Henry Adams

Young, James P.

Published by University Press of Kansas

Young, James P.
Henry Adams: The Historian as Political Theorist.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84297
Part II

The Philosophy of History
This page is intentionally left blank.
Adams's two great late books, *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* and *The Education of Henry Adams*, form a pair; each complements the other. Both are concerned with the relation of politics and history to religion, science, and technology, and the development, one might even say creation, of Adams's sense of self. And central to much of this discussion is the role of women in society. On most of these questions Adams held unconventional, even iconoclastic views.

This was nowhere more true than his thinking on religion. I remarked earlier that, in spite of his Puritan ancestry, Adams could submit himself to the discipline of no church. In the *Education*, he tells us that as far as Boston was concerned, the Unitarian clergy had solved the problems of the universe, thus, in effect, leaving them with nothing to do.

Of all the conditions of his youth which afterwards puzzled the grown-up man, this disappearance of religion puzzled him most. The boy went to church twice every Sunday; he was taught to read his Bible, and he learned religious poetry by heart; he believed in a mild deism; he prayed; he went through all the forms; but neither to him nor to his brothers or sisters was religion real. Even the mild discipline of the Unitarian Church was so irksome that they all threw it off at the first possible moment, and never afterwards entered a church.1

It is not even clear whether Adams was ultimately an atheist. Yet his most aesthetically beautiful book centers on the Virgin Mary. It is a veritable hymn of praise, a very joyful hymn at that. And it is highly personal, seemingly not rooted in any theology, least of all Roman Catholic theology. His Mariolatry was of a piece with his general adoration of women, though the adoration was always practiced, after the tragic death of his wife, from a safe distance. But to understand Adams on religion it is necessary to come to grips with his views on women.

Early in the *Education*, Adams lays down a "general law of experience—no woman had ever driven him wrong; no man had ever driven him right."2 More specifically, he claims that "the American woman of the nineteenth
century was much better company than the American man." And in perhaps the most striking of all his generalizations, he proclaims, "The proper study of mankind is woman, and by common agreement since the time of Adam, it is the most complex and arduous." His first general foray into the topic of women was a lecture given at the Lowell Institute in 1876, though it was not published until 1891. In many respects, "Primitive Rights of Women" is an astonishing essay that exhibits considerable learning and a great historical sweep, ranging from North American Indians to ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, to the Scandinavian sagas, to the development of Christian ideas about the social role of women. Defining his interest, Adams tells us, "As he grew older, he found that Early Institutions lost their interest, but that Early Women became a passion. Without understanding movement of sex, history seemed to him mere pedantry." In his paper, Adams is particularly concerned to show that his friend Sir Henry Maine was wrong to adopt the position that the early place of married women was one of slavery, with the husband wielding despotic power over his wife, just as he did over his children.

Adams examines the social place of women in societies ranging from simple communal systems, where all things were owned in common, to the more complex ancient societies and on into early Christianity. In all the early societies he finds that women had a great deal of freedom to marry or divorce and that in these societies there was space for strong women to flourish as well. For instance, Homer's Penelope was besieged by suitors because of her power position, in spite of the fact that she was a good deal older than most of those who sought her hand.

But this happy situation was not to last. The villain of the piece is Christianity. Christian theologians "adopted the Trinity, and in adopting it, de-throned the woman from her place." But Adams anticipates Chartres by noting, "Yet even then, notwithstanding this degradation, the irresistible spread of Mariolatry, the worship of the Virgin Mother, proved how strongly human nature revolted against the change."

But worse was to come:

Next to the purification of morals, and indeed as one of the principal means toward it, the Church felt with most intensity the necessity of discipline and obedience in society, and taught that lesson with only too much earnestness and success. The rise of Christianity marked the diminution of women's social and legal rights.

Put bluntly, "the Church was the principal agency in degrading the status of women." Church doctrine came to focus more on the duties of women
than on their rights. The "legal and temporal" aspects of marriage tended to be subordinate to the moral aspect and religious meaning of the contract. A new ideal of femininity developed, displacing the "proud, self-confident, vindictive woman of the German tradition." The new woman was to be "meek and patient, the silent and tender sufferer, the pale reflection of the Mater Dolorosa, submissive to every torture her husband could invent, but more submissive to the Church than to her husband." Under these conditions, "the family, like the State, took on the character of a petty absolutism." Thus, neither the church nor the state could rest the claim to authority on consent. Obviously, this is not the foundation for a conventional nineteenth-century view of either women or religion.

In Adams's New England context, perhaps the most notable aspect of this discussion of women's rights is the absence of any mention of women's suffrage. Ernest Samuels observes, "Henry Adams doubtless shared James Russell Lowell's amused contempt for the perspiring crusaders who proclaimed the New Jerusalem in strident treble voices. Entirely beneath notice were the unseemly activities of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott, and their National Woman Suffrage Association." But perhaps there was some mitigation for Adams's position. In his view, Samuels goes on, "Women's suffrage did not touch the basic question: How to establish the dignity of women as co-equals with men. In his judgement mere legislative enactments did not face the question at all."

This position cannot just be dismissed out of hand. Dignity and equality with men are surely worthy goals. And one could certainly argue that the adoption of women's suffrage has not solved all women's problems by any means. Yet from another point of view, Adams's position is more than a little strange. He was, after all, a member of the fourth generation of perhaps the most important political dynasty in American history. And surely he must have been aware of his great-grandmother Abigail's famous injunction to her husband John Adams to "remember the ladies." Nor could it be said that he did not treat women's political views seriously; for example, some of his most interesting letters from a political standpoint were sent to his dear friend Elizabeth Cameron, the estranged wife of Senator Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania. One can only assume that he was so caught up in the manners and mores of Victorian America that he simply failed to see the anomaly in his thought. But the flaw is significant. Perhaps in elevating women to an almost mystical level and in stressing motherhood, as he did, he could not see that the equality, if not the superiority, he sought for women could be furthered by granting them the suffrage. Here, as elsewhere in his career, Adams shows a
weakened sense of politics and the political. As Clive Bush comments, “A sexual, or indeed sexist, bias then enters the picture. An opposition emerges between female-oriented institutions which are basically apolitical and male-oriented states which are fully political. As a symbolic narrative this opposition reflects a certain conservatism at a time when women in the United States were pressing for the vote.”

There is, as William Merrill Decker says, an undercurrent of reaction in this early paper by Adams. But perhaps to compensate for that, “he has elevated the woman to the status of historical subject,” and while women play no role in the History, they can be studied in the freer form of the novel. Thus, in spite of the suffrage problem, his paper on early women’s rights is in some ways a remarkable performance. The range of learning Adams displays is genuinely impressive, though I would not venture to say how well the scholarship holds up today; it is the normative import of his position that is interesting. Still, it can be argued that the work is that of a genuine pioneer. In her fine article “Henry Adams’s Anthropological Vision,” Eugenia Kaledin compares his work with that of Joan Wallach Scott and Natalie Zemon Davis. Thus Adams, like Scott, was interested in “looking at the way women’s presence gave a richer meaning to the organization and perception of historical knowledge.” And Kaledin suggests that Adams matches Davis’s position on the role of gender studies, the goal being “to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods and how they functioned in the social order to promote its change.” Pioneer or not, in Adams’s worldview, women are surely central, as is absolutely clear in his second novel of ideas, Esther, published in 1884 under the pseudonym Frances Snow Compton.

**Faith, Science, and Organized Religion**

Esther occupied a central place in Adams’s mind and heart. As he wrote to Elizabeth Cameron, “I care more for one chapter, or any dozen pages of Esther than for the whole History, including maps and indexes.” The source of his deep feeling is that this is another roman à clef, closely modeled on his most inner circle of friends and, above all, on his wife Marian, who inspired the title character, with, as in the case of Madeleine Lee, elements of the author’s mind and personality included in the portrait. And of course, having exposed some of her deepest feelings, that meaning was even more precious to Adams after the suicide of his wife.

The plot of the novel is essentially simple, and the philosophical argument
is clear, though not without complexity. Adams's heroine, Esther Dudley, loves and is loved by the Reverend Stephen Hazard. But she cannot share Hazard's religious faith and so, in an unhappy ending, rejects him because she feels that her lack of belief would be a hindrance to his ministerial career. The heart of the book is an intense series of conversations about religion and science with the active participation of geologist George Strong, who is so impressed by Esther's spirited defense of her ideas and beliefs that he too wishes to marry her. But he also is rejected because of Esther's love for Hazard.

