

ACADEMIC CRITICISM ON  
HENRY ADAMS: CONFUSION  
ABOUT CHAOS

HARRY M. CAMPBELL

Few writers have been both praised and condemned for the wrong reasons more than Henry Adams, mainly because his pessimistic philosophy very easily provokes emotional arguments either for or against it. A number of critics who are usually well balanced seem to assume an extreme position when they are discussing Adams. Consider, for example, the essays on Adams by Yvor Winters in his The Anatomy of Nonsense (1943) and by Professor Robert E. Spiller first published in Saturday Review of Literature (February 22, 1947) and reprinted as part of his chapter on Adams in the Literary History of the United States (Macmillan, 1948).<sup>1</sup>

Winters in particular characteristically adopts an Olympian attitude in disparaging his victim with such phrases as "childish mentality" applied to all Adams's works except the History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. To consider a specific instance, Winters finds a "certain iridescence of emotional surface but precisely nothing of sanity" in the famous passage in the Education in which Adams can find only disillusionment in the study of psychology as a possible source of unity. In his lifelong search for unity for the individual, Adams had at last come wearily to investigate psychology only to discover

that the psychologists had, in a few cases, distinguished several personalities in the same mind, each conscious and constant, individual and exclusive . . . . To his mind, the compound . . . took at once the form of a bicycle rider, mechanically balancing himself by inhibiting all his inferior personalities, and sure to fall into the subconscious chaos below, if one of his inferior personalities got on top . . . .

The mind, like the body, kept its unity unless it happened to lose its balance, and the professor of physics, who slipped on a pavement and hurt himself, knew no more than an idiot what knocked him down, though he did know -- what the idiot could hardly do -- that his normal condition was idiocy, or want of balance, and that his sanity was unstable artifice. His normal thought was dispersion, sleep, dream, inconsequence . . . .

By that path of newest science, one saw no unity ahead  
 -- nothing but a dissolving mind.

Now, in Winters' opinion, "mechanically" here is synonymous with "by a base and contemptible trick," and since Adams speaks of the balance as artificial and of chaos as the only absolute truth, he means, according to Winters, that "one might as well immerse oneself in it [the chaos] as soon as possible." In other words, Adams's morality "aims at loss of balance." But certainly this is a strained interpretation of Adams's pessimistic language. In the first place, it must be remembered here that in this passage Adams is merely reporting that in his search for unity he could find no assistance from the outstanding contemporary psychologists. That he may have overstressed the degree to which chaos rather than unity for the individual mind is implied in their writings is beside the point; the point is whether or not Adams's interpretation of what he thought they meant indicated that his own philosophy and even, as Winters would have it, his morality "aimed at loss of balance." It seems to me that even St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, whose account of the mind or soul Winters (though not a Thomist, not even a Christian) thinks is the most satisfactory that has been given, would have found no basic disagreement with Adams's (of the modern psychologist's) description of the fragility of the human mind. The inferior personalities and the subconscious chaos St. Thomas would have called the Devil, against which the sane mind (by the help of God's grace of course) must struggle. To be sure, Adams lacked the steadying influence of St. Thomas's God, but so, by his own admission, does Winters. Without such assistance, then, man must make his own order, and certainly no one else tried harder than Adams, from whom Winters himself (rather contradictorily since he accuses Adams of "aiming at loss of balance") quotes several passages like the following:

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.

But Adams could never have agreed with Winters that one can believe something merely because such a belief seems best adapted to preserving or increasing his mental welfare. "The philosophical problem, as I see it," says Winters,

is to keep as scientific, as Aristotelian, an eye as possible upon the conditions of our life as we actually find ourselves forced to live it, so that we may not make the mistake of choosing a mystery which shall, in proportion as it influences our actions, violate these conditions and lead to disaster. For example, a strictly deterministic philosophy . . . can lead only toward automatism in action, and automatism is madness. And similarly, a strictly nominalistic

view of the universe can lead only to the confusion and paralysis reached by Adams . . . . If we find that a theory violates our nature, we have then learned something about our nature; and we have learned that there is something wrong with the theory.

