

History:

IN DEFENSE OF HENRY ADAMS

In a recent essay, critic Alfred Kazin praised Henry Adams for possessing a "a mind so fine that no 'practical' ideas about *anything* could violate it." But when similar judgments were voiced by Adams's contemporaries, they were not intended as compliments. Judged by the pragmatic standards of the 1890s, Adams, the descendant of American presidents, appeared to be a failure. And in some of his own writings, this troubled Bostonian criticized himself as an overprivileged dabbler. All this has too often obscured Adams's real achievement—his lucid analysis of American culture on the brink of the 20th century. Here, historian Jackson Lears reconsiders that accomplishment.



by T. J. Jackson Lears

"What was the matter with Henry Adams?" the novelist Owen Wister once asked Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Holmes replied with brusque assurance: "He wanted it handed to him on a silver platter." Both Wister and Holmes knew what "it" was: political power, prestige, influence in the world of public affairs. To a scion of the house of Adams, a descendant of two presidents, national eminence seemed a birthright. And Henry Adams never attained the kind of eminence he thought he deserved.

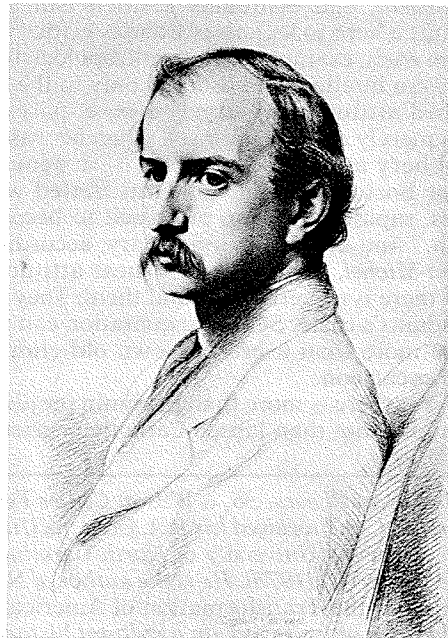
To be sure, Adams's life was crowded with accomplishments. He was born in Boston in 1838. A childhood attack of scarlet fever nearly killed him, leaving him shorter and slighter than his classmates. But young Henry Adams's mind remained robust, his wit puckish, his curiosity omnivorous. He graduated from Harvard College in 1858, studied briefly in Berlin, returned to the United States, and then traveled to Britain to serve as secretary to his father, Charles Francis Adams, Sr., who was Ambassador to the Court of St. James during the Civil War. He edited the influential *North American Review* and taught history at Harvard for seven years. He also authored two biographies, two novels, and a nine-volume *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (1889–91). Toward the end of his life, Henry Adams penned two extraordinary volumes of cultural criticism: *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1904), an elegiac lament for the lost intensi-

ties of medieval faith and feeling; and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), an idiosyncratic autobiography.

Rather than parading his achievements in the conventional Victorian manner, Adams's *Education* aimed to show (among other things) how inadequately he had been fitted for life in modern industrial America. Exuding dust and ashes, the autobiography pronounced its author a "failure," detailing his disillusionment with the national creed of progress and predicting unprecedented social chaos as technological power outran the human capacity to control it. *The Education* established Adams's reputation as a fastidious dilettante who inflated his private disappointments into a vision of technological apocalypse and who never sought high public responsibility because he wanted it handed to him on a silver platter.

Generations of historians have tended to accept Justice Holmes's view. From Van Wyck Brooks to Richard Hofstadter, they have taken *The Education* at its word and treated Henry Adams's career as an example of the decline of the powerful Northeastern families at the turn of the century. From this view, Adams was merely the most thoughtful and articulate among a generation of sour patricians unable to adjust to a raw new industrial democracy. Rejected by the populace, discomfited by the new world of machines, they retreated from worldly achievement to escapist fantasy (like Adams's medievalism) or languorous aesthetic dabbling. Their careers, once bright with promise, dimmed to the autumnal glow of *fin de siècle* decadence.

An 1868 sketch of Henry Adams by Samuel Laurence. Adams briefly took up journalism in Washington that year—"the nearest approach to a career for a literary survivor of a wrecked education," he later wrote.



The problem with this argument is that it is grossly oversimplified. The whole notion of a "waning patriciate" is based on the complaints of the patricians themselves. In recent years, demographers and social historians have made clear that the old American gentry have kept a tenacious hold on wealth and power from the Civil War down to our own time. Around the turn of the century, they merely became less visible, moving from elective office to the Foreign Service, from manufacturing to investment banking. Quietly they helped formulate a new, pragmatic liberalism that sanctioned a partnership between big business and the regulative state, providing a firmer rationale for corporate capitalist development. For every "begonia" like Henry Adams (as a Republican Senator once called him), there was a strapping bully-boy like Theodore Roosevelt.

But was Adams really such a begonia? Certainly in the activist view of men such as Holmes, an Army veteran and Supreme Court Justice, Adams's withdrawal from the strife of the world was somehow unmanly and un-American. There is an almost stereotypical quality to Holmes's dismissal of Adams: The patron saint of pragmatic liberalism puts down the quintessential aesthete and pessimist. That put-down was based on the assumption that the man who is not up and doing, particularly if he has Adams's talents and advantages, has somehow squandered his birthright. And that assumption led to the conclusion that Adams's work as a speculative artist of ideas could be regarded as a whine of petulance.

