

Robin W. Winks

HENRY ADAMS' PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

THE MAN many consider to be America's finest historian was born of Brahmin ancestry in pre-Civil War Boston and lived through three of America's wars before death came to him after eighty years of seeking to re-educate himself to life in a modern and complex world. Henry Adams' quest for meaning in life led him along a circuitous path from disillusionment to mystical unity with the force of a mediaeval God symbolized by the Virgin Mary. His search for personal values was to produce, in the way of by-products, both a series of excellent histories and a challenging philosophy of life and life's residue, history.

Adams' writings begin with a single premise—that he, as an individual, was a failure. This fact he felt most acutely because of the success both of his great-grandfather and his grandfather; they had been Presidents of the United States, but he was offered nothing more than the post of consul to Guatemala. Taking his failure as symbolic of his generation, Adams set out to measure the *Zeitgeist* and to relate it to some "philosophy of sequences." Discarding the sequences of time, space, and events as unsatisfactory, he arrived at a philosophy based upon the sequence of forces.

Always a child searching for an education, he faced himself and the world about him honestly; Vernon Louis Parrington pays him just tribute when he says that there was "none honester and none abler in his generation."¹ But Parrington is not entirely fair with the younger Adams, declaring him to have been "too completely the intellectual, too aloof from his generation in spirit and will. . . ."² Admittedly, because Adams was making an effort to find some meaning in a chaotic universe and attempting to restore unity within the framework of the deterministic irrationality of a society lacking a pattern, he was isolated from his generation. But it was not he who was aloof; it was his generation, which ignored a question of prime importance.

Adams traced the decline of John Quincy to the Hamiltonian financial policy which started capitalism on its path to dominance in America. He thought that a

“vulgar order” of economic factors had caused the “evil day” in which he lived.³ He attempted to shake off Puritanism, but he never quite succeeded, for his sense of duty compelled him to account to himself for his existence. He believed that man must invent formulas for the universe when standard explanations fail, must have a philosophy of life. For sixty years he sought the accepted values, only to find that they no longer existed in a “multiverse.” The only law of nature was chaos, order was a dream of man. Disillusioned by the painful death of his sister, he first turned to a personal iconoclasm:

Stoicism was perhaps the best; religion was the most human, but the idea that any personal deity could find pleasure or profit in torturing a poor woman, by accident . . . could not be held for a moment. For pure blasphemy, it made pure atheism a comfort. God might be as the Church said, a substance, but He could not be a Person.”⁴

Because of his first experience with the “basic fact” of death, “The last lesson—the sum and term of education—began . . .”⁵ To attempt an answer to Job’s question to God, he “tramp[ed] the corridors of expositions . . . pore[d] over the reports of the Smithsonian Institute . . . wrestle[d] with French and German treatises on geology, biology, mathematics, and atomic physics . . .”⁶ Although his principal means of expression was the history book, he also wrote two novels, *Democracy and Esther*, and married a fellow-searcher who committed suicide after thirteen years of marriage, a fact he does not mention in his autobiography. But, as Partridge observed, “from village loyalties he could not rid himself,”⁷ and as a result, he felt that the simple civilization represented by the village was the best. This led him to search for a period of maximum unity, that is, simplicity, in history, to use it as a basis for comparisons with the past. He came to postulate two forces, the inner or spiritual and the outer or physical, with the inner uppermost in the Middle Ages, the outer in his time. Man’s basic problem was to reconcile his need for unity, for self-accounting, with the world of multiplicity, and to account for his state of isolation. Thus, historian Adams made intellectual history, for, as Henry Steele Commager says, “what he was is more significant than what he wrote.”⁸ Historically, he is the intellectual expositor of a philosophical position which can be traced from Darwin and Spencer in England, Twain and Crane in America, and Balzac and Flaubert in France, down to the present schools of estrangement and Existentialism.

Adams selected the period 1150-1250 as the Age of Unity, of resolution in all direction and method, with the objective being God, attained through His symbol, the Virgin Mary. The love and worship of God, through Mary, was expressed in

the cathedrals. This period he contrasted with his own time, the Age of Multiplicity, symbolized in the worship of forces of science as represented by the Dynamo. However, he was convinced that there must be a philosophy of history which would show the unity behind the diversity. This unity he found in the law of Entropy as related to Vital and Social Energy.

His philosophy begins with the Law of the Conservation of Energy, an affirmation of "the unity and indestructibility of Force . . . as a scientific dogma or Law . . ." ⁹ He then applied a naturalistic concept of entropy to the universe, declaring that the transformation of motion into heat and thus energy meant to "the vulgar and ignorant historian . . . only that the ash-heap was constantly increasing in size."¹⁰ In his *Letter to American Teachers of History* he outlined the resulting application of the laws of thermodynamics to historical processes, advising a rejection of both a theory of benevolent evolution and a dogmatic law that history was not a science since society was not an organism.¹¹ The historian should be interested, not in the collecting of facts as the geologist collects fossils, but in the assimilation of facts to prove that history is a science due to its dealing with the subject matter of Social Energy.¹²

