Henry Adams
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Henry Adams: The Historian as Political Theorist.

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More than just an autobiography, The Education of Henry Adams is both a tale of a lifetime of education and a theory of history. It is a deeply personal book, as personal in its way as Chartres, and the education in question is that provided by the events of his life as filtered through his often quirky mind. Some disagree. The idea that it is less personal than its predecessor no doubt stems from the fact that Adams writes about himself in the third person, thus attempting to generate a sense of detachment from his own life. Instead, I suggest that rather than being impersonal, the story of his career reveals different sides of the very complex Adams persona, more guarded and more ironic than in the utopian enthusiasm of Chartres. But there is no doubt that a clearly personal portrait emerges—brilliant, wry, sometimes acidic, but always a recognizable self, though perhaps not one as likable as the author of his great exploration of medieval France. “He was,” as Andrew Delbanco says, “between Whitman and Mailer, the most self-conscious of our major writers, I think, defiantly asserting that the most interesting literary subject he could find was the action of his own mind.” Michael Rogin also notes the similarity of Adams to Norman Mailer, a comparison Adams probably would not have relished. The Time of Our Time, Mailer’s anthology of his own work, both fiction and nonfiction, designed to tell the history of our time, may seem to be the sort of “monument to the ego” that Adams rejected, but “the Education did not so much ‘efface the ego’ (Adams’s claim) as to make it the measure not just of American but of eschatological history.” And it is no small ego that presents its own life as history itself. The story Adams tells represents not only his life but also the history of his family, his class, and indeed his country, not to mention, in his later years, the fate of the Western world. It also shifts the focus away from the “world of joy” in Chartres to a “world of power.” He explores this world as it was represented by his life, or at least a sublimated, abstracted, aestheticized version of it.

Considered as an autobiography, the book is full of twists and turns and is indeed rather odd. But Adams did not call his book an autobiography. That label was attached by the publisher after his death. This is a book that omits
twenty of the most productive and, at first, happiest years of his life. Of course, the omission is due to the pain of writing about his marriage and the suicide of his wife Marian. When the narrative resumes in 1892, Adams refers to it as his “posthumous life.” The book was first printed and circulated to friends in 1907. The public edition appeared after his death in 1918, with an “Editor’s Preface” written by Adams but bearing the signature of Henry Cabot Lodge. In it, he treats the Education as the sequel to Mont Saint Michel and Chartres and suggests Saint Augustine’s Confessions as a model. This obviously is no mean standard.7

The Education of Henry Adams offers what Adams wanted his public to think about. It is not by any means a standard autobiography. For that, it is much better to turn to the enormously voluminous and brilliantly written letters.8 As I have suggested, what Adams had in mind was something altogether more ambitious than a mere autobiography, no matter how great, since, with no little display of ego, he took his life to be emblematic of all American history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His book is another take on his theory of American historical development, into which we have already dipped, and, running throughout but completely dominating the final chapters, his philosophy of history. The one feeds the other. And his education begins at the beginning.

Education as an Adams

Even the simple statement of Adams’s birth in the famous opening paragraphs is portentous. It is clear that he saw that being an Adams conveyed both advantages and disadvantages. Born in Boston, “under the shadow of the State House,” and christened by his uncle, the minister of the First Church, he could not have been more marked, or handicapped, “had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest under the name Israel Cohen.” A hundred years before, this heritage would have secured his future, but by 1838, the Boston associations, “so colonial—so troglodytic,” posed problems for a boy required to “play the game” in the twentieth century.9

Education began with Henry’s eighteenth-century inheritance.

The atmosphere of education in which he lived was colonial, revolutionary, almost Cromwellian, as though he were steeped, from his greatest grandmother’s birth, in the odor of political crime. Resistance to something was the law of New England nature; the boy looked out
on the world with the instinct of resistance; for numberless genera­
tions his predecessors had viewed the world chiefly as a thing to be 
reformed, filled with evil forces to be abolished, and they saw no rea­
son to suppose that they had wholly succeeded in the abolition; the 
duty was unchanged. That duty implied not only resistance to evil, 
but hatred of it. . . The New Englander, whether boy or man, in his 
long struggle with a stingy or hostile universe, had learned also to love 
the pleasure of hating; his joys were few.

In Massachusetts, politics was as “harsh as the climate,” and, as already ob­
served, it was simply the systematic organization of hatreds.10

Perhaps no other passage captures the mood of the Adams political her­
itage quite so well—the reformist zeal, the hatred and contempt for the oppo­
sition, the deep distrust of any form of orthodox party politics, and the 
conviction that moral force can improve, though not transform, the world. 
(It must be said that Henry Adams would come to question the last point.) 
The Adamses were born to be political mavericks, whether they sought office 
or, in the case of Henry, chose to pursue reform with the pen. He was very 
much a product of the education provided by this family tradition.

And, of course, at the heart of that tradition were two presidents. With 
great charm he tells about sitting in church in Quincy looking at the bald 
head of his grandfather, the sixth president, John Quincy Adams:

It was unusual for boys to sit behind a President grandfather, and to read 
over his head the tablet in memory of a President great-grandfather, 
who had “pledged his life, his fortune, and his sacred honor” to secure 
the independence of his country and so forth; but boys naturally sup­
posed, without much reasoning, that other boys had the equivalent of 
President grandfathers. . . . The Irish gardener once said to the child: 
“You’ll be thinking you’ll be President too!” The casualty of the remark 
made so strong an impression on his mind that he never forgot it. He 
could not ever remember to have thought on the subject; to him, that 
there should be a doubt of his being President was a new idea.11

This says a great deal. There is the well-deserved sense of familial pride; 
the sense of duty, if not destiny; and the seeds of disappointment when the 
youthful expectations were not met, a disappointment that turns into a gen­
eral critique of American politics when those “obviously” best fitted to rule 
were unable to attain the heights of power. There is a sense of an aristocracy, 
perhaps even a Jeffersonian “natural aristocracy,” that is central to the later
generations of the Adams family. Henry explains that until 1850 and beyond, the professions ran New England. The men acted not as individuals but as representatives of their professional classes, "as though they were clergymen and each profession was a church. In politics the system required competent expression; it was the old Ciceronian idea of government by the best that produced the long line of New England statesmen." As a boy, he expected this system to be permanent. The system worked; even Germany wanted to try it. "England's middle-class government was the ideal of human progress." Three instruments worked for the human good: "Suffrage, Common Schools, and Press." Only Karl Marx expected radical change, as Adams so wryly remarked.  

It was as a boy in Quincy that Adams claims to have discovered the problem that became the center of his educational concerns and his lifelong obsession as well. It was the problem of order, but not order alone. "From cradle to grave this problem of running order through chaos, direction through space, discipline through freedom, unity through multiplicity, has always been, and must always be, the task of education, as it is the moral of religion, philosophy, science, art, politics, and economy." And of course, as described earlier, he learned the power of firm, traditional, yet highly personal authority from his president grandfather, who silently marched him off to school against his will. It is also important to note that all these lessons were learned during summers in Quincy, not in Boston, which Adams came to detest, not least because it was the center of rising capitalist finance. Nor did he receive these lessons of education in school, for he believed his schooling from age ten to sixteen years to be time wasted. Pointing to the tremendous upheavals that were to come, he says, quite rightly, "Perhaps his needs turned out to be exceptional, but his existence was exceptional. Between 1850 and 1900 nearly everyone's existence was exceptional."  

Complexity began to enter this world of certainties when his father took twelve-year-old Henry to Washington to visit his widowed grandmother. There he made a pilgrimage to Mount Vernon. The roads were terrible, and from this he received a complete Virginia education. To a New Englander, good schools, good roads, and the like were part of the system of order. "Bad roads meant bad morals. The moral of this Virginia road was clear, and the boy fully learned it. Slavery was wicked and slavery was the cause of this road's badness which amounted to social crime—and yet, at the end of the road and product of the crime stood Mount Vernon and George Washington." Luckily, Adams tells us, boys accept contradictions as easily as their elders, or he "might have become prematurely wise." He was told, and
accepted for life, that Washington stood alone, a polestar that was always steady. Jefferson, Madison, Marshall, Franklin, even John Adams could be seen in changing light, but Washington held still. “Mount Vernon always remained where it was, with no practicable road to reach it; and yet, when he got there, Mount Vernon was only Quincy in a Southern setting. No doubt it was much more charming, but it was the same eighteenth-century, the same old furniture, the same old patriot, and the same old President.”

But still, the trip to the South introduces into the story a sense of the complexity that was to be central in Adams's thought.

Life remained fairly simple for a time. Faced with slavery, the boy simply stepped back from an eighteenth- to a seventeenth-century morality. He was more political than ever, but “slavery drove the whole Puritan community back on its puritanism.” Still, he began to see that there might be some difficulty reconciling sixteenth-century principles with eighteenth-century statesmanship and nineteenth-century party organizations. Life became less simple, and old educational verities began to show signs of strain.

Education at Harvard College

The early education in Quincy—since he never liked Boston—and the trip to Washington furnished Adams with the foundations of his view of the world. These ideas stayed with him, but already there is a hint that he felt that they unfitted him for the modern world in which he lived his life. The values of Quincy become a kind of lost utopia, which becomes all the more clear as he examines his Harvard education, the first of the “failures” that provide one of the main narrative lines of the Education.

Adams did not much like Harvard, though he thought it less hurtful than any other university of the time. The education it offered was certainly not distinguished, though it was mild and liberal and made possible a friendship with “Rooney” Lee, the son of Robert E. Lee, as well as with some of Rooney’s Virginian friends. Adams liked the Virginians, but this did not stop him from looking down on them from the heights of his sense of Yankee superiority. As he puts it, “Strictly, the Southerner had no mind; he had temperament. He was not a scholar; he had no intellectual training; he could not analyze an idea, and he could not even conceive of admitting two; but in life one could get along very well without ideas, if only one had the social instinct.” Always assuming that Adams’s recollections are accurate, one can see here the continuation of the condescension toward the prewar South that had begun in Mount Vernon and continued until after Emancipation.
Though he learned something about Southern character, Adams saw the
time spent at college as largely wasted. "Harvard College was a good school,
but at bottom what the boy disliked most was any school at all." He complains
that he simply was not taught anything about the two writers of his time who
later influenced him most; thus, he never heard the name of Karl Marx or
of Capital, nor was there any mention of Auguste Comte. Of course, one has
to say that this complaint is more than a little unfair—a case of authorial
license, one might say—since the first volume of Das Kapital was not pub­
lished until 1867, nine years after Henry's graduation, and the first English
translation of Comte was not published until 1853 and popularized only in
1865 by John Stuart Mill's little book Auguste Comte and Positivism. 18

In the classroom, the one saving grace seems to have been Louis Agassiz
in his course on the glacial period and paleontology, which was to prove help­
ful later, when Adams turned his attention to the theory of evolution. More
importantly, perhaps, Agassiz was to have a major influence on Adams's style
of thought regarding scientific matters. Agassiz was devoutly Christian and
held an antirationalist attitude toward science, which had the effect of steer­
ing Adams away from experimental and biological sciences. The religion of
Agassiz never captured Adams, but when he gave up his religious heritage,
it was not replaced by naturalism or scientific materialism; instead, he adopted
a quasi-idealistic approach to the sciences. Thus, as William Jordy says, "Adams
enjoyed the vivid generalizations of science far more than its methodical
investigation." 19 Certainly this may help account for the freewheeling spec­
ulation, unanchored by much real evidence, of his late attempts to apply the
laws of physics to history.