The petulance is certainly there, along with snobbery, anti-Semitism, and fastidious aestheticism. The aestheticism has made Adams a hero to legions of literary critics who have come to revere him as an early example of the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's *bricoleur*—an intellectual absorbed only in the "free play" of ideas. This detached attitude was largely a pose, part of Adams's pretense that he was merely amusing himself when he was desperately serious. But the snobbery and anti-Semitism were genuine—if commonplace. Like other Boston patricians, Adams fretted wryly that "the new socialist class, rapidly growing, promised to become more exclusive than the Irish." And even the Virgin Mary, according to his depiction in *Mont-Saint-Michel*, "hated Jews." These attitudes are disagreeable enough, and there is no getting around them: They are the inherited deformities of Adams's caste. Selective quotation can make Henry Adams look like little more than a broken-down old clubman, a fugitive from a *New Yorker* cartoon.

Yet there is more than Brahmin prejudice in Henry Adams—just as there is more than lapsed-Catholic prurience in James Joyce. Adams's

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letters, now being published by Harvard University Press in a superb, comprehensive edition (three volumes have so far appeared), reveal an elegant style, a supple intelligence, and a remarkable capacity for observation. His accounts of Samoan life (1890–91) are amazingly precise and sensitive evocations of an alien culture. The letters also show Adams's sustained capacity for loyalty, tenderness, and warmth toward family and friends. His playful letters to children are particularly touching; they express a sensibility that is almost entirely suppressed in his *Education*.

But it is for *The Education* that Adams is most widely—and justly—remembered. That book is far more than the wail of a displaced patrician; it is a devastating assault on the most complacent assumptions of the transatlantic Victorian culture: that Anglo-American civilization represented the highest point mankind had ever reached, that the reign of rationality could be painlessly achieved through the expansion of industrial capitalism, that material improvement meant moral advance as well. Yet *The Education* also acknowledged that the emerging post-Victorian culture, for all its therapeutic nostrums and its demands for “more life,” might be more dangerous than its predecessor.



Adams's critical stance was only partly shaped by class and ethnic prejudice. It was far more powerfully influenced by his personal turmoil as son, husband, and doubting religious seeker. This may seem surprising, because on the surface *The Education* is the most impersonal of autobiographies. Adams was reticent about his relationship with his parents, silent about his relationship with his wife. He wrote about himself in the third person, in a tone of bemused detachment, creating a nervous, bumbling “Henry Adams” persona. “The habit of doubt; . . . the tendency to regard every question as open; the hesitation to act except as a choice of evils; the shirking of responsibility; . . . the horror of ennui . . .” —these habits of mind characterized the young Adams of *The Education* and intensified as the narrative proceeded.

Adams was not merely engaging in ironic self-deprecation but elevating personal conflicts to a philosophical plane. By emphasizing the fragmented and diffuse nature of his own identity, Adams implicitly scored contemporary notions of self-made manhood achieved through conscious will and choice. By exaggerating his own ineffectuality, Adams dramatized his failure to free himself from his inherited cultural traditions: a Victorian moral code; a liberal faith in individual autonomy; a positivist belief that science could explain the universe through all-embracing “laws”; and a progressive assumption that improvements in material life meant moral advance as well. These were the foundations of 19th-century bourgeois values; in *The Education* they were embodied in Charles Francis Adams, Sr. Repeatedly, *The Education* examined the paternal heritage and found it wanting. The “failure” of Henry Adams, *The Education* implied, was traceable to the failure of his father's culture.

Early on in *The Education*, Henry Adams's faint praise sets up his father as a convenient target. Charles Francis Adams, Sr., "possessed the only perfectly balanced mind that ever existed in the name." His "memory was hardly above the average; his mind was not bold like his grandfather's or restless like his father's, or imaginative or oratorical—still less mathematical; but it worked with singular perfection, admirable self-restraint, and instinctive mastery of form. Within its range it was a model." Henry Adams denied to his father all the mental qualities the son had come to value: memory and imagination, boldness, restlessness, analytical precision; there was nothing left but the coldness of "perfect poise." Yet the criticism was not merely personal. From the outset, Adams made clear that his father's shortcomings were those of a transatlantic bourgeois culture. "The Paris of Louis-Philippe, Guizot, and de Tocqueville, as well as the London of Robert Peel, Macaulay, and John Stuart Mill, were but varieties of the same upperclass bourgeoisie that felt instinctive cousinship with the Boston of Ticknor, Prescott, and Motley."

And of all these, the calmest and most confident were the Boston Unitarians who controlled Harvard College. In their view, "politics offered no difficulties, for there the moral law was a sure guide. Social perfection was also sure, because human nature worked for Good, and three instruments were all she asked—Suffrage, Common Schools, and Press. On these points doubt was forbidden. Education was divine, and man needed only a correct knowledge of facts to reach perfection. . . ." This progressive creed produced balanced and moderate men like Adams's father. Harvard College was full of them; so were the New England congressional delegations that Adams encountered during the secession winter of 1860–61, when he prepared to accompany his father to his ambassadorial post in England. As he said, in one of his characteristically self-canceling sentences: "The New Englander's strength was his poise which amounted almost to a defeat."



Under the shadow of such sanity and poise, it was not surprising that the young Henry Adams betrayed similar qualities of mind. Even his Class Day Oration at Harvard, he wrote in *The Education