Esther is perhaps the only character in either of Adams's novels who emerges as anything like a fully characterized person. She is very intelligent, quick-minded in discussion, and has a sure sense of herself that she is extremely reluctant to violate. She is introduced to us by Strong, modeled partly on Adams and primarily on Adams's dear friend, the distinguished geologist Clarence King. Strong calls Esther "the sternest little Pagan I know." Mr. Wharton, an artist based on another family friend, John La Farge, recalls Henry James's comment on Clover Adams when he refers to Esther as "one of the most marked American types I know." And Wharton adds some interesting testimony on the nature of Esther's mind:

She gives one the idea of a lightly-sparred yacht in mid-ocean; unexpected; you ask yourself what the devil she is doing there. She sails gaily along, though there is no land in sight and plenty of rough water coming. She has never read a book, I believe, in her life.... She picks up all she knows without an effort and knows nothing well, yet she seems to understand whatever is said. Her mind is as irregular as her face, and both have the same peculiarity. I notice that the lines of her eyebrows, nose, all end with a slight upward curve like a yacht's sails which give a kind of hopefulness and self-confidence to her expression. Mind and face have the same curves.

Esther has a well-developed will and likes to have her own way. Also, like Madeleine Lee, not to mention Henry Adams, "She had the instinct of power, but not the love of responsibility." She is also very strong. As her father lies dying, she fends off the concerns of her suitor, Reverend Hazard, saying, "Do not feel alarmed about me. Women have more strength than men." It is also interesting and perhaps a little puzzling, in view of Adams's later attraction to the Middle Ages, that the painter Wharton pays her tribute by saying, "There is nothing medieval about her. If she belongs to any besides the present, it is to the next world which artists want to see, when paganism will come again and we can give a divinity to every waterfall." And
above all, she has no use for organized religion. Regarding church services: “By the time the creed was read, she could not honestly feel that she believed a word of it, or could force herself to say that she ever could believe it.” In her words, “I can’t be respectable and believe the thirty-nine articles. I can’t go to church every Sunday or hold my tongue or pretend to be pious.”

This aversion to religion precipitates the dramatic crisis of the novel. She is loved by Hazard, an Episcopalian minister in New York, who is based on Adams’s second cousin Philips Brooks. Throughout his courtship of Esther, Hazard and Strong are engaged in a struggle for her soul, or perhaps, given Esther’s irreligious nature, one might better say for her sense of self. By representing himself to some extent in the characters of both Esther and Strong, Adams places himself in the heart of the discussions at the center of the novel. J. C. Levenson shrewdly observes that “as the spokesman for unromantic liberalism, he occupies the far point in the lover’s triangle and, in his relation to Esther, he makes possible a dialogue between personifications of two aspects of Henry Adams.” The discussions among the three characters encapsulate much of the debate between science and religion in the nineteenth century. And, as in Democracy, the discussions, in part due to Adams’s limitations as a writer of fiction, take on some of the characteristics of a philosophical dialogue, with little genuine novelistic impact.

The heart of the problem is laid out early in the novel. Stephen Hazard preaches a sermon in which he claims that “the church now knows with the certainty of science what she once knew only by the certainty of faith,” that behind all thought and matter lies one idea, “an idea which the church has never ceased to embody.” That idea is “I AM.” This idea is both the starting point and the goal of both metaphysics and philosophy, but “the church alone has pointed out from the beginning that the starting-point is not human but divine. The philosopher says—I am, and the church scouts his philosophy. She answers: No! You are NOT, you have no existence of your own. You were and are and ever will be only a part of the supreme I AM, of which the church is the emblem.” As narrator, Adams adds sardonically, “In this symbolic representation of his right to property in their souls and bodies, perhaps the preacher rose a little above the heads of his audience.” This gloss on Descartes is certainly not how the congregation identifies itself.

But the sermon hardly seems over Esther’s head, though she cannot be said to have been convinced. “I thought it very entertaining,” she says, and a little later adds, in conversation with her freethinking father, “I am charmed.... Only it certainly does come just a little near being an opera house. Mr. Hazard looks horribly like Meyerbeer’s Prophet. He ordered us about in a fine tenor
Therein lies the problem of the novel. Esther scorns the doctrine but rapidly comes to love its messenger. The stage, as I have said, is set for a number of spirited discussions of science, religion, and the relations among the three characters as Hazard tries to sweep aside Esther's qualms about his religion and Strong weighs in with his understanding of science. Strong argues from a slightly odd, almost pragmatic position, because he believes “that since the Church continued to exist, it probably served some necessary purpose in human economy, though he could himself no more understand the good of it than he could comprehend the use of human existence in any shape.” But Strong has no particular wish, or need, to impose his beliefs on others. In fact, his skepticism is so strong that he feels he cannot ask anyone else to accept them. Though at one point he says to Hazard that “science alone is truth,” in general, he is a skeptic about even that. As he says later in another context, “Mystery for mystery science beats religion hollow. I can't open my mouth in my lecture room without repeating ten times as many unintelligible formulas as ever Hazard is forced to do in his church.”

It is in a discussion with Esther that Strong gives his fullest statement on the nature of science. Esther begins the dialogue by asking whether religion is true. Strong begs off answering and says, “Ask me something easier! Ask me whether science is true!” And of course Esther, being close kin to Madeleine Lee and the Adams family, does indeed ask, “Is science true?” Strong answers no.

“Then why do you believe in it?”
“I don’t believe in it.”
“Then why do you belong to it?”
“Because I want to help in making it truer. . . . There is no science which does not begin by requiring you to believe in the incredible.”
“Are you telling me the truth?”
“I tell you the solemn truth that the doctrine of the Trinity is not so difficult to accept for a working proposition as any one of the axioms of physics. The wife of my mathematical colleague, to my knowledge, never even stopped to ask whether it was true that a point has neither length, breadth nor thickness.”

Esther explodes that Strong is not being honest and asserts, “You don’t care whether geology is true or not.” And Strong answers that he really does not very much. But of course this does not satisfy Esther, who has a desperate
need to know the truth of the claims of religion, because if she cannot accept them, she cannot marry Hazard, since her disbelief would damage him with his congregation. And Strong replies, “The trouble with you is that you start wrong. You need what is called faith, and you are trying to get it by reason. It can’t be done. Faith is a state of mind, like love or jealousy. You can never reason yourself into it.” But a moment later, Hazard tells her that if she has enough faith in Hazard she can accept the church and submit. And Esther’s final outburst is, “I want nothing of the church! Why should it trouble me? Why should I submit to it? Why can’t it leave me alone?”

We have already encountered Esther’s resistance to organized religion, and her love for Hazard develops in spite of what starts out to be his very orthodox position, so orthodox that he would rather face equally strong opponents because he is “never afraid of pure atheism; it is the flabby kind of deism that annoys me, because it is as slippery as air.” Indeed, his orthodoxy is his strongest point. “Of all weaknesses he most disliked timid and half-hearted faith. He would rather have jumped at once to Strong’s pure denial, than yield an inch to the argument that a mystery was to be paltered with because it could not be explained.” Echoing the possessiveness claimed for the church in his sermon, Hazard extends it to Esther: “I am tyrannical. I want your whole life and even more. I will be put off with nothing else. Don’t you see that I can’t retreat.”

Given Esther’s personality and beliefs, this is a very unlikely path to success for Hazard. Sensing this, he makes a strategic retreat and offers a version of Pascal’s wager. Saying that even he has doubts and that every nontheistic question can be answered by a tenet even more inconceivable than that of the church, he goes on to ask, “What do you gain by getting rid of one incomprehensible only to put a greater one in its place, and throw away your only hope besides? The atheists offer no sort of bargain for one’s soul. Their scheme is all loss and no gain. At last both they and I come back to a confession of ignorance; the only difference between us is that my ignorance is joined with a faith and hope.” Hazard then goes on to point out, still in his Pascalian, “pragmatic” mode, that there are scores of clergymen who are little more than skeptics, having made the same wager, in effect, exercising something akin to William James’s “will to believe.” But orthodoxy triumphs; Hazard cannot long remain in the pragmatic mood, even in his desperate desire to win Esther. Asked whether he truly believes in the resurrection of the body, he answers that he does, to which Esther replies that the very idea is “shocking.” And when Hazard challenges her by asking if she can imagine a future in which she would not see her loved ones again, she bursts out, “Why must the
church always appeal to my weakness and never to my strength! ... What is the use of appealing to my sex? The atheists at least show me respect enough not to do that!"

With this Hazard admits defeat and leaves the scene. Strong has overheard Esther’s defense of her principles and is so moved that he also proposes. He too is rejected, with Esther saying, “But George, I don’t love you, I love him.” But of course, this is more than a simple sad romance come to a bad end. In rejecting both Hazard and Strong, Esther has rejected both science and religion. Levenson puts it with characteristic acuity: “Esther declares the emotional bankruptcy of both science and religion, the great contesting forces in the nineteenth-century struggle of belief.” Strong has told her that he believes in nothing but mind and matter and that he has no wish to convert anyone to his beliefs. In fact, he goes so far as to say, “I prefer almost any kind of religion. No one ever took up this doctrine who could help himself.” And though her position is certainly closer to Strong’s than to Hazard’s, this is not enough for Esther’s ideals. Perhaps only the pagan world imagined for her by the painter Wharton can meet her needs. As it is, she can neither compromise her beliefs for the apparent satisfactions of pragmatism nor fit her conscience to the requirements of a church incapable of engendering her faith. She is the embodiment of the New England conscience stripped of religion.

