--separated forever--in act if not in sentiment, by the opening of the Boston and Albany Railroad; the appearance of the first Cunard steamers in the bay; and the telegraphic messages which carried from Baltimore to Washington the news that Henry Clay and James K. Polk were nominated for the Presidency. This was in May, 1844; he was six years old; his new world was ready for use, and only fragments of the old met his eyes.[12]

The expression Adams later gave to his alienation from modern society offers company to the similarly miserable contemporary reader: "all intelligent people are still staring, with stupid bewilderment, at the storage power of an atom of radium."[13]

Adams' upbringing both exposed him to the significance of the changes taking place in the world that would be his and hampered his adjustment to them. Because Adams grew up in the politically, socially, and scientifically involved Adams family, he was aware of the impact of technological and scientific developments even when he was still a child. At a very impressionable age, he knew he would not live the life of gentleman politician that his father, grandfather, and great grandfather had lived. The pattern of their lives and the education the family arranged for Henry militated against a smooth transition for him; however, he wanted what his ancestors had accepted as their rightful inheritance.

In "The Press," reflecting the events of the year 1868, Adams establishes the dramatic impact on his worldview of these technological changes. As a child he knew only that the old world had been thrown on the ash-heap; as an adult he knew himself to be a worm lost in those ashes. The childhood sense that any outcome was possible had succumbed to the pessimistic view that not much was possible, at least for him.

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[12] Adams, The Education, p. 5.

[13] Henry Adams. The Degradation of Democratic Dogma, ed. Brooks Adams. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1920, p. 215.

> One could divine pretty nearly where the force lay, since the last ten years had given to the great mechanical energies--coal, iron, steam--a distinct superiority in power over the old industrial elements--agriculture, handwork, and learning; but the result of this revolution on a survivor from the fifties resembled the action of the earthworm; he twisted about, in vain, to recover his starting-point; he could no longer see his own trail; he had become an estray; a flotsam or jetsam of wreckage; a belated reveller, or a scholar-gipsy like Matthew Arnold's. His world was dead.[14]

The fragment from Matthew Arnold's poem "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" suggests three possible worlds: the dead world, the new world "powerless to be born," and the inbetween place that cannot offer a spiritual home--"with nowhere yet to rest my head." Adams places himself on the grave of the old world, not ready to wander in search of new possibilities, not ready to help the new world to be born. As is often the case with Adams, his actions contradict his words. His travels and studies demonstrate his willingness to believe that a new world will be born. Wherever he placed himself in Arnold's schema though, we do know that he shared Arnold's sensibility: "Adams thought Matthew Arnold the best form of expression in his time."[15]

In a poignant albeit overwrought comparison, Adams likens his fate and that of other antimodernists of being "ejected from his heritage" to that of the Indian or the buffalo.[16] In this rush of self-pity, he neglects to reveal whether he expects the extinction of the elite or merely their placement on reservations. To explain his fear of the new scientific discoveries his age was trying to incorporate into their worldview, Adams offers a religious analogy to the bewilderment and helplessness of a pagan priest confronted with the force of Christianity, circa 300 A. D. These images of alienation force the twentieth-century reader who has become inured to change,

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[14] Adams, The Education, p. 238.

[15] Adams, The Education, p. 358.

[16] Adams, The Education, p. 238.

especially in the area of scientific discoveries, as the norm to empathize with the enormity of the psychological impact of the changes wrought by the nineteenth century:

> The magnet in its new relation staggered his new education by its evidence of growing complexity, and multiplicity, and even contradiction, in life. . . . He found it in politics; he ran against it in science; he struck it in everyday life, as though he were still Adam in the Garden of Eden between God who was unity, and Satan who was complexity, with no means of deciding which was truth.[17]

Not every antimodernist expressed such desperate need for unity and such fear of the demonic complexity of the modern world, but a similar sentiment surely fueled the antimodernist rage for the Church, the Middle Ages, the Orient, and nature.

Adams sums up for his fellow travelers their guiding principle: "Chaos was the law of nature; order was the dream of man."[18] He did not take the principle to its political extreme as his brother and many Europeans did. Because Adams could discover no unity in science despite his best efforts to find teachers who could unveil the mysteries for him, he was forced to find his unity in the Church, which alone "had asserted unity with any conviction."[19] He describes his fallback position as being "caught in the eternal drag-net of religion."[20] He employs religion as a form of Nietzsche's necessary lie. What was not true but held to be true constituted a useful form of accommodation to reality.

His failure to find a satisfactory unity in the twentieth century forces Adams back to the thirteenth century when "man held the highest idea of himself as a unit in a unified universe."[21]

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[17] Adams, The Education, p. 397.

[18] Adams, The Education, p. 451.

[19] Adams, The Education, p. 430.

[20] Adams, The Education, p. 429.

[21] Adams, The Education, pp. 434-5

He plays the title "Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres: a Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity" off against his proposed title for The Education: "The Education of Henry Adams: a Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity" to establish the contrast. He might have given up his search for answers in science, but he employs the vocabulary of science to explain his choice of religion as a source of unity for society if not for himself: "man as a force must be measured by motion, from a fixed point." [22]

Scientific beliefs elicited the same stance of skeptical recognition. Because evolution was the tendency of his age he accepted it. "Henry Adams was Darwinist because it was easier than not" and because it amused him.[23] Adams pretends that he does not care whether Darwinism should prove to be true, but he does indulge his skeptical nature by avoiding whole-hearted acceptance of the new theory. "The great word Evolution had not yet, in 1860, made a new religion of history."[24] The truth of evolution is not of great importance to Adams because he is after a greater good, or rather seeking to avoid a greater negative. He is pursuing absolute Unity, truth or no truth, because he knows the importance of accommodation in a world in which Truth would always be an elusive goal. He "had no need to learn from Hamlet the fatal effect of the pale cast of thought on enterprises great or small. . . . One could not chase doubts as though they were rabbits."[25] Of course, he chases doubts throughout The Education, but he can console himself that he knows better. He continues in an increasingly bitter tone:

> For the young men whose lives were cast in the generation between 1867 and 1900, Law should be evolution from lower to higher, aggregation of atom in the mass, concentration of multiplicity in unity, compulsion of anarchy in order; and he would force himself to follow wherever it led, though he should sacrifice five

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[22] Adams, The Education, p. 434.

[23] Adams, The Education, pp. 225, 232.

[24] Adams, The Education, p. 91.

[25] Adams, The Education, p. 232.

> thousand millions more in money, and a million more lives. . . . he could not foresee that science and society would desert him in paying [the price]. . . . The Church was gone, and Duty was dim, but Will should take its place. . . .[26]

He briefly lightens his gloomy reflections with a typically trenchant witticism; as he moves from his discussion of evolution in general to the particular instance of the political system: "The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin."[27] He then continues on a more lugubrious note: "The political dilemma was as clear in 1870 as it was likely to be in 1970. The system of 1789 had broken down, and with it the eighteenth-century fabric of a priori, or moral, principles."[28]

Adams' world made another, perhaps even more extreme shift, when he viewed the dynamo at the Paris Expo of 1900 and had "his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new."[29] In the classic Chapter 25, "The Dynamo and the Virgin" (1900), Adams chronicles his efforts to trace the development of the force of the dynamo from the force of the Virgin, who represents both the power of Christianity (along with the Cross) and the power of female sexuality.

> Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the Western world ever felt, and had drawn man's activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done; the historian's business was to follow the track of the energy. . . .[30]

America was taken with the dynamo as sole source or emblem of force because it had never truly appreciated the Virgin, a natural outcome of its national lack of appreciation for sex as evidenced in its sexless art; only Walt Whitman is excepted from his broad sweep. "An

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[26] Adams, The Education, p. 232.

[27] Adams, The Education, p. 266.

[28] Adams, The Education, pp. 280-1.

[29] Adams, The Education, p. 382.

[30] Adams, The Education, pp. 388-9.

American Virgin would never dare command; an American Venus would never dare exist. . . . American art, like the American language and American education, was as far as possible sexless."[31]

These diatribes against the insipidity of American art hide the depth of his concern. Adams reacts with the characteristic mixture of awe and horror of a man caught between two worlds: "man had translated himself into a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old."[32] The machine had replaced the cross as the dominant force in the world, and he acknowledged the new power. Like the Old Testament prophets, however, he testified darkly to the loss of meaning and beauty that the transition entailed: "All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres."[33] The implication is clear: modern technology is inferior to the sensual, religious, aesthetic power that the Virgin manifested through the Cathedral, and the two forces operated in opposition, not synthesis, so the world was poorer for the change, unless and until another synthesis could be achieved. Adams harbors too much fascination for science and too unflinching an outlook on the naivete of retreat to deny the present and the probable future entirely. His nostalgia is wistful rather than activist.

At times Adams succumbs to the lure of blind nostalgia for an idyllic past. Most of his writings though reveal a desperate hope in the past, particularly the Middle Ages, because his good faith effort to adjust to the present and educate himself about the future has not satisfied his need for order. Adams is not naive about the efficacy of past models or religious doctrines in solving the psychological and social problems associated with modernity, but he sees no choice other than to use them.

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[31] Adams, The Education, p. 385.

[32] Adams, The Education, p. 381.

[33] Adams, The Education, p. 388.