This reasoning of Winters, Adams would surely have said, sounds dangerously like the pragmatism of William James as applied to belief: we believe something because "it links things satisfactorily." The whole function of philosophy," said James,

ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me at definite instants in our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one.

And of course the choice of a world-formula should be determined by this "definite difference," provided, James adds, we manage to "assimilate the novel in our experience to our beliefs in stock." In this way, says James in the concluding sentence of his essay entitled "What Pragmatism Means," the conclusions of pragmatism "will be as friendly as those of Mother Nature."<sup>2</sup>

Although Adams (with considerable justification) would have scorned this kind of argument, he did try very hard to find for himself the emotional unity experienced by believers in the thirteenth century, but his skeptical mind interfered with an emotional faith and found far too many rational flaws in the intellectualized faith of scholastic philosophy. An extremely devastating analysis of medieval philosophy is his chapter on Abélard and William of Champeaux in Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, in which, reporting an imaginary extension of a debate between the two, he proves with flawless logic that nominalism, if logically extended far enough, always leads to materialism and that realism, if similarly extended, always leads to pantheism -- chaos, then, in the very stronghold of unity. "Narrow and dangerous," he says, "was the border-line always between pantheism and materialism, and the chief interest of the schools was in finding fault with each other's paths." There was chaos even in St. Thomas's great Church Intellectual, which Winters praises so highly, but never more definitely than to say that it "steadied the thought of the period with a little of that rarest form of profundity curiously called common sense." Why, then, does not Winters specifically point out the common sense profundity in the following and other fundamental tenets of St. Thomas in which Adams found such grave logical difficulties?

Abélard's question [says Adams] still remained to be answered. How did Socrates differ from Plato -- Judas from John . . . . Were they, in fact, two, or one? What made an individual? . . . The abstract form or soul which existed as a possibility in God, from all time -- was it one or many? To the Church, this issue overshadowed all else, for, if

humanity was one and not multiple, the Church which dealt only with individuals, was lost. To the schools, also, the issue was vital, for, if the soul or form was already multiple from the first, unity was lost; the ultimate substance and prime motor itself became multiple; the whole issue was reopened . . . . Thomas Aquinas was not so happily placed, between the Church and the schools . . . . Thomas asserted that the soul was measured by matter . . . and suggested that the body's form might take permanence from the matter to which it gave form. That matter should individualize mind was itself a violent wrench of logic, but that it should also give permanence -- the one quality it did not possess -- to this individual mind seemed to many learned doctors a scandal.

Also on the point of man's free will, Adams reasoned thus: if God was, as St. Thomas contended, "the sole and immediate cause and support of everything in His creation," then this fact, which St. Thomas ignored, must follow:

God was also the cause of its defects, and could not -- being Justice and Goodness in essence -- hold man responsible for His [God's] own omissions. Still less could the State or Church do it in His name . . . . He wills that some things shall be contingent and others necessary, but He wills in the same act that the contingency shall be necessary . . . . In the same way He wills that His creation shall develop itself in time and space and sequence, but He creates these conditions as well as the events.

If Adams found these and many more logically irreconcilable difficulties in medieval theology, he found still more in modern theology, which he considered worse than none at all, and he would have scorned a "common sense" theory like that of Winters which determines truth by what it promises toward insuring our sanity. Adams was an honest and a fearless thinker, and he saw no honest reason for asserting that the truth about the universe is necessarily adapted to preserving or increasing our sanity; sanity, he had decided, must dispense with such magical assistance, however precarious the balance may be in even the healthiest of us.

Winters apologizes for the elaboration of his argument but explains that he feels it necessary because

my acquaintance with the minds of my literary contemporaries is extensive, and I am sure that many of them derive an important part of their thought from Adams, though many of them do not know it; and to my great regret I have found that many of the most brilliant of them understand simple matters only with the greatest of difficulty.