Just as Madeleine Lee cannot accept Senator Ratcliffe’s pragmatic compromises with the absolutist morality she believes in, so too must Esther Dudley reject a religion weakened by pragmatism and a science focused only on mind and matter. Just like an Adams, she must have something more permanent on which to stand. Mont Saint Michel and Chartres may be read as an attempt to discover such a standard.

The Ideal Female

Mont Saint Michel and Chartres occupies a special place in Adams’s work. As he explains in the Education, he sought to measure man as a force by its motion starting from a fixed point. He looked for the point in history “when man held the highest idea of himself as a unit in a unified universe.” Years of study led him to think that that point might be the century from 1150 to 1250. Then, “Setting himself to the task, he began a volume which he mentally knew as ‘Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres: a Study of Thirteenth Century Unity.’ From that point he proposed to fix a position for himself, which he could label, ‘The Education of Henry Adams: a Study of Twentieth Century Multiplicity.’ With the help of these two points of relation, he hoped to
project his lines forward and backward indefinitely, subject to correction from anyone who should know better."48 Thus the two works cannot really be separated; they complement each other, and it is only for the sake of expository clarity that they are not treated together.

Chartres is something altogether remarkable and, I think, sui generis. Surely there is nothing else quite like it in American letters. Completed in 1904 but, like the great History and the Education, printed in a private edition for his friends, it was not available to the public until 1913. With the possible exception of Esther, it is Adams's most personal book.49 Clearly it touches something very deep within him that inspires a work of great artistic beauty. It is a happy book, a jeu d'esprit, lacking the irony, bitterness, and cynicism that are characteristic of so much of his other writing. Adams has succeeded in heeding his own warning: "The man who wanders into the twelfth century is lost, unless he can grow prematurely young."50 His friend William James, not always so sympathetic to Adams's work, caught this spirit: "I can't help sending you a paean of praise. From beginning to end it reads as from a man in the fresh morning of life, with a frolic power unusual to historic literature." And clearly, as Samuels says, James saw the book as an abandonment of both vulgar positivism and "arrogant intellectualism,"51 in favor of an essentially aesthetic approach.

That is no doubt true. It certainly is not a book of history in anything like the usual sense, and its scholarship, from an orthodox point of view, is excessively personalized, not to mention sometimes quite derivative. What Adams offers is essentially a myth; referring to the central character in Adams's book, John McIntyre writes, "His Virgin is a fiction and should be treated as such."52 Edward Saveth is quite right to treat Adams's Virgin as another character along with Madeleine Lee and Esther Dudley.53 The myth he constructs is a very pretty picture indeed, though his view of the Middle Ages is certainly highly selective. As Alfred Kazin says: "In his American histories he had shown himself the most demanding student of social and economic facts. There was nothing like these in the thirteenth century—he took no interest in how the Church spellbound and controlled the masses; there were no tiresome wars of tribute; no looting Crusaders; no murders in the cathedral or disease raging outside it."54

Though Chartres has some partially buried political implications, Adams leaves politics and economics, in any modern sense, almost completely out of the picture he is painting, though one might argue that in the medieval world, politics and perhaps even economics were religious in some fundamental way. If one does take them directly into account, it is hard to find the
unity Adams attributes to the medieval world. Samuels sums up more fully than Kazin:

The politics of the time were a trackless jungle in which feudal monarchs and nobles stalked each other in a ceaseless contest for territory and power, a contest in which the rival ambitions of great priests and prelates were inextricably confounded. Serfs and peasants were hustled off to fight and die in a thousand nameless quarrels or stayed home to be plundered with savage ferocity by lawless marauders. Whole populations were decimated in the hysterical frenzies of the Crusades. . . . It was a society in which barbarous superstitions were maintained by a penal system whose tortures confront us in countless paintings. It was also a world undergoing an immense transformation as commerce rapidly expanded, dotting the landscape with thriving towns, developing manufactures, and encouraging science.  

Ignoring these factors in order to focus on a unity of religion and art is to pay a high historical price. The result is a work that stands in marked contrast to the complex mix of politics, economics, and culture that was characteristic of the History.  

Of course, Adams was fully aware of these lacunae. After all, he had introduced the seminar method to Harvard in his teaching of medieval history. And in the History, he was quite scathing in his remarks about the medieval period. Thus Napoleon, the great villain of the History, had a “moral sense which regarded truth and falsehood as equally useful modes of expression— an unprovoked war or secret assassination as equally natural forms of activity— such a combination of qualities as Europe had forgotten since the Middle Ages.” Between them, Napoleon and Pitt had renewed “the bigotry and despotism of the Middle Ages.” Given this, it is clear that Adams knew that he was not writing any kind of standard history but rather a work that is, for the most part, a prose poem.

It can hardly be said that when Adams tried to find a fixed, unified starting point for his interpretation of Western history he cared much for historical precision. As he said of Eleanor of Aquitaine, her “real nature in no way concerns us.” And he states, “For us the poetry is history, and the facts are false.” What Adams sought was less a real-world starting point than an ideal against which to measure the development of history and the condition of twentieth-century civilization. Mont Saint Michel and Chartres is an exceedingly rich book, and it is necessary to bypass much that is of great interest. I have no qualifications to evaluate what Adams says about the architecture of
the great cathedrals or medieval literature. Also, I cannot enter into a discussion of the merits of Adams's ideas on medieval thought. Instead, I focus on Adams as an early-twentieth-century figure who was deeply concerned with the dynamics of his own society and sought to understand his own century by contrasting it with a particular and very personal image of the medieval worldview. The subject, then, is Adams and not medieval France.

One final comment should be made before discussing Adams's fascinating book. In spite of its subject matter, Mont Saint Michel and Chartres is in no sense a religious or devotional book. As Levenson says, "He had no desire to teach faith, which he thought was unteachable and knew he had not earned," a position that is entirely consistent with the views of Adams as expressed by George Strong in Esther.

Adams begins dramatically with Saint Michael, the patron saint of Mont Saint Michel: "The Archangel loved heights. . . . The Archangel stands for Church and State, and both militant. He is the conqueror of Satan, the mightiest of all created spirits, the nearest to God." But note that these are intensely masculine images, and it is women that concern Adams much more profoundly, not just in the medieval world, but in his own time too.

Thus, Chartres clearly begins in a masculine mode, a mode that is the first part of a tripartite structure. According to one view, the whole argument of the work is a stepping down from the archangel's heights to the end of the discussion of Thomas Aquinas in the last chapter of the book. This is not altogether fanciful when the book as a whole is considered, but it overlooks the still greater heights reached in the central chapters, which deal with women in general but above all with the place, the sheer force, of the Virgin Mary's role in medieval society.

Thus, Chartres may begin with Saint Michael, but the heart of the book is the colorful, iconoclastic, some might say heretical portrait of Mary, spelled out in detail over several chapters focused on Chartres Cathedral. As R. P. Blackmur has written, the discussion of Mont Saint Michel was "Romanesque and military," while the description of Chartres was "Gothic and intuitive; the one was a matter of struggle and survival, the other a matter of understanding and aspiration. But Adams' interest is in the second rather than in the first." For Adams, "The Virgin was a real person, whose tastes, wishes, instincts, passions, were intimately known." Writing about her almost as if she were the subject of a standard scholarly biographical literature, he claims, "Enough of the Virgin's literature survives to show her character, and the course of her daily life. We know more about her habits and thoughts than those of earthly queens." At the very least, his treatment of her is unorthodox. The best way to
Religion, History, and Politics

139

approach it is by quoting from it at length. To the extent that Mary is near the center of Adams's thought, we can understand a significant part of his social, historical, and political thought through his picture of her. Interestingly, but surely not coincidentally, she seems to share some of Adams's quirks and ideas. Perhaps this is because his portrait of Mary is a direct descendant of his picture of Esther Dudley and, by extension, of Marion Adams. And unfortunately, like Adams, "She had many of the failings and prejudices of her humanity. For example, in spite of her own origin, she disliked Jews, and rarely neglected a chance to maltreat them," though here, in contrast to some of his other writings, Adams has the grace to suggest that this was a failing on the part of his heroine. Again like Adams, "Mary never loved bankers." But more importantly, I think, she shared with Clover Adams her sprightly and iconoclastic nature, though of course not her motherhood or her ability to work miracles. Surely here, as elsewhere, Adams created a heroine who suited his political and historical purposes.

But to begin more systematically, "She was the greatest artist, as she was the greatest philosopher and musician and theologian, that ever lived on earth, except for her Son, who, at Chartres, is still an infant under her guardianship. Her taste was infallible; her sentence eternally final." Notice that in Chartres Cathedral, the Son is decidedly in second place, reduced to an afterthought.

She was surrounded by people begging her for favors "mostly inconsistent with law," a theme that arises often in different variations. In general, she was a problem for those in authority, not least those in the church, who "never quite accepted the full claims of what was called Mariolatry." Nor were bourgeois capitalists or medieval schoolmen really at ease with her.