Adams considers Christianity as it had been practiced since the Middle Ages a failure, and he wants something to take its place. "One sought no absolute truth. One sought only a spool on which to wind the thread of history without breaking it."[34] He condemns the materialist choice his society has made to replace Christianity--"society by common accord agreed in measuring its progress by the coal-output"[35]--and offers a Virgin-centered Christianity with its emphasis on the female principle of merciful compassion as a serviceable truth with which to keep the thread of history and the threads of individual lives from breaking.[36]

Even though he writes with veneration of the beauty and unifying power of medieval Christianity, Adams' cynicism extends to religion; he lacked the gift of faith even in his own vision. He acknowledges the mystical force of the Virgin and the Cross but denigrates the motivations of Christians. "What is now known as religion affected the mind of old society but little. The laity, the people, the million, almost to a man, bet on the gods as they bet on a horse."[37] And even more revealing of his failure to find meaning in Christianity is his sardonic assessment of Constantine's decision to use the Cross to gain political power and unity: "Good taste forbids saying that Constantine the Great speculated as audaciously as a modern stock-broker on values of which he knew at utmost only the volume. . . ."[38]

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[34] Adams, The Education, p. 472.

[35] Adams, The Education, p. 490.

[36] Adams never clearly defines the feminine principle, although he approaches a definition in Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. Ferdinand Tonnies, a nineteenth-century sociologist, associates the feminine principle with community, belief, feeling, family, imagination, custom, habit versus the masculine principle, which he associates with skepticism, intellect, strangers, calculating self-interest, and cold reasoning. In Christopher Lasch. The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1991, p. 142.

[37] Adams, The Education, p. 479.

[38] Adams, The Education, p. 478.

Who else but Henry Adams would have delivered himself of such a cynical observation with the caveat that "good taste" kept him from doing what he was indeed doing? Perhaps the phrase "good taste" is a key to all of Adams' reactions to modernity. Were he a less cultivated man he might say more directly what he thought of the mass of mankind, which thought itself capable of replacing an Adams as arbiter of culture. Were he a less cultivated man the aesthetic damage would grate less on his sensibilities. Were he a less cultivated man he might not know what the modern world was missing.

D. W. Brogan, in his introduction to the 1961 edition of The Education of Henry Adams, describes the book as "the story of a lifelong apprenticeship to the fact that the world could ignore the standards, the ranks, the assumptions of Boston, that nothing was stable, not even the natural precedence of the Adams family."[39] Adams' case illustrates the plight not just of the American elite with whom he shared specific social and political expectations, but also of the European intellectual elite as well because the problems he faced pervaded the Western world. Their particular contributions of educated service and proper behavior were no longer valued. The American public dispensed with the cultural wisdom of the Adams family and their peers at the same time it dispensed with their political wisdom.

In order to illustrate the difficulty he would find in adjusting to a world in which authority had been redefined and dispersed, Adams recounts with approval the story of John Quincy Adams' authoritative response to young Henry's temper tantrum. Henry recalls that he "admitted force as a form of right" and assumed that "what had been would continue to be."[40] These evocations of force and tradition raise the hackles of most twentieth-century readers. Adams knows they are no longer generally valued, but he also knows that he still values them as evidenced by his

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[39] Adams, The Education, p. xi.

[40] Adams, The Education, pp. 13, 14, 16.

defense of the Puritans: "The Puritan thought his thought higher and his moral standards better than those of his successors. So they were."[41] He takes for granted that his readers know what qualities of thought he associates with his forebears. Whether blinded by idealism or friendship, Adams yearned for the "good old days" when statesmen not politicians ruled and when statesmen guided public opinion--not the reverse. He further betrays his elitist bias in his account of a visit to the Senate: "the statesman of all periods was apt to be pompous, but even pomposity was less offensive than familiarity."[42]

"All experience since the creation of man, all divine revelation or human science, conspired to deceive and betray a twelve-year-old boy who took for granted that his ideas, which were alone respectable, would be alone respected."[43] The self-awareness that Adams displays in revealing his own childhood pomposity disarms very few of the modern critics for whom any form of elitism is reprehensible. It makes a great deal of difference, however, whether the elite response to the democratization of culture involves anguish over lost standards of excellence or mere whining over lost cultural hegemony. Adams' lack of respect for minds less nimble and less polished than his own is usually couched in a more palatable expression of concern for the loss of unity and beauty and ballast in the modern world.

This disdain for lesser minds is the sign of an elite of intellect not an elite of wealth and as such it reflects more than disdain. Even though he held a position of cultural power as a Harvard history professor, Adams felt alienated because the special talents and training and insight he brought to his culture were considered less than special by most of his compatriots. He did not trust the democratized masses with power in cultural decisions any more than he trusted their

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[41] Adams, The Education, p. 26.

[42] Adams, The Education, p. 45.

[43] Adams, The Education, p. 33.

choices of political leaders. "The effect of unlimited power on limited mind is worth noting in Presidents because it must represent the same process in society, and the power of self control must have limit somewhere in face of the control of the infinite."[44]

Like other literary artists, especially the French, Adams detested bourgeois commercial values and their degrading effect on society and politics. Adams reveals his own querulousness by noting the impact of bourgeois modernism on his world, referred to as the world: "Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid." The world demanded new men "with ten times the endurance, energy, will and mind of the old type," but the transformation was too wrenching for someone tied to the distant past and prepared by birth, ability, and education to succeed in the recent past.[45] The prospect of facing an unknown and ugly future in which he would not be appreciated, or indeed lionized, exacerbated Adams' natural proclivity toward gloominess and some degree of isolation. The Chicago Exposition of 1893 inspired further expression of outrage in the face of emerging American capitalist unity with the advances in technology: "the whole mechanical consolidation of force, which ruthlessly stomped out the life of the class into which Adams was born."[46]

Adams was a consummate critic of his society, successful perhaps because of his very failure to engage himself fully in the new world. Adams would agree about the role of critic--he said he developed the habit of regarding every question as open at an early age, and furthermore, "Resistance to something was the law of New England nature"--but he would quarrel with the notion that he was disengaged. Despite Adams' surprise at and lack of preparation for a world

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[44] Adams, The Education, p. 418.

[45] Adams, The Education, p. 499.

[46] Adams, The Education, p. 345.

in which his role was no longer clear and no longer clearly superior, he engaged himself--at least by his own lights: "To his life as a whole he was a consenting, contracting party and partner. . . . Only with that understanding--as a consciously assenting member in full partnership with the society of his age--had his education an interest to himself or to others."[47]

Exposing the anxiety that prompted him to write The Education, Adams notes that the American boy of 1854 was nearer the year one than the year 1900; his education simply could not prepare him for the present, much less the future.[48] Part of his animus for writing The Education was his belief that society had failed him and his generation by not keeping up with its own changes; he would do what he could to prepare another generation to cope.

Adams tries to learn what he needs to about the world in order to establish himself in a career by studying law in Germany after he finishes college. When he discovers that the experience does not suit him, he decides to escape for a while the pressures of adjustment to the new world and retreat to the old world in Rome. "He was in a fair way to do himself lasting harm, floundering between worlds passed and worlds coming, which had a habit of crushing men who stayed too long at the point of contact."[49] Much as he values his critical mind and wishes that his society did, he knows that it poses some danger to him because it does not allow easy accommodation with the world.

As his account of his Italian sojourn reveals, Adams' alienation from the modern world was as much aesthetic as it was social and political. He writes with palpable relief of the wonderfully unmodern world he found in Rome in May of 1860:

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[47] Adams, The Education, p. 4.

[48] Adams, The Education, p. 52.

[49] Adams, The Education, p. 83.

> medieval Rome was alive; the shadows breathed and glowed, full of soft forms felt by lost senses. No sand-blast of science had yet skinned off the epidermis of history, thought, and feeling. . . . Rome was the worst spot on earth to teach nineteenth-century youth what to do with a twentieth-century world.[50]

His glorying in Rome's inability to help him with the goal he claimed to have set for himself might lead one to question the strength of his commitment except that he does not tarry long in his favorite haven.

As proof of his earnestness, Adams rejected any element of French influence in his early education because "France was not serious."[51] That seriousness begins to define itself in Adams' 1872 harangue against Carlyle whom he derides for his attack on "the habit of faith." The habit of faith plays an essential role in his personal life in the twenty years that intervene until he takes up his story again in 1892. His wife's suicide, an event he does not mention although it colored the whole tenor of his book, seems to have inspired the writing of it. He still "felt nothing in common with the world as it promised to be,"[52] in fact, without his wife he felt less sure than ever of his purpose and more in need of faith. Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres represents his attempt to explore and regain that faith through a study of the history, art, architecture, and theology of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries.

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[50] Adams, The Education, p. 90.

[51] Adams, The Education, p. 96.

[52] Adams, The Education, p. 317.

CHAPTER 4

MONT-SAINT-MICHEL AND CHARTRES

Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres (1905) is a cascade of unsupported and often unsupportable opinions on everything from art to the meaning of humanity, offered with the clear expectation of having them accepted without demur. Henry Adams may have felt that his society had excluded him and dispensed with the erudition he had to offer, but he wrote, nonetheless, with the confidence of an appreciative and generally uncritical audience because he had indeed carefully selected that audience from among his friends. The book is at the same time self-indulgent and sincere, frolicsome and earnest. It begins as lighthearted travel guide for his adored and adoring nieces; it ends with pathos of a soul's desperate searching. This nearly great work of art relies on the symbol of the physical tension and great beauty of the Gothic arch to point to the possibility of unity in a chaotic universe.