Nevertheless, Harvard had its influence. The New England certainties
established in childhood began to waver, if only a little. Adams "was slipping
away from fixed principles; from Mount Vernon Street; from Quincy; from
the eighteenth century; and the first steps led toward Concord." But "he
never reached Concord, and to Concord Church he, like the rest of mankind
who accepted a material universe, remained always an insect, or something
much lower—a man." 20 Thus, despite his wife's close familial connections to
the transcendentalists, Emerson, Thoreau, and other major intellects of his
time had little impact on his thought.

So transcendentalism did not take hold, and the New England values
were simultaneously weakened, though the judgmental Puritan cast of mind
never disappeared. This set up a lasting tension between the certainty of
moral rectitude and the growing uncertainty about the foundations of that
sense of right. But still, looking back, Adams thought that his education had
not even begun. So he did what any well-to-do youth might have done; he went to Europe for two years. Although being in Europe doubtless deepened his aesthetic sensibilities, there is little sign that he was provided with the ideas necessary for the tumult of the last half of the nineteenth century, let alone the early twentieth, however long he might imitate Gibbon sitting on the steps of Santa Maria Ars Coeli in Rome. The next real chance for education came with the Civil War and a close-up view of international diplomacy when he served in London as his ambassador father’s private secretary.

**War, Diplomacy, and Education**

Following the election of 1860, Adams’s father, then a congressman from Massachusetts, went to Washington, accompanied by the twenty-two-year-old Henry, to be present for the looming crisis. Even after forty-four years, Henry’s assessment of the impending situation was clear and blunt—treason was the only word to suffice. Confronting the Southern radicals was a government that had an “air of social instability and incompleteness that went far to support the right of secession in theory as in fact; but right or wrong, secession was likely to be easy when there was so little to secede from. The Union was a sentiment, but not much more.”

Echoing his article on the secession winter, Adams finds the secessionists “unbalanced,” like victims of “hallucinations,” not to mention “stupendously ignorant of the world” and “provincial to a degree rarely known.” By contrast, their New England opponents, in his rather Manichaean view of the world, “were sane and steady men, well-balanced, educated, and free from meanness or intrigue.” In spite of any friendship he felt for Rooney Lee, Southerners as a group were to be avoided.

Of course, senators could not be avoided, but the institution they inhabited still met with Adams’s withering contempt, even looking back from 1907. They were, he said, much given to “admiring in [the institution’s] members a superiority less obvious or quite invisible to outsiders.” In this setting, the Puritan character of Representative Adams had to be supple, and though he was thick-skinned, like all the Adamses, all would have insisted “that they had invariably subordinated local to national interests, and would continue to do so, whenever forced to choose. C. F. Adams was sure to do what his father had done, as his father had followed the steps of John Adams, and no doubt thereby earned his epithets.” Thus, the family tradition, redolent of civic republicanism, would continue.

One thing was certain; Abraham Lincoln did not appear to be up to the job entrusted to him. In what Adams must surely have known, in retrospect,
to be a bizarre misjudgment, only General Winfield Scott looked ready for
the crisis. And Adams, who may have been unaware of it even as late as 1907,
had misjudged Lincoln just as badly. All he could see at the Inaugural Ball
was a “long, awkward figure; a plain, ploughed face; a mind, absent in part,
and in part evidently worried by white kid gloves; features that expressed nei-
ther self-satisfaction nor any other familiar Americanism, but rather the same
painful sense of becoming educated and of needing education that tor-
mented a private secretary; above all a lack of apparent force. . . . No man
living needed so much education as the new President . . . but all the edu-
cation he could get would not be enough.”27 There is no clear sense of the
famous Adams irony here. Of course, no one going into the war could have
known how to cope, but Adams’s lack of regard for the president, plus his
own self-regard, makes it appear that at this crucial turning point in Ameri-
can history, Adams simply missed the significance of Lincoln.28 Only very
late in life did he offer a more positive, if brief, evaluation of Lincoln.

Certainly the important conclusion to the chapter dealing with the cri-
sis in Washington as war fever increased gives no hint that Adams was not
totally serious in his estimate of Lincoln. Notice carefully what Adams says:

Not a man there knew what his task was to be, or was fitted for it; every-
one without exception, Northern or Southern, was to learn his busi-
ness at the cost of the public. Lincoln, Seward, Sumner, and the rest,
could give no help to the young man seeking education; they knew less
than he; within six weeks they were all to be taught their duties by the
uprising of such as he; and their education was to cost a million lives
and ten thousand million dollars, more or less, North and South,
before the country could recover its balance and movement.29

The familiar Adams arrogance is striking here. Certainly it is true that no
one knew what to expect from the Civil War. No one foresaw the awful car-
nage that was to come. What is disturbing here is that Adams, while protest-
ing his lack of education, claims to know more than the other, much more
senior, much more consequential figures he mentions. This defies all prob-
ability. His views on Reconstruction provide strong evidence that he never
fully grasped what was at stake in the crisis over slavery. But this is an impor-
tant passage, because it is an early instance of one of the most common rhe-
torical strategies in the Education, the pose of Socratic ignorance.30 Through-
out the book Adams protests his lack of knowledge and the failure of his
education. But the reader clearly is intended to understand that despite this
failure, Adams grasped ideas and events better than his contemporaries. Sim-
ilarly, in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates, in spite of his protests, does in fact know more than his fellow conversationalists, and he knows that he does. What is troubling here is that in this passage, it is obvious that Adams is ignorant, but it is not at all clear that he recognizes that fact. His assessment of the coming crisis of the Civil War shows little of his characteristic irony. For a recognition of genuine failure, a failure that really taught him something important about the difficulty of understanding human affairs, we need to look at his experience as private secretary to his father during the war. In those years, Adams came to see the difficulties of interpreting men, motives, and events, and in coming to this understanding, he developed a deep sense of the true complexity of political action.

Diplomatic service in London, even in a minor capacity, proved to be both educational and deeply disconcerting for the young secretary. On May 12, 1861, things seemed simple; he thought that the British government was a friendly one, "true to the anti-slavery principles which had been their steadiest profession. For a hundred years the chief effort of his family had aimed at bringing the Government of England into intelligent cooperation with the objects and interests of America. . . . The slave states had been the chief obstacle to good understanding. As for the private secretary himself, he was, like all Bostonians, instinctively English. He could not conceive the idea of a hostile England. He supposed himself, as one of the members of a famous anti-slavery family, to be welcome everywhere in the British Islands." But on May 13, the British recognition of Confederate belligerency was announced, and Adams suddenly learned "that his ideas were the reverse of truth; that in May, 1861, no one in England—literally no one—doubted that Jefferson Davis had made or would make a nation, and nearly all were glad of it. . . . The sentiment of anti-slavery had disappeared." The great goal of American policy, under these surprising circumstances, became preventing the British from extending this position and extending diplomatic recognition to the Confederacy.

At the same time, leaving other expectations to one side, Henry writes, "Thanks to certain family associations, Charles Francis Adams naturally looked on all British Ministers as enemies; the only public occupation of all Adameses for a hundred and fifty years at least, in their brief intervals [from] quarreling with State Street, had been to quarrel with Downing Street." On the British side, the two principals to contend with were Lord Palmerston, the prime minister, and Lord John Russell, the foreign secretary. In private, it was taken for granted, even by his friends, that Lord Russell was a liar. Palmerston was thought to be hardly better. "Other Prime Ministers may perhaps have
lived who inspired among diplomats as much distrust as Palmerston, and yet between Palmerston’s word and Russell’s word, one hesitated to decide, and gave years of education to deciding, whether either could be trusted, or how far.” Adams did not really mind this, saying quite realistically, “Diplomatists have no right to complain of mere lies; it is their own fault, if, educated as they are, the lies deceive them; but they complain bitterly of traps. Palmerston was believed to lay traps. He was the enfant terrible of the British government.”

Ambassador Adams believed that Palmerston wanted a quarrel and that he could better trust Lord Russell than he could the prime minister. The private secretary, for his part, believed that there was nothing to choose between the two British leaders. Indeed, he went so far as to ask Thurlow Weed, a consummate Albany politician who joined the embassy staff, whether he thought that no politician could be trusted; Weed advised him that a young man should not begin by thinking so. Adams thought that this simply meant that Weed believed that youth needed illusions. But later, Weed’s position appeared more complex to him:

Young men needed experience. They could not play well if they trusted to a general rule. Every card had a relative value. Principles had better be left aside. Adams knew that he could never learn to play politics in so masterly a fashion as this; his education and his nervous system equally forbade it, although he admired all the more the impersonal faculty of the political master who could thus efface himself and his temper in the game.

Thus Adams had trouble taking Weed’s advice. As he says, he “felt officially sure of dishonesty.” But whom to distrust? Perhaps everyone? This decision depended on a knowledge of the genuine facts, which the ambassador died without knowing. Charles Francis Adams went to his grave in 1886 believing Lord Russell’s protestations of friendship. But in a biography of Russell, who had died in 1878, Spencer Walpole published a tale unknown to the senior Adams. By September 1862, when news of Lee’s invasion of Maryland reached London, the idea of a Union in crisis was widespread. The fall of Washington or Baltimore was expected. Palmerston immediately wrote to Russell, asking whether, in such an eventuality, England and France should not intervene between North and South and suggest a separation. Had it reached the American legation, this letter would have surprised no one, given Palmerston’s supposed diplomatic inclinations at the time. But, as Adams says, it is Russell’s reply to Palmerston that bears careful analysis.

Russell, so trusted by Charles Francis Adams, argued that should media-
tion with a view to recognizing the Confederacy fail, England should indeed recognize the rebels unilaterally. “Here, then,” Adams writes, “appeared in its fullest force, the practical difficulty in education which a mere student could never overcome; a difference not in theory, or knowledge, or even want of experience, but in the sheer chaos of human nature. Lord Russell’s course had been consistent from the first, and had all the look of rigid determination to recognize the Southern Confederacy ‘with a view’ to breaking up the Union.” Besides having the appearance of forethought, the policy required the “deliberate dishonesty” not only of Palmerston and Russell but also of the previously unmentioned chancellor of the exchequer, William Gladstone. It would have been interesting to know the ambassador’s reaction to these revelations, had he been privy to them, but, says Adams, it would have been even more interesting to know his father’s response to Palmerston’s reply to Russell, in which he urged caution just in case the Union forces won. Thus, “the roles were reversed. Russell wrote what was expected from Palmerston, or even more violently; while Palmerston wrote what was expected from Russell, or even more temperately.” Not only was the private secretary’s view wrong, but it turned out that the closest associates of the British leaders “knew little more about their intentions than was known in the Legation.” Thus it emerged that only three members of the cabinet favored recognition of the Confederacy.38

Had these facts been known in the American embassy, there would have been great relief and a sense that the danger had passed, but this euphoria would have been mistaken. Enter William Gladstone, the Liberal leader. If there was a fixed point in the world, Adams thought, it was the British exchequer. But here, he tells us, is the education he received from observing Gladstone’s actions. The chancellor indicated that he was glad to hear the prime minister’s position because of the rapid progress of the Southern forces and the risk of impatience in the Lancashire mill towns, which “would prejudice the dignity and disinterestedness of the proffered mediation.” This letter to Palmerston was dated September 24, but on October 3, the news of the great Union victory at Antietam and the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation reached London. Adams remarks of Gladstone’s letter to Palmerston, “Had the puzzled student seen this letter, he must have concluded from it that the best educated statesman England ever produced did not know what he was talking about, an assumption which all the world would think quite inadmissable from a private secretary—but this was a trifle.”39

It was a mere trifle because, on October 7, in spite of his knowledge of the Union victories, Gladstone delivered an amazing address. In it he proclaimed
that the North would have to take its medicine, for "there is no doubt that Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the South have made an army; they are making, it appears, a navy; and they have made, what is more than either, they have made a nation."