To elucidate these simple matters that his brilliant contemporaries can understand only with the greatest of difficulty. Winters feels it necessary throughout his argument not to spare the cudgel. To consider another example, he scorns as trivial the difficulties that Adams found in the theories of Darwin and Lyell as another approach toward unity. Winters admits that his own knowledge of biology is slight but says that even an elementary knowledge of the subject would have removed these difficulties for Adams. Winters ignores or is unaware of the fact that Lyell had Adams write the introduction for the American edition of The Principles of Geology and was well satisfied with Adams's writing, which contained a sharp reference to one of the difficulties scorned as trivial by Winters. Also, and far more important, two of the three points which Adams raised in his Education are precisely the difficulties which Darwin himself in The Origin of Species admitted as seriously valid for an adverse criticism of his theory. Winters says that Adams need not have been disturbed by the presence of nothing higher than shellfish in the Cambrian period, because, to quote Winters, "the shellfish, Mollusca and Arthropoda, represent the two phyla most highly developed before the chordates." Of course, but Adams's point was that there should be forms intermediate between the shellfish and chordates to prove the gradual, minute-variation, uniformitarian ascent proposed by Darwin. As Adams says:

When the vertebrate vanished in Siluria, it disappeared instantly and forever. Neither vertebra nor scale nor print reappeared, nor any trace of ascent or descent to a lower type. The vertebrate began in the Ludlow shale, as complete as Adams himself -- in some respects more so -- at the top of the column of organic evolution: and geology offered no sort of proof that he had ever been anything else.

The following sentence from The Origin of Species indicates that Darwin himself found this difficulty important:

The several difficulties here discussed, namely -- that, though we find in our geological formations many links between the species which now exist and which formerly existed, we do not find infinitely numerous fine transitional forms closely joining them all together; -- the sudden manner in which several groups of species first appear in our European formations; -- the almost entire absence, as at present known, of formations rich in fossils beneath the Cambrian strata, -- are all undoubtedly of the most serious nature.<sup>3</sup>

In the latter part of this statement Darwin has admitted the seriousness of another problem that disturbed Adams and is considered trivial by Winters -- the fact that in the pre-Cambrian epochs there was at that time absolutely no trace of organic existence. Again Darwin says:

. . . the difficulty of assigning any good reason for the absence of vast piles of strata rich in fossils beneath the Cambrian system is very great . . . . The case at present must remain inexplicable, and may be truly urged as a valid argument against the views here entertained. (253, 254)

Since Adams is telling what his views were about the time or a few years after The Origin of Species appeared, the fact that later discoveries have largely removed these difficulties certainly does not prove that he any more than Darwin was "witty rather than intelligent" in being disturbed by them at that time.

Winters, too, finds Adams's judgment of art vitiated by a thorough-going relativism. According to Winters, Adams insists throughout Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres that the judgment of art must be wholly relative. "He prefers the older tower of Chartres cathedral to the later," says Winters, "and as far as one can judge from the photographs the preference is certainly sound; but he cannot defend the preference." The fact is that Adams gives two full pages of expert analysis defending his preference for the older tower, though he admits that some eminent critics have preferred the newer. "Of course," says Adams,

one sees that the lines of the new tower are not clean, like those of the old; the devices that cover the transition from the squares to the octagon are rather too obvious; the proportion of the flèche to the tower quite alters the values of the parts . . . . There can be no harm in admitting that the new tower is a little wanting in repose for a tower whose business is to counterpose the very classic lines of the old one . . . . The new tower has many faults, but it has great beauties, as you can prove by comparing it with other late Gothic spires, including those of Viollet-le-Duc. Its chief fault is to be where it is. As a companion to the crusades and to Saint Bernard, it lacks austerity. As a companion to the Virgin of Chartres, it recalls Diane de Poitiers.

The rest of the two-page discussion of the two towers contains criticism quite as acute and judicial as this, and the same competence is to be found in the whole book in the various fields of art, architecture, philosophy, religion and politics. The whole point of the matter is that it is not Adams but Winters who is confused. Adams finds confusion, but he certainly does not create it. The chaos, if we may believe a very respectable and serious group of philosophers from Heraclitus to Sartre, may be in the nature of things. Winters of course can legitimately argue against this philosophy, but as a critic who emphasizes rational understanding he should understand that many intelligent men (including Adams, who lived to be eighty and remained a serious scholar, mentally alert, to the very last)

have believed in cosmic chaos without suffering any damage to their normal activities or their mental processes.