The conceit of the book--Adams wrote it for his nieces--conditions the reader to accept Adams' unusual, playful style and thereby his terribly serious concerns for his society. The association with innocent childhood "creates in the willing reader the conditions of uncommitted response, the recklessness of true feeling. . . ," and deters "objection to the incongruous and contradictory."[53] Adams wrote Mont-Saint-Michel as art, so the rules of art apply. As Blackmur, who approximates Adams' alter ego, defines it, art is the divine in the human. Poetic insight creates the things it sees.[54]

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[53] Blackmur, p. 180.

[54] Blackmur, pp. 186, 192.

The poetic insight Adams gained from Chartres was by no means unique. The Cathedral, along with other art treasures of Europe, held great power for the culture-deprived American tourists of the nineteenth century:

> The intelligent American, if he or she got the chance to visit Europe, could find his taste transformed in a sort of pentecostal flash by a single monument of antiquity. . . . To the culturally starved Yankee the arrival in Italy or France seemed like an admission to Heaven, a place reached after an initiation of suffering, the purgatorial voyage across the Atlantic. Four weeks of vomiting, and then. . . Chartres. 'We do not dream,' one New Yorker wrote in 1845, 'of the new sense which is developed by the sight of a masterpiece. It is as though we had always lived in a world where our eyes, though open, saw but a blank, and were then brought into another, where they were saluted by grace and beauty.'[55]

The introduction by the monarchist Ralph Adams Cram represents a common critical stance that misses the artistic and spiritual power, the ambiguity of yearning and tentative hope shielded by cynical sophistication that is Adams; it tells us more about Cram's own antimodernist leanings than about the author. Cram sums up Adams' vision of the thirteenth century in these sentimental terms:

> Seven centuries dissolve and vanish away, being as they were not, and the thirteenth century lives less for us than we live in it and are a part of its gaiety and light-heartedness, its youthful ardour and abounding action, its childlike simplicity and frankness, its normal and healthy and all-embracing devotion.[56]

Adams belies this idyllic picture with his opening pages wherein he regrets the difference between the eleventh century and all centuries, including the thirteenth, since then: "one knew life once and has never so fully known it since. . . ."[57] He then indulges his gloomiest streak as he

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[55] Robert Hughes. "Art, Morals, and Politics," The New York Review of Books, vol. 39, April 23, 1992, p. 22. The passion for Chartres has not abated: The Englishman Malcolm Miller has been guiding tourists through the mysteries of the stained glass and sculpture since he fell in love with the cathedral while researching his college thesis in 1957; he is paid in tips for this labor of love.

[56] Henry Adams. Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1905, p. vii.

[57] Adams, Chartres, p. 3.

laments the decline of standards from the time when his beloved Chartres was built into the thirteenth century: "The world grew cheap, as worlds must."[58] He is not so biased against his own century as to believe that all previous periods in history presented mankind with superior choices. One cannot presume a straight line of decline.

Part of the intense feeling Adams displays in this book can be attributed to his attempt to recover from his wife's suicide in 1885. After the suicide, he removed himself from his world by traveling to the South Seas, then returned, through Chartres: "the spiritual autobiography of his return led him through the emotion of Chartres."[59] Not only was he caught up in the particular religious struggles of his wife (as he examined in the novel Esther), but the love of his wife led him to seek religious love more profoundly--"all love is religious."[60] The religious, devotional sensibilities that color this history reveal Adams' desire for meaning even as his skepticism undercuts his beliefs. In the main, though, he argues for meaning through religion and beauty and a mystical life force--the female principle replaced, to our everlasting sorrow in the nineteenth century, by the dynamo.

"In Chartres, Adams attempted to restore to symbolic being the unity, in art, of sex and thought and occult force without the felt need of which his own time seemed meaningless."[61] The power of Adams' almost mystical argument is lessened considerably when he uses similar rhetoric to describe the power of the "masculine" Norman church of Mont-Saint-Michel: "The whole Mount still kept the grand style; it expressed the unity of Church and State, God and Man,

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[58] Adams, Chartres, p. 9.

[59] Blackmur, p. 194.

[60] Blackmur, p. 200.

[61] Blackmur, p. 30.

Peace and War, Life and Death, Good and Bad; it solved the whole problem of the universe."[62] Despite his protestations of feminine superiority, he continues to link the masculine and the feminine by writing nostalgically of the entire period from 1000 to 1300 as an age "when passions were real," and of the "purity of taste, feeling, and manners which stamps the art of these centuries."[63]

Adams' affection for alliteration led him to lump together a bizarre but not therefore uncommon collection of antimodernist longings: "Our age has lost most of its ear for poetry, as it has its eye for colour and line, and its taste for war and worship, wine and women."[64] Many antimodernists of Adams' generation, especially Brooks Adams, did favor warfare and the martial arts as a way to intensify their involvement with life, although this is not a major concern of Henry's. He values the female principle of energy and female intelligence--not just the female body as his comment might indicate. He elaborates on the ideal of poetry that he has found to mirror an earlier age in "directness, simplicity, absence of self-consciousness, intensity of purpose."[65]

It is possible to develop with such passages a powerful defense of Adams as a constructive critic, returning to the Middle Ages for what was missed, not with the intention of hiding there from the modern world. According to Blackmur, a careful study of Adams' writings and life will show "how little Adams went to his Middle Age for escape and withdrawal and how much for backing and renewal."[66] His outline of the centuries under Adams' scrutiny shows his complete

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[62] Adams, Chartres, p. 44.

[63] Adams, Chartres, pp. 80-82.

[64] Adams, Chartres, p. 29.

[65] Adams, Chartres, p. 30.

[66] Blackmur, p. 217.

affinity with Adams' view. He links escape, puerilization, and denial with the Paramount Theater as symbol of twentieth century efforts. In contrast, Chartres Cathedral stands for the assent, maturity, and faith of the Middle Ages.[67] "Those who complain that he romanticizes a fantastic or an eccentric impulse have not thought from what depths that impulse came, nor how ancient and universal its human history is, nor how hollow is the pretense of denial that it still exists, which is the chief obstacle to its expression today."[68]

The skeptical, distant Adams betrays the depth and quality of his beliefs in this paean to the Middle Ages in which he contrasts his own century's irreligious spirit unfavorably with the more mystical spirit of the thirteenth century:

> True ignorance approaches the infinite more nearly than any amount of knowledge can do, and, in our case, ignorance is fortified by a certain element of nineteenth-century indifference which refuses to be interested in what it cannot understand; a violent reaction from the thirteenth century which cared little to comprehend anything except the incomprehensible.[69]

Adams devoted his life to understanding what he could of science and politics. He always retained the humility of the true student underneath his arrogant demeanor, thus he was able to appreciate fully the thirteenth-century embrace of mystery. In support of this truth, alien to his mechanistic world, Adams treats his critics to a barrage of sarcasm for their positivist nineteenth-century insistence on tangible evidence:

> You may, if you really have no imagination whatever, reject the idea that the Virgin herself made the plan; the feebleness of our fancy is now congenital, organic, beyond stimulant or strychnine, and we shrink like sensitive-plants from the touch of a vision or spirit; but at least one can still sometimes feel a woman's taste, and in the apse of Chartres one feels nothing else.[70]

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[67] Blackmur, p. 241.

[68] Blackmur, p. 197.

[69] Adams, Chartres, p. 109.

[70] Adams, Chartres, p. 127.

Mary could have healed society had it allowed her to do so, but the Church itself had rejected her influence. She embodied an authority the world craved, a queen's authority of grace, humility, common humanity, and compassion to all who suffered under law--the Buddhist element in Christianity. Adams aligns himself and other elitists with the poor and the criminal under the protection of the Virgin against the true bane of his existence (and of most premodernists, antimodernists, and postmodernists), the complacent middle class. The banker who ignored the pauper annoyed her far more than the sinful poor or proud: "So Mary filled heaven with a sort of persons little to the taste of any respectable middle-class society, which has trouble enough in making this world decent and pay its bills, without having to continue the effort in another." She would have allowed Henry into her heaven: "Mary was rarely harsh to any suppliant or servant, and she took no special interest in humiliating the rich or the learned or the wise."[71]

The Virgin is Adams' model for accommodation with the world. She represents mankind's last stay against atheism: "Without Mary, man had no hope except in atheism, and for atheism the world was not ready." She exhorts mankind to transcendence, as she forgives its transgressions. Blackmur argues that medieval France struck a balance between man and the universe like that of classical Greece: the Virgin embodied the energy of both love and matter; she provided escape from anything less than or greater than the human ideal. . . ."[72] The beauty of her church allows one to accept both the human and the divine. "The pointed arches ought to collapse, and are certainly in constant peril; but they not only stand, they leap. In fact all that is

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[71] Adams, Chartres, pp. 274-5.