This was a startling pronouncement. From it, Adams "drew some harsh moral conclusions: Were they incorrect? Posed bluntly as rules of conduct, they led to the worst moral practices. As morals, one could detect no shade of difference between Gladstone and Napoleon except to the advantage of Napoleon. The private secretary saw none." The evidence against Gladstone was overwhelming. One should never, says Adams, use the word "must," as Gladstone had in his speech. He knew perfectly well that the only hope for a Southern nation rested in the hands of the British. Failing British action, his position was nonsense. "Never," says Adams, rising to a great height of indignation, "in the history of political turpitude had any brigand of modern civilization offered a worse example." Even Palmerston was outraged, since he had no thought of letting the chancellor force his hand. As for Russell, he followed Gladstone in favoring British intervention, but when Russell met with Ambassador Adams, he contended that intervention was still in doubt, insisting that Gladstone had been misunderstood. In spite of Gladstone's speech, the ambassador continued to believe in Russell. The "truth," when it was revealed thirty years later, showed Russell's position to be the reverse of what he had claimed while meeting the senior Adams. In fact, as it turned out, Gladstone had drawn his position from Russell's own policy. Palmerston disavowed Gladstone, but Russell never did. For the young Adams, "the lesson was to be crucial; it would decide the law of life. All these gentlemen were superlatively honorable; if one could not believe them, Truth in politics might be ignored as a delusion."

Young Henry might have been distrustful—he only later learned the truth himself—but his father's belief in Lord Russell continued, as we have seen, to his death. Without pursuing further complications relating to this matter, such as the involvement of Napoleon III in pursuit of the goals of Russell and Gladstone, Adams drew some important lessons on which we too can build.

Of the principal actors, Russell was the most interesting to Adams, simply because he was the most consistent and hence "statesmanlike." His every act showed a clear determination to break up the Union. He showed persistence, "supported, as was necessary, by the usual definite falsehoods." He said one thing and "habitually" did another.

Palmerston, so distrusted in the American embassy, tried to check Russell, scolded Gladstone, and discouraged Napoleon. "Palmerston told no falsehoods;
made no professions; concealed no opinions; was detected in no double dealing. The most mortifying failure in Henry Adams's long education was that, after forty years of confirmed dislike, distrust, and detraction of Lord Palmerston, he was obliged at last to admit himself in error, and to consent in spirit—for by that time he was nearly as dead as any of them—to beg his pardon."

Gladstone was the "sum of contradictions." His confessions of 1896 "brought all reason and hope of education to a standstill." Gladstone simply confessed to "undoubted error." He even had the effrontery to assert that his statement that Jefferson Davis was making a nation was intended, though based on a "false estimate of the facts," as an act of "friendliness to all America." Doubtless out of a sense of filial piety, Adams does not comment on his father's repeated acceptance of Lord Russell's lies, which merited a more skeptical examination. There is no doubt that the senior Adams was regularly deceived.

From all these misperceptions, Adams concludes that he, the private secretary, had "seen nothing correctly at the time." He is perhaps a little unfair to himself, since he indicates that he entertained a certain skepticism about British leadership as these events occurred. However, the situation points the way to what may be, for him, the central implication of this complex diplomatic situation. "Forty years afterwards," reading Gladstone's reports on cabinet meetings, "when everyone except himself, who looked on at this scene, was dead, the private secretary of 1862 read these lines with stupor, and hurried to discuss them with John Hay, who was more astounded than himself. All the world had been at cross-purposes, had misunderstood themselves and the situation, had followed wrong paths, drawn wrong conclusions, and had known none of the facts. One would have done better to have drawn no conclusions at all. One's diplomatic education was a long mistake."

As usual, Adams's protestations of failed education go too far. In fact, they provide important lessons for scholars, journalists, politicians, and all others who hope to understand contemporary events. One thing that can surely be learned, or relearned, is that it is necessary for decision makers to do as well as possible under the prevailing circumstances, whatever they are. And these circumstances always include incomplete information. Frequently, perhaps usually, it is not possible to wait until all the facts are in, and when they are in, precisely what they are is likely to be disputed, as is their meaning. The most direct, close-up participants are likely to be deceived by the events going on around them, yet they must act in spite of their ignorance. This is an important lesson that Adams can teach.

Nor is this situation unique to the specific situation Adams was in. This is certainly part of the meaning of Tolstoy's account in War and Peace of the
great Russian battles in the Napoleonic wars, in which he portrays scenes of incredible confusion where no one has any real knowledge of what is going on. But we need not limit ourselves to fiction. In his superb account of U.S.-Soviet relations in the immediate postrevolutionary setting, George Kennan observes something quite similar. His was the first study to go back to the original sources to try to discern what had happened. The first volume is a minutely detailed study of events from the revolution in November to the Russian withdrawal from World War I in March. Kennan’s comments on his work and what he found are amazingly reminiscent of Adams’s. He notes “the marvelous manner in which purpose, personality, coincidence, communication, and the endless complexity of the modern world all combine to form a process beyond the full vision or comprehension of any single contemporar-y.” Then he concludes, “It is sobering to reflect that, imperfect as this study is, there was none of the participants in the events recounted here—indeed, there was no one alive in those years of 1917 and 1918—who knew even the entirety of what is set forth in this volume.” Surely this passage would have been relished by Adams, and I suggest that no serious history or any contemporary study of politics can honestly avoid similar conclusions. The methodological lessons for history and political science today are clear and profound.

One can hardly doubt that when he returned from England in 1868, Adams combined his wartime experiences and the skepticism they bred with the long-standing Adams family distrust of any orthodox party politics of the sort abundantly on display in England. With this skepticism came a growing sense of the ambiguity of agency and intention in politics. Doubtless these attitudes influenced his journalistic critiques of American politics and society, which have already been examined, as have relevant passages in the Education. These criticisms must be kept in mind while we consider some of Adams’s other intellectual interests, not least his growing concern with scientific developments in his time, which often fed back into his conceptions of politics and history.

**Darwinism and Education**

Adams’s interest in science carried on a long family concern, perhaps most notably in the case of John Quincy Adams. But the interest goes back as far as John Adams, who perceived “laws of nature, not less without our power, than beyond our comprehension.” But between the first and fourth generations of the Adams dynasty, there was a significant difference.
The second president's beliefs reflected, and in turn encouraged, the socially engaged interests of a practicing statesman; the future historian's search for unalterable law reflected and encouraged his tendency to passive observation and lonely disinterestedness. The Adams trait they shared was a scientific turn of mind with a clear history for four generations—and something beyond that, an obscure love of cosmic necessity that seems to reach into the Calvinist Puritan past with its central, compelling interest in the providence of an inscrutable, omnipotent God.

To be sure, Henry no longer believed in the Puritan God, but he surely held to the Puritan cast of mind, try though he did to use it to fathom the inscrutable. That Adams should develop an interest in Darwinism in the years following the Civil War is hardly surprising. Darwinism was a rather loose body of ideas that swept the English-speaking world, particularly in the popularized form offered by Herbert Spencer and, in the United States, by William Graham Sumner. More often than not put to deeply conservative purposes as a defense of the allegedly fittest who had survived the rigors of laissez-faire competition, it could also be used by reformers to support cooperative action on behalf of the victims of unrestrained competition. Adams, however, was not particularly interested in either political use. He was too critical of post-war capitalism to join with the conservatives, and his reformist sensibilities did not run in the direction of cooperative social and economic reform.

Indeed, his first response to evolutionary theory seems to have been simple curiosity:

Unbroken Evolution under uniform conditions pleased everyone—except curates and bishops; it was the very best substitute for religion; a safe, conservative, practical, thoroughly Common-Law deity. Such a working system for the universe suited a young man who had just helped to waste five or ten thousand million dollars and a million lives, more or less, to enforce unity and uniformity on people who objected; the idea was only too seductive in its perfection; it had the charm of art.

Thus, evolution attracted Adams as a possible way to reach his lifelong goal of unity, as well as providing a cosmic basis for moral intention, since Darwinism has a tendency to moralize force and necessity. But Darwinism proved not to be the answer, and he was not to reach the goal of theoretical unity by this or any other means.
Technical discussions of Adams's views on evolution need not detain us here. The political and historical lessons he drew are of interest, however. On the level of scientific evidence, his brief explorations into the fossil record were not of much value to him. Terebratula, a kind of mollusk, proved to be uniform from the beginning of geological time, so there was no evidence of development through natural selection. Then he considered Pteraspis, a fish and a very early vertebrate. But he could detect no connection between Pteraspis and other higher vertebrates. He was untroubled by the idea that Pteraspis and sharks were “his cousins, great-uncles, or grandfathers.” What did trouble him was that he could see no evidence of evolution from lower to higher species. “He could detect no more evolution in life since the Pteraspis than he could detect it in architecture since the Abbey. All he could prove was change.”

He elaborates this theme:

Behind the lesson of the day, he was conscious that, in geology as in theology, he could prove only Evolution that did not evolve; Uniformity that was not uniform; and Selection that did not select. To other Darwinians—except Darwin—Natural Selection seemed a dogma to be put in the place of the Athanasian Creed; it was a form of religious hope; a promise of ultimate perfection. . . . [But Adams] felt he had no Faith; that whenever the next new hobby should be brought out, he should surely drop off from Darwinism like a monkey from a perch; that the idea of one Form, Law, Order, or Sequence had no more value for him than the idea of none; that what he valued most was Motion, and that what attracted his mind was Change.

And then, shockingly for an Adams, “Henry Adams was the first in an infinite series to discover and admit to himself that he really did not care whether truth was, or was not, true. He did not even care that it should be proved true, unless the process were new and amusing. He was a Darwinian for fun.”

This takes being playful with ideas to a considerable extreme.

But Adams fought against accepting this dangerous new thought. “From the beginning of history, this attitude had been branded as criminal—worse than crime—sacrilege. Society punished it ferociously and justly, in self-defense.” This sort of relativism was a belief that annoyed his father, but it annoyed Henry no less; he had no thought of falling victim to Hamletian doubts. He wanted the dominant current of his time to be his current. “He insisted on maintaining his absolute standards; on aiming at ultimate Unity.”

