INTRODUCTION

Henry Adams is a lonely figure in American political thought. By any standard he is one of the finest, possibly the greatest, of American historians, and his “autobiography,” however idiosyncratic, is one of the undisputed classics in the genre. His great multivolume history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations is also undoubtedly a masterpiece; he wrote some of the best political journalism of the nineteenth century; and he was the author of two novels that, while not the work of a truly gifted fiction writer, are nevertheless full of intellectual interest. He is the author of one of the deepest meditations on the difference between the medieval world and modern industrial civilization, the great creation through which he hopes to describe the trajectory of modern Western history. He also made a serious attempt to come to grips with the biological and physical sciences of his time. Not least, he poured out a body of letters of great literary distinction and sociopolitical interest. On the side, he was a competent amateur painter. In this vast flood there is embedded a theory of the development of America history and, still more broadly, a theory of Western history that can be interestingly compared with those of Karl Marx and Max Weber. It may be that this concern with the meaning of history is characteristically American. Richard Hofstadter once remarked, “While it is no doubt true to some degree everywhere that history doubles for political theory and has even in secular ages taken on some of the work of theology, it is perhaps more keenly true in the United States.” Therefore, to have such a theory of history is almost automatically to have a social and political theory as well, even when, as in the case of Adams, it is not formally developed.

And yet, while historians are very respectful of the massive history of the Jefferson and Madison presidencies, his work is probably more admired than actually read by any other than specialists on the early national period, and, interestingly, a large part of the commentary on his writing is by specialists in American literature. This is particularly true of his great late books, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams*. But even in literature, though he may be admired, he is not really of canonical status; he is not
one of those writers who is perceived as essential to a literary education. Perhaps only the famous chapter on the Virgin and the Dynamo in the *Education* is widely known. Most surprisingly, political theorists, with a few exceptions, have slighted his work; he is certainly not part of the standard curriculum on American political thought. Of the writings by theorists that stand out, even so brilliant a reader as Judith Shklar seems so handicapped by her dislike of the subject that she has less than usual to contribute, though she is certainly not without insights. Russell Hanson and Richard Merriman are closer to the mark when they suggest that Adams was the last of the civic republicans, a plausible designation, given Adams’s hope for leadership dedicated to public as opposed to private interests, though at the time Adams wrote, that had become a rare species indeed. These ideas are surely central to Adams’s critique of his society, although they cannot be said to exhaust the complexities of Adams’s position. Another useful theoretical contribution is by Henry Kariel, who has interesting and important things to say about Adams’s deep concern with science and technology, as well as on the limits of historical positivism. But there is not a great deal more from political theorists.

Some of the neglect is probably fairly easy to explain. Adams is not always a particularly attractive character. He has a pronounced snobbish streak, and his “autobiography” — *The Education of Henry Adams* — is sometimes marred by excessive irony and a sense of self-pity that, in spite of the personal tragedy that marred his life, is almost entirely uncalled for, given Adams’s social position and his proximity to the centers of American power. More seriously, there is a thoroughly nasty streak of anti-Semitism that often appears in the letters, though it does not erupt too often in his public writings. It is not, I think, central to his theories, but it still must be dealt with. Further, as he repeatedly observed, he had what he said was an eighteenth-century mind, which he claimed made him out of place in the twentieth century; yet at the same time, he was both attracted and repulsed by twentieth-century science and technology, so the matter is not so simple as he made it out to be. It is precisely this sense of distance and alienation, coupled, in a complex way, with his acute sense of personal, familial connection to American politics and culture, combined with his interest in science, that is a major source of his power and insight. In spite of his often acid criticism of American life and politics, he is clearly what Michael Walzer would call a “connected critic,” even when the ties that bound him to the nation his family had done so much to shape were strained to the breaking point. His was a lover’s quarrel with his country. As William Merrill Decker says, he sought public influence, though it must be said that in the end he despaired of achieving it and
chose publication forms that worked against it. Still, “although at times he seems to write to no end but to annoy, his work always betrays the wish to be dialogically placed in a purposive and sophisticated national discussion. It always reveals the hope (or the equally significant despair) that it may contribute to an American civilization that would vindicate the aspirations of the country’s fathers, among whom an Adams had conspicuously figured.” It is important to understand that a connected critic is still a critic and that his discussion of his tradition may gain as much as it loses from the connection.