[72] Blackmur, pp. 177, 202.

built into the church is a perilous balance of incongruities, anachronisms, and contradictions of law and feeling. . . ."[73]

Along with the Oriental figures Adams admired on his travels, the Virgin was the inspiration for the spirit Adams hoped to see in the statue he commissioned Augustus St. Gaudens to erect over Clover's grave in Washington's Rock Creek. The Virgin not only offered a compassionate refuge from law but she also represented for Adams a rebellion against law itself:

> Mary concentrated in herself the whole rebellion of man against fate; the whole protest against divine law; the whole contempt for human law as its outcome; the whole unutterable fury of human nature beating itself against the walls of its prison-house, and suddenly seized by a hope that in the Virgin man had found a door of escape."[74]

Such passion might have resulted from rage over his wife's untimely death or his own sense of responsibility for the depression that led to her suicide. It could have been the result of an unfulfilled passion for the second love of his life, Elizabeth Cameron, the unhappily married confidante and recipient of many of his most appealing letters; he referred to Elizabeth and her daughter Martha as his Madonna and Child. This eighteenth-century rationalist might have been beating against the doors of Enlightenment modernity. A later passage bolsters this interpretation: "the charm of the twelfth-century Church was that it knew how to be illogical. . . drew aside to let the Virgin and St. Francis. . . take the lead--for a time."[75] His inclusion of St. Francis with the Virgin indicates his concern with compassion and his belief, which he often contradicted with his rhapsodic prose, that this was not an exclusively feminine principle. He did insist that St. Gaudens' statue be neither male nor female.

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[73] Blackmur, p. 192. Postmodernism's early concern with architectural forms resonates with Adams' fixation on Chartres, although Adams focused more on the meaningful than on the playful in his return to the architecture of the past.

[74] Adams, Chartres, pp. 273-4.

[75] Adams, Chartres, p. 336.

The theological ideal is not consistently female either; St. Thomas Aquinas represents an alternative model with his accommodation of reason and faith to resolve the Christian dilemma. Mankind had been presented with an anarchical universe but insisted on unity: a God of harmony could not rule over a discordant universe. "With practical unanimity, mankind rejected the dual or multiple scheme; it insisted on unity. Thomas took the question as it was given him. . . . St. Thomas's settlement could not be a simple one or final, except for practical use, but it served, and it holds good still."[76] Blackmur characterizes Thomas' appeal:

> doubtless the essence of Thomas' attractive force was that by the authority of his form he composed the dualism of fate and freedom, mechanism and vital purpose, anarchy and organization, order and chaos, in a single assertion of unity. By in some sense assenting to both at the same time he achieved the perilous balance of Christian theology.[77]

Thomas' model is ultimately less successful though than the illogical feminine principle of the Virgin: "In his effort to be logical he forced his Deity to be as logical as himself, which hardly suited Omnipotence."[78]

In the final pages of Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, Adams declares the results of his seeking: beauty is truth, faith is truth, science fails to grasp the full meaning that art supplies. "Truth, indeed, may not exist; science avers it to be only a relation; but what men took for truth stares one everywhere in the eye and begs for sympathy."[79] The Church of the Virgin, St. Francis, St. Aquinas, and the Gothic cathedral of Chartres once offered mankind a form of truth. Then mankind changed its attitude toward the universe, and the new "modern" world had never since allowed of such a unity as the Middle Ages offered. Adams reveals the affinity of his own

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[76] Adams, Chartres, p. 366.

[77] Blackmur, p. 225.

[78] Adams, Chartres, p. 358.

[79] Adams, Chartres, p. 376.

soul with the main symbols of Gothic architecture, the "apparent instability" of the broken arch and the flying buttress--"the visible effort to throw off a visible strain--never let us forget that Faith alone supports it, and that, if Faith fails, Heaven is lost." In the final paragraph of the book, he seems to be writing his own spiritual autobiography:

> The equilibrium is visibly delicate beyond the line of safety; danger lurks in every stone. . . . the irregularities of the mental mirror--all these haunting nightmares of the Church are expressed as strongly by the Gothic cathedral as though it had been the cry of human suffering, and as no emotion had ever been expressed before or is likely to find expression again. The delight of its aspirations is flung up to the sky. The pathos of its self-distrust and anguish of doubt is buried in the earth as its last secret. You [his nieces] can read out of it whatever else pleases your youth and confidence; to me, this is all.[80]

The extent of Adams' religious faith was not clear even to his closest friends and admirers. When Henry James wrote in July 1906 of his appreciation of the book, he expressed envy of Adams' ability to immerse himself in the subject, suggesting that he considers Adams to be blessed with faith:

> your sublime study of Mt. St. Michel & Chartres. . . the divine beauty & interest. . . . reading you with bated breath of wonder, sympathy & applause. May I say, all unworthy and incompetent, what honour I think the beautiful volume does you & of how exquisite & distinguished an interest I have found it, with its easy lucidity, its saturation with its subject, its charmingly taken and kept, tone. Even more than I congratulate you on the book I envy you your relation to the subject.[81]

Blackmur considered Adams a private nihilist, despite his public self-satisfaction.[82] The point is moot; we can only surmise that Adams was serious in recommending a religious solution he could not himself accept to the modernist dilemma. The main lesson to be learned from Adams' forays into medieval religious studies is that truth requires a balancing of mind and heart. His

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[80] Adams, Chartres, p. 377.

[81] Monteiro, pp. 69-70.

[82] Blackmur, p. 177.

failure to maintain that balance in his own life does not deny the validity of his search or the earnestness of his exhortation to his society. Blackmur finds the nub of Adams: he "cries with Yeats against the 'self-born mockers of man's enterprise!'" A posthumous collection of Henry's writings on science and history, The Degradation of Democratic Dogma, proves the intensity of Adams' will to belief.

CHAPTER 5

THE DEGRADATION OF DEMOCRATIC DOGMA

Biography must be written by a sympathetic observer, especially when the subject is "so complex a creature" as Henry Adams. His brother Brooks was a soulmate and kindred spirit--someone who shared not only Henry's scientific, cultural, and political interests but also his unusual family background. The boys experienced together the advantages of education and careful upbringing as well as the burden of living up to the family name. Brooks conveys his critical yet reverent appreciation for his outstanding relatives as he introduces the scattered philosophical writings of Henry in this posthumous collection.

The introduction and prefatory essay, "The Heritage of Henry Adams," relieve the minds of Adams students confused by his inherent contradictions. Henry, Brooks assures us, was more than a bit of a puzzle. Henry was "cultivated, stimulating. . . never quite frank with himself or others. . . . shy. . . . oversensitive. . . dearly loved paradox."[83] Brooks further credits Henry with being an angel and "saner than I."[84]

Brooks attempts to explain Henry by skipping back a generation to show that he inherited both intellect and personality from their grandfather, John Quincy Adams. The latter, like Henry, was in Brooks' rather dramatic phrasing, "a martyr to his belief in God, education, and science."[85] Henry's own words deny the truth of Brooks' characterization; he acknowledges the family calling by refusing it: "I have no vocation for martyrdom."[86] John Quincy Adams was

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[83] Henry Adams. The Degradation of Democratic Dogma, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1920, pp. 1-2.

[84] Adams, Degradation, p. 91.

[85] Adams, Degradation, p. xiii.

[86] Adams, Degradation, p. 91.

the braver of the two, the more willing to look into the void and declare that the twin pillars of modernity were a sham; he was "forced to admit that science and education offer no solution."[87] John Quincy Adams was able to face what his grandson could not: political modernity, democratic liberalism, must admit its failure if education cannot guarantee an enlightened and unified public. Henry, despite his cynical sputterings about the downward spiral of human possibilities, clung to the hope that religion offered a way out of the chaos of a society, the dominant dogma of which, democracy, had been deified by a people who either did not or would not see that it was a hopelessly degraded reality. "If there be a God and a consequent unity, man should confess him. Then indeed he may have a chance of steady advancement toward perfection. But, if there be no unity and on the contrary, only multiplicity, he can only develop into that chaos of which he forms a part."[88] In the tradition of defeated politicians, John Quincy detected the death of the modern world because of his unhappy personal experiences with democracy; Henry took up his battles as a matter of family honor and magnified his own disenchantment thereby.

The family history of complete dedication to and consequent alienation from the democratic dogma serves as poignant evidence for Brooks that the promises of democracy were empty. He believed the Adams family had given the ruling ideology their best efforts; they would have continued to believe if the conditions had allowed it. Whereas Henry attempted to avoid displaying his "intellectual priggishness" in his published works, his brother suffered from no such qualms. Brooks praises the Adams family's moral rectitude as a necessary outcome of the degradation of democratic dogma. The Adamses had inherited, and were bred to, strength of mind and character; yet they were not suited to the new world in which the admirable George Washington no longer epitomized American democracy, or in which people were not at least

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[87] Adams, Degradation, p. 10.

[88] Adams, Degradation, p. 101. Unlike many others, he links women with order rather than chaos.

"capable of understanding and appreciating his moral attitude."[89] Lesser figures had risen to power, and the virtues of the Adamses no longer flourished in such a debased environment: "a type must rise or fall according as it is adjusted to its environment. . . . It is now full four generations since John Adams wrote the constitution of Massachusetts. It is time that we perished. The world is tired of us."[90] The shining ideals of democracy had manifested themselves in such degraded characters as Andrew Jackson, whom John Quincy described as "a barbarian who could not write a sentence of grammar and hardly could spell his own name."

His grandson Henry suggested similar epithets for U. S. Grant in The Education. Adams does not draw out the extrapolation in Brooks' collection, but his writings make possible the following conclusion: The country could either choose Jackson and Grant, thereby admitting the degradation of democratic dogma as an unavoidable corollary to the degradation of energy asserted by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, or it could escape the authority of scientific law by declaring Thought independent and, thus, allow cultural ascendance to the independent thinkers in the Adams family.