There is a certain defiance of reason here. His mind tells him that truth
is an illusion, but he vows to cling to the illusion because it is socially useful, as when Socrates propagates the myth of the metals in the Republic, but with this difference: Socrates remains undeceived. He knows that the myth is a myth or, in some interpretations, an outright lie. In the case of Adams, he too is a Socratic figure, but one trying as hard as he can to believe what his mind tells him is no longer valid. The tension between the New England heritage and the disruptions of modern thought and life is beginning to become extreme.

In any case, it is clear to Adams that while change is the law of life, there is no guarantee that the direction of change will be positive. In the optimistic nineteenth century, belief in progress was widespread, but of course, Adams believed, as we know, that the history of the presidency from Washington to Grant was enough to disrupt any fantasies about inevitable progress. As Levenson says, “Instead of having to deduce George Washington from the sum of all wickedness . . . he now faced the up-to-date, inductive question of explaining” presidential and, more generally, political decline.55

But other, more personal, more serious events were to create further problems, further education for Adams’s developing perceptions. As we have seen, he thought that the country was in a constitutional crisis, a crisis brought about by sheer drift, his common term to describe the policies of the Grant administration but affecting the reformers as well. Political chaos could be seen in the pervasive corruption he documented in his journalism. To the reformer, it seemed that “the country might outlive it, but not he. The worst scandals of the eighteenth century were relatively harmless by the side of this, which smirched executive, judiciary, banks, corporate systems, professions, and people, all the great active forces of society, in one dirty cesspool of vulgar corruption.”56

The last lesson of education, as he called it at the time, came in 1870, when he was called from London to his sister’s bedside in Bagni di Lucca, Italy. She had been thrown from a cab and injured. Tetanus set in. Here, genuine chaos struck the family. Before, Adams had never really seen nature—only the “sugar-coating that she shows to youth.” He remarks, “One had heard and read a great deal about death, and even seen a little of it, and knew by heart the thousand commonplaces of religion and poetry which seemed to deaden one’s senses and veil the horror. Society being immortal, could put on immortality at will. Adams being mortal, felt only the mortality.”57

He was deeply shaken. Gone are the usual cynical mannerisms, gone are all traces of superciliousness. Instead, he emits a cry of pure existential rage against the universe:
The usual anodynes of social medicine became evident artifice. Stoic­icism was perhaps the best; religion was the most human; but the idea that any personal deity could find pleasure or profit in torturing a poor woman, by accident, with a fiendish cruelty known to man only in perverted and insane temperaments, could not be held for a moment. For pure blasphemy, it made pure atheism a comfort. God might be, as the Church said, a Substance, but He could not be a Person.8

Reading these words, it is hard to see Mont Saint Michel and Chartres as a religious book. At most, it is a picture—highly partial, to be sure—of a beautiful society inspired by what, given the outburst precipitated by Catherine’s death, Adams might well have thought to be a delusion. As Levenson says, while the earlier book confirmed the reality of the Virgin, “the other confirmed doubt.” After quoting Adams’s outburst, he continues, “instead of being about the works of love which defy reality, the Education is concerned with the ultimate reality of the real world. Yet the terrifying negation in this climax, it must be emphasized, is a turning point and not an end.”9 This is true enough, I think, for Adams had a mind too restless to ever come to a complete stop. But once again, the New England verities were shaken, and one can see in this statement the themes of Adams’s later years beginning to take shape, affecting the still-to-be-written History, where even men conventionally called great become the mere playthings of forces beyond their control. Drift leading to chaos begins to be a central theme in Adams’s thought. Again, Levenson is on the mark when he comments, “The discontinuities of experience, which made Adams repeat so often that he had a new world to learn, attained their ultimate form.”60

One can see these ideas at work during Adams’s brief tenure as a Harvard University history professor. As a result of President Eliot’s famous reforms, this Harvard was much improved over the Harvard College Adams had attended and scorned. The problem he saw as a teacher was this: “A teacher must either treat history as a catalogue, a record, a romance, or as an evolution; and whether he affirms or denies evolution, he falls into all the burning faggots of the pit. He makes of his scholars priests or atheists, plutocrats or socialists, judges or anarchists, almost in spite of himself. In essence incoherent or immoral, history had either to be taught as such—or falsified.”

Adams wanted to do neither. He had no theory of evolution to teach, and could not make the facts fit one. He had no fancy for telling agreeable tales to amuse sluggish-minded boys, in order to publish them afterwards as lectures. He could still less compel his students to learn
the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Venerable Bede by heart. He saw no relation whatever between his students and the Middle Ages unless it were the Church, and there the ground was particularly dangerous. He knew better than though he were a professional historian that the man who should solve the riddle of the Middle Ages and bring them into the line of evolution from past to present, would be a greater man than Lamarck or Linnaeus; but history had nowhere broken down so pitifully, or avowed itself so hopelessly bankrupt, as there. Since Gibbon, the spectacle was almost a scandal. History had lost even the sense of shame. It was a hundred years behind the experimental sciences. For all serious purposes, it was less instructive than Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas.61

This is a stern indictment, though anyone teaching today can certainly recognize the problem inherent in engaging students with events in the distant past, particularly at a time when a generation seems like infinity. Having repudiated the lecture system, Adams introduced the German seminar to Harvard. Characteristically, Adams certified his years at Harvard as a failure. But his own words belie him. He found the students “excellent company. Cast more or less in the same mould, without violent emotions or sentiment, and, except for the veneer of American habits, ignorant of all that man had ever thought or hoped, their minds burst open like flowers at the sunlight of a suggestion.”62 Surely in this picture there is hope for democracy. For a professor, this is not failure but success. Adams should have taken his own words to heart. “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”63

**Twenty Years After (1892)**

Here there occurs a huge break in Adams’s narrative and the start of what he often referred to as his posthumous life. The break, as I have mentioned, was occasioned by Adams’s inability to write about the years of his marriage to Marian Adams, who committed suicide in 1885. We largely lose any further reflections he may have had on the political and social developments in these twenty years or any thoughts supplementing his writings, including, in particular, the *History,* but also the novels so close to his heart. And also, more important from our point of view, there is a change in his concerns, not immediate but nonetheless real. Adams does not lose interest in American politics; indeed, he has a considerable fascination with the Populist movement of the 1890s. But closely connected to this, he develops a growing interest in international capitalism,
particularly in its banking dimensions; he is deeply interested in geopolitics; he displays an intensifying concern with the development of technology and an equally intensifying search for a source of unity in a world whose principal attribute is multiplicity. This last, in particular, leads him into deep, if often quixotic, reflections on the philosophy of history. The consequence of this is that much of the last third of the Education operates on a very high level of abstraction, making it necessary to refer more often to his correspondence to establish the context for his theorizing. But in no sense does he give up his intellectual quest. His ever-active mind pursues a general theory of history and politics to the end.

It is best to begin with the politics and economics, which are closely linked in his thought. As of 1892, when the narrative of the Education resumes, Adams is indifferent to party; politicians are graded according to whether they are friends or enemies of reform. In either case, as he wryly puts it, his views of politics and politicians “lacked enthusiasm.” But, as is already abundantly clear, to banks and to the rigid orthodox adherence to the gold standard, “he was fated to make his last resistance behind the silver standard.” His own interests as an investor were with gold, but, he tells us, he was more interested in the “moral standard” than in the gold standard.

Then came the panic of 1893, and Adams, incorrectly fearing that he was now a beggar, returned from Switzerland to help save the family fortune. Though the situation proved to be less dire than initially thought, it did set Henry thinking, partly under the influence of his younger brother Brooks, about the nefarious role of banking in politics and society. And this process lessened his faith, already shaky, in the status of orthodox economics. As Ernest Samuels says, “The Panic of 1893 opened his eyes to the larger economic and social movement. The sacred laws of laissez-faire economics no longer supplied a clear guide to political morality, especially if they meant enriching one’s enemies. Perhaps the power of government should be used after all when the laws of economics no longer served one’s purposes. Perhaps their political philosophy had been wrong from the start.” On the political side, this meant that Adams allied himself, loosely, tentatively, and temporarily, with some of the more radical forces in American politics, the aggrieved farmers from the South and Midwest. It also brought him together with Brooks, who was developing the ideas that became his major contribution to the interpretation of history, The Law of Civilization and Decay.

Finally, and very unfortunately, it tapped into a previously buried vein of anti-Semitism, based on his association of banking with Jews. The last result of his trip home for the family emergency was a visit to the Chicago Exposition,
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where he was particularly fascinated by the display of dynamos, which were
to play a large part in his general theory of history and the forces that made
it move. Adams professed not to know the national destination and doubted that his
fellow citizens did either. But Washington raised fewer questions. Already, as
discussed in chapter 4, the decision had clearly been made for a system of
centralized industrial capitalism, which Adams opposed, without elabora-
tion, to simple industrialism standing alone. In 1893, when the decision
turned on the gold standard, the choice was decisively for the new capital-
ism and all that it entailed, the very system Adams liked least. This result, as
Russell Hanson and Richard Merriman argue, certainly precluded any re-
vival of a civic republican tradition via a return to first principles of the politi-
cal system. Those principles had simply been superseded. And, even granted
Adams’s distinction between industrialism and capitalist industrialism, it was
clearly too late to return to the earlier “precapitalist” form of organization.

Though Adams comments on how easily he and his silver friends adapted
to the gold standard, in fact, the fight continued into the presidential elec-
tion of 1896. Adams says very little in the Education about his temporary flir-
tation with the Populists. One suspects that he considered it an unfit subject
for public discussion. But Adams misdates the final triumph of the gold sys-
tem, which occurred not in 1893, as his chronology suggests, but with the
presidential election of 1896. A brief look into his letters suggests the com-
plexities of Adams’s position. “Although I—very doubtfully—hold that on
the whole the election of McKinley will do more mischief than that of Bryan,
and, as a conservative anarchist, am therefore inclined to hope for McKin-
ley’s success, while I help Bryan all I can, certainly I cannot make so very
complicated a program intelligible to any party.” Unexpectedly, given the
huge differences between his sensibility and the Democratic candidate’s, he
says, “I rather like Bryan—I mean politically—and go near going over to
him.” This was especially true if Europe were to go politically, socially, and
financially bankrupt within the next five years, in which case he would defi-
nitely support Bryan, because that would “cut us free” at once. But then he
lapses into his anti-Semitic obsession. If the “Jew regime” were going to con-
tinue for ten or twenty years, so that “all the world is to be owned by Lom-
bard Street,” then McKinley would be preferable, because the tariff would
be more important than free silver, which could be useful for barely ten years
as a weapon against Europe. This, of course, rests on the crazed assumption
that the international banking system was under Jewish control and centered
in London, hence the reference to Lombard Street. For a time, this notion
The statement about helping Bryan refers to the fact that, at the urging of his brother Brooks, and through him as an intermediary, Adams donated money to Bryan’s campaign. He seems to have thought the money well spent. Again writing to Mrs. Cameron, Adams comments, “Bryan has made quite a wonderful fight, whether beaten or not, and poor McKinley seems a very sad jellyfish beside him. But the Major has never been regarded as serious by anyone—except himself—and me.” Thus, as I have mentioned, crusty old Henry Adams aligned himself temporarily, using what must be called bizarre reasoning, with some of the most radical forces in American politics. But Adams lacked the courage of his peculiar convictions and in the end came round to McKinley, going home in October, as he put it, “with everyone else, to elect McKinley President and to start the world anew.”