Winters' chaotic understanding of the philosophy of chaos is shared by Professor R. E. Spiller, who speaks of "Adams' creation of an arbitrary cosmology for his purposes." Like Winters, Professor Spiller apparently cannot understand that Adams was merely following out very carefully in his theory the logical implications of the best scientific thought of his day. Professor Spiller admits on one page that "The choice of the second law of thermodynamics, the law of dissipation of energy, as the needed formula, was dictated by the stage to which physical science had developed by 1910." He admits this and yet on the very next page condemns the logic of Adams's theory in the following curious criticism:

These two hypotheses [unity for the Middle Ages and multiplicity or chaos for the modern world] are complementary when treated in purely intellectual terms, but they present a fundamental inconsistency when viewed in the light of emotion. Adams thus also creates, perhaps unwittingly, a dichotomy between intellect and emotion which supplies the pattern for his art form, but which destroys the validity of his theory as an instrument for the logical explanation of the universe.

Professor Spiller apparently means here that from the artistic standpoint the hypothesis of unity for the Middle Ages and that of multiplicity or chaos for the modern world make an artistically polarized combination, but that the loss of unity in modern times is emotionally distressing -- the artist is adversely affected by his own creation -- and hence the dichotomy between the intellectual (artistic) unity and the emotional dispersion in suffering. But emotional suffering because of a certain explanation of the universe does not necessarily mean that this explanation was made emotionally and therefore illogically. Unless one has the fortitude of a Spinoza, he may suffer as a result of his very soundly intellectual and rational understanding of the truth if the truth seems to be tragic. But more of this point later.

Though Spiller, like Winters, makes no qualification in his total condemnation of Adams's theory "as an instrument for the logical explanation of the universe," yet, unlike Winters, Spiller feels that Adams (though failing for the universe) attained for himself a personal (semireligious) philosophical unity (a kind of Bergsonian exaltation of intuition) through his vast studies in unity and multiplicity, especially through his study of the Virgin.

The truth which Adams recognizes [says Professor Spiller] is that unity may be achieved through emotion even when denied by reason . . . . She [the Virgin] could put in terms of positive symbolism what the hooded figure in Rock Creek could only permit by reflection. This is what Adams had learned from the American woman, but he had to trace it

back to twelfth-century France to find it unembarrassed and whole. Intuition is above reason; love may triumph over logic; art can speak deeper truths than science.

There are two fundamental errors in these remarks: (1) That love can triumph over logic was certainly a belief of the Virgin's worshippers in the Middle Ages, but Adams says that for himself and for most moderns the power of the Virgin and religious faith in general is dead. For example, in Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres he says, sadly but positively:

For seven hundred years Chartres has seen pilgrims, coming and going more or less like us, and will perhaps see them for another seven hundred years; but we shall see it no more, and can safely leave the Virgin in her majesty, with her three great prophets on either hand, as calm and confident in their own strength and in God's providence as they were when Saint Louis was born, but looking down from a deserted heaven, into an empty church, on a dead faith.

In his introduction to Adams's novel Esther, Professor Spiller quotes the following passage from the Education as evidence of what Adams had learned from the Virgin and believed about her:

He [Adams] never doubted her force, since he felt it to the last fibre of his being, and could no more dispute its mastery than he could dispute the force of gravitation of which he knew nothing but the formula.<sup>4</sup>

But Professor Spiller does not notice that just two pages beyond this passage, when Adams read that M. de Plehve had been assassinated at St. Petersburg, he was stunned by

this scandalous failure of her Grace [that of the Virgin Mary]. To what purpose had she existed, if, after nineteen hundred years, the world was bloodier than when she was born? The stupendous failure of Christianity tortured history. The effort for Unity could not be a partial success; even alternating Unity resolved itself into meaningless motion at last . . . . The old formulas had failed, and a new one had to be made . . . . Therefore, when the fogs and frost stopped his slaughter of the centuries . . . he sat down as though he were again a boy at school to shape after his own needs the values of a Dynamic Theory of History.