One of the catalysts for the degradation of democratic dogma or, more generally the degradation of society, was women's emancipation. Woman was the cement of the family and therefore of society; in seeking other fulfillment she had deserted her post, leaving the family to wither. It is not always possible to know the extent to which Henry believed his own pronouncements. He certainly enjoyed the company of intelligent, independent women, an attitude he might have learned from his grandfather, who reportedly worshipped Henry's intelligent, powerful great-grandmother Abigail. Brooks notes that Henry found the Reformation appalling

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[89] Adams, Degradation, p. 105.

[90] Adams, Degradation, p. 93.

not only because the Virgin had been dethroned, but also because the Puritans had attacked women in general.

> Mary's treatment of respectable and law-abiding people who had no favours to ask, and were reasonably confident of getting to heaven by the regular judgement, without expense, rankled so deeply that three hundred years later the Puritan reformers were not satisfied with abolishing her, but sought to abolish the woman altogether as the cause of all evil in heaven and on earth.[91]

His Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres and "The Virgin and the Dynamo" are powerful evocations of the feminine principle in the person of the Virgin. More powerful than his affinity for independent women, however, was his desire for unity in society. The larger good always superseded the individual good in Adams' thought, unless he were himself the sacrificial lamb.

The texts that Brooks Adams gathered for The Degradation of Democratic Dogma manifest Henry's contrariness perhaps better than any of his other writings. These accounts of his efforts to write a science of history veer between disdain for and fascination with the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century that constitute the reference point for all studies of man, including his field of history. If Henry Adams were alive in the 1990s, he would have continued this proclivity, and be found searching in the chaos theories of physics for a means to ordering history or labeling the disorder.

The dominance of science becomes problematic at mid-nineteenth century when two new scientific theories conflict with each other, or, more precisely, when the social interpretations and applications of those theories conflict. The Second Law of Thermodynamics promulgated in 1850 by Julius Thomsen asserted the dissipation of all energies and thus fueled pessimistic prognostications of society's imminent demise. Soon thereafter, Darwin's evolutionary theories (1859) as they were interpreted by a generally optimistic American population to indicate the continual upward progress of human society brought some measure of hope.

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[91] Adams, Chartres, p. 274.

Adams holds himself apart from the excesses of both the optimists misinterpreting Darwin's ideas and the pessimists who took the Second Law as a signal of the end of mankind, even though he indulged his pessimistic nature in more than a few rides to perdition. At the same time that he mocks society because it "has the air of taking for granted its indefinite progress towards perfection with more confidence. . . more dogmatism than in 1830. . . , " he notes its failure to be perfectly confident and dogmatic. "Yet the same society has acquired a growing habit of feeling its own pulse. . . and of doubting its own health like a nervous invalid."[92] His Hamlet-like failures to act that he chronicles in The Education partake of more than a bit of nervous invalidism, so perhaps Henry should be more sympathetic. He suggests that doubt, while essential to the education phase of one's life, should only result in hesitation, not timidity (or nervous invalidism). He describes himself as timid at the end of The Education, so he must not intend to set himself up as a model. He means, perhaps, that education should cause one to consider the possibility of failure but leave one with enough confidence to act. Adams could occasionally step into the arena of social and public affairs and offer pragmatic solutions or approaches to solutions. When he addresses the issue of academic freedom in the teaching of pessimistic philosophies, Adams bemoans the hypocrisy of putting degradationist rhetoric under the restrictions that hampered Galileo, but he sides finally with societal rather than individual or even academic needs.

> However much to be regretted is such a result, society cannot safely permit itself to be condemned to a lingering death, which is sure to tend towards suicide, merely to suit the convenience of school-teachers. The dilemma is real; it may become serious; in any case it needs to be understood.[93]

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[92] Adams, Degradation, p. 186.

[93] Adams, Degradation, p. 190.

This is the reasonable civic-minded Adams, eager to confront the reality associated with the theory.

As always with Adams, however, this eagerness to be of service to the greater good of his society in the family tradition contends with his tendency toward extreme interpretations of theory. The true believer and the cynic battle for control of his soul. The enthusiast, who thrived on every glorious moment of his years of education despite his carping, found a way out of the stranglehold of the Second Law of Thermodynamics on intellectual life if not on society. He argues that history is a science not of statistics (a recent interpretation of history as science) but of "Vital Energy." Furthermore, the purpose of the University is:

> to teach that the flower of vital energy is Thought, and that not Instinct but Intellect is the highest power of a supernatural Will;--an ultimate, independent, self-producing, self-sustaining, incorruptible solvent of all earlier or lower energies, and incapable of degradation or dissolution.[94]

Adams the inveterate critic, on the other hand, is not too subtle as he lumps pessimists and optimists together and dismisses both as fools:

> The humor of these prophecies [of impending disaster] seldom strikes a reader with its full force in America, but in Europe the love of dramatic effect inspires every line. Compared with the superficial and self-complacent optimism which seems to veneer the surface of society, the frequent and tragic outbursts. . . announcing the end of the world, surpass all that could be considered as a natural product of the time. The note of warning verges on the grotesque; it is hysterically solemn; a little more, and it would sound like the Salvation Army; a small natural shock might easily turn it into a panic.[95]

The tone is offhand and amused; it belies the intensity of Adams' own dire warnings of cataclysms in The Education and in the articles and letters that comprise The Degradation. In deriding other culture critics, especially in France or Germany, for their announcements of

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[94] Adams, Degradation, p. 206.

[95] Adams, Degradation, pp. 180-1.

"supposed social decrepitude,"[96] he must be forgetting his own forays into this field. In mocking blind optimism, Adams fails to acknowledge his own mirror-image failing of blind nostalgia, as revealed especially in Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.[97]

"The Tendency of History" (1894) is a letter Adams wrote to the American Historical Association as president of that body, wherein he reveals his fighting spirit: he may fail but will try anyway to "apply Darwin's method to the facts of human history."[98] Several factors contend against this project, especially the "immense forces" of church and state. The church in particular objects because science and faith in an active providence are mutually exclusive. This was not always the view of the popes, many of whom argued that God could create a world to develop in many ways. Adams argues that the previous fifty years had witnessed a "rapid progress in history," but he predicts a cataclysm soon. The evidence he provides for either position is scarce in this document. His pessimism is tied up with his observations of the degradation of democratic dogma, but his deeper fears seem to stem from the authority of science, which tells him that everything degrades.

The cataclysm he foretells is a clash between the forces of capitalism and those of communism; belying his assertion of pleasure in the crumbling of worlds, he lays the blame for such a disaster at the doors of universities that have been tearing down society's faith in progress, which he considers a useful myth. "If such a crisis should come, the universities throughout the world will have done most to create it, and are under most obligation to find a solution for it."[99] His attitude is considerably more fiery and prescriptive than he ever showed in The Education;

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[96] Adams, Degradation, p. 186.

[97] See Christopher Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 1991.

[98] Adams, Degradation, p. 127.

[99] Adams, Degradation, p. 132.

this is not the distant cynic of his previous writings. He is holding intellectuals accountable for the effect of their teaching on society.

On his birthday sixteen years later, 16 February 1910, Henry Adams accelerated his quest to develop a science of history in "A Letter to American Teachers of History." He acknowledges the authority of science, tries to be part of it and make use of it, rather than fight it. He conveys the truism of the time succinctly and poetically:

> in a literary point of view the Victorian epoch rested largely,--perhaps chiefly,--on the faith that society had but to follow where science led; to--
>
> "Move upward, working out the beast,
> And let the ape and tiger die";
>
> in order to attain perfection.[100]

Essentially Adams is looking to science to save history from the teachings of science. He declares the Newtonian universe null and void, then asks for a new Newton. Mankind had lived in a comfortable enough mental universe under a system of theological unity, governed by the will of the creator. The new mechanical unity of Newton had taken a little getting used to, but the basic human need for unity was fulfilled by the Law of Conservation of Energy: nothing added, nothing lost. "The Law of Conservation was an easy one; it left a reasonable share of freedom in the universe; even astronomers were allowed to be devout. . . ."[101] All was well until the Second Law of Thermodynamics proclaimed the dissipation of energy and thereby "tossed the universe into the ash-heap."[102]

The dramatic and poetic language betrays the depth of Adams' affinity with universal scientific formulations. He relates to universe-sized concerns on their own terms and explores their significance for his own field of history. He pretends, however, just as he pretended to

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[100] Adams, Degradation, p. 159.

[101] Adams, Degradation, p. 209.

[102] Adams, Degradation, p. 141. Adams uses the same phrase in The Education.

failure in The Education, to no understanding of the scientific debate. He knows at least that a world governed by its conception of science has little respect for historians. "Since the Church had lost its authority, the historian's field had shrunk into narrow limits of rigorously human action"; the new authority of science did not admit "the vulgar and ignorant historian" into the transcendent realm.[103] Not just his social class but even his profession had been displaced. He does not make this displacement an excuse for inaction, though. The position of historians on the outside of power looking in did not absolve them of the responsibility to learn and teach the dimensions and ramifications of the problems posed for society by new discoveries in science. Historians were as necessary and as powerless as ministers in the new order. Adams believed in fighting the losing fight with a good will, just as his grandfather did on a less cosmic scale.

