

## ***the education of henry adams*** **fifty years after**

henry wasser

We are now one year after the semi-centennial of the death of Henry Adams, and, despite considerable criticism, still troubled by the problem of how to explain his mind. A major appraisal would emphasize the pattern of his thought which connects its components, would indicate a certain susceptibility to diverse kinds of metaphysical pathos in religion and in science, would realize the influence of his intellectual habits on his speculations and finally would recognize that he was not the *esprit simpliste* but of those habitually sensible of the general complexity of things. Notable as a number of books on Henry Adams published in the last two decades have been, none attain all of these objectives. As a beginning toward definitive assessment, therefore, one might indicate the significant characteristic of this mind which lies athwart all movements of thought in America from 1870 to 1910.

The key to comprehensive evaluation is that Henry Adams is an intellectual of morality to whom scruple in the sense of a strict and minute regard for what is right is central. The whole point of his *Education* is scruple of thinking and thence of action. The test of the democratic process to him was whether or not the seat of power attracts scrupulous intelligence and gives it full freedom. The final goal in society was the responsible control of social energy. Since the ultimate values of society are rarely detected with absolute clarity, every move toward an education ought to be made with maximum intelligence and should be subject to every criticism one's experience provided. Society, however, in Adams' view saw the goal as *immediate* power and values as those of personal self-interest of individual or groups. Therefore the ultimate objective, control of social energy, was left to irresponsible interests, i.e., interests responsible only to self and not to society. Consequently Adams' dilemma was the dilemma of the intellectual—

Should he assume that his society was not a field for intelligence and that its motion was sufficient to its needs?—the

alienated, the uncommitted intellectual (None of the Adamses had ever shirked his social duty—in their view this *persona* seemed especially foreign for an American).

Should he postulate society's basic corruption and work actively for its subversion?—the revolutionary intellectual (Adams believed himself to be so shaped by tradition and education as to be unable to follow Marx).

Should he rather enter the field, outwardly conforming to society's rules while inwardly following his own goal the best he could as his grandfather John Quincy Adams had done?—the committed intellectual (Post Civil War America scarcely permitted even this split existence).

Or should he work on society from the outside, accepting his final defeat at the beginning and express the society rather than attempt to control it?—the stoic, even existential intellectual (This last formulation most clearly fits the Adams we now read).

In making this choice Adams brought the entire pressure of all the education he could muster upon society from the outside. As *The Education* relates, his first pressure was practical political journalism (especially essays on finance and politics); his second was also practical (teaching history at Harvard, editing the *North American Review*); and his third was imaginative expression, to recapture the meaning of human energy and thereby, if possible, gain a sense of unity, both for himself and for society (his histories, biographies, fiction and philosophical essays). He inevitably failed to find the meaning of human energy, i.e., to find God or unity, but he recognized his lack of success, uniquely describing his failure and the bypaths of his fruitless search and scrupulously recording the agonies of his quest in *The Education*. This revelation of his complex awareness in his cognition of failure is perhaps the closest to unity that an American could come, for as he writes:

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. (*Education* [Boston, 1961], 408).

Yet Adams as an American intellectual had to have unifying conceptions as working principles whereby he could provisionally ascertain every value to be conveyed to his reader.

But also to the reader Adams had to communicate the sense of failure, for the mind must ultimately come to failure because it is compelled to measure its knowledge in terms of its ignorance. The ordinary education stops at success, but Henry pushed his mind to the limit of

reason and his feeling to the limit of sensibility and failure is inherent in the attempt. Adams' scrupulous intellectuality made him dramatically aware of his own failure, and this awareness is the major drive of his work. To R. P. Blackmur this kind of failure is the expense of greatness. The greatness of Adams' mind is in the effort of its imagination to solve the problem of meaning of self and society and the use and value of their energy. The greatness is in the attempt itself, in the multiple responses deliberately made to every level of experience—the scientific, the religious, the political, the social and the trivial.

Failure and perhaps greatness had also been the lot of Henry's ancestors. After a lifetime of effort to control power intelligently, marked by occasional and transitory success, every Adams had ended as a failure—neither John nor John Quincy had succeeded in being re-elected president nor had Charles Francis succeeded in becoming president. But where his ancestors had found in a combination of scruple and temper an effective termination of useful public careers, Henry found his scrupulous intellectuality enough to preclude a public career altogether. The end of life found all of them to be bitterly aware of their own failures. But with Henry it is now possible to judge him one of the most finely honed intellectuals of our society at a time when America of necessity has been undergoing the kind of complex self-awareness and examination that pervades *The Education*. The book then becomes less an autobiography of an unusual mind than a guide for society's self-analysis, and the self-analysis of the morally aware intellectual becomes the stance that society must assume.

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