And (2) as for the hooded figure in Rock Creek, it is true that Adams at one time gave it as a title "the peace of God," but this seems to have meant only a stoical resignation, not a religious hope, because he specifically told St. Gaudens that he wished the figure to symbolize "the acceptance, intellectually, of the inevitable."<sup>5</sup> It is certainly hard to see how an intellectual acceptance of the inevitable can be interpreted by Professor Spiller to mean that, in Adams's opinion, "intuition is above reason; love may triumph over



logic; art can speak deeper truths than science." Professor Spiller goes on to say that Adams "was not alone on these pilgrimages to Rock Creek . . . . His tragedy had become his secret index to the mystery of life and death." But how could it be such an index when Adams said specifically (in a letter quoted by Cater) that the figure was meant "to ask a question not to give an answer; and the man who answers will be damned to eternity like the men who answered the Sphinx"? (610)

The truth seems to be that Professor Spiller, starting out from his perfectly valid comments about the artistic unity of Chartres and Education, is trying to read into Adams's conclusions in these books some additional philosophical unity, for which Adams was indeed looking but which was the exact opposite of what he found. That Professor Spiller falls into such a misinterpretation as I have attributed to him is further indicated when he says that Adams's quest for a scientific formula to explain the nature of the universe was

as romantic as those of Ahab for Moby Dick or Parsifal for the Holy Grail. As in those cases, it became a search for the symbol of the life force, an effort to wrest the meaning of man from a reluctant nature by sheer violence. The discovery of a new and scientific basis for history would mean the creation of a new religion.

I have carefully searched Adams's writings to find where Spiller gets this curious idea about Adams's romantic hope, but I cannot find it. What I find, for example, in the chapter entitled "A Dynamic Theory of History," is this:

The influx of new force was nearly spontaneous. The reaction of mind on the mass of nature seemed not greater than that of a comet on the sun . . . the idea that new force must be in itself a good is only an animal or vegetable instinct. As Nature developed her hidden energies, they tended to become destructive. Thought itself became tortured, suffering reluctantly, impatiently, painfully, the coercion of new method . . . as the mind of man enlarged its range, it enlarged the field of complexity, and must continue to do so, even into chaos, until the reservoirs of sensuous or super-sensuous energies are exhausted, or cease to affect him, or until he succumbs to their excess . . . . This, then, or something like this, would be a dynamic theory of history.

And the same is true of Adams's attitude toward the dynamo, about which Professor Spiller writes, somewhat glowingly, as follows: "Adams, in the high excitement of discovery, chose the dynamo as a central symbol of modern civilization . . . . Here was the outward image of his second kind of force, almost specific enough to excite worship if worship were due." But Professor Spiller does not detect the weary irony in Adams's reference to this terrifying object, before which one was almost inclined to

fall down and worship. If one should worship, Adams implies, it would be for the same reason that early man propitiated the gods, whose chaotic power to destroy him he feared. "For Adams's objects," says Adams of the dynamo,

its value lay chiefly in the 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. No more relation could he discover between the steam and the electric current than between the Cross and the cathedral . . . . Langley could not help him. Indeed, Langley seemed to be worried by the same trouble, for he constantly repeated that the new forces were anarchical, and specially that he was not responsible for the new rays, that were little short of parricidal in their wicked spirit towards science . . . . In these seven years man had translated himself into a new universe, which had no common scale of measurement with the old. He had entered a supersensual world, in which he could measure nothing except by chance collisions of movements imperceptible to his senses, perhaps even imperceptible to his instruments, but perceptible to each other, and so to some known ray at the end of the scale.