Employing his usual shifting tones, Adams justifies his decision that history really was a science. He is at once the eager, intense searcher for meaning and the fearful disbeliever in meaning: "physicists regarded society as an organism in the only respect which seriously concerned historians:--It would die!" He concludes rather sarcastically from this evidence that history was a science.[104] In explaining the significance of this conclusion for his fellow history professors, he certainly mocks the antimodern attitudes of which he has been accused: the University professor of history can "remain quietly in the pleasant meadows of antiquarianism, protected as heretofore by the convenient and sufficient axiom of the nineteenth century that history is not a science, and society not an organism."[105] In this context, "convenient" serves as a term of disdain rather than as a term of approbation as it often does elsewhere in Adams' work. And far from siding with the antimodernists who looked back in history for their models

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[103] Adams, Degradation, pp. 142, 146.

[104] Adams, Degradation, p. 150.

[105] Adams, Degradation, p. 169.

of unified and healthy societies, Adams appears to consider even a nineteenth-century model hopelessly outdated and useless. Adams' fascination with science and dedication to his education kept him eager for the future, although perhaps not in equal proportions to his fear, which was based on disgust for the present, or to his genuine love of the Gothic past.

With one problem solved apparently to his satisfaction, Adams then addresses himself to the problem of determining which form of science was the province of history. The Second Law of Thermodynamics had been followed in short order by Darwin's theories of evolution in 1859, and the laws contradicted each other, at least as students of human energy interpreted them.

Adams displays his understanding of the society from which he held himself separate in his explanation of the human need for theories of progress. "Society naturally and instinctively adopted the view that Evolution must be upward. . . ."[106] The evolutionist "stood as heir apparent to all the aspirations of mankind."[107] Adams understood, as many fellow alienated intellectuals do not, the alternate, nonscientific realm of truth. Even as he is arguing in disgusted tones about the degradation of democratic dogma and the shock of industrialization to man's sensibilities, he speaks approvingly of the "energies of. . . hope."[108] In reference to another theory, he concedes with his gracious accommodation to the reality of humanness that it is not true, "but it is convenient."[109] His search for truth in science and religion is always burdened by his unshakable suspicion that truth is unattainable. He notes, for instance that "the few certainties of geology as of history are so easily read in opposite senses,"[110] and "cross-purposes

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[106] Adams, Degradation, p. 153.

[107] Adams, Degradation, p. 157.

[108] Adams, Degradation, p. 157.

[109] Adams, Degradation, p. 166.

[110] Adams, Degradation, p. 166.

have become almost a standard rule in sociology. They have always been the rule in history."[111]

These denials of absolute truth in history muddy the image of Adams as one of the antimodernists looking blindly back to the Middle Ages for stationary, incontrovertible truth. It is difficult enough to categorize anyone's thoughts, but the contradictions in Adams' thoughts almost bespeak a perverse delight in confounding the reader. How can one reconcile his assertion that "in former ages, the world went on, after a fashion, trusting to the energy of its archaic instincts to make good the lapses of its reasoning powers" with his equally adamant declaration that "The function of man is, to the historian, the production of Thought."[112] Adams conjectures in wise Socratic manner: "Man had always flattered himself that he knew--or was about to know--something that would make his own energy intelligible to itself, but he invariably found, on further inquiry, that the more he knew, the less he understood."[113]

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The second section of his letter to history professors contains Adams' suggestions for solving the problems he outlined in the first section. He begins, in a playful fashion that deconstructionists might admire, torturing a pun out of the title, "The Solutions" while he plays fast and loose with his own beliefs about individuality and education:

> Notoriously civilization and education enfeeble personal energy; emollit mores: they aim especially at extending the forces of society at cost of the intensity of individual forces. . . . The individual, like the crystal of salt, is absorbed in the solution, but the solution does work which the individual could not do.[114]

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[111] Adams, Degradation, p. 179.

[112] Adams, Degradation, pp. 192, 205.

[113] Adams, Degradation, p. 149.

[114] Adams, Degradation, p. 211.

The solution lies in solutions. Adams might have reveled in an active social life, and he certainly craved the attention of women, but he had no intention of subsuming his anarchic, individualistic mind to any social stew. Perhaps he meant only to prescribe for others.

The solutions Adams proposes echo the style of temperance advocates and the current preachings of advocates for personal and environmental health. He joins forces with the late twentieth-century futurologists at the same time that he repeats his fixation on female energy (with mother Nature replacing the Virgin of Chartres) to propose that we stop wasting resources, both individual and societal: "man is a bottomless sink of waste unparalleled in the cosmos, and can already see the end of the immense economies which his mother Nature stored for his support."[115] Adams sounds uncharacteristically moralistic and precise in his prescriptions for halting the degradation of human energies. He attacks the stupidity of man's pleasures: drinking, firing cannon, killing wildlife, and breeding feebler forms of life, and the stupidity of man's achievements: "steam horsepower to what end?"[116] The problem of man's self-destructive choices is exacerbated by the failure of the intellectuals who train the next generation to offer any efficacious solution; Adams would, of course, suggest that they inculcate the religious belief of the Middle Ages. "Universities of today hesitate to assert with confidence the old conviction of spiritual authority."[117] We need to make use of our reason, but we need also to recognize that reason is a less intense phase in human history than artistic or religious emotion, which he associates with the Middle Ages.[118] He would have argued that the postmodern denial of unifying truths is a further degradation of human energy from art and religion to reason to

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[115] Adams, Degradation, p. 218.

[116] Adams, Degradation, pp. 217, 233.

[117] Adams, Degradation, p. 232.

[118] Adams, Degradation, p. 229.

nothing. Although he does not enjoy the faith he desires for the salvation of his society, he does exhibit a religious devotion and leap of faith by carrying on in the darkness.

The end of "A Letter to American Teachers of History" (1910) echoes the end of The Education (the 1905 section) in its plea for a savior. In the Letter, Adams derides the Newtonian universe as a catastrophe, then requests another Newton as the only feasible solution to the problem he perceives for society to correlate its social with its scientific doctrines.

> If the physicists and physico-chemists can at last find their way to an arrangement that would satisfy the sociologists and historians, the problem would be wholly solved. Such a complete solution seems not impossible; but at present,--for the moment,--as the stream runs,--it also seems, to an impartial bystander, to call for the aid of another Newton.[119]

He claims that the discovery of the degradation of energy presents a "dilemma worse than the sixteenth century" when the world had to adjust to Newton's laws. "The law of Entropy imposes a servitude on all energies, including the mental. The degree of freedom steadily and rapidly diminishes."[120] In The Education, he mocks Constantine's self-serving use of Christianity, then asks for another Constantine to reestablish a unifying faith: "The two-thousand years failure of Christianity roared upward from Broadway, and no Constantine the Great was in sight."[121] Some of Adams' inconsistencies can be attributed to the erratic nature of his educational venture, but he does have a pragmatic, extremely serious concern for the state of his society that allows this intensely critical mind to gesture vaguely toward whatever works. He would never deny the possibility of finding truth, because mankind cannot flourish without it. The point is not so much whether it is strictly provable within a scientific framework as whether it is essential to human

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[119] Adams, Degradation, p. 263.

[120] Adams, Degradation, p. 251.

[121] Adams, Degradation, p. 500.

existence. The postmodernists have reversed his formula: he declared that truth exists because it is necessary; they declare that truth does not exist, so it is irrelevant whether it is necessary.

If, as Adams suggests in "The Letter," the energy of mankind has degraded from the religious and artistic energy of the Middle Ages to the intellectual energy of the modern scientific era, then it is a puzzle to account for his logarithmic chart in "The Rule of Phase Applied to History" (1909) that seems to indicate the opposite situation. The modern (his word is Newtonian) phase--roughly 1600 to 1900--represents the beginning of the upswing from a horizontally flat period dominated by religion to a vertically flat period dominated by the law of dissipation, what is now called the postmodern age. The rising period is the Mechanical, but the significance seems to lie in society's interpretation of progress during the period; Adams is less sanguine about the doctrine of progress.

In "The Rule of Phase," which he called a "mere intellectual plaything," Adams continues his search for a scientific model that will account for the vagaries of human history. He borrows the phases of ice, water, and steam to explain:

> We live in a world of phases, so much more astonishing than the explosion of rockets, that we cannot, unless we are Gibbs or Watts, stop every moment to ask what becomes of the salt we put in our soup, or the water we boil in our teapot, and we are apt to remain stupidly stolid when a bulb bursts into a tulip, or a worm turns into a butterfly. No phase compares in wonder with the mere fact of our existence, and this wonder has so completely exhausted the powers of Thought that mankind, except in a few laboratories, has ceased to wonder, or even to think.[122]

The conclusion Adams draws from this observation is that "the future of Thought, and therefore of History, lies in the hands of the physicists. . . ." He has thrown up his hands and placed his faith in a future he cannot trust: "Nothing further can be expected from further study on the old lines. A new generation must be brought up to think by new methods," those of physics. Chaos

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[122] Adams, Degradation, p. 282.

theory certainly does seem to have dominated the thought of the late-twentieth century, following Adams' jaded prescription. His observation has its positive side though; he displays his capacity for joy, his ability to take in the humble, accessible wonders of the universe, such as Chartres or a tulip. He also demonstrates the capacity to revel in the ramifications of an infinitely expanded universe:

> The problem to the anthropoid ape a hundred thousand years ago was the same as that addressed to the physicist-historian of 1900:--How long could he go on developing indefinite new phases in response to the occult attractions of an infinitely extended universe? What new direction could his genius take?[123]

One might well ask what new direction the genius of Henry Adams could take. The transcendence of the search is the only constant of his life and works.