Other, more specifically intellectual factors may account for Adams’s relative neglect. He was a master political historian, and this is a time when social rather than political history is dominant. His is also a history of the actions of elites, even when he despises them; there is little sense at all of the now fashionable history “written from the bottom up.” And although he is fully aware of the difficulties, his initial goal is to write Rankean history wie es eigentlich gewesen ist. This is, or on the surface appears to be, positivist history with no trace of currently voguish notions that reality is somehow a matter of human invention. As he puts it in The Education of Henry Adams, “He had even published a dozen volumes of American history for no other purpose than to satisfy himself whether, by the severest process of stating, with the least possible comment, such facts as seemed sure, in such order as seemed rigorously consequent, he could fix for a familiar moment a necessary sequence of human movement.” In principle then, however difficult, there is a world out there whose sometimes inscrutable workings we can at least hope to understand.

Still, Adams by no means adheres rigorously to this positivist position in all his work, and even in the History, the mind of a critical moralist is clearly at work. Moreover, he was clearly aware that a historian’s perspective influences what he sees, as is demonstrated by his letter to President Eliot of Harvard in support of a position in the history faculty for Henry Cabot Lodge. As he put it, Lodge’s views, being “federalist and conservative,” as opposed to his own, which “tend to democracy and radicalism,” have an equal right to expression. Moreover, in the Education, he begins to raise serious questions about the very idea of truth, though, at the same time, he fights against this temptation. Still, the attempt to understand requires a grip on reality, difficult to come by though that may be. And to understand also requires a theory of how the world works. The theory he advances is increasingly a critical theory. Adams transcends historical positivism through his literary power and sometimes rhapsodically poetic style, combined with an increasing sense of moral outrage at what he sees as the deterioration of his country that makes
him a powerful scourge of American life in the post–Civil War era. As Clive Bush argues, his Rankeanism has limits and serves as the basis for a narrative strategy that is “biased toward value and point of view.”

Adams judges what he sees, and he judges harshly. The standards of judgment are those of a “New England conscience,” a term I borrow from Austin Warren. For Warren, the term indicates a kind of “fussy and overactive conscience,” a state of mind that often takes on pathological overtones and in which “pleasure, graciousness, joy, [and] love” are missing. Warren understands that Adams is a somewhat atypical example of the type. Though his intellectual conscience is very strong, there is little examination of his “personal moral conscience,” though there certainly is a great deal of self-examination of his own very active intellect. But Warren’s term is useful anyway, because it suggests Adams’s Puritan ancestry without identifying him specifically as a Puritan. To identify him so would overlook the fact that, though he might have wished otherwise, Adams lacks religious faith. But, in his way, Adams is trying to provide the nation with a New England conscience he sees to be sorely lacking. He writes in the great tradition of the Puritan Jeremiad. The Puritans were possessed by a sense that they were betraying the high calling that had brought them to New England, that they were falling away from their own very high moral and social standards. The Jeremiad, a sermon that pointed out the huge gap between the shining ideal and the often ugly real, became one of the characteristic forms of American political rhetoric. Adams is one of its late, great masters. The sense of betrayed ideals is a major theme of his history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations, and it permeates much of his other writing. And once he moves beyond the great History and the post–Civil War journalism, his work takes on a philosophical dimension that no purely positivist history could offer. At no point in his career is it possible to mistake his profound theoretical and moral concerns.

But even on its most positivist side, the History represents a great event in American historiography. Among Adams’s greatest predecessors, Francis Parkman focused on the wilderness and the struggle between Britain and France for Canada, so that his main themes were at some remove from American national development. George Bancroft was an enthusiastic Jacksonian nationalist who could descend into “mindless patriotism,” in spite of genuine historical ability. And while lesser, or today at least less well known figures such as Francis Bowen and Richard Hildreth were more critical and skeptical, they were still men with a celebratory message. Many of the influential men who came of age during or after the Civil War were New England amateurs who had their differences but were still resolutely conservative nationalists espe-
cially anxious to defend property rights. Adams shared many of these biases, but he was in every way more iconoclastic. He wrote in anything but a celebratory mode, and while he never came close to being a socialist, though he did flirt with it in some of his letters, he was bitterly critical of capitalism and the abuse of society by those with great accumulations of property. He could be very conservative, but he could also be profoundly radical, particularly in the Marxian sense of "going to the root." And any picture of Adams as some sort of antidemocratic ideologue is mistaken. It is necessary to consider seriously his own self-portrait in the letter to Eliot quoted earlier. As J. C. Levenson says of him:

> Since he did not always share the sentiments and ideas by which American democrats or radicals are conventionally classified, his statement of belief is often ignored or dismissed as insincere. He never idolized those who labor in the earth or in the shop, he only respected them as men. He never cherished a dream of the barricades, for to him the revolutionary impulse (which he too sometimes felt) was essentially anarchic. He seriously thought that in this country democracy had once and for all taken possession of the national government and that secession movements, after 1798, were right-wing revolutions, antidemocratic and antilibertarian in nature.