Adams must certainly have had mixed feelings about this new world. It is true that John Hay, his closest friend, became ambassador to Britain and later secretary of state, so that Adams stood closer to the halls of power than he had ever been. At the same time, it is even clearer now than it was in 1906 that the election of William McKinley established a new regime in American politics that was to last until the New Deal. It was a regime of corporate domination and declining voter participation in elections, as well as a decline in the importance of political parties. Bryan had no appeal for the urban working class, and his capture of the Democratic Party narrowed the options for voters, a trend partially reversed by the New Deal, but now again one of the deepest dilemmas for American democracy. As Walter Dean Burnhan writes, “The ultimate democratic purpose of issue formulation in a campaign is to give the people at large the power to choose their and their agents’ options. Moreover, so far as is known, the blunt alternative to party government is the concentration of political power in the hands of those who already possess concentrated economic power.” Given the weakness of parties, we are thrown back on “image” and “personality” voting.

The existence of such a system posed serious problems for Adams. He hated corporate capitalist domination, but he hated political parties as well. A lifetime of heterodox independence left him without the institutional means to fight back. We do not know in any detail what he thought of Theodore Roosevelt’s attempts to regulate the trusts, though we do know that in general terms he was contemptuous of TR. Perhaps if his serious practical interest in the domestic scene had lasted longer, he would have continued his flirtation with radicals such as Bryan. But even in 1896, his attention has a place in Adams’s thought, and we will have to explore it further. But for now, the politics is of particular interest.
was turning toward geopolitics and the philosophy of history. And of course, his interest was always more in diagnosis than in treatment, so he was an unlikely candidate to become an activist, no matter how much he despised the status quo.

When his thinking on international developments is considered, it is also important to take note of his intellectual relationship to his brother Brooks. "Brooks Adams had taught him [Henry] that the relation between nations was that of trade." Of course, this implies a need for markets, and although Henry emphatically rejected territorial empire, he certainly favored keeping international markets open as a means to the end of American economic development. Henry pithily sums up Brooks's central thesis:

All Civilization is Centralization.
All Centralization is Economy.
Therefore all Civilization is the survival of the most economical (cheapest).  

But Adams does not think that capitalism can continue indefinitely. One possibility that intrigues him comes from his brother. "Among other general rules he laid down the paradox that, in the social disequilibrium between capital and labor, the logical outcome was not collectivism, but anarchism," a point he marks for study. But more immediately, he sees something else. Writing in 1898, he saw Hungary as a "child of State-Socialism in a most intelligent and practical form. In principle there is no apparent limit to its application." It is a form of society that deserves attention, "especially in connection with Russia." It is a future he says he wants nothing to do with. Nevertheless, he writes, "To me it seems to demonstrate the axiom of what we are civil enough to call progress, has got to be:—All monopolies will be assumed by the state; as a corollary to the proposition that the common interest is supreme over the individual." Then Adams goes on to urge Brooks to drop the free silver campaign and move on to socialism. He adds, in a peculiarly Hegelian fashion,

Not that I love Socialism any better than I do Capitalism, or any other Ism, but I know only one law of political or historical morality, and that is that the form of Society which survives is always in the Right; and therefore a statesman is obliged to follow it, unless he leads. . . . Socialism is merely a new application of Economy, which must go on until Competition puts an end to further Economies, or the whole world becomes one Socialist society and rots out. One need not love Socialism in order to point out the logical necessity for
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Society to march that way; and the wisdom of doing it intelligently if it is to do it at all.\footnote{78}

This is a striking commentary, and not completely characteristic of Adams's thinking. Here, “Adams momentarily envisioned an ideal socialism which transcended nationality and was consistent with individual energy, but a mere glimpse could not revive youthful hope or generate a practical belief in a utopia he might help to build. ... Intellectual curiosity was more important than humane sentiment in determining the meaning of this vision. What lasted from this phase of his peregrinations was the insistence that a real choice could be made between intelligence and drift.”\footnote{79} This important point should be remembered as the fatalistic theories of his last years emerge after 1910.

Along this line, as Levenson suggests, the 1898 letter to his brother shows that he had not completely given in to determinism; intelligent leadership still had a role to play. Adams's position is very much like Joseph Schumpeter's thirty-six years later. Schumpeter too believed that capitalism would not survive if it continued along its present developmental path, which he saw threatened by the New Deal. However, unlike Adams, he was distressed by the thought, since he was an admirer of the capitalist system. Still, he saw a movement much like the one Adams suggests. In the long run, the difference between capitalism and socialism would not prove to be great, he thought; however, he hoped that the dire trends he saw could be halted in time. And though he did not much care, he thought that democracy would survive under capitalism, contrary to the ideas of some free-market liberals, though it would still be what he called “more of a sham than capitalist democracy ever was.”\footnote{80}

Of course, Adams too was troubled by democracy under capitalism. But he saw more grounds for hope than did Schumpeter. He believed deeply in the need for a governing elite and felt that the need to manage the new socialist system would provide the Adamses a way back into power. R. P. Blackmur neatly sums up the implications of his analysis of the dynamics of capitalism.

Henry Adams in making out his rough socialistic position was making out, as much as anything, a case for the only possible vitalization of the governing class that he could see. Every other position constituted a more or less abject surrender to the money power; a surrender upon which every president since Lincoln had batten, just as the money power had batten on presidents. Socialism as framed was meant precisely to control the money power through absorption. So far,
Socialism was the only means of control that went further than compromise. No government that was at the conspicuous mercy of the bankers, as Grant's had been, and Cleveland's, and Roosevelt's, could fairly be said to govern. . . . There was, in short, no such thing as political independence at home or abroad, unless there was financial independence.81

This is an extreme statement of Adams's position, though it is certainly not an illogical extension of it. In fact, however, his stance on socialism fluctuated frequently. As is so often the case, there is a tension in his thought. Reflecting this, he wrote in the Education, "By rights, he should . . . have been a Marxist, but some narrow trait of the New England nature seemed to blight socialism, and he tried in vain to make himself a convert. He did the next best thing; he became a Comteist, within the limits of evolution."82 But he continued to forecast the eventual triumph of socialism in spite of his distrust, though in his view, as in Schumpeter's theory, capitalism and socialism would become virtually indistinguishable forms dominated by large-scale organizations.

Money, Markets, and Anti-Semitism

Throughout his career, Adams had always been interested in the subject of money, from early writings on British financial policy to his pieces "The Legal Tender Act" and "The New York Gold Conspiracy." But, at least partially under the influence of Brooks, foreign exchange, gold, and trade became of obsessive interest to him. This phase in Adams's thought lasted from the mid-1890s until 1906, at which point he regained some sense of proportion. But in this obsessional stage, Adams fell victim to delusions that resulted in a vicious anti-Semitism. This does not assume a large role in Chartres or the Education, but it is certainly there, even if not central to his theories. As Levenson says, his anti-Semitism "disfigures, albeit inessentially, his late masterpieces—pockmarks of a disease that can be fatal."83 Certainly Adams had no idea of the horrors that were to come. "As a chapter of engineered cruelty, the genocidal programs that would come in consequence of the nineteenth century's discourse of hate far exceeded Adams's worst expectations of the twentieth century."84 However, his letters are filled with a poisonous anti-Semitism. Jews, bankers, goldbugs, and usurers are mentioned more or less interchangeably, all as synonyms of something hateful. The attitudes spill over from monetary questions into such celebrated cases as the Dreyfus affair. Adams saw Dreyfus as a "howling Jew" and became a bitter anti-Dreyfusard.85
And, bizarrely, he identified the British campaign against the Boers with the legal campaign for Dreyfus. “Both of them are Jew wars, and I don’t like Jew wars.” For whatever reason, he does not take up this theme in the Education, and, as Samuels says, “Happily, in suppressing it he suppressed most other phases of his morbid anti-Semitism.”

But Adams did not always hold this ugly view of the world. When younger, he did not hesitate to chide Thomas Jefferson for an anti-Jewish remark, and in spite of occasional use of common stereotypes, “he had a genuine liberal’s distaste for either scorn or pride of race.” During the years of his marriage to Marian Adams, the couple had many Jewish friends, and his much-loved sister was married to a Jew. As late as 1880, as Barbara Miller Solomon writes, Jews appeared in his novel Democracy “as upper class Americans with no ethnic stigma.” In the History, he is almost rhapsodic about immigration to the United States and its relation to democracy, a position that seems to cover Jewish as well as other immigrants. There is no trace of ethnocentrism here:

[The Americans] said to the rich as to the poor, “Come and share our limitless riches! Come and help us bring to light these unimaginable stores of wealth and power!” The poor came, and from them were seldom heard complaints of deception or disillusion. Within a moment, by the mere contact of a moral atmosphere, they saw the gold and jewels, the summer cornfields, and the glowing continent. The rich for a long time stood aloof,—they were timid and narrow-minded; but this was not all,—between them and the American democrat was a gulf.

Adams continues on an even more exalted, less material plane. “Every American,” except for a few Federalists, “seemed to nourish the idea that he was doing what he could to overthrow the tyranny which the past had fastened on the human mind.” It was easy for the sophisticated or the cynical to fail to see in this “its nobler side, to feel the beatings of a heart underneath the sordid surface of a gross humanity.” Europeans could not see this nobility. They found only cause for complaint “in the remark that the American democrat believed himself to be working for the overthrow of tyranny, aristocracy, hereditary privilege, and priesthood, wherever they existed.”

What happened to this Adams? Digby Baltzell points out that the first mention of the word “Jew” in Adams’s letters occurs in 1896. Until then, there is no sign of serious derangement in his thought. But in the 1890s, the leadership positions of the upper class were threatened; the old establishment could no longer claim unquestioned authority, nor could it count on win-
ning positions of power as a matter of right. The upper classes tended to respond by turning an aristocracy, which Baltzell thinks of as open to the talented, into a closed caste, walling itself as a matter of self-protection. Privilege without power breeds resentment and leads to the creation of a caste system, thus depriving the nation of the services of an open-ended, upper-class elite. This sense of having been displaced from positions of power can also be explained by Richard Hofstadter’s well-known theory of status anxiety. Both theories clearly apply to the Adamses and are abundantly evident in the pages of the Education.

Combined with this was the nationwide emergence of patterns of deep-seated, nativist, anti-immigration sentiment, which included but was not limited to Jews. As Samuels writes, “All the antiforeignism and racism of the time against the south European immigrant and the Oriental came to a head in the Jew as the master image of the enemy to Anglo-Saxon supremacy.”