And so I can only conclude that Professor Spiller is in error when he says that, in Adams's opinion, "love may triumph over logic," and that Adams's quest for truth was as "romantic" as that of Parsifal for the Holy Grail. Adams was far more like his spiritual descendents of the twentieth century, the atheistic existentialists Sartre and Camus and their followers for whom the condition of the universe and the fate of its inhabitants can only be described as tragically Absurd. Winters is certainly right in saying that Adams did not find Unity for himself or for the universe, but Winters was certainly not justified in calling Adams's arguments foolish or intellectually less valid than the opposing view. Indeed, if we discount the obviously erroneous timing of his dire predictions in "The Law of Acceleration," the basic part of Adams's explanation of the universe has by no means been disproved. According to Wasser, for example, the best judgment about the second law of thermodynamics, the law of dissipation of energy (as recently as 1956, and there is no evidence of a change since then), was as follows: "The most recent physics has not found the second law of thermodynamics untenable; it has emphasized that the law might hold true of a closed universe, but that it has by no means been ascertained whether the universe is closed or open."<sup>6</sup> So although we hope that Adams was wrong, it seems that there is a definite possibility that he may have been right; indeed the destructive forces revealed in the atom and hydrogen bombs and the evidence (accepted now by many astronomers) of an expanding (sometimes

called exploding) universe (with no evidence of a compensating contraction) might well support Adams's general theory of eventual cosmic dispersion and chaos. And if his theory should prove to be true physically, he certainly accumulated a vast amount of evidence indicating that it might include the degradation of psychical and social as well as physical energy -- for example, the decline of rural population, the multiplication of suicides, and the increase of nervous exhaustion, insanity, alcoholism, drug addiction, crimes of violence and so forth. In philosophy, likewise, since Adams's death the existentialist Absurd (the term borrowed from Kierkegaard) as the basis of life (reflected in many aspects of art, music, drama, fiction and poetry) might well lend credibility to Adams's general theory for all those not prepared to follow Kierkegaard's leap beyond reason into faith. Instead of ignoring or scorning pessimistic prophets like Adams and Spengler, we should take seriously their dire predictions, which are based on a most convincing array of accurate data, and do all that is humanly possible (invoking also divine assistance) to prevent these predictions from coming true. The decline is certainly here; perhaps the fall may be averted.

Oklahoma State University

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> I have selected these two critics as typical in content (if extreme in expression) because I find no other critic who presents an interpretation of Adams's attitude toward chaos and unity essentially different from that of one or the other of these two. Baym, Blackmur, Cater, Hume, Levenson and Samuels believe, like Professor Spiller, that Adams found some kind of unity (aesthetic or religious) for himself that counterbalanced his intellectual skepticism and belief in cosmic chaos. Cf. Max I. Baym: The French Education of Henry Adams (New York, 1951), 204; R. P. Blackmur: The Expense of Greatness (New York, 1949), 275-276; Harold D. Cater: Introduction to Henry Adams and His Friends; A Collection of His Unpublished Letters (Boston, 1947), lxxxviii; Robert A. Hume: Runaway Star: An Appreciation of Henry Adams (Ithaca, New York, 1951), 191, 218-219, 228-230; J. C. Levenson, The Mind and Art of Henry Adams (Boston, 1957), 271-288, 323-331; Ernest Samuels: The Young Henry Adams (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1948), passim. On the other side, More, Arvin, Jordy, Hochfield and others, though less caustic than Winters, believed, like him, that Adams did not find unity for himself and that his attitude toward this problem was not intellectually valid. Cf. Paul Elmer More: Shelburne Essays, Eleventh Series (Boston, 1921), 140; Newton Arvin: Introduction to Selected Letters of Henry Adams (New York, 1951), x; William H. Jordy: Henry Adams: Scientific Historian (New Haven, Connecticut, 1952), passim; George Hochfield: Henry Adams (New York, 1962), 139, 144.

<sup>2</sup> Pragmatism (New York and London, 1943), 50 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Darwin, The Origin of Species and the Descent of Man (New York: The Modern Library, n. d.), 255.

<sup>4</sup> R. E. Spiller, Introduction to Henry Adams, Esther (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1938), xix, quoting Henry Adams.

<sup>5</sup> Cater, Introduction, liii, quoting Adams.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Wasser, The Scientific Thought of Henry Adams (Thessaloniki, 1956), 5.