

# HENRY ADAMS AND THE MODERN SPIRIT

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HENRY ADAMS is the prophet of the modern spirit because he enunciated with clairvoyant acuity the major problems that torment the consciousness of twentieth-century man. He had tested most of the cosmological theories which were in his time offered as solutions and found fatally lacking in some respect; in each case he tried to go beyond them, seeking some new philosophical synthesis. In 1868, upon returning to America from abroad, he had hoped to wield considerable influence and promote the cause of political reform by writing for the newspapers and magazines. When this hope proved futile, when he found that neither he nor the cause he had espoused was making any appreciable progress but that on the contrary the forces of reaction were in the saddle and riding hard for perdition, he withdrew disenchanted, though not yet embittered, from the political arena. He turned his energies to the study of medieval history, Anglo-Saxon law, United States history, biography; he taught at Harvard, he conducted seminars in historical research.

His mind was not at peace, however, and upon the death of his wife he again took up the struggle. The one force, it seemed to him, that must be conquered was that represented by science, and the historian could not conscientiously shirk this duty by arguing that science and history had nothing in common. It was his task as a pioneer of the emerging future to reconcile these apparent contradictions, to understand and interpret the dynamic course of events in the light of scientific formulations. Perhaps by the study of physics the historian of human culture would be enabled to discover a formula, a law of progression. "The Rule of Phase Applied to History" rigorously pessimistic in its conclusions, was the outcome of Henry Adams' intellectual quest. The application of the second law of thermodynamics indicated with relentless accuracy that the energy of the solar system was breaking down. This vision of Doomsday is painted with scientific sobriety and scholarly objectivity; it points the direction in which Henry Adams' thought was travelling. The fruit that he had plucked from the tree of science ripened into a bleak, cosmic pessimism.

Such conclusions, however objective and final they might appear, were nonetheless unpalatable, especially to a tempera-

ment like Henry Adams'. Like William James, he could not resign himself to the spectacle of a universe that was rapidly running down and headed for the abyss. Intellectually and spiritually, it was an intolerable state of affairs. Henry Adams' first impulse, also characteristic of a number of modern writers, was to escape, to flee incontinently from the Sodom and Gomorrah of a capitalist civilization blindly indifferent to its ultimate fate. Restlessly Henry Adams travelled to England, France, the Orient, seeking in sheer physical motion and distant places the peace which passeth all understanding, the inner calm, the secret of Baddha's mystical silence. But flight is no solution. The environment can be changed, the burden of the self cannot be left behind. Even on the isle of Tahiti, Henry Adams could not shake off the metaphysical restlessness that coursed like a fever through his blood.

His spiritual malaise had to find some outlet. He could not remain in a state of unresolved tension. Christopher LaFarge, the artist with whom he had travelled to Japan, provided the impetus for the next adventure of the mind. The artist with his daemonic energy, his creative *élan*, his faith which calmly turned aside all rational arguments as irrelevant, obviously possessed a secret which Adams envied and which he was determined to discover for himself. Upon LaFarge's suggestion he undertook the study of the art of the Middle Ages, especially the Gothic cathedrals at Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. Earnestly he waged the struggle for unquestioning faith, for communion with the invisible, the absolute, for the re-discovery of God who rules in a realm raised above all conceptual logic and scientific analysis. Hard though he strove for this instinctive faith, he was honest enough to record his doubts at the same time that he voiced his skepticism of the scientific outlook. He knelt in all humility at the feet of the Virgin, the Mother of God. Here were mysteries surpassing in intensity and complexity the force emanating from the Dynamo. Religious faith, religious aspiration—that was manifestly more powerful than any technological invention, far more powerful than the scientific genius of man. For it had built these cathedrals, it had created this sacred literature and art, heroic symbols of the indwelling presence and inspirational guidance of the Virgin, whose abode was in the contrite and adoring hearts of men. If Henry Adams did not gain the instinctive assurance of religious faith, he won, in the final account, something perhaps equally precious; the release of his dormant creative energies, the dependence on art

as salvation, the rewards that sustain the artist in his struggle with recalcitrant materials, the artist who imposes order and unity on chaos.