This sentiment tapped a powerful stain of ascriptive prejudice buried in the American national character and challenging the “official” liberal ideology so well reflected in Adams’s History. The anti-Semitic version of ascriptivism was widespread and could be found in virtually all segments of American life and culture. The Jewish stereotype did not appear until the 1870s and after that spread throughout the culture. In addition to Adams it can be found in such literary luminaries as Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner, not to mention the later and more egregious cases of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The anti-Semitism of many of these writers was essentially cultural, with the Jew symbolizing liberal capitalist modernity without the saving grace of a Christian aristocracy that could dilute the vulgarity of capitalist society. It is also worth noting that the Jewish stereotype is based on Jews’ success as immigrants to the American culture, which occurred at a time when Adams saw himself as a failure, at least by the exalted standards of his family. Thus, in one of the few outbursts in the Education displaying his psychic disorder—one can hardly call it less—Adams cries out,

he twisted about in vain to recover his starting point; he could no longer see his own trail; he had become an estray; a flotsam or jetsam of wreckage... His world was dead. Not a Polish Jew fresh from Warsaw or Cracow—not a furtive Jacob or Ysaac still reeking of the Ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of the customs—but had a keener instinct, an intenser energy, and a freer hand than he—American of Americans, with Heaven knows how many Puritans and Patriots behind him, and an education that had cost a civil war.
This is certainly part of what drove Henry Adams; he simply did not like the way his America had turned out and was looking for someone to blame. Carey McWilliams writes, “Although he regarded the new dispensation as inevitable, he could not accept it because he was too deeply immersed in the older democratic culture.” This sense of displacement and the decline of an earlier form of democracy would still be evident, even if we leave aside the anti-Semitic excrescences. Jews serve as a scapegoat for his more general rage against the widespread corruption of American society and politics.

All these factors no doubt played a part in the eruption of Adams’s irrational anti-Semitism. But one other important factor needs to be taken into account—his detestation of capitalism. It is clear from his journalism that he saw an intimate connection between capitalism and the corruption of the political system that was so destructive to his idea of democracy. But where does the anti-Semitism come from? He despised capitalism before the emergence of the Jewish stereotype in the 1870s. Of course, anti-Semitism in general has an ancient and dishonorable pedigree. But the connection between Judaism and capitalism goes back before Adams; in fact, none other than Karl Marx—an example of that peculiar creature, the anti-Semitic Jew—gives an early statement of the theme in his 1843 pamphlet On the Jewish Question. Writes Marx, “What is the profane base of Judaism? Practical need, self-interest. What is the worldly cult of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly god? Money.” Almost immediately he goes on, “In the final analysis, the emancipation of the Jews is the emancipation of mankind from Judaism.” And then, sounding very like Adams lamenting the presumed international power of Jews, he adds, quoting Bruno Bauer, “The Jew, who is merely tolerated in Vienna, for example, determines the fate of the whole Empire by his financial power.”

Though it is extremely doubtful that Adams could have known these early works of Marx, they have the tone he was to adopt, a tone that became widespread in American culture and in other cultures as well. There is the same paranoid distrust of bankers and the same tendency to list a set of disparaging terms associated with the word Jew: in the case of Marx, self-interest, huckster, and the like. And yet, as already mentioned, Adams did not turn his disgust with capitalism into anti-Semitism until the 1890s. Perhaps this cannot be adequately explained short of psychoanalysis. There simply may be no fully rational explanation for the irrational. It can be said that the anti-Semitic stereotype was not available to Adams when he began his biting critique of capitalism. But in 1893, when the Adamses’ financial fortunes took a downturn, perhaps the new vocabulary seemed plausible to him. It is also
important to remember the political aspects of McWilliams's interpretation. Deep down, what may have bothered Adams the most was the decline of the democratic forms he believed in and their subversion by capitalism.

The anti-Semitism never entirely disappeared, but the obsession with markets and money did, and with it, the virulence of his ethnic hatred declined also. In 1906, probably reflecting the final stages of his work on the Education, he wrote to Brooks, “But please give up the profoundly unscientific jabber of the newspapers about MONEY in capital letters. What I see is POWER in capitals also. You may abolish money and all its machinery, the Power will still be there, and you will still have to trapeze after it in the future just as the world has always done in the past. On the whole, our generation has suffered least of any. The next can run its own machine.” Certainly Adams was fully aware of money as a major source of power, so he could not have meant to deny that. But by that time, technology was on his mind as a force to be reckoned with, as was mass democracy. Just possibly, there may have been hopeful moments in which he believed that, in a better world, democratic public opinion might regain some degree of power and become a force for positive change. Commenting on Theodore Roosevelt's approach to the trusts, he said that the problem was that “the public had no idea what practical system it could aim at, or what sort of men could manage it. The single problem before it was not so much to control the Trusts as to create the society that could manage the trusts.” The new American must be either the child of the new forces or a sport of nature. He must adapt to the new realities of the modern political economy and all that went with it. The import of this is not altogether clear. The distinction between control and management is muddy, to say the least. As someone who feared centralization, perhaps he hoped that society would replace centralized control with a revolutionary change in the public perception of the trusts. This would, as McWilliams suggests, involve a transformation of values of major dimensions. Did Adams have any real hope that such a thing could happen? Probably not, but today we might, though there are certainly no particular grounds for optimism.

The Problem of Technology

When he visited Chicago for the Exposition of 1893, Adams was forcefully struck both by the city and by the power of technology. Putting aside his usual scorn for the Midwest, Adams was almost rhapsodic, though also quizzical. “The Exposition itself defied philosophy. One might find fault till the last gate closed, one could still explain nothing that needed explanation. As a
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scenic display, Paris had never approached it, but the inconceivable scenic display consisted in its being there at all—more surprising, as it was, than anything else on the continent. Unlike Niagara Falls and the Yellowstone geysers, these were man-made creations, which made them especially remarkable. It seemed as if the Parisian school of the beaux arts had been transferred to the shore of Lake Michigan. Was it possible that it “could be made to seem at home there? Was the American made to seem at home in it?” Honestly, he had the air of enjoying it as though it were all his own; he felt it was good; he was proud of it.” And he goes on: “For the moment he [Adams] seemed to have leaped directly from Corinth and Syracuse and Venice, over the heads of London and New York, to impose classical standards on plastic Chicago. . . . All trader’s taste smelt of bric-a-brac; Chicago tried at least to give her taste a look of unity.”

Could this be real, Adams wonders, saying that his own personal universe depended on the answer, “for if the rupture was real and the new American world could take this sharp and conscious twist towards ideals, one’s personal friends would come in as winners in the great American chariot-race for fame.” Artists and architects like Hunt, Richardson, St. Gaudens, McKim, and Stanford White would be talked about when their “politicians and millionaires were otherwise forgotten.” The artists themselves were not optimistic, but perhaps there was hope. For Adams, this is a remarkable statement. It suggests a degree of optimism-cultural, in this case—a note not often heard in his late writings and one that ought to be remembered amidst the general gloom about the direction of his country, its culture, and indeed all of world history.

But of course what intrigued Adams even more than the architectural wonders of Chicago was the technology on display at the exposition. This is the force that began to move to the center of his thinking about the dynamics of history and that sent his historical imagination into overdrive. “One lingered long among the dynamos,” he tells us, “and they gave to history a new phase.” Combined with his amazement at the fact of Chicago itself, the new technology posed vast problems for him to consider:

Chicago asked in 1893 for the first time the question whether the American people knew where they were driving. Adams answered, for one, that he did not know, but would try to find out. On reflecting sufficiently deeply, . . . he decided that the American people probably knew no more than he did; but that they might still be driving or drifting unconsciously toward some point in thought; as their solar system was said to be drifting toward some point in space; and that,
possibly, if relations enough could be observed, this point might be fixed. Chicago was the first expression of American thought as a unity; one must start there.¹¹⁰

Washington was another expression of American unity, and here the picture is much less attractive. At this point, Adams launches into the lament, already discussed, that in 1893 the American majority decisively declared itself in favor of capitalism, thus joining forces with the banks and creating the form of society and government that Adams liked least. Thus, says Adams, at this point, "education in domestic politics stopped."¹¹¹

Unfortunately, this is largely true, though Adams continues to speculate on the domestic scene in his letters. We are left, it seems to me, with cultural hope in Chicago, though not without some uncertainty, and political gloom regarding Washington. Though he was well placed to do so, Adams has little to say about the efforts of the Progressive movement, however inadequate, to come to grips with the corporate capitalism he detested. Perhaps his distaste for Theodore Roosevelt held him back. In any case, he does nothing to explore his suggestion that what was needed was a society that could manage the trusts rather than a government that could control them. Instead, he largely leaves the American scene aside in order to explore the dynamics of world history.

At this point, we return to the world of the Virgin of Chartres. The year 1900 found Adams at an exposition again, this time the Great Exposition in Paris. He continues to mull over education, saying that nothing in it is "so astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of mere facts." He had seen most of the art collected in the museums of the world but could not understand the art in Paris, and he had assiduously studied Marx and found his lessons inapplicable to Paris.¹¹² What was of interest were the giant electric motors. As he grew accustomed to the gallery of machines, he began to feel them as a moral force, much as the early Christians saw the cross. By the end, he began to pray to them.¹¹³ To him, they were like an occult mechanism. "Between the dynamo in the gallery of machines and the engine-house outside, the break of continuity amounted to abysmal fracture for a historian's objects." At the same time, he sees, quite presciently, the force revealed by the discovery of radium: "The force," Adams notes, "was wholly new."¹¹⁴

Thinking about the nature of these new forces and technologies, Adams began to reconsider the nature of history, both as a substantive analysis of what had happened in the past and as a mode of disciplined inquiry. He tells us, "Historians undertake to arrange sequences,—called stories, or histories—
assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect. These assumptions, hidden in the depths of dusty libraries, have been astounding, but commonly unconscious and childlike; so much so that if any captious critic were to drag them to light, historians would probably reply, with one voice, that they had never supposed themselves to know what they were talking about.” Looking back on his own work, Adams recalls that he had published a dozen volumes of American history just to satisfy himself that facts arranged in a rigorous way could establish a “necessary sequence of human movement.” One may doubt that this was the reason, or at least the primary reason, for writing the history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations, but Adams still expressed dissatisfaction with the result, pointing out that when he presented his sequence, others saw something quite different. Of course, that others saw the same facts differently does not disprove Adams. These critics may only have looked at the facts from a different perspective. But, as Susan Haack has pointed out, “Truth is not relative to perspective; and there can’t be incompatible truths. . . . But there are many different truths—different but compatible truths—which must somehow fit together.” More importantly, Haack adds, “Although what is true is not relative to perspective, what is accepted as truth is; although incompatible statements cannot be jointly true, incompatible claims are frequently made.” And one might add, in good Millian fashion, that the conflict between differing perspectives can further the search for truth. Adams seems to have seen this; remember his suggestion to President Eliot of Harvard that he appoint Henry Cabot Lodge as a conservative counterbalance to his own radical democratic position. But still, Adams, for all his greatness as a historian, gives up too soon. The sequence of men leads to nothing, he concludes, and the sequence of society cannot go further, while the time sequence is artificial and the sequence of thought mere chaos. He therefore turns dramatically to the “sequence of force; and thus it happened that, after ten years’ pursuit, he found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, with his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new.”

This, he thought, was something very new. The discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo had broken professorial necks in about 1600, and a hundred years before that, Columbus had turned the world upside down, “but the nearest approach to the revolution of 1900 was that of 310, when Constantine set up the Cross.” A totally new education was required to deal with this almost unprecedented situation. The comparisons that leaped to his mind are interesting and important in the context of his thought. “The force of the Virgin was still felt at Lourdes, and seemed to be as potent as X-rays;
but in America neither Venus nor Virgin ever had value as force—at most as sentiment. No American had ever been truly afraid of either.”