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[123] Adams, Degradation, p. 298.

CONCLUSION

Henry Adams said that he did not seek absolute truth--only a spool on which to wind the threads of history. He looked to the "rival shibboleths of Religion and Science" for that spool and finally found part of his answer in Buddhism. The spirit of peace and compassion he experienced in that Eastern religion led him back to the compassionate Virgin of Chartres in his own tradition, giving purpose to his fixations on the maternal and the aesthetic. He achieved thereby a "tenuous transcendentalism."[1]

The complex and contradictory Adams vacillated in his pronouncements so widely that he does not lend himself to easy synthesis or convenient association with one mode of thought. One thread was common throughout his life and his writings, however; he sought order wherever he could find it in his chaotic personality and world. At times he espoused an idealistic belief in the eighteenth-century rationalist version of modernity. His traveling companion, the artist John La Farge, once dreamed that "Adams' disembodied mind rustled about the room like a rat," and exclaimed "Adams, you reason too much." Adams said of himself: "My methods are all [too] intellectual, analytic and modern" [to write the South Seas novel that his friend John Hay requested].[2] At other times he rejected reason as life-denying, in contrast to the life-affirming feminine (and Buddhist) principle, which did not reside in the mind. The impact of his wife's suicide must surely be credited with the preponderance of the religious emphasis in his later years. Augustus St. Gaudens' memorial for her at Rock Creek stands today as testimony to Adams' commitment to his quest for spiritual repose.

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[1] Ernest Samuels. Henry Adams: The Major Phase. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964, p. 62.

[2] Samuels, Major Phase, pp. 23-4.

Henry Adams certainly was an antimodernist, despite whatever inclinations and pronouncements place him in the modern or postmodern categories. He blamed industrialization and democratization and the concomitant secularization of society for many of ills he saw in his world. He hated the power of the degraded modern age to take away his power as an individual that was one of the original promises of the modern age, but he did not evince concern for the individual members of his society so much as for the unit itself: "A later age may indeed be shocked by Adams' profound detachment from the less respectable classes of society."[3] Rather than judging late-nineteenth-century antimodernists by contemporary democratic standards though, it would be wise to follow Jacob Burckhardt's advice in judging the men of the Renaissance: "Their contemporaries took what these men said to be a true expression of their feeling, and we have not the right to despise it as an affectation."[4]

The choice of Henry Adams for this study depends for very practical reasons on his being a member of the intellectual elite, a role that has to be salvaged from Hayden White and other current theorists, especially literature critics, who argue that an emphasis on quality of thought or writing cloaks an anti-egalitarian effort to exclude certain segments of society from prominence.[5] Intellectual work is necessarily elitist because higher education and writing about academic issues are inherently elitist activities even if social class is no longer a barrier to these activities or to membership in this elite. Not everyone has the time or inclination to participate in gauging the progress or decline of society, suggesting solutions to problems, or proposing new possibilities for development; those who do will necessarily speak for those who do not.

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[3] Ernest Samuels, Henry Adams: The Middle Years. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1958, p. 20.

[4] Jacob Burckhardt. The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, vol. I. New York: Harper and Row, 1958, p. 436.

[5] Peter Shaw. The War Against the Intellect: Episodes in the Decline of Discourse. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989, p. 78. Shaw derides the efforts of feminist criticism to salvage second rate novels by women. The more radical critics repudiate literary values altogether, asserting that aesthetic standards are themselves a politically inspired imposition in the service of "interests." Privileged classes impose standards to maintain the status quo.

The elite-bashing by many leftists and postmodernists denies the very real contributions to society of such elite figures as Henry Adams; it was one of the goals of this study to reclaim Adams and his insights for current use. He achieved a sort of greatness; much of the writing and thought in his late works is a miracle of passion and clarity and beauty in the midst of his undeniable muddle. In addition, his whole life offers a model of strenuous seeking after answers to society's dilemmas. "Only by living life as a problem and predicament, the meaning of which was always to be partially hidden, could society attain the moral tension and spiritual awareness needed for a deep and vital sense of purpose."[6] His antimodernism stemmed from an heroic conception of life even though he lacked Nietzsche's courage or the madness to face the void.

The art critic Robert Hughes explains the necessity of valuing the elite by reference to his own woodworking hobby. He knows how to value the skill and achievements of master cabinet-makers because he has tried to do what they do. "People who can make such things (a Hepplewhite cabinet or the great temple of Horyu-ji in Japan) are an elite; they have earned the right to be." Not resentment but reverence and pleasure should be the response.[7] It is human to discriminate, to choose that which satisfies the senses. "These differences of intensity, meaning, grace can't be set forth in a little catechism or a recipe book. They can only be experienced and argued, and then seen in relation to a history that includes social history."[8] This is not to deny the very real problem of a parasitic elite of wealth and birth that prides itself on native superiority and expects homage and support as a result. Contempt for this group has spilled over, however, into disdain for all who share the cultural milieu or the manner.

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[6] César Graña. Modernity and Its Discontents: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century. New York: Harper and Row, 1964, p. 96.

[7] Robert Hughes. "Art, Morals, and Politics," The New York Review of Books, vol. 39, April 23, 1992, p. 27.

[8] Hughes, p. 27.

Because one defines oneself not just by the groups to which one belongs, but also by those to which one does not belong, those who see themselves as cultural aristocrats also see themselves as outsiders. The fault for that exclusion lies on both sides. Adams and other elitist antimodernists failed to understand their society well enough to lead it; on the other hand, their society did not always value what they had to offer. "In a democracy, the majority names and sustains itself, in part, by stigmatizing a minority" (George Santayana). Henry Adams, though, suffered less from actual exclusion than from the failure of society to meet his extraordinarily high expectations based on his family background and his personal gifts.

Whatever its function, high culture does not offer a simple alternative to low culture: as Adams and other elitists presented it, high culture was the only choice. This is ungloved cultural imperialism: "The Tocquevillian does not shrug a de gustibus shrug of dislike but drives home with a judgment the teleology of aesthetic and cultural choice."[9] But to see clearly, or to think that one does, implies responsibility to change, regardless of whether society applauds and follows. "Observing well is the best revenge," but it does not suffice.[10] Henry Adams, though, cannot be taken at his own word as a failure in the public realm. For many years he offered himself as an eager, idealistic, hard-working public servant. And talented, public-minded individuals have always felt that their talents should be exercised in the public good, which did mean that democracy should listen to them. Their arrogance made the isolation worse, but they had reason to expect their insights to be valued as America grappled with the social problems of the modern industrial age.

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[9] Robert Dawidoff. The Genteel Tradition and the Sacred Rage: High Culture vs. Democracy in Adams, James, and Santayana. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p. 27.

[10] Dawidoff, p. 148.

The most telling criticism of many elite antimodernists, including Adams, is that they did not trust the people whose heroes they wanted to be. They refused their enemies even the respect necessary to engage them in combat; they rejected the opportunity to prove the value of high culture in developing a moral principle. The liberal reformers, of whom Adams was a leader, combined intellectual arrogance with unreasoning fear of listening to their countrymen. Although he has been accused of lacking the humility that comes with true intellectual and moral superiority,[11] Adams did have the natural humility of the eager lifelong student.

Adams and the antimodernists who reacted primarily against the democratization of culture often seem so hampered by elitist attitudes and blind, unproductive nostalgia that all their thinking loses validity for many democratic critics. Henry James inadvertently offered a recapitulation of the efforts of Henry Adams when he commented on Adams' anonymously published novel Democracy: "clever, though much of the satire a good deal too coarse. Who is it by . . . . It is good enough to make it a pity it isn't better."[12] Had Adams been an even better writer, his words might have been more compelling to those who disagreed with the content. Had he shown less condescension and more sympathy for those Americans outside of his class, his antimodernist concerns might have won him a broader audience. But to some extent the failure of Adams to serve as a productive influence today reflects the anti-elitism of mid- to late-twentieth-century American critics more than the quality of his own ideas. A more sympathetic examination can accept the Boston Brahmin tone as a blemish rather than as a sign of internal rot and look to the wealth of insight he can bring to contemporary concerns.

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[11] John G. Sproat. "The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 280.

[12] George Monteiro, ed. The Correspondence of Henry James and Henry Adams, 1877-1914. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1992, p. 47.

Postmodernist historians such as Hayden White are particularly eager to deconstruct the "real" meanings behind the erudition of the well-educated upper class. White is concerned, for instance, that Adams included a preface to his Education in order to control the reader's view of what he reads. He does not add anything, thereby, to traditional historical analysis. Postmodern theory may just be a massive adumbration of what has been obvious only to the more discerning traditional critics. A richer, broader, more all-encompassing tradition of criticism would have allowed some dignity and authority to the author, while turning the critical gaze on both the form and the content of his work.