He pointed out that society must accept the second law of thermodynamics—"the progressive degradation of energy by dissipation and levelling of intensities"—as finally as it must accept the first law.¹³ Society had, as usual, been inconsistent; it had used the first law, for it supported the view that evolution was always upward, but a person like Adams must reject such a view, for the "laws of conservation, dissipation, and evolution were self-contradictory." The last, which postulated that Vital Energy could be raised without compensation, as with Haeckel's concept of man evolving from a chunk of carbon in twenty-six stages, must be rejected, while the first two could be reconciled to his belief that Social and Vital Energy were similar.¹⁴ "The historian of human society must be supposed to have watched with agonised interest the direction which science should take; since the decision of palaeontologists would fatally decide his own."¹⁵ To resolve the contradiction between Kelvin and Darwin, he turned to palaeontology, especially the 1893 theory of Dollo that evolution develops by leaps, is irreversible, and is limited.¹⁶ Pointing out that there is no proof of any increase in vital energy, he arrived at the pessimistic view that, although such theses of "harrowing horrors" as that of Camille Flammarion are not justified,¹⁷ the second law of thermodynamics, as symbolized by the Dynamo and as demonstrated by the bomb, effected deterministic control upon history. He thus defined history as not a science of statistics, but "the Science of Vital Energy in relation with time . . . tending . . . toward mathematical expression."¹⁸ He decried the use of Gibbon's figure of rise and fall, suggesting that expansion and

contraction were more in keeping with a history dominated by the Law of Dissipation. Vacillating evolution yields to the uncompromising concept of Transformation.¹⁹ Thus, progress was a delusion, due to the expenditure of irreplaceable energy. Society, with the rule of phase applied to it, faces total stagnation as its Energy runs out. Having explored, and abandoned, the sequences of time, space, and evolution, he had found a non-cyclical resolution of the multiplicity, based upon the ideas of Kelvin, Helmholtz, and Louis Saporta.

To Adams, both civilization and education enfeeble personal energy, for they aim at "extending the forces of society at the cost of the intensity of individual forces."²⁰ The individual as a member of society is like a crystal of salt—diffused in water it is no less useful, for it is only absorbed in the solution and, according to the first law, it is not destroyed, for the solution may do work which the individual crystal could not do; yet, by the second law, it has lost its intensity and is dissipated.²¹ The individual reacts in the same manner to society and the "broadening" education.

The second major point of his philosophy carries the age of multiplicity back to the Middle Ages, for the theory of drift from unity to multiplicity, and the theory of man as a force, "must be measured by motion, from a fixed point. Psychology helped here by suggesting a unit—the point of history when man held the highest idea of himself as a unit in a unified universe."²² Conceiving of the dynamo as "a symbol of infinity", feeling the "forty foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross", judging that the heterogeneity of Radium had "denied its God",²³ and being driven by the conviction that it was the duty of the historian to follow the path of energy, he arrived at the dual symbol of procreation (woman) which tied all ages together, and of spiritual force (the Virgin) which tied a particular age together. Today man accelerates the second law; in the Middle Ages he retarded it.²⁴ At that time, Energy, in the abstract, was the ultimate Substance, *das Ding an sich*, and "Thought was God", thought giving Platonic Form to energy.²⁵ The Virgin was the greatest force the world ever felt, and although dissipated by multiplicity, she could still close scientific expositions on Sundays even in the twentieth century.

During the time the Virgin's force and the adoration of her were at their height, the highest concept of existence was an emotional response to her "noble appeal", with the good life being the unified life. During the period 1150-1250, the great age of the transition set in, the time when "equilibrium between the love of God—which is faith—and the logic of God—which is reason" spurred unity to its historical zenith.²⁶

In conclusion, it should be pointed out that, although Adams' revolt against the "chaos and old night" of modern science threw him back onto a unity represented by the Catholic Church and to adoration of the Virgin, it was an emotional and non-Roman view which he took of the Virgin, for "She knew that the universe was unintelligible to her, as any theory of morals, as it was to her worshippers."²⁷ The key to his final arrival at a mystical position—a position encompassing the laws of thermodynamics and applying them to both the physical world and the spiritual—is found in his quasi-Biblical reference to the means of comprehending the meaning of the Virgin: "Unless you can go back to your dolls, you are out of place [in a cathedral]."²⁸

Adams was, perhaps, in advance of his time with his idea that history should make concert with biology, sociology, physics, and psychology "to get a common denominator to establish a working model for the study of the vital energies."²⁹ This statement, prophetic of its prostitution through the "core curriculum," and his prediction that the destructive power of the bomb would so increase that by the middle of the twentieth century it would hold all dissolution of energy within the range of one blast—prophetic of chain-reaction bombs—mark him as one of the few men who may have actually comprehended his own time. And one of his observations in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* is a striking precursor of the philosophies of the present Age of Anxiety, especially Existentialism as described by Helmut Kuhn. In one of his greatest summaries, Adams observed: "Man is an imperceptible atom always trying to become one with God. If ever modern science achieves a definition of energy, possibly it may borrow the figure: Energy is the inherent effort of every multiplicity to become unity."³⁰

NOTES

1. Vernon Louis Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1930), III, 225.
2. *Ibid.*, 215.
3. *Ibid.*, 216.
4. Henry Adams, *Education of Henry Adams* (Boston, 1927).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven, 1950), p. 133.
7. Parrington, *Main Currents*, III, 215.
8. Commager, *American Mind*, 137.
9. Henry Adams, *A Letter to American Teachers of History* (Washington, 1910), p. 1.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-2.
20. *Letter*, 123.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Commager, *American Mind*, pp. 136-7.
23. Adams, *Education*.
24. Adams, *Letter*, pp. 154-5.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-8.
26. Parrington, *Main Currents*, III, 223.
27. Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (Boston, 1933), p. 213.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Adams, *Letter*, pp. 203-204.
30. Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel*, p. 322.