Henry Adams belongs to literature by virtue of his two books, *The Education of Henry Adams* and *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*. He belongs equally to history by virtue of his contributions of a nine-volume history of the United States, his two biographies, and his miscellaneous essays. Chiefly, however, he is treated neither as a litterateur nor as an historian but as a thinker. It is his ideas that challenge our attention; it is the problems he attempted so desperately to solve that constitute his importance for this age. He re-examined the old entrenched truths and dared to speak his mind openly on a number of crucial issues. His mind in its range and depth, its richness and diversity of interests, its unfailing integrity, casts a prophetic light. He was modern in his skepticism and despair, his chronic culture of doubt, his opposition to many vulgar features of American civilization, his preoccupation with science as an answer to the eternal enigma of life, his unflinching rationalism with its wistful realization toward the end of his career of the limits of human reason and his glimpse of the power of the supersensuous, his search for order and unity, meaning and purpose—all these make his life and work a source of fruitful study. He makes the moderns defend their values, reappraise their philosophic assumptions, test the foundations of the house of faith they live in. His mind is so versatile, so fertile, that his writing is interesting in itself; it is a work of art as well as a search for a pattern of meaning. It reminds one, in some respects, of Unamuno's *The Tragic Sense of Life*, though death was never with Adams a source of metaphysical terror. He was never morbid.

For the younger generation following World War I, he was an eloquent spokesman. He helped to make explicit their crises of rejection. But many of the moderns find him already dated. He is stimulating, but he cannot attract any followers. *The Education of Henry Adams* ends on a note of defeat. He achieved no synthesis; his science is pseudo-science, a species of metaphysics. His mysticism is an emotionalized rationalism. At the end he accepted neither science nor religion. He rejected America and its democracy; he failed to foresee the future or welcome it like Whitman with any degree of buoyant hope. Except for his nostalgic admiration for the communal solidarity and universal faith of the Middle Ages, he formulated no

comprehensive theory of society, and his "science" of history was a provocative but fallacious bit of speculation. In this sense, his work, like his "education", was a failure.

No one realized better than Henry Adams that he was a transitional figure. He saw the horns of the dilemma on which he was impaled, he knew the tragedy of his divided soul. He bore his lot with fortitude and with a measure of wisdom, but at all times he sought to understand as well as to live. Where his forbears grappled with the task of shaping the destiny of a nation, he wrestled, solitary and perplexed, with problems of value and matters of faith. Neither his grandfather nor his father experienced such anguish of spirit, such troubled searching of the heart, but neither did they bring up such pearls from the depths of suffering introspection.

Henry Adams had to cope with the newly emerging and destructive forces of science and industrialism. He had at first trustingly followed his contemporaries in swallowing the gospel of evolution, interpreting it optimistically as progress. It was his misfortune, however, to have bungled his career, to have known no singleness of direction, no unity of purpose. He drifted from one thing to another, a dilettante, a "butterfly", as someone once called him, but paradoxically enough, therein lay his native strength and his opportunity. He touched the life of his time at many vital points, he reacted with imaginative vigor and sensitive awareness to all its strains and stresses. It would have been a comparatively easy matter for him to play the game as the world plays it, for high political stakes, and he could have won if he had been willing to sacrifice his personal integrity to the dictates of expediency. He would not compromise. His destiny was precisely this—to stand apart and suffer, to search for a truth difficult and impossibly out of reach. He took up the age-old quest of the absolute, and in this as in all things he acquitted himself well. At times he may have lost heart and railed savagely at the Jews and the degradation of the democratic dogma, but the quest itself he never gave up.

With the possible exception of Walt Whitman, no American writer of the nineteenth century appeals so powerfully to the modern generation as does Henry Adams. In one sense, his is even more potent an influence than that wielded by the bard of Paumanok. The latter, self-proclaimed apostle of democracy and singer of the song of the universal, has won disciples and gained international fame; he is expansive, optimistic, he

contains multitudes, but he is prophetic in his affirmations rather than discriminations. He does not resolve contradictions, he simply rides rough-shod over them. Unlike Whitman, Henry Adams attracted few disciples and formulated no gospel, yet his influence, though chiefly negative, is deep and persistent. Though he belongs by tradition and by temperament to the nineteenth century, it is not without significance that his life overlapped the twentieth and that the two books by which he will be remembered, *The Education of Henry Adams* and *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, were published in 1905 and 1918, respectively. By carrying the conflicting tendencies of the nineteenth century to their logical conclusion, he became the most challenging literary figure of the twentieth century, asking cosmic questions that have not yet been answered. He is the first gifted, passionate, thoroughgoing skeptic in American letters. Beside him, the metaphysical gropings of a Melville or a Hawthorne appear naive. Henry Adams goes the whole hog. All or nothing. He will brook no illusions, he will permit nothing to stand in the way of truth.