Returning to a theme that goes as far back as his paper “The Primitive Rights of Women,” Adams comments:

The Woman had once been supreme; in France she seemed potent, not merely as a sentiment but as a force. Why was she unknown in America? . . . When she was a true force she was ignorant of fig-leaves, but the monthly magazine-made American female had not a feature that would be recognized by Adam. The trait was notorious, and often humorous, but anyone brought up among Puritans knew that sex was sin. In any previous age, sex was strength. Neither art nor beauty was needed. Everyone, even among the Puritans, knew that neither Diana of the Ephesians nor any of the Oriental goddesses was worshiped for her beauty. She was a goddess because of her force; she was the animated dynamo; she was reproduction.

The key here is clearly not sexual activity as such, but reproduction. It was the power to reproduce that made woman the central force in the family and thus the center of society as a whole. This was the source of woman’s energy. Again returning to an earlier theme, this time from Chartres, he says, “On one side, at the Louvre and at Chartres, as he knew by the record of work actually done and still before his eyes, was the highest energy ever known to man, the creator of four-fifths of the noblest art, exercising vastly more attraction over the human mind than all the steam-engines and dynamos ever dreamed of; and yet this energy was unknown to the American mind. An American Virgin would never dare command; an American Venus would never dare exist.”

Here Adams steps back from the centrality of motherhood for a moment and asks questions about sex and its representation in American culture. Adams wants to know whether any American artist ever insisted on the power of sex, as the classics had always done. In general, the answer to the question was no. The major exception was Walt Whitman, who could hardly be more different from Adams. He also mentions Bret Harte, who wrote sympathetically of gamblers and prostitutes, and one or two unnamed painters. For the rest, he says, sex was mere sentiment.

Adams is even critical of his friend, the sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens, claiming that as an American, his art was starved from birth, while Adams admits that his own instincts were “blighted from babyhood.” For Adams, the Virgin of Amiens became a symbol of force, while for St. Gaudens, she was
merely a model of taste. Even Adams began to feel the Virgin’s force only in 1895, and even then, not everywhere. “At Chartres—perhaps at Lourdes—possibly at Cnidos if one could still find there the divinely naked Aphrodite of Praxiteles—but otherwise one must look for force to the goddesses of Indian mythology.” Artists complained that the power of, say, a railroad train could never be captured. But Adams could see that “all the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres.” Adams therefore decided to pursue the mystery of this force, thus leading him to write *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, remarking wryly that the problem could scarcely be more complex than radium. The Virgin would be easier to handle, Adams thought, though he was later forced by his never-ending curiosity to consider radium and other aspects of the new science. And the specter of controlling force begins to be raised. “Forty-five years of study had proved to be quite futile for the pursuit of power; one controlled no more force in 1900 than in 1850, although the amount of force controlled by society had enormously increased.” The issue starts to become whether we can control the forces being unleashed by the new science and technology. The difficulty was that the world was growing more and more confusing and required more and more intellectual energy to cope with it. Looking at everyday life, he expresses his thought—his dilemma—with moving clarity:

In all this futility, it was not the magnet or the rays or the microbes that troubled him, or even his helplessness before the forces. To that he was used from childhood. The magnet in its new relation staggered his new education by its evidence of growing complexity, and multiplicity, and even contradiction, in life. He could not escape it; politics or science, the lesson was the same, and at every step it blocked his path whichever way he turned. He found it in politics; he ran against it in science; he struck it in everyday life, as though he were still Adam in the Garden of Eden between God who was unity, and Satan who was complexity, with no means of deciding which was truth.

Gone are the old New England certainties; this is a genuinely open and perplexed mind. This is no dogmatist, but rather a questing spirit casting doubt on the means of discovering truth and, by extension, truth itself. We may not like the results of the search, but we can only respect the intensity and tenacity with which it is carried out. Adams is not one to give in to despair, in spite of appearances. The search goes on.

And here his thoughts begin to turn again to politics, though on a very high level of abstraction. Politics and science begin to merge. “All one’s life,”
Adams tells us, "one had struggled for unity, and unity had always won. The National Government and the national unity had overcome every resistance, and the Darwinian evolutionists were triumphant over all the curates; yet the greater the unity and the momentum, the worse became the complexity and the friction." Adams has to deal with these complexities with no sure sense of the nature of truth. However much he loves the image of the woman and the Virgin, deep down, Adams senses that it is too late for them to be of much help. One can contrast the twentieth century with the beauties of medieval France, all to the advantage of the latter, yet Adams knows that he has no choice but to live in the very different world of American modernity. Recall also that he lacks the faith so eloquently portrayed in Chartres. And, to look ahead, it is by no means as clear as is commonly believed that Adams completely rejects the modern American world. He is always a divided and ambivalent thinker.

Another Try at Political Education

In 1901, Adams visited the Wagner Festival in Bayreuth, where, with the dark strains of Götterdämmerung sounding in the background, he began to explore his notion of conservative Christian anarchy. Though he does not use the term there, the idea of a form of anarchism is explored earlier in Chartres; if anything, there is more anarchy displayed there than in the Education. Though he briefly cites Saint Thomas as one source, that seems entirely implausible, but, given his probably heretical portrait of the Virgin, she clearly qualifies for the label anarchist. In his image, Mary is distrustful of authority, is concerned with the victims of injustice, cares for the poor, and is at home with ordinary people. In conventional modern terms, however we may label Adams, his heroine is definitely positioned on the Left. Adams cannot have been unaware of this. In the larger context of his political thought, what does this mean? It is possible only to speculate, because Adams gives us very little to go on. As I have already suggested, a close reading of Chartres suggests more sympathy for modern complexity or multiplicity than Adams usually allows. And, more speculatively, if my reading of Adams on multiplicity is correct, his picture of the Virgin might be a somewhat indirect way to introduce a critical leftist position into the complex discussions of modern politics. This is, as I suggest, pure speculation; I know of no direct textual support, other than the guarded defense of socialism he offers in his letter to his brother on Hungary, presenting it as the best in an array of bad choices provided by modern politics. Of course, there is also the Virgin's disdain for
authority and her tendency to support the underdog, both characteristic positions of the Left.

But, if this is not Adams's specific intent, are contemporary readers justified in using his work as a platform to explore such ideas anyway? I think the answer is yes, if they are cautious. Obviously, we are not entitled to make past political thinkers say any old thing we want them to say. Plato cannot be read as a modern democrat, and Marx is no partisan of capitalism beyond its "necessary" position along the road to socialism. But it is not uncommon or improper to discover hidden meanings in a text or to discern implications of a line of reasoning that the author may not have seen or intended or fully worked out. Once ideas reach the public, they take on a life of their own. If they are good and fruitful, they may stimulate others to take them beyond their initial boundaries. This is one way that traditions of thought grow. Perhaps it is possible to use Adams in this way, though it is important not to claim that Adams read in this way is the historical Adams.

In any event, these implications are not so clear when Adams turns to conservative Christian anarchism. There he admits to having "played with anarchy; though not with socialism." He tells us that his branch of the anarchist's party consists of two members, himself and Bay Lodge, the son of Henry Cabot Lodge. The role of each is to denounce the other as "unequal to his lofty task and inadequate to grasp it. Of course, no third member could be so much as considered, since this great principle of contradiction could be expressed only by opposition; and no agreement could be conceived, because anarchy, by definition, must be chaos and collision, as in the kinetic theory of a perfect gas." This law of contradiction was a kind of agreement, a limitation of personal liberty, but the continuous contradictions could lead to a still larger contradiction. "Thus the great end of all philosophy—the 'larger synthesis'—was attained, but the process was arduous, and while Adams, as the older member, assumed to declare the principle, Lodge necessarily denied both the assumption and the principle in order to assure its truth." Of course, Adams is playing games with Hegel as well as with his readers, though one has to doubt that, given his aversion to metaphysics, he was seriously influenced by the great German. It is much more likely that what is at work here is his intellectual playfulness and his sheer contrariety.

But the game continues for a time, though I think that for Adams, it is more than just a game. What he calls the "last synthesis" is a recurrent theme in his late work, including the correspondence. The synthesis reached concludes that,
order and anarchy were one, but that unity was chaos. As anarchist, conservative and Christian, he had no motive or duty but to attain the end; and, to hasten it, he was bound to accelerate progress; to concentrate energy; to accumulate power; to multiply and intensify forces; to reduce friction, increase velocity and magnify momentum, partly because this was the mechanical law of the universe as science explained it; but partly also in order to get done with the present which artists and some others complained of, and finally—and chiefly—because a rigorous philosophy required it, in order to penetrate the beyond, and satisfy man's destiny by reaching the largest synthesis in its ultimate contradiction.¹⁰

The major conclusion is that order and unity are contradictory, that the paradoxical fact is that order and chaos are synonymous. Moreover, these conclusions are validated for Adams not by Hegel's dialectic but, more importantly, by the findings of modern science as they emerged in the early twentieth century. Finally, it is important to keep in mind the analysis of Chartres, in which the conclusion is that unity may not be superior to multiplicity after all. With the exception of the last point, all these ideas become frequent motifs of Adams's thought, most notably in his late thinking about the nature of history. The prose may be playful, but the ideas are serious.

Adams is much too astute not to recognize the obvious objection to his formulations, namely, that they are neither conservative nor Christian nor anarchic. On the face of it, it seems like not a bad objection to say that the whole notion appears self-contradictory, but Adams is rather airily dismissive of this response. The "untaught critic," he says, should begin his education "in any infant school in order to learn that anarchy which should be logical would cease to be anarchic."¹¹ Prevailing anarchist doctrines were either innocent, sentimental derivations from Russian culture, such as those of Kropotkin, or the ideals of French workers "diluted with absinthe," leading to a bourgeois "dream of order and inertia." Both doctrines had simply inherited their conceptions of the universe from "the priestly class to which their minds obviously belonged." A mind that followed nature, as Adams's did, had no more in common with them than with socialists, communists, and collectivists. They all needed to go back to the twelfth century, where their ideas had enjoyed a reign of a thousand years. The conservative Christian anarchist must rest on "the nature of nature" itself. This hardly even needed proof, he says. "Only the self-evident truth that no philosophy of order—except the Church—had ever satisfied the philosopher reconciled the conservative Christian anarchist to prove his own."¹²
Blackmur offers an analysis of Adams's rather murky conservative Christian anarchism that is interesting and without Adams's flippancy. He admits that Adams gives us only a "primitive and ambiguous sketch." But, he suggests, "We can say that the point of view behind it is conservative because it holds hard to what survives in man's mind, Christian because it must encompass in a single piety even the most contradictory of the values which survive, and anarchic because all the values and every act of encompassment are products of an order of forces that are beyond the scope of the mind to control and that are perhaps alien and ultimately destructive to it." This is a reasonable interpretation, though I think only the comment on anarchism is wholly plausible. The interpretation of "conservative" is fairly close to the mark, though what survives in man's mind is by no means beyond debate, and one must ask whether encompassing contradictory values is particularly Christian; one might even say that Christianity often tries to exclude contradictory values. Still, this is an interesting effort that captures a sense of Adams's attempt to contain enormous turbulence within the framework of a deeply challenged tradition.