The bourgeois had put an enormous share of his capital into what was in fact an economical speculation, not unlike the South Sea Scheme, or the railway system of our own time; except that in one case the energy was devoted to shortening the road to Heaven; in the other to shortening the road to Paris; but no serious schoolman could have felt entirely convinced that God would enter into a business partnership with man, to establish a sort of joint-stock society for altering the operation of divine and universal laws. The bourgeois cared little for the philosophical doubt, if the economical result proved to be good, but he watched this result with his usual practical sagacity and [satisfied] himself that relics were not certain in their effects; that the Saints were not always able or willing to help; that Mary herself could certainly not be bought or bribed; that prayer without money seemed to be quite as efficacious as prayer with money; and that neither the road to
Heaven nor Heaven itself had been made surer or brought nearer by an investment of capital which amounted to the best part of the wealth of France.\textsuperscript{69}

Continuing with the theme of investment, Adams notes, “Illusion for illusion, — granting for the moment that Mary was an illusion, — the Virgin mother in this instance repaid to her worshipers a larger return for their money than the capitalist had ever been able to get, at least in this world, from any other illusion of wealth which he had tried to make a source of pleasure and profit.”\textsuperscript{70} Perhaps in this passage we hear an echo of Pascal’s wager, already raised in Esther. Is this another flirtation with pragmatism?

As for the clergy, they fair no better than the bourgeoisie. “The Virgin had the additional harm to the public that she was popularly supposed to have no very marked fancy for priests as such; she was a Queen, a Woman, and a Mother, functions, all, which priests could not perform.”\textsuperscript{71} Nor did she have any taste for the metaphysics of theology. Chartres Cathedral is wholly given over to the Mother and the Son; the Father does not often appear, and the Holy Ghost even less. “Chartres represents, not the Trinity, but the identity of the Mother and Son. The idea is not orthodox,” Adams continues, “but that is no affair of ours. The Church watches over its own.”\textsuperscript{72} So much for the bourgeoisie and the church, even with all its theological trappings.

The Virgin was more favorably disposed to those less well placed in society than were the clergy and the bourgeoisie. She was prejudiced against neither prodigal sons nor even prodigal daughters. Indeed:

She was rather fond of prodigals, and gentle toward the ladies who consumed the prodigal’s substance. She admitted Mary Magdalen and Mary the Gypsy to her society. She fretted little about Aristotle so long as the prodigal adored her, and naturally the prodigal adored her almost to the exclusion of the Trinity. She always cared less for her dignity than was to be wished. . . . Among the peasants she liked to appear as one of themselves; she insisted on lying in bed, in a stable, with the cows and asses about her, and her baby in a cradle by the bed-side, as though she had suffered like other women, though the Church insisted she had not.\textsuperscript{73}

She was hardly at home in “polite” society. In fact, according to Adams, “in no well-regulated community, under a proper system of police, could the Virgin feel at home, and the same thing may be said of most other saints as well as sinners. Her conduct was at times undignified. . . . She condescended
to do domestic service, in order to help her friends, and she would use her needle.” She did not worry about such things because she was, in effect, a law unto herself. “The Virgin cared little for criticism of her manners or acts. She was above criticism. She made manners. Her acts were laws. No one thought of criticizing in the style of a normal school, the will of such a Queen; but one might treat her with a degree of familiarity, under great provocation, which would startle easier critics than the French.”

But while Mary’s word was law, other authorities received less support from her. “Intensely human, but always Queen, she upset, at her pleasure, the decisions of every court and the orders of every authority, human or divine; interfered directly in the ordeal; altered the processes of nature; abolished space; annihilated time.” And though she showed a “marked weakness for chivalry,” she had little knowledge of political economy, and “her views on the subject of money-lending or banking were so feminine as to arouse in that powerful class a vindictive enmity which helped to overthrow her throne.” Common moneylending practices displeased her greatly, “because she knew too well how easily the banker of good credit, could arrange with the officials of the Trinity to open the doors of paradise for him.” Unfortunately, the administration of heaven was much like that of France, but since her sentiments inclined toward pity rather than justice, “she shut her eyes to much she could not change.” Thus she directed her miracles to those who needed them most, who were “rarely the well-to-do.”

Such attitudes did not sit well with ecclesiastical authorities, as one might expect:

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. She was above law; she took feminine pleasure in turning Hell into an ornament; she delighted in trampling on every social distinction in this world and the next.

But Mary is presented in terms even more radical, so that she is in conflict with the established religion. Adams explains that “the Church itself never liked to be dragged too far under feminine influence, although the moment it discarded feminine influence it lost nearly everything of any value to it or to the world, except its philosophy.” Mary’s tastes were simply too popular, which was a great loss for the church.
The convulsive hold which Mary to this day maintains over human imagination,—as you can see at Lourdes,—was due much less to her power of saving soul or body than to her sympathy with people who suffered under law,—divine or human,—justly or unjustly, by accident or design, by decree of God or by guile of Devil. She cared not a straw for conventional morality, and she had no notion of letting her friends be punished to the tenth or any other generation, for the sins of their ancestors or the peccadillos of Eve.

“So Mary filled Heaven with a sort of persons little to the liking of any respectable middle-class society.” In effect, she created a church of her own “so effective that the Trinity might have perished without much affecting her position.”

This dilemma also spread to Protestantism, leading Adams to take a hearty swing at his ancestors. Mary’s treatment of the respectable, law-abiding people who could get into heaven through ordinary channels was so irritating 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. The puritans abandoned the New Testament and the Virgin in order to go back to the beginning and renew the quarrel with Eve.”

One final characteristic of the Virgin is of great significance and eventually exposes a significant problem in Adams’s argument. He begins his case with typical boldness, making a point of such breathtaking “political incorrectness” that few today would dare utter the thought, though Adams clearly intends it as praise of women rather than denigration. Adams asserts, “that the Virgin was by essence illogical, unreasonable and feminine, is the only fact of any ultimate value worth studying, and starts a number of questions that history has shown itself clearly afraid to touch.” Today we resist the conclusion that to be feminine is to be illogical and unreasonable, but to focus on this is to miss a larger point. Adams propounds a list of unanswered questions:

No one has ventured to explain why the Virgin wielded exclusive power over poor and rich, sinners and saints alike. Why were all the Protestant churches cold failures without her help? Why could not the Holy Ghost,—the spirit of love and grace,—equally answer their prayers? Why was the Son powerless? Why was Chartres Cathedral in the thirteenth century—like Lourdes today—the expression of what is in substance a separate religion? Why did the gentle and gracious
Virgin Mother so exasperate the Pilgrim Fathers? Why was the Woman struck out of the Church and ignored in the State? These questions are not antiquarian or trifling in historical value; they tug at the very heart-strings of all that makes whatever order is in the cosmos. If a Unity exists, in which and toward which all energies center, it must explain and include Duality, Diversity, Infinity,—Sext

The question of sex is considered later, though Adams does not dwell on it at length, since his main interest in his pre-Freudian world is femininity. He develops these themes most generally in the Education. However, first we need to consider the source of Mary’s popularity in the Middle Ages, which is not, in Adams’s view, sexual. She was supported by all classes, as Adams sees it, because men did not want justice or equity but rather favor. Since all men were sinners, no one wanted to face strict justice. Individuality penetrated society from top to bottom. “The individual rebelled against restraint; society wanted to do what it pleased; all disliked the laws which Church and State were trying to fasten on them. They longed for a power above law,—or above the contorted mass of ignorance and absurdity bearing the name of law.” Like children, men yearned for “protection, pardon, and love.”

This was what the Trinity, though omnipotent, could not give. Whatever the heretic or mystic might try to persuade himself, God could not be Love. God was Justice, Order, Unity; Perfection; he could not be human and imperfect, nor could the Son or the Holy Ghost be other than the Father.

Then Adams continues with what, in the context of his larger argument or what is generally taken to be his larger argument, is a strange contention. “The Mother alone was human, imperfect, and could love; she alone was Favor, Duality, Diversity.” Under any religion, Adams argues, duality must find its place somewhere. If, in the Middle Ages, it could not be embodied in the Trinity, then it must be in the Mother. “If the Trinity was in essence Unity, the Mother alone could represent whatever was not Unity; whatever was irregular, exceptional, outlawed; and this was the whole human race.... In Mary’s eyes, all were subjects for her pity and help.” In this connection, William Merrill Decker makes an important point, namely, that in his celebration of Mary’s willful, illogical nature, Adams “develops a recognition that he had made years before in ‘Primitive Rights of Women,’ that Mary served a popular need that could not be satisfied by the Holy Ghost, the abstraction
with which the misogynist church fathers replaced the eternal woman when they assimilated the Egyptian Trinity into Christian doctrine, manifesting a reflex later to reappear in the Anglo-American Puritan.”