In relegating the effects of documents in intellectual history to other areas of study such as economics or psychology, White seems to suggest that intellectual historians should apply to all texts the standards of Marxism and Freudianism--a double dose of the very authoritarianism he derides. By his own logic, his suggestion carries no authority and need not be heeded. Though he notes that Freud and Marx must be subject to semiotic review just as all other classic figures should be, he does not propose that his own contributions be deconstructed. The project offers rich possibilities. His vocabulary, for example, is far more elitist and exclusive than any Henry Adams ever employed. Adams did indeed limit his audience to the select who could appreciate his concerns; White limits his audience to the few whose dictionaries contain: propaedeutic, organon, onanistic, anaclitic, phati, conative--not comic strip words. His choice of vocabulary casts doubt on his desire to communicate with the general reader whom he seemed to be defending against the authority of the classics. Perhaps the postmodern distaste for antimodernists reveals a hidden disgust with their own elitism.

White second guesses the objections of his critics that his approach is reductionist, but his only escape is to claim reductionism as a virtue, and he misses that opportunity:

> By unpacking the rich symbolic content of Adams's work we desublimate it and return it to its status as an immanent [N.B.: not "eminent"] product of the culture

> in which it arose. Far from reducing the work, we have, on the contrary, enflowered it, permitted it to bloom and caused it to display its richness and power as a symbolizing process.[13]

The latter half of the claim has some validity, but in the process of providing grist for the critics of process he has indeed denied dignity to the work, its author, and its readers; this is reductionist. Hayden White's efforts and those of many postmodernists lack the dignity and the usefulness of the good faith antimodernist efforts of Henry Adams.

The most extreme expression of postmodern reductionism is Richard Rorty's mockery of the "real live metaphysical prig" who believes in "reality" and "truth." The Japanese refer to Westerners as "logic nuts" because they insist on explaining even what must be accepted without explanation; postmodernists use similar terminology for modern historians: "fact fetishist," "facticity," "vulgar factologist."[14] Henry Adams expressed the same distrust of facts in Mont-Saint-Michel, but he meant thereby something more akin to the romantics' disdain for a mechanistic view of life. He did not dispense with facts in the sense of historical truth.

Adams' religious spirit would never have allowed him to embrace the nihilism of postmodernism, but he shared its negative expression, in part because his religious spirit never found rest in true belief. He proclaimed: "To me the crumbling of worlds is always fun," yet he worked tirelessly to keep his world from fragmenting into chaos.[15] His "nihilistic spirit of rebellion" surfaced regularly: "I regard any concession to popular illusions as a blemish. . . ."[16] Nonetheless, his concern for order usually won the battle for his allegiance, though; because he

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[13] Hayden White. "Method and Ideology in Intellectual History: The Case of Henry Adams," Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives, eds. Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982, p. 310.

[14] Qtd. Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling it as you like it: Post-modernist history and the flight from fact," The Times Literary Supplement, No. 4672, Oct. 16, 1992, p. 13.

[15] Qtd. Samuels, Major Phase, p. 393.

[16] Samuels, The Middle Years, p. 344; Major Phase, p. 75.

believed in the impact of ideas, he stopped short of forcing his most negative outlook on his readers. If the world were really bent on destruction, "I do not think that art or manners require us to fling the fact constantly in our neighbors' faces."[17] On the lighter side, his work has "frolic power," definitely a characteristic of the playful school of postmodernism.[18] He pushed the borders of reality in his search for truth and order, although never so far as Derrida or Nietzsche. One cannot picture Henry Adams doing anything but despairing in the face of the void, but he found a form of dancing in his fascination with the religious past.

These resonances with the postmodernists do not signify a change of categories for Adams; they merely call the categories into question and dispense with some of the simplistic rejections of Adams due to his elitist antimodernist preachings. All of his seeking for a purer democracy, a finer aesthetics, a clearer understanding of his world militate against Foucault's anti-transcendence and Derrida's denial of meaning outside of the text; thus he cannot be counted among the postmodernists.

The essence of the accommodation between flawed humanity and flawed reality that kept Henry Adams from despair is Nietzsche's claim that "a belief can be a necessary condition of life and still be false." In his essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History" (1874) Nietzsche sympathized with modern man's need for a safe harbor: "modern man. . . yearns for a coast in the wide waste of the ocean of knowledge."[19] Especially in the area of science, an embarrassment of riches confronts mankind with the need for an organizing myth. Myth is a form of art and no more than any other art can it create reality or declare our freedom from reality, but

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[17] Samuels, Middle Years, p. 319.

[18] Cushing Strout, quoting William James, "The Broken Arch of Henry Adams' Life," Reviews in American History, vol. 18, Dec. 1990, p. 533.

[19] Qtd. Allan Megill. Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p. 58.

it can allow us to face reality.[20] For Adams that myth or necessary lie was religion, although he continued to look to science.

The two mythical poles of the Apollonian--mind, light, dream, individuality--and the Dionysian--will, reality, immediacy, unity--merged to form Greek culture, and that union has been the ideal, with one pole or the other accentuated ever since. Only with postmodernism has the uneasy, shifting balance been denied as a possible ambition. The German Schein means both light and illusion; it is one of those felicitous combinations such as chaos/opportunity in Chinese that allows humankind to look again at the void and see possibility. If one believes, as did Adams at Chartres, that light is the concomitant of illusion, that one sees truth only by accepting untruth, then one continues to maintain a precarious balance. Postmodernists have refused to take advantage of the double meaning in order to adjust to an imperfect world of illusions; they have declared the original Greek synthesis invalid and insist on offering no alternative. Postmodernism is a Dionysian embrace of reality without the light of Apollonian illusion.[21]

"Post-modernism entices us with the siren call of liberation and creativity, but it may be an invitation to intellectual and moral suicide. . . . [It is] radically anti-humanistic, profoundly anti-historical." What Gertrude Himmelfarb and other anti-postmodernists see as a curse, Hayden White regards as a blessing. He believes that a chaotic form of history suits chaotic times: "We require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot."[22] He dismisses Adams' view that such turmoil had always been the lot of humankind: "Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man." White

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[20] The Enlightenment thinkers also operated in a world that failed to meet their standards of reason based on science. Megill notes the "radical contradiction between the Enlightenment project for a science of society and its continuing belief in morality and freedom" as evidence of eighteenth-century accommodation. Megill, p. 10.

[21] See Megill, pp. 38-46.

[22] Himmelfarb, "Telling it," p. 15.

commends those who relieved us of the burden of history, but as Himmelfarb points out "To free men from the 'burden' of history is to free them from the burden of humanity." Henry Adams offers a model of continued engagement with the burden of history.

This study began with many questions, about Henry Adams, a generation of elitist antimodernists, postmodern theory, and the possibilities for resolving current cultural crises. It ends with many impressions, more questions, and a conclusion that the life and works of Henry Adams offer an illustration of the current angst. His struggle provides historical perspective: someone has been through this failure before; our time is not uniquely crisis-ridden; the possibility of beauty and truth exists in the modern or postmodern world. We have the option Henry Adams did not of choosing from the elements of modernism and postmodernism to build our worldview. Modernity survives.[23]

The life and work of Henry Adams, especially his contributions to the life of the mind, remind contemporary readers of the power of the "worthy failure," Jacques Barzun's defense of Romanticism against mechanistic views of the world. Following Henry Adams in his very modern search for answers in science, one can find a model for doing history that gives credence to the idea of the worthy failure. The process of observation and experiment by which science is performed serves to remind historians that an observation does not have to lead to definitive conclusions. The scientist begins with a question not an answer. One cannot force conclusions in history any more than in science. The Education, though Adams deemed it a failure because

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[23] In addition to the chronological perspective offered by Adams, it would be interesting to add the geographic, cultural perspective of the Orient to an understanding of postmodernism. As Miyoshi Masao has written in Off Center, Japanese literary culture was essentially "postmodern" before Westernization: "the shosetsu [Japanese prose narrative] is a verbal flow concerned with contiguous variations in pace, which seeks to decentralize discursive space, fragmenting the dominant narrative focus into segments and sections. The shosetsu. . . attracts the reader's attention to its own presence and artificiality." Perhaps this more organic, less brittle, less vehemently destructive model could provoke a more constructive, less highly charged debate about the condition of the modern world. Miyoshi Masao. Off Center: Power and Culture Relations between Japan and the United States. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 50.

his mind would not produce the answers he desired, was nonetheless a heroic achievement even if it was a worthy failure.

As a result of his careful consideration of the problem of disunity intrinsic to the full manifestation of modernity, Adams offered an unprogrammatic, personal solution: he advocated a return to the religious sensibility that created Chartres Cathedral and the adoration of the power of the feminine embodied by the Virgin of Chartres. The specific solution is far from universally applicable, but Adams did battle on a universal level; he confronted problems of alienation, ugliness, and meaninglessness that have not abated, and he tried to propose a timeless solution. Although he could not fully accept his own solution, Adams helps us to understand the psychological dimensions of the problem, and he answers the question posed by the postmodernists: Yes, he proclaims, the universe and human life admit of meaningful interpretation.

Despite its obvious contradictions and perversities, Adams' life offers the integrity of a man who desired to believe strongly even if he could not always do so, and who yet acted on those beliefs for what he envisaged as the good of his society. He would have regretted that "The heroic optimism of infinite search justified by the sheer greatness of a transcendent goal has been lost by modernity."[24] Adams' antimodernism is inspired by a positive desire for the possibility of transcendence, not just a fearful reaction to change in general or a niggardly desire to keep the benefits of the world to himself. His illusions are self-conscious. The faith of Henry Adams, like that of Matthew Arnold, was an exploded dream, but through constant searching he found a way back to the belief in the power of belief with which he began his life.

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[24] Matei Calinescu. Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1987, p. 67.

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