Scion of an illustrious family, destined for notable achievements, he had started his career under the happiest auspices. He had done his best to establish himself as a political force; he had fought the good fight against incompetence and corruption in government, only to arrive at the disillusioning conclusion that the cancer of materialism had eaten too deep into the flesh of democracy. America was anathema, the symbol of all that was hideous and decadent and doomed in Western civilization. Henry Adams' diatribes against the degradation of the democratic ideal, the profiteering, the concentration of capital, anticipate the cultural alienation of the expatriates of the twenties.

More significant for our time was his attempt to assimilate and put to use the teachings of science. Like Thomas Huxley he had turned to science with high hopes that it would eventually solve all problems, but he was not content with promissory notes. He had to find out for himself, make doubly sure, check the proof himself to see if it were authentic. He studied paleontology, geology, biology, and physics; he read Comte, Lyell, Pearson, Ernest Mach, Clerk-Maxwell, Faraday, in order to discover what science had to say about the inscrutable universe in which man occupied a tiny, inconspicuous corner. The inventions of science, the machinery it brought into being, the dynamos and X-rays and steam-engines, both fascinated and appalled

him. Here was the new god in the making—a god insentient, unconscious, beyond good and evil. If science could supply an answer to the riddle of life, then, regardless of consequences, he would wrest its secret and put it in words. But science failed him: it could not answer the questions he asked, and he abandoned it and set out on new paths.

This last transition was not an easy one to make. It is hard to discard the habits of a lifetime, it is difficult to challenge the authority of science. This is precisely what Henry Adams did, and in this act of defiance, this determination to find an answer not couched in scientific terms, he is again prophetic of the modern temper. He had gone as far as science would take him, and it had left him stranded. The pluralistic universe of flux that science pictured, a vertiginous dance of atoms, was no solace for the soul of this pilgrim of eternity. In short, science not only gave no answer; it was powerless to do so.

It was Christopher La Farge who set his feet on a new and more perilous quest—the search for faith. Henry Adams started out on his quest by fixing his eyes on the art of the twelfth century in France. Here was an age centred in absolute faith, glorious in its art, which could serve as a contrast to the disintegration of values in his own age. Though Henry Adams was too far gone in skepticism ever to recapture the fullness and spontaneity of the old faith, the naive absolutism that impelled the people of the Middle Ages to build lofty cathedrals and kneel before the image of the Mother of God, he made another discovery that, like Pascal's confession, was to have a profound influence on the modern mind. He came to the revolutionary conclusion, at sharp variance with all that he had once believed, that reason was not enough. Skepticism, if followed to the limit, ended in mental suicide. There were sources of knowing not tapped by the instrumentality of reason. There were deep sources of feeling that yielded convictions more fruitful and more valid than any of the truths elicited by the empirical method of science.

Henceforth Adams would try to follow his instincts, to rely on his feelings. He would not censor every impulse in order to see if it accorded with the strict canons of scientific logic. He would no longer badger his brains for laws, reasons, demonstrations of proof. The feelings obeyed a logic of their own. Art was its own excuse for being. Henry Adams thus anticipates the modern search for religious insight, the modern preoccupation with mystical fountains of knowledge, the journey

to the Absolute, the search for Brahma. Much as he tried, he could not himself become a mystic, but he paved the way. Equally important was his realization late in life that creative fulfillment was more important and more rewarding than scientific reflection and research. One could not live by the sterile products of the intellect; facts could neither nourish nor save the soul. Poetry was the seminal stuff of history, of imagination all compact. If all is indeed illusion, then it behooves man to select those as-if fictions which are most viable and most consoling. Henry Adams made his choice. He had begun with the study of Darwin, Comte, and Karl Marx; he ended with a "Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres."