I have presented this argument in great detail because it seems to open up a large hole in the structure of Adams’s thought as conventionally interpreted. If his goal is to find unity in the face of multiplicity, then, based on his apparent rejection of the source of unity in favor of the diversity represented by his heroine, the Virgin, we must at least question his commitment to the unity he claims to seek. At the most, his apparent rejection of his own century from the depths of his eighteenth-century mind may be less firm than he wants us to believe. Always remember that Adams is not a notably straightforward writer. To return to an earlier discussion (see chapter 3), perhaps Adams, like one of Isaiah Berlin’s hedgehogs, appears to be seeking (as did Tolstoy) a single theory to explain all of history but is really a fox in disguise, one who recognizes the irreducible multiplicity of history in spite of his longing for a more orderly view of the world.

It is necessary to consider that theme again in the context of the Education, but it is possible to see in Adams’s image of the Virgin the origins of the theory of conservative Christian anarchy that he begins to toy with in his letters and treats somewhat more directly in the Education. Mary is certainly Christian, though not in any orthodox way, and her disregard for convention, her uneasiness with established authorities (whether legal or clerical), and her sympathy for the underdog may well lead toward some form of anarchism, though it is hard to see the conservatism. In any event, it is unclear how even the perceived domination of medieval society by a woman of such unsettling characteristics could last.

Adams is too far removed from writing conventional history to offer any account of the downgrading of Mary in the medieval world. At the end of the chapter on Nicolette and Marian, he hints at what is to come. Between 1250 and 1300, according to him, “the Woman and the Rose became bankrupt. Satire took the place of worship. Man, with his usual monkey-like malice, took pleasure in pulling down what he had built up.” And then, in conclusion, he adds, “For the first time since Constantine proclaimed the reign of Christ, a thousand years, or so, before Philip the Fair dethroned him, the deepest expression of social feeling ended with the word: Despair.”

Samuels offers a considerably more circumstantial account of the displacement of the Virgin from her place of eminence. Taking up the political, social, and economic history that Adams avoids, and following Adams’s favorite architectural authority Viollet-le-Duc, Samuels notes that the erect-
tion of cathedrals became a duty because it was a protest against feudalism. “The popular support for the Virgin of Majesty had therefore a revolutionary character, becoming in fact one of the instruments for the overthrow of the feudal system.” But ironically, this did not work to the Virgin’s advantage. In place of Adams’s imaginative account, Samuels argues that church building was not just the expression of a simple faith. It was the work of powerful priests “whose ambition marvelously energized their piety.” They competed with one another to build the most magnificent edifices. As society grew more secular, the kings provided better protection than the Virgin, while the levies imposed by the great bishops were resisted more and more. “The Virgin of Majesty had indirectly achieved her revolutionary purposes.” But given her enemies, this was at the cost of her special position.

As a result of the decline of the Virgin, in the final three chapters of Chartres, Adams returns to a world of men: Pierre Abelard, the mystics, and Thomas Aquinas. What distinguished Abelard was his relentless logic, beautifully illustrated in the dialogue that Adams constructs between him and William of Champeaux on that favorite topic of medieval philosophy—universals and particulars. It is not to the point here to reconstruct Adams’s brilliant set piece. It is necessary only to note that Abelard wins the debate by making a reductio ad absurdum argument that leads to the conclusion that realism always leads to pantheism. Abelard’s logic then turns to the Trinity. Adams tells us, “No human being was so stupid as not to understand that the Father, Mother and Child made a Trinity.” The difficulty comes when the church tries to identify the Mother with the Holy Ghost. It is this concept that Abelard insists on subjecting to his logic. Adams explains the problem in biting nonphilosophical terms. The difficulty is that “common people like women and children and ourselves could never understand the Trinity; naturally intelligent people understood it still less, but for them it did not matter; they did not need to understand it provided their neighbors would leave it alone.” But the mass of men wanted the Mother, who was nearer to them than either Father or Son. The substitution for the Mother was inadequate because the Holy Ghost was feared rather than loved. The church went on the defensive, realizing that to inquire into this mystery risked discrediting the whole Trinity, “under the pretense of making it intelligible.” But “precisely this license was what Abelard took, and on it he chose to insist. He avoided open heresy and treated the idea with great respect, but he refused to let it alone.”

It was this style of thought that frightened the church. As Saint Bernard, Abelard’s major opponent, understood the problem, “Pure logic admitted no
contingency; it was bound to be necessitarian or ceased to be logical; but the
result, as Bernard understood it, was that Abelard’s world, being the best and
only possible, need trouble itself no more about God, or Church, or man,” a
result obviously unsettling for the religious establishment.

Given his praise of Mary’s irrationality in the heart of the book, one might
expect Adams to be hostile to Abelard, the great logician. Indeed, this is what
R. P. Blackmur takes to be his position, or at least the implication of his posi­
tion. Abelard “saw little comfort or grace in any mind but his own. His func­
tion was that of irritant, innovator, anarchist as rebel, and his power was that
of the unaided intellect everywhere passionately equal to itself, everywhere
calamitously unequal to the world in which it found itself.” In fact, he was
rather like John Randolph, despised by Adams as brilliant, but erratic and
unstable.90 And later Blackmur comments, “Abelard, a philosopher who dealt
with theology as if it were a part of the study of law, seems to have resented
the human need for the Virgin,” a need that Adams certainly saw to be essen­
tial.91 And it is also true that Adams is briefly rather harsh in his characteriza­
tion of Abelard’s style of argument. Throughout his career, he tells us, Abelard
“made use of every social and personal advantage to gain a point with little
scruple in manner or in sophistry.” The form of logic he preferred was the
reductio ad absurdum, a weapon “Socrates abused” and of which Abelard
was the “first French master”; however, “neither State nor Church likes to
be reduced to an absurdity, and on the whole, both Socrates and Abelard fared
ill in the result.”92 But this suggests only that Socrates and Abelard courted
danger, which they certainly did, but not necessarily that they were wrong,
since the problems they dealt with remain unsolved.

None of this is implausible, but it is hard to read the chapter on Abelard
without feeling a real sense of Adams’s sympathy for his subject. I suggest that
Adams’s feelings about Abelard are rather like those he had toward Thomas
Jefferson—critical, but not uncomplicated, and with a certain admiration for
a kindred, even if misled, spirit. I think Robert Mane is right to say that in
the medieval drama, “Abelard will certainly not appear as the villain of the
play; indeed he rather seems to act the part of a hero, not unlike Hamlet,
who makes catharsis possible. It is easy to understand how Adams could—
more or less consciously—identify himself with this man, ‘well-born,’ whose
chief crime was to be more intelligent than his contemporaries.”93

Through all this, something significant about the mind of Adams is emerg­
ing. He is critical in important ways about twentieth-century rationality and
is drawn to the medieval aesthetic, as well as to the “irrationality” of the Vir­
gin and to mystics such as Saint Francis, who is considered next. But he is not
prepared to give up logic, even logic as corrosive as Abelard’s. His is a divided mind, trying to encompass a wide range of thought that might help critics of the twentieth century adjust to their world.

The internal church debate, in his view, had reached a dead end and created a dilemma:

The schools argued, according to their tastes, from Unity to Multiplicity or from Multiplicity to Unity, but what they wanted was to connect the two. They tried Realism and found that it led to Pantheism. They tried Nominalism and found that it led to Materialism. They attempted a compromise in Conceptualism which begged the whole question. Then they lay down exhausted.94

The search for a solution to these conundrums led Adams to Italy for a consideration of Saint Francis, “the ideal mystic Saint of western Europe.”95 The “immense popular charm” of both Francis and the Virgin lay in their heresies. “Both were illogical and heretical by essence;—in strict discipline, in the days of the Holy Office, a hundred years later, both would have been burned by the Church, as Jeanne d’Arc was, with infinitely less reason, in 1451.” But in the twelfth century, “the Church drew aside to let the Virgin and Saint Francis pass and take the lead—for a time. Both were human ideals too intensely realized to be resisted merely because they were illogical. The Church bowed and was silent.”96

But, Adams says, “What the Church thought or thinks is its own affair.” What is important is what Francis and Mary thought. “Saint Francis was even more outspoken than the Virgin. She calmly set herself above dogma, and with feminine indifference to authority, overruled it. He, having asserted in the strongest terms the principle of obedience, paid no further attention to dogma, but, without the least reticence, insisted on practices and ideas that no Church could possibly permit or avow.”97

Of course, the guiding principle for Saint Francis was the universal brotherhood of all living things, indeed, of all creation. “If Saint Francis made any exception from his universal law of brotherhood it was that of the schoolmen, but it was never expressed.” Even so, at a meeting of several thousand of the schoolmen, he chided them for their excessive intellectualism and placed them below the devils, who were, in his scheme of things, God’s wardens.98

Some lines are being clearly drawn here. No one, says Adams, was to blame for the contradictions between the saint and the scholars. “The schoolmen saw their duty in one direction; Francis saw his in another; and apparently, when both lines had been carried, after such fashion as might be, to
their utmost results, and five hundred years had been devoted to the effort, society declared both to be failures.” And here, for once in this work, Adams makes an explicitly political deduction. The universal church has no choice but to move with caution, while Francis, who acted only for himself, could operate on the basis of a simple, childlike faith. Faced with this dilemma, Adams declares: “The two poles of social and political philosophy seem necessarily to be organization or anarchy, man’s intellect or the forces of nature.” Adams clearly lays out the alternatives as he sees them, and it is equally clear that he is torn between them. He lacks faith, though he would like to have it, and he is skeptical of the power of intellect, but like most powerful thinkers, he is reluctant to simply dismiss it. It is to Thomas Aquinas, an apostle of both faith and intellect, that Adams turns to see whether these tensions can be worked out.