We need, Levenson goes on, to recapture this sense of "democratic nationalism" if we are to understand Adams. Adams's sense of democracy may not be ours, and he certainly might be upset by some forms of contemporary democratic theory, but his claims cannot simply be dismissed. And surely he was right in his assessment of the secessionist movement, not an unimportant thing if one considers secession and the Civil War to be at the very center of American history. Finally, if, as Hofstadter suggests, all the great American historians present theories, this is above all true of Adams, though his ideas are sometimes masked by a facade of positivism in his earlier work and become overt primarily in the later, much more speculative writings.

Thus, I think, history as Adams understands it is a very complicated enterprise. Surely he would have subscribed to Kierkegaard's view that "Life is lived forward but is understood backward." Equally surely, for all his nostalgia, he would have agreed with Clifford Geertz, perhaps not without some sorrow, that it is not possible to live in the past. Unlike Geertz, he may have believed that one can foretell the future from the past, at least in a general way, and he may have thought it possible to derive laws of social necessity from the past. At least he experimented, though with limited success, along
these lines. But, in the end, I think he would endorse Geertz's view that the best we can derive from the past is the ability to perceive, "a bit less blankly, what is happening around one, reacting, a bit more intelligently, to what, in the event, swims into view."\(^{18}\)

Insights into the exceedingly complex nature of this problem also come from an unexpected source. I think Adams would have agreed with his contemporary, the Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky, who wrote, "The past within the present—there's my task." But the musicologist Richard Taruskin, in his great book on Mussorgsky, accidentally refined the problem by transposing this comment to read "the present in the past."\(^{19}\) For Taruskin, this fruitful misquotation captures the essence of Mussorgsky's historical operas better than the original statement. For the study of Adams, Taruskin's inadvertent error points to the complex way in which the relation of past to present in the study of history is reciprocal and therefore dauntingly complicated. This problem is central to the complex intertwining of past and present in Adams's thought. And Adams's approach, based as it is on tremendous narrative power combined with deep philosophical insight, is ideally suited to dealing with these problems. And writing along these lines can, as Shklar suggests, be a vital path to understanding both our past and our present: "Narrative history, informed by philosophical and social analysis and a critical spirit, remains our likeliest path to political understanding."\(^{20}\) Surely if it is not the likeliest path, it is one of the most powerful.

An exploration of these problems involves some complex theory. And the complexity deepens because we are dealing with a writer often hidden behind a mask compounded of irony and self-deprecation. (That the latter is often merely a pose does not reduce its presence.) Moreover, for all his theoretical impulses, Adams does not write in the way political theorists, or even historical theorists, typically present their works. There is no real system. No ideal is specifically spelled out. There is no formal discussion of subjects such as power, authority, democracy, equality, or any of the other standard topics of the political theorist. The lack of a genuine system is itself a complicating factor. If Adams has a theory of history, in its artistry it is closer in style and, to some extent, in content to Tolstoy than to such social scientists as Marx or even Weber, though he shares many of the concerns of the latter two.\(^{21}\) His work is saturated by ideas, but they are not stated in propositional, let alone testable, form. Adams is a humanist to the core. That is a large part of his quarrel with modernity, which, in spite of, or perhaps because of, his scientific interests, he sees as dominated by an antihumanistic scientific ethos. He is serious about his scientific concerns, however dated or even bizarre they
now seem, so that there is a tension in his mind between his deep humanistic and his strong scientific leanings.

There is no need for another biography of Adams. Ernest Samuels has given us a superb life and letters in his magisterial three-volume study, and another equally massive study by Edward Chalfant is in progress. Nor is there need for an exploration of Adams’s relation to his illustrious family, surely one of the most distinguished in American history. After all, his great-grandfather was John Adams; his grandfather was John Quincy Adams; and his father, Charles Francis Adams, was a congressman and held the vitally important post of ambassador to the Court of St. James during the Civil War. His brother Charles Francis, Jr., was also a member of Congress and later president of the Union Pacific Railroad, and another brother, Brooks, was a theorist of some interest, though not on a level with Henry. Such familial factors cannot be completely ignored, but it is important to remember that theory cannot be reduced to biography, however interesting. If we want to understand the theory, we must turn to the published works, which is surely where we will find the ideas Adams hoped to leave behind. Letters and biographical materials can assist this effort, but they are no substitute for it. This is not to denigrate the letters. They are often brilliant, witty, charming, gossipy, and full of interesting ideas; they can also be self-serving, disingenuous, and filled with the worst sort of prejudice. It is certainly possible that Adams believed that someday they would be published. In any event, they provide important clues to the works that were more immediately released to the public; it is these texts that receive the bulk of my attention here.