J. C. Levenson offers a simpler reading of conservative Christian anarchism. He considers it a term born from confusion that means the same thing as the conservative anarchism Adams mentioned in 1896. Here the term refers to someone who resists centralization "but anticipates (often with morbid glee) his own defeat with a general cataclysm to follow." Levenson sees this meaning as essentially frivolous, leading to Adams's facetious party of two. To find a serious meaning, we must go back to Chartres. Recall the formulation there in which Adams states that absolute liberty is the absence of restraint but that responsibility equals restraint, so that in an ideally free world, the individual is responsible to himself. Levenson reads this to mean that Adams is willing to accept that this is a world in which religion and society no longer control individual conduct. "Within that world he chose, on his own responsibility, to conserve the liberal values among which he had lived for as long as he could remember and, ultimately, the Christian values of which he had acquired a personal memory after great pains." This reading is, I think, closer to the mark than Blackmur's. It accommodates the point I made in the previous chapter that Adams's formulation skips over the liberal theory of responsibility and substitutes anarchism for it. The case for Adams's anarchism, and for the Virgin's, is compelling, though Adams goes much beyond the conception of anarchy advanced by Levenson. Further, the idea of conserving liberalism is central to the American political tradition of which Adams is a part. It is also important to remem-
ber that Adams's self-identification is as a liberal. However, it needs to be stressed that Adams's “Christianity" is entirely secular, paradoxical though that may be. The discussion of Christianity may have helped him recall a Protestant, Puritan code of conduct that supported his moral sense. His Christianity is certainly not Catholic. Adams, even if he had wished it, was not ready or able to embrace Roman Catholicism, as Levenson is well aware. As Adams wrote in 1915, referring to a priest with whom he was in correspondence, “Father Fay is no bore—far from it, but I think he has an idea that I want conversion, for he directs his talk much to me, and instructs me. Bless the genial sinner! He had best look out that I don’t convert him, for his old church is really too childless for a hell in this year of grace.136 On this, Levenson comments, “Except as his historical imagination carried him back to the high Middle Ages, he remained a stoic: God existed for him in the realm of essence and historical existence, perhaps, but not in the realm of present reality.”137 This is an odd sort of Christianity, I think.

Adams drops his arrogant tone almost immediately, admitting that, at the time, there was deep darkness. He could not even affirm, he says, that the “larger synthesis" would definitely turn out to be chaos, since, contrarian to the end, “he would equally be obliged to deny the chaos.” The rapid growth of industrial power and technology “drowned rhyme and reason.” At least the conservative Christian anarchists saw light in the darkness.118

The political party that Adams describes is a strange sort institution. Of course, it is not a party at all, except in a metaphorical sense, but rather a facet of Adams's philosophy of history. He is disturbed by the pace of social change. As he writes to Brooks, “Either our society must stop or bust.” And in the same letter he says, “I rather incline to think that the situation is new, not contemplated by nature, as hitherto constituted on this planet, and that God Almighty couldn't guess what will or won't happen. This being my view of it, I am not disposed to put my fingers into the machinery. Today, no doubt, this sounds rather mad. Ten years hence, who knows? . . . We know so little, and our power is so great.”138 One might read this as an expression of a conservative temperament distrustful of all efforts toward institutional reform. But I think the matter is more complex. By the time Adams wrote the Education, he clearly thought that nature was deeply involved in the dynamic of social change and that an adequate theory of history needed to take that fact into account. However, the other themes persist. He continues to believe in the absolute newness of the situation, and he continues to adopt a rather passive, let nature take its course, position. There is a deep-seated pessimism in his thought, though it is important to keep in mind the occasions when a
glimmer of hope rises to the surface. The pessimism is evident in a letter to the poet Bay Lodge, where he writes with perhaps a little more than his usual acerbity, "Also you know that Conservative Christian Anarchy, since Cain’s time, has seemed somewhat to lack popular approval. Although Christ came personally down from God the Father to set things straight, he seems to have failed, like most other poets."[40] And yet, amidst the gloom, there are outbursts of hope, not least about America, which he continues to see, for better or worse, as being well in advance of all other nations. To Americans’ great advantage is this fact:

In America all were conservative Christian anarchists; the faith was national, racial, geographic. The true American had never seen such supreme virtue in any of the innumerable shades between social anarchy and social order as to mark it for exclusively human and his own. He never had known a complete union either in Church or State or Thought, and had never seen any need for it. The freedom gave him courage to meet any contradiction, and intelligence enough to ignore it.[41]

Here and elsewhere, it seems that at least as late as 1907, Adams was not ready to give up on America, whose saving grace seems to be an almost Whitmanesque ability to contain multitudes. What is troubling is his unwillingness to turn his mind toward meaningful reforms. This is not so much conservatism as an inclination to a passive determinism fostered by his understanding of science, sometimes tinctured by hope, but that proved, I argue later, to be a limiting factor on his political theory. And, of course, his flip­pant remarks about throwing his weight to whatever side would hasten the collapse of the system he loathed are totally irresponsible and potentially dangerous if acted upon. To see the danger, one need only consider the fate of the German communists who failed to confront the Nazis, thinking that the triumph of Hitler would lead to a rapid collapse, after which the Left would pick up the pieces.

In spite of this unwillingness to resuscitate his interest in reform, Adams remained an interested and interesting observer of politics.[42] Foreign policy was a matter of great concern to him, and he used his connection with John Hay to influence it as much as possible. But he was not always successful, and he opposed the sudden emergence of the American empire. Still, at the time in his life when, on the surface, he should or could have been very influential, he was not. He did not like what he called McKinleyism. Washington was needed to control the new power in the land, but, though "amus­
ing," the capital was interesting mainly for its distance from New York. "The movement of New York had become planetary—beyond control—while the task of Washington, in 1900 as in 1800, was to control it. The success of Washington in the past century promised ill for its success in the next." After the death of McKinley, Adams might have tried to use his influence with his friends President Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge, now a senior and very influential senator from Massachusetts. However, the young president was a problem rather than a solution. The trouble with Roosevelt was a basic character flaw. "Power when wielded by abnormal energy is the most serious of facts, and all Roosevelt's friends know that his restless and combative energy was more than abnormal." Wryly, Adams compares himself with Seneca, saying that Seneca "must have remained in some shade of doubt what advantage he should get from the power of his friend and pupil Nero Claudius, until, as a gentleman past sixty, he received Nero's filial invitation to kill himself. Seneca closed the vast circle of his knowledge by learning that a friend in power was a friend lost." An instinct of self-preservation kept him from the White House. "Power is poison," he reflected. Its effect on Presidents had been always tragic; chiefly as an almost insane excitement at first, and a worse reaction afterwards; but also because no mind is so well balanced as to bear the strain of seizing unlimited force without habit or knowledge of it. . . . Roosevelt enjoyed a singularly direct nature and honest intent, but he lived naturally in restless agitation that would have worn out most tempers in a month, and his first year of Presidency showed chronic excitement that made a friend tremble. The effect of unlimited power on limited mind is worth noting in Presidents because it must represent the same process in society, and the power of self-control must have limit somewhere in face of the control of the infinite. 

More might have been expected from Hay and Lodge than from Roosevelt, but if Adams had expected it, he was disappointed. Hay was tired and sick, and Lodge was in an impossible position. "He could not help himself, for his position as the President's friend and independent statesman at once was false, and he must be unsure in both relations." But beyond this, Adams thought that Massachusetts was an impossible state to represent, a state with a fragmented political culture that Adams knew would emerge everywhere. Already in Massachusetts there were simply too many forces at work: State Street and the banks; the Congregational clergy; Harvard; immigrants, especially the Irish; and even a new socialist class. In another of his startlingly
prescient analyses, Adams comments, “New power was disintegrating society, and setting independent centers of force to work, until money had all it could do to hold the machine together. No one could represent it faithfully as a whole.”

Give such leadership, it would not be surprising for Adams to despair of his hope of creating a society that would not merely control the trusts but manage them. As McWilliams says, for that to work, it would be necessary to place values ahead of programs. Since ideally, programs are based on values, this would doubtless be healthy. A transformation of values obviously implies a need for fresh thought, a theme that runs throughout the late work of Adams. However, what that new thought might entail is left more than a little unclear. Still, there may be a hint in a letter from Adams to Brooks. Theodore Roosevelt’s famous distinction between good and bad trusts is useless, Adams says. “It gives away our contention that they have no right to exist.” But this does not really take us anywhere, because “our society has chosen its path beyond recall.” It is too late for reform. All that can be done is to “vapor like Theodore” about honesty, law, and decency. Adams dams all this as useless. The result is that all we can do is “make the machine run without total collapse in a catastrophe” until it suffers its inevitable breakdown. Thus, by 1910, the hope extended in the Education seems to have been lost in a fit of despair, though the point that the trusts had no right to exist is a clue to his deeper feelings.

This does not imply that the failure to produce a society with the values and programs Adams would have preferred leads him to abandon democracy as a hope, even if it is not a reality. Nor are his concerns limited to the United States. When the Roosevelt administration privately negotiates a Far Eastern peace settlement, he complains, “About five hundred million people were waiting with their lives and money at stake, to hear what these two jackasses said, and nobody ever suggested that the 500,000,000 should be anyhow consulted. I’m going to die, soon—thank God.” But aside from this generalized and perhaps atypical concern, Adams continues to have faith in the ultimate good sense of the American people, in spite of his disgust with Theodore Roosevelt. As late as 1905, he writes, “As yet nothing is broken. Our people are quick and practical and have not yet lost their heads.”

It is not hard to understand why Adams was disturbed by the politics of his time. After all, it was much like our own. There is a certain symmetry between the beginning of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. There was a great deal of corruption. Capital did at times seem out of control. And while Theodore Roosevelt was a better president than
Adams thought, there was good reason to fear his volatile temperament. Of course, the problems were structural and institutional, not just products of the president’s flamboyant personality. And in spite of his worries, through all this, Adams maintained faith in the American people. Just as in the War of 1812, he saw that the problems of the nation were much more the fault of the political and economic leadership than of the people. Adams did not subscribe to a theory of the “degradation of the democratic dogma.” This is the title his brother Brooks gave to the posthumous collection of his papers aimed at a scientific theory of history. Indeed, Brooks probably read his own views into the title. Characteristically, “Brooks, when President Eliot mildly observed to him after an address at the Law School that he apparently did not overcherish democracy, responded abruptly in his harsh, full-carrying voice: ‘Do you think I’m a damned fool?’” This is not Henry’s style. It is worth noting that when the scientific essays were reissued ten years after their first appearance, they were shorn of Brooks’s title and his lengthy introduction as well. The new title was The Tendency of History, a much more suitable label. As for Henry, while it is abundantly clear that he was not some precursor of the participatory democracy of the 1960s, he was still committed to the theory and practice of representative democracy. President Eliot of Harvard was quite mistaken, I think, when he said after reading the Education, “I should like to be saved from loss of faith in democracy as I grow old and foolish. I should be very sorry to wind up as the three Adamses did. I shall not unless I lose my mind.” It is equally mistaken for Samuels to follow this point by suggesting that Adams repudiated democracy in his late work. But it is also clear that democracy as well as much else was threatened by corporate capitalism, by the dramatic growth of technological power, and by the science that made technological power possible.