Adams clearly attached great importance to the chapter on Aquinas that concludes Chartres. Adams said that he was most proud of this part of his study, even though, as Samuels has written, for years he thought of the work as a whole as his “Miracles of the Virgin.” But, Mary drops completely out of sight in the chapter on Saint Thomas, as does the masculine-feminine dichotomy that to this point is omnipresent in the work. Samuels puts it bluntly: “Adams intends the emphasis of omission. Aquinas’ solution not only dethroned the Virgin, it ignored her.”

There is a degree of oddity in Adams’s approach to the Angelic Doctor, particularly given his insistence on the importance of Aquinas. He remarks that the twenty-eight quarto volumes of the Summa “must be closed books,” for only Dominicans dare interpret him. For others, too many intricate problems are entailed. However odd, this approach is consistent with his practice. He never refers to the Summa in his correspondence, nor were any of its volumes in Adams’s library. Undoubtedly, what he knew about Aquinas was derived from secondary sources. Some sense of the spirit in which he approached his subject can be gleaned from a letter to Charles Milnes Gaskell. “All day long I read metaphysics, and study Saint Thomas Aquinas. It is as amusing as Punch, and about as sensible. St. Thomas is frankly droll, but I think I like his ideas better than those of Descartes or Leibnitz or Kant or the Scotchmen, just as I like better a child of ten that tells lies, to a young man of twenty who not only lies but cheats knowingly. St. Thomas was afraid of being whipped. Descartes and the rest lied for pay.” And yet, in spite of this lighthearted stance, Adams wrote, “I care more for my theology than for my architecture, and should be much mortified if detected in an error about Thomas Aquinas, or the doctrine of universals.”
The problem Adams chooses to tackle is narrow, given the huge range of Thomas’s work. He does not write of the politics, ethics, or theory of natural law, which interest us so much today. Still, what he does cover is undoubtedly theologically important. Granting that God is a concrete thing rather than an idea, “He [Aquinas] admitted that God could not be taken for granted.” This was a bold and dangerous move, because “God must be proved as a true cause in order to warrant the Church or the State in requiring men to worship him as a Creator.” A churchman wants to be “assured that Thomas succeeded in his proof, especially since he did not satisfy Descartes and still less Pascal.” And, of course, the very demand for proof tends to undermine faith; for Adams, as he makes clear as early as Esther, faith cannot be reached by reason.

The proof Adams discusses is well known: “I see motion,” said Thomas: — “I infer a motor!” The reasoning, which may be fifty thousand years old, is as strong as ever it was; stronger than some more modern inferences of science; but the average mechanic stated it differently. “I see motion,” he admitted: — “I infer energy. I see motion everywhere; I infer energy everywhere.”

But however adequate or inadequate is Aquinas’s proof, Adams’s treatment of it leaves something to be desired. As Michael Colacurcio says, it sounds quite reasonable to move from the idea of motion to the idea of a motor. But this is not exactly what Aquinas wrote. Colacurcio says, “At the risk of seeming pedantic one may point out that Thomas’ Latin for that which does the moving is mover; it has always been translated mover rather than motor.” The distinction may appear small, but in the common philosophical language, mover suggests a being capable of producing change or motion, while motor has a clear materialist and mechanical bias, which is contrary to Thomas’s sense of God as a spiritual act but consistent with Adams’s place as a twentieth-century man with a deep interest in physics. This substitution continues throughout the discussion of Thomas’s proof.

On this foundation, Thomas builds his gigantic intellectual structure. The Trinity is restored to its place, though Adams insists once again “that no one may even profess to understand the Trinity,” with the result that Mary is removed from her exalted throne. Deep down, this conclusion must have been a disappointment to Adams, but this is merely a theological issue, and Adams tells us, with considerable insouciance, that we need not be concerned:

About Saint Thomas’s theology we need not greatly disturb ourselves; it can matter now not much whether he put more Pantheism than the law allowed, or more Materialism than Duns Scotus approved, — or less of either — into his universe, since the Church is still on the spot,
responsible for its own doctrines; but his architecture is another mat-
ter. . . . Neither the Church nor the architect's Church was a sketch, 
but a completely studied structure.

Adams goes on to add that in Aquinas, "Science and art were one." And still 
further, "Both the *Summa Theologiae* and Beauvais Cathedral were exces-
sively modern, scientific, and technical, marking the extreme points reached 
by Europe on the lines of scholastic science. This is all we need to know."\(^{110}\)

In this connection, the change from mover to motor discussed by Cola-
curcio is not at all pedantic. Rather, it is a significant indicator of where Adams 
stands. Also, it should be remarked that the treatment of the Virgin is much 
the same as that of Aquinas. The motor stands for a physical force, and so do 
the activities of the Virgin, though it must be said that her force might be 
interpreted as spiritual. But Adams understands her as "only a capacity to get 
work done."\(^{111}\) Thus, in the construction of Chartres Cathedral, "the inspira-
tion of the art proves the Virgin's presence." As he puts it, "Every day, as 
the work went on, the Virgin was present, directing the architects."\(^{112}\) Deep 
down, his is not an eighteenth-century mind so much as a twentieth-century 
mind with a considerable, if seriously ambivalent, commitment to science. 
And in spite of his assurances, "Adams takes for granted his readers' ready 
agreement that 'metaphysics were a medieval absurdity.'"\(^{113}\) Of course, the 
matter is more complex than this suggests. Adams did not write a long book 
on medieval art, religion, and culture out of mere whimsy, and his constitu-
tional purism has a decidedly eighteenth-century cast to it. But one ought 
not to portray him simply as a technophobe in revolt against his own time. 
Rather, he is a sophisticated critic of that time for whom a highly artificial 
contrast model of medieval unity is a useful device. One ought not to leap to 
the conclusion that the loving care devoted to this model necessarily means 
that he fully embraces it or totally rejects his own century. And certainly he 
is aware that it is not possible to return to the conditions of medieval France, 
even if it were desirable.

In the discussion of Saint Thomas, the physical imagery continues. The 
restoration of the Trinity creates a problem in the balance of forces. Church 
theologians did not like to look deeply into the subject, on which they were 
philosophical realists. They did not want to admit "that the third member of 
the Trinity contained multiplicity, because the Trinity was a restless weight 
on the Church piers, which, like the central tower, constantly tended to fall, 
and needed to be lightened. Thomas gave it the lightest form possible, and 
there fixed it."\(^{114}\)
Aquinas was also concerned with the social balance of forces. “Saint Thomas was working for the Church and the State, not for the salvation of souls, and his chief object was to repress anarchy.” Where this would leave the conservative Christian anarchy that was beginning to germinate in Adams’s mind is not clear.) Mankind, Adams says, cannot admit an anarchic or multiple universe. “The world was there, staring them in the face, with all its chaotic conditions, and society insisted on its Unity in self-defense.” But it also insists on free will, which raises deep, fundamental problems. Thomas tried to resolve the problem by admitting that while unity was the rule, it was “full of defects,” which might even prove beneficent. This was a huge concession, but Thomas still needed a means of bringing into the system one element which vehemently refused to be brought, that is, Man himself, who insisted that the universe was a unit, but that he was a universe; that Energy was one, but that he was another energy; that God was omnipotent but that man was free. The contradiction had always existed, exists still, and always must exist, unless man either admits that he is a machine, or agrees that anarchy and chaos are the habit of nature, and law and order its accident. . . .

No one has ever seriously affirmed the literal freedom of will. Absolute liberty is absence of restraint; responsibility is restraint; therefore the ideally free individual is responsible only to himself. This principle is the philosophical foundation of anarchism, and for anything that science has yet proved, may be the philosophical foundation of the Universe; but it is fatal to all society and is especially hostile to the State.

In his own way, Adams here discusses one of the basic problems of political theory, and one that has generated perhaps more than its fair share of recent American debate, in the form of extended discussions of the relation of the individual to the community or society. His analysis is a little puzzling, since he simply skips over the liberal theory of the responsible person and leaps to a critical view of anarchism, a formulation that is peculiar, in that Adams had already clearly identified himself as a liberal and was, as Chartres was being written, well on his way to his own unique, though ambiguous, form of anarchism. Whether the discussion of the latter in The Education of Henry Adams resolves these problems will have to be put aside until the next chapter.