Adams’s later works are written in a mood of world-weary cynicism. But the cynicism is, I think, born of disappointment. The early Adams was almost flamboyantly idealistic, an ardent pro-Union nationalist possessed of a sense of the potential for greatness embedded in the American Republic. The letters of his early manhood are filled with a contempt worthy of John Quincy Adams for the slaveholding South. Moreover, there is an abiding belief in the superiority of American democratic institutions to the sclerotic conditions he perceived in Europe. These beliefs were certainly in no way altered by the duplicitous behavior of the English during the Civil War, when he served in London as private secretary to his father, the ambassador.

But the Union victory in the war turned hollow. It ended slavery and subdued the South, but it also ushered in a period of incredibly rapid social and industrial change, accompanied by a period of monstrous corruption, arguably matched in American history only by what we have seen in the last generation. And Adams was mesmerized, attracted, repelled, and almost paralyzed
by the technological developments he saw as the driving force in Western history, another interesting parallel to the present. Under similar circumstances, some have turned to religion, and Adams was fascinated by an idealized medieval unity and a near enchantment with the Virgin Mary. Yet someone who could not submit to the authority of the Unitarian Church could hardly embrace Catholicism, so he became a pessimistic prophet compelled, so he claimed, to wander in the wilderness, surrendering to blind historical forces seemingly beyond human control. His interest in science and technology combined with his religious concerns led him to symbolize the movement of world history as a conflict between the Virgin and the Dynamo, and with some apparent reluctance, he perceived the Dynamo as the winner, though one must be very careful not to overestimate his rejection of technology or to see him as some sort of technophobic neo-medievalist.

The principal foci for this study are Adams's two interlocked theories of history. The first is his overview of the American experience, focusing on what he saw as the early betrayal of the original constitutional understanding by the Jeffersonians and the further debasement of American ideals by the rapid development of industrial and financial capitalism following the Civil War. One might even argue that his more speculative, more philosophical writings are warranted by the solid empirical foundations of his historical and journalistic work. The second theory takes off from the American experience and is closely linked to it. It is an almost Weberian lament for the decline of humane values in the wake of capitalist industrialization and the concomitant growth of technological power, a set of forces seen in their most advanced form in the United States. In the face of these changes, he laments the world lost to us with the decline of medieval unity and religious faith, but he is under no more illusions than Weber that such faith can be restored. Thus, his “system,” if that is not too grandiose a term, ends on a note of tragic despair, though a despair sometimes lightened by brief rays of hope. These are ideas that may shed some light on contemporary problems, and even paradoxical ideas such as “conservative, Christian, anarchy,” as developed in *The Education of Henry Adams*, may offer some clues for a democratic revival, particularly when combined with some of the themes that run through his monumental history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations. For now, we can leave open the question of whether he would approve of such a revival.

To explore such possibilities requires some subtle interpretation—if possible, as subtle as the author of the ideas themselves. Adams is not an easily accessible writer. The famous description he wrote of Thomas Jefferson
might well apply to him: “Jefferson could be painted only touch by touch, with a fine pencil, and the perfection of the likeness depended upon the shifting and uncertain flicker of its semi-transparent shadows.” Adams’s “autobiography,” a term appended by his publisher to The Education of Henry Adams after his death, only complicates matters. All autobiographers present themselves as they wish to be seen, but in this case, the matter is more complicated than usual. To start with, the Education is written in the third person to convey a sense of detachment. And as Brooks Simpson writes, “The Education is part autobiography, part novel, part philosophy, and part social commentary, for Adams consciously shaped and distorted the facts of his life to fit larger themes concerning power, education, and knowledge.” Leaving aside Simpson’s evident bias, the cautionary note is warranted. Adams is an elusive thinker, one all too often oversimplified in a vain effort to capture him with an easy label. To do justice to him, we must take into account his irony, the cynicism that clouds his idealism, and the change in his views over time. Beyond all this, he is, I think, a deeply divided thinker. He would like to have had religious faith but failed to achieve it. He worried about the effects of science and technology but nevertheless admired their achievements, and his mind was much influenced by them. And, contrary to much opinion, he was a believer in democracy, though he was often dismayed by the results it produced. The dilemmas he faced have not disappeared, and so I believe he remains an important voice for us today. It is time to revive interest in the whole body of his work, particularly the neglected history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations, which is arguably still his most successful work.
This page is intentionally left blank.