His consuming passion, however, had been to know, not because knowledge was valuable in itself but because it could be used to unify the universe and give birth to some comprehensive system of faith. It was this perception of the discontinuity introduced by science, its uncanny and incalculable power, that brought about a crisis in Adams' life. It was a crisis he had not the strength and the resources to meet, just as many of the contemporary intellectuals, dismayed by the threat of the atomic bomb, run to cover and embrace a form of Oriental mysticism. Like them he was driven into the arms of mysticism, only in his case it was a rationalized mysticism, the religious teachings of Thomas Aquinas mixed with the metaphysical doubts and the paradoxical affirmations of a Pascal.

Science was no longer the Sermon on the Mount. If force was the paramount fact in the universe, what, after all, determined the direction of change in natural selection? Movement in any given direction assumed the existence of a controlling force outside, which, whether it was God or Nescience, had to be consulted. "Pascal and all the old philosophies," Adams declares, "called this outside force God or Gods." Caring but little for the name, and fixed only on tracing the force, Adams had gone straight to the Virgin at Chartres, and asked her to show him God, face to face, as she had done to St. Bernard. She replied, kindly as ever, as though she were still the young mother of to-day, with a sort of patient pity for masculine dullness: "My dear outcast, what is it you seek? This is the Church of Christ! If you seek him through me, you are welcome, sinner or saint; but he and I are one. We are Love! We have little or nothing to do with God's other energies which are infinite, and concern us less because our interest is only in man, and the infinite is not knowable to man." Of the two kinds of

ignorance, that issuing from science and that emanating from the Virgin, he unhesitatingly preferred the latter. Like the uprooted, God-seeking intellectuals of our day, he was thrown back, as all must be who presume to question the ways of God or trace energy to its ultimate source, on his own resources. It was then, when he had made the last gesture of repudiation, discarding the proud trappings of science, that he came to see that the universe of Thomas Aquinas was actually more "scientific" than that of Ernest Mach or Karl Pearson. At least, Aquinas' conception of God was no more chimerical or absurd than the contradictions fathered by science. Moreover, the church conferred peace upon the troubled spirit of the metaphysical outcast and imposed unity upon a universe that otherwise seemed lost in a chaos of multiplicity.

This is Adams' courageous transcendence of his old inhibiting intellectualism. *The Education of Henry Adams* speaks to our age, not because of the solutions it offers, for Adams characteristically failed to arrive at any decisive affirmation, but because of the problems with which the author struggled so earnestly. Even in his negations, he performed a salutary, pioneering task. Karl Pearson's *The Grammar of Science* had swept aside the scientific dogmas of the past; now man had to resign himself not only to a fractionalized but also postulated, fictionalized universe, the shadow of a shadow, the mere reflection of sense perception. But consider, Adams pointed out, all that such a scientific interpretation left out, how dreadfully it impoverished the complex nature of man with all its instincts and imperious cravings, its aesthetic perceptions of beauty, its need for order, continuity, and meaning in the universe. It was this insight that gave Adams the courage born of despair to leave science behind him and to seek other goals and gods. Even if what science asserted were proved to be irrefragably true, its sternly imposed taboo against searching out the answer to the unknowable could not be obeyed, no matter how logically convincing it might appear. One had to go on exploring a universe that was at bottom the negation of rationality. He intended to plunge into the wilderness of chaos and pluck out the heart of the mystery.

The bitter categorical rejection of modernism—its vulgar dynamisms, its lack of intelligence, its triumphant mediocrity, its capitalist concentration, its indifference to all things except utilitarian values—strikes another prophetic note. Certain ideas recur with significant frequency, giving us the measure



of the man. He represents to a marked degree the conflict between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a transitional figure, he is of great importance to those of the moderns who are caught in the same trap. His struggles forecast the crisis of the present generation. He rejected science on the ground that it left so much that was beautiful and life-enriching out of its calculations: poetry and religion and art and the underlying unity of the world. Science promised so much and yielded such barren fruit. St. Thomas offered a solution; Darwin and the later scientists did not. That was the all-important distinction.