But Adams and Aquinas are still troubled by the problem of free will. Adams presents an argument that is very dense and requires detailed elabo-
ration. He tells us that the church never admitted free will, nor did Thomas. Adams discusses Aquinas’s solution in his characteristic way by “translating his school-vocabulary into modern technical terms.” God—the “Prime Motor”—supplies all the energy of the universe and “acts directly on man ... moving him as a mechanical motor might do.” But man, since he is more complex than other creatures, has a capacity to reflect, “which enables him within certain limits to choose between paths; and this singular capacity is called free choice or free-will.” But the reflection is not really a choice, since without an energy impelling us to act, we would never, in fact, make up our minds to choose. Adams then quotes Aquinas as saying, “We must therefore recur to the intervention of an exterior agent who shall impress on our will a movement capable of putting an end to its hesitations:—That exterior agent is nothing else than God.” And Adams concludes, “The scheme seems to differ little from a system of dynamics as modern as the dynamo.”

Thus Aquinas is converted into a modern scientist, or perhaps an electrical engineer. Of course, this analysis has important implications for science, religion, and the relations between the two. “Modern science, with infinite effort, has discovered and announced that man is a bewildering complex of energies, which helps little to explain his relations with the ultimate Substance or Energy or Prime motor whose existence both Science and the Schoolmen admit; which Science studies in laboratories and Religion worships in churches.” But in spite of the similarities between science and religion that many believe exist to this day, “Modern science, like modern art, tends, in practice, to drop the dogma of organic unity. Some of the mediaeval habit of mind survives, but even that is said to be yielding before the daily evidence of increasing and extending complexity.”

But it is not at all clear, contrary to common interpretations, that Adams views this conclusion as a disaster.

The fault, then, was not in man, if he no longer looked at science or art as an organic whole, or as the expression of unity. Unity turned itself into complexity, multiplicity, variety, and even contradiction. All experience, human and divine, assured man in the thirteenth century that the lines of the universe converged. How was he to know that these lines ran in every conceivable and inconceivable direction, and that at least half of them seemed to diverge from any imaginable centre of unity!

At least three things are striking here. In this passage, Adams, having returned from the thirteenth century, seems much more concerned with the
empirical evidence of contemporary science than he was with empirical evidence about the medieval world. Nor does he seem terribly concerned about these findings. He even admits, "Art had to be confused in order to express confusion; but perhaps it was truest, so." And finally, he makes a telling remark about Scholastic philosophy, Gothic architecture, and their connection to modern science. To repeat a point already made in a slightly different context, "Both the *Summa Theologiae* and Beauvais Cathedral were excessively modern, scientific, and technical, marking the extreme points reached in Europe on the lines of scholastic science. This is all we need to know. If we like, we can go on to study, inch by inch, the slow decline of the heart. The essence of it,—the despotic central idea—was that of organic unity both in the thought and the building. From that time, the universe has steadily become more complex and less reducible to a central control."

The reference to Beauvais Cathedral is a particularly arresting image, for Beauvais is contrasted throughout with Chartres. The latter was still solid, while Beauvais, though it survived, "after a fashion" was a "towering fragment" that was "poorly built from the first, which has broken down offener than most Gothic structures, and seems ready to crumble again, whenever the wind blows over its windy plains." Given the elaborate parallel Adams draws between the Church Intellectual of Saint Thomas and the Church Architectural, the implication that both are unstable structures does not seem to bode well for the Thomistic philosophy. In this connection, Blackmur adds a telling comment. There is not much use in this lesson on instability, he says, unless we think of it in terms of something Adams was well aware of but which he hardly touched on in his book—namely, the ferocious and single-minded brutality which was the complement of every aspiration in the balance. The brutalities balanced too: those done for God, for Church, for simple aggrandizement, or for their own sake were somehow of equal weight and pressure in the general turbulence of society. [Further] man is most violent in asserting and imposing order when his society is least capable of receiving it.

Once again, Adams pays a price for his aestheticized, depoliticized view of medieval life. He paints a gorgeous portrait but without a real-life model. According to Adams, one idea controls both Gothic architecture and Saint Thomas's church. "The method was the same for both, and the result was an art marked by singular unity, which endured and served its purpose until man changed his attitude toward the universe." Unity dissolves through no fault of the art or the architecture. "Granted a Church, Saint Thomas's
Church was the most expressive that man has made, and the great gothic Cathedrals were its most complete expression.”

But it is not clear that Adams was really prepared to grant a church, and if he was, it is also not clear, in view of his celebration of the Virgin Mary, in all her irrationality, that that church really would be or should be the Church Intellectual of Saint Thomas. In any case, the church, on Adams’s own showing, had ceased to be viable. At the end of chapter 10, Adams takes leave of Chartres Cathedral, and the discussion of architecture begins to recede into the background. His conclusion at that juncture is more than a little grim: we can “safely leave the Virgin in her Majesty, with her three great prophets on either hand, as calm and confident in their own strength and in God’s providence as they were when Saint Louis was born, but looking down from a deserted heaven, into an empty church, on a dead faith.”

The praise of Saint Thomas turns out to be faint praise indeed. Both architecture and philosophy reveal an “apparent instability.” As Adams puts it, “The equilibrium is visibly delicate beyond the line of safety; danger lurks in every stone.” Everything rests on faith. “The peril of the heavy tower, of the restless vault, of the vagrant buttress; the uncertainty of logic, the inequalities of the syllogism, 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 has ever been expressed before or is likely to find expression again.” But it would not do to end this exposition on a pessimistic note. Instead, dour Henry Adams ends with a sunburst of hope. Writing of the Gothic cathedral, he says, “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 can read out of it whatever pleases your youth and confidence; to me, this is all.”

One hesitates to violate the beauty of the concluding paragraph of this masterful book by adding any commentary. However, it should be remarked that, with his stress on architectural and intellectual instability, Adams introduces a note of uncertainty that indicates a retreat from the sort of premature closure of the argument that flawed his novel Democracy. Here, all questions remain open, their answers provisional, just as they are in George Strong’s discussion of the equally provisional character of science in Esther. Decker captures this perspective with some elegance. “What Adams registers as the architecture’s lack of repose materializes as his own text’s restlessness, the vagrancy of the verbal cathedral magnifying that of the stone. If art at last does not turn into history, it remains always historical, part of a continuous paradoxical discourse.”
I also suggest that for Adams, art offers a set of social standards. We can, he seems to say, judge a society by the level of beauty it attains. Taste is an organizing principle that allows him to judge some societies as superior to others, and in this light, twelfth-century France rates high. Of course, the medieval standard he adopts in Chartres has little to do with history. As Kazin suggests, it is prettified and aestheticized, though this is not to denigrate Adams’s achievement. Good history, after all, is not the only source of judgment. But he demonstrates a passion for his picture of the medieval world, a passion that is not often evident anywhere else in his work. Its function in his worldview is the contrast it offers to modern democratic, industrial civilization. But having said that, it is important to note that this does not entail, as some might argue, a total rejection of modern society. The modern and medieval worlds exist in tension with each other in his mind.

Adams’s aestheticism is not the democratic aestheticism of which George Kateb writes. The medieval dream Adams idealizes is hierarchical rather than democratic. Moreover, the democratic aestheticism Kateb describes holds that all things, though not equally beautiful, are worthy of attention, a point Adams would doubtless refuse to accept. But still, we ought not to consign Adams to the ranks of medieval reactionaries. Though the Virgin disappears after the central section of his book and is replaced by the Thomistic hierarchy, that hierarchy is unstable. More important, there is no doubt that his heart is with his heretical, anarchic heroine, whose propensity to subvert authority, not to mention her care for the downtrodden, points toward ultimately democratic sympathies.

Medieval France and Modern America

We have come to the end of a complex book, a book as elegantly poised between hope and despair as the unstable architecture and thought it describes. In the central chapters, Adams offers a kind of feminine utopia. Notice I do not say feminist, though Adams has some intellectual affinities with contemporary feminism. The title of his article “The Primitive Rights of Women,” if expanded to include Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, says most of what needs to be said: “Henry Adams’s ‘Primitive Rights of Women’: An Offense Against Church, the Patriarchal State, Progressive Evolution, and the Women’s Liberation Movement.” Certainly Adams had a high regard for women in general, with the Virgin as his highest symbol, and in the Education, he generalizes his discussion to include her with fertility symbols from a variety of cultures. There is no doubt; for him, women speak “in a different
And there can be no doubt that Adams expresses great admiration for the strong women he writes about in “Primitive Rights.” Nor is there any doubt that in the essay explicitly and in the book implicitly he lays the blame for the decline of the Virgin on the doorstep of the church. And finally, the Education is full of doubt about the soundness of any theory of inevitable evolutionary progress. The history of the church argues against such a view, and so does the history of politics.

But however much aid and comfort Adams might offer women, his indifference to empirical evidence precludes him from being an icon for contemporary feminists. Quite rightly, they will not accept his view of women as inherently irrational, even if he does suggest that this is a positive quality when set against the rationality of industrial capitalism. And his picture of the life of women in the medieval world is badly skewed by the focus on his utopia. Adams himself, in a brief reference to the historical world, undercuts his own argument about the beauty of the medieval world and its supposed dominance by women. He tells us, “The superiority of women was not a fancy but a fact.” The role of men was to hunt, to fight, and to make love, as well as to travel in pursuit of commercial interests, so that they were frequently away from home. “The women,” in contrast, “ruled the household and the workshop; cared for the economy; supplied the intelligence, and dictated taste.” But then, Adams recognizes problems and introduces a flagrant contradiction of this pleasing picture. “Both physically and mentally the woman was robust, as men often complained, and she did not greatly resent being treated as a man. Sometimes the husband beat her, dragged her about by the hair, locked her up in the house; but he was always quite conscious that she always got even with him in the end.” This last point is hopelessly weak in view of the description that precedes it, a clear case of wishful thinking that badly weakens his case for a medieval female utopia.

At the same time, thinking back to “The Primitive Rights of Women” and including Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, the message sent is mixed. The feminine virtues were very powerful and much admired by Adams. Women set the standards of behavior and held the central place in the family. In fact, their great role was to hold the family together, just as Mary held medieval society together through the release of a spiritual rather than a biological energy. Strikingly, as Robert Mane remarks, “Mary of Chartres hardly appears in her role as mother; when she is maternal, it is adults whom she mothers.” How could it be otherwise, he asks, “since there is so much in her of Marian Adams who never had a child?” Nor, of course, did Madeleine Lee or Esther Dudley. And for all Adams’s occasional references to the power
of “Sex,” it does not play a large role in the work. Edward Saveth writes, “As for conjugal love, the women of the thirteenth century, as Adams describes them, seemed, like Madeleine and Esther of another era, rather uninterested in it.” Adams was writing highly sublimated, “genteel” literature. Later, to be sure, in a letter to the young poet George Cabot Lodge, he hints at the emergence of a women’s movement, in spite of his earlier disdain for the cause of women’s suffrage: “A branch of the sex is sure to break off as an emancipated social class.” But this does not help us tease much out of Chartres regarding politics. To do that, it is necessary to look at Mary’s highly unconventional behavior as depicted in the central chapters of the book.

Writing to his close friend Charles Milnes Gaskell, Adams remarks that Mont Saint Michel and Chartres “is my declaration of principles as head of the Conservative Christian Anarchists; a party numbering one member. The Virgin and St. Thomas are my vehicles of anarchism.” Applying the anarchist label to Aquinas is quite a stretch, given Adams’s recognition of his interest in preserving the stability of both the state and the church, but it makes sense when used in connection with Mary. To pair Mary and Aquinas points to the conflict between faith and reason, rationality and irrationality, the twentieth and the thirteenth centuries, which is at the heart of this book as well as of the Education. Mary stands for faith, irrationality, and the thirteenth century. She is genuinely an anarchic figure and one who flirts with heresy; she truly is “the Virgin of Majesty and Heresy.” As Adams cheerfully points out, she would be very difficult for organized society to tolerate. Also quite interesting is her sympathy for society’s underdogs, a sensitivity that is largely, though not entirely, missing in Adams. But aside from the warm and deep-seated feeling for Mary, there is little in Chartres that can explain the paradoxical idea of conservative Christian anarchy. For that, it is necessary to turn to the Education, where the notion is more fully developed, though not with complete clarity. What can be seen at this stage in the development of Adams’s thought is an emergent, very independent radicalism—radicalism in the sense, as Marx used it, of going to the root of things.

Chartres also has implications for the vexed problem of the relation between individual and society. In spite of the fact that the book deals with medieval France, Adams’s work is characteristically American. Given his heritage, this is hardly surprising. Still, there is a rambunctious quality to his thought exhibited by no one else in his family. One can also see this quality in the often violently polemical journalism and in the unabashedly pro-American, anti-British treatment of the War of 1812. Henry’s unique style stands out, even if the legendarily short and explosive tempers of John and John
Quincy Adams are conceded. And while it is true that he had a mastery of European cultural history, his approach to that tradition is very American. In his provocative introduction to Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, Raymond Carney gives an interesting estimate of the relation of American to European culture. "America was, in its essence, the culture founded on a belief in man's personal power to escape the reigning European structures and forms of understanding and to replace them with new ones of his own creation, as substitutes for the discredited orders being left behind." He further advances his point by noting Gertrude Stein's remark that America was the first country to enter the twentieth century and cites what D. H. Lawrence called the "extremist consciousness" of Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman. "The European moderns," says Lawrence, 'are all trying to be extreme. The great Americans I mention just were it.' Carney is attempting to locate Adams in or near the postmodernist camp. Indeed, he sees the whole tradition of American letters as being postmodernist in some sense. Given Adams's openly cavalier attitude to empirical history in Chartres, this makes some sense, at least for that work. But a cautionary note is needed. This is not the place to attempt to characterize the entirety of the American literary tradition, but Adams certainly does not appear to be postmodern in writing the great History or in his post–Civil War journalism. Those works are saturated with a moral and political critique that Adams certainly believed to be rooted in the empirical realities he saw. That he brought his own powerful imagination to the materials does not mean that he thought that another, radically different perspective would be as good. This is true, even if we recall the sense of perspective he displayed in urging on President Eliot a Harvard appointment for Henry Cabot Lodge. Surely he thought, given the histories of the two families, that he was right and Lodge wrong.

Still, Adams, as an individual who felt threatened by the encroaching rationality of industrial capitalism, makes a heroic effort to differentiate himself from the crowd by cultivating a unique self in both of his late masterpieces. As I argue later, he is not unlike Max Weber in fearing for the individual in a complex system of all-intrusive, relentlessly encroaching, bureaucratic structures. A postmodernist might associate this with the "death of the author" or the "erasure" of the individual. But the tradition of American individualism accounts just as well for the authorial personality he displays. Surely, for all of Adams's despair late in life as his close friends die and he faces death himself, he is an author who is emphatically alive and who resists the obliteration of his unique self to the end. As Carney says, Adams "refuses to accede to the nightmare erasure of the individual." Instead, he recognizes "the vocal pres-
ence of an eccentric, individual, passionate, personal author.” Quite rightly he refers to the “exuberance of Adams’ tone, the daring extravagance of his outlandish and inventive conceits, the puckish wit, the sly metaphorical games and puns . . . [that] are signs of an idiosyncratic, personal, authorial presence that will not be absorbed into an abstract system of signification, an ego utterly unsubdued by the reigning historical systems of analysis, an energy of personal imagination and feeling ascendant and ultimately, one may judge, supremely triumphant over all systems of understanding.”

All this seems to be modern rather than postmodern, the assertion of a cranky American liberal individualism. But there are ways in which Adams seems to at least flirt with postmodernism. To take only one example, I agree with Carney and Colacurcio that Adams simply imposes his own thought patterns on Saint Thomas in a way that clearly says the “real” Saint Thomas hardly matters. Instead, he becomes a creature drawn from Adams’s imagination. But that need not matter here, since the subject of his book is really the mind, one might say the musings, of Henry Adams more than the Angelic Doctor or any other historical figure. If we were grading Adams as a historian of ideas, as Colacurcio is to some extent, he might well receive low marks. But students of Adams can just as well express wonder at his imagination and vitality.

We cannot begin to comprehend fully the philosophy of history developed in Chartres until we look at it in comparison with the Education, its great companion volume. Here, I just call attention to the argument that has begun to emerge in this chapter. Whatever joy he takes in exploring it, Adams is not in the end a man of the thirteenth century. He certainly does not hold that history records the march of progress, but he knows that it does not run backward, so there can be no return to the age of the great cathedrals, no matter how glorious and beautiful. Nor, in spite of his frequent assertions, is he fully a man of the eighteenth century either, though the Enlightenment certainly has a powerful attraction for him. Instead, he is a man of the nineteenth century, stripped of Whiggish illusions of the inevitability of progress, who has lived on into the twentieth century. And though that century frightens him, as well it might, he is by no means ready to reject it in toto. It would be too much, I think, to say with Kazin that “Adams found [the] historic shift from religion to science utterly congenial.” However, he is certainly not trying to escape science and withdraw completely into a utopian, aestheticized past, though his artistic sense mattered a great deal to him. He is too much a man of his time to withdraw in that way, as can be seen most clearly in his late, and not very successful, essays toward a philosophy of “scientific” history. He is caught up in his own time and is bitterly critical of it, but he is
not willing to retreat from it altogether, not least because he knows that there is no alternative to it. We cannot live in the past. What we will see in his later works is a man caught between the past and the present, between art and science, heroically trying to bridge the gap between two worlds. For this reason, I think that Samuels overstates the case to insist that Adams's attitude was one of total contempt for the modern world. Mont Saint Michel and Chartres shows us a man in open revolt against the industrial-capitalist rationality depicted by Max Weber and against positivist history as well. But that is not all there is to this exceedingly complex mind. In the next chapter, some new dimensions will be added.