Though we must not take Adams' jeremiads too literally, since in his old age he enjoyed venting his spleen, there can be no question but that he felt out of tune with the life of the twentieth century, and his repeated gloomy predictions of an impending smash-up have come true. He damned the universe so heartily that he soon grew to believe that it was damned, and he sought to determine the exact time when this civilization would fall apart. Those intellectuals who have turned to Kierkegaard for aid and illumination in this crisis of consciousness can appreciate Adams' "Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres," with its humble appeal for divine aid.

The opposition to science on humanistic or religious grounds continues to grow. Scientific conclusions, it is now urged with polemic passion, fail to satisfy the nature of man. The universe of science is a hollow travesty on the kind of universe that man requires for his development and fulfilment. Even an earnest seeker after truth like Henry Adams is severely criticized for yielding to the seductions of the scientific temper. And yet his sins, though he is repudiated by both the scientists and the humanists, are not very great. The orthodox distrust his very method of inquiry, which tends to undermine the foundations of faith. The scientists reject his findings because he is a layman rather than an experimentalist; he indulges his imagination too much instead of remaining on firm empirical ground.

Henry Adams is nonetheless a forerunner of modern consciousness, wrestling with the problems that have now become our problems. His intellectual odyssey is a symbol of the dangerous journey of the spirit all men coming after him will have to take, though he holds out little hope that they will reach the Happy Ises. He adventured on all the seas of thought, seeking with steadfast purpose a harbor of meaning, an anchorage in the ebbing tide of faith. He travelled far and wide, studying old ruins and ancient civilizations, trying to capture the sec-

ret of the primitive and the meaning of the Orient. He refused to be confined within any one field, to remain a narrow specialist. He rebelled against artificially imposed limits in the universe of knowledge. What he wanted above all was a philosophy of life sufficiently comprehensive to embrace every phenomenon, but he also desired to formulate a philosophy and a faith that would liberate the soul and affirm the essential dignity of man. Hence his opposition to the scientific outlook. His recoil from the dogmatic positivism of modern science, since it could not supply the unity he sought, his acceptance of the Church as a substitute symbol for science and the machine age, all this foreshadowed the spiritual crisis through which many literary men of our day are passing.

The twentieth century, as Henry Adams saw it, was a race between chaos and order, unity and multiplicity. While for any of his contemporaries science was a vague if potent force, he knew what it foreboded, the fight that would have to be waged. He made the effort to master this new Frankenstein, but he finally came to the conclusion that science could not save mankind. Its knowledge did not culminate in wisdom and was not a satisfactory guide to life. What it offered in the last analysis was a confession of ignorance. If empiricism was the beginning and end of metaphysical inquiry, the net result would be bewilderment, frustration, futility, chaos. Through the ages man, ignoring all the warning signs, had persisted in the quest. This desperate quest for salvation, in the teeth of all the evidence, could not be dismissed as a pathological wild-goose chase. That was what spurred him on to seek for a principle of transcendence, and in this, too, he was prophetic of the modern spirit.

He was primarily more interested in the science of life, if it could be formulated, than in a science of knowledge. Knowledge was fundamentally a means to an end, not an end in itself. It was a means to the solution of the mystery that made mere existence a nightmare born of chaos. He had to undertake the quest practically alone. The challenge of science had to be met. The story of his groping for the thread of truth in the labyrinths of the unknown constitutes a vitally fascinating chapter in the history of American culture. His autobiography is in the form of a drama vividly portraying the conflict between the Evolutionist and the physicist on one hand and the Virgin on the other. Transcendentalism had gone bankrupt, but the pragmatic synthesis proved equally untenable. Evolution at

a cult of progress broke down and gave birth to a pessimism generated by a mechanistic philosophy. An ordered cosmos split into atomic fragments and became a howling chaos. All science could give was a multiplicity of facts; it could not communicate the substance of a faith by which he could live. So in the end he concluded that science was an illusion, less satisfying by far than other illusions that men had once entertained. The symbol of the Virgin was more consoling than the symbol of the Dynamo. Though he failed in his quest, who shall say, in such matters, what is failure and what is success? His words are addressed to the future—to all men who stagger along the road of life under a burden of doom too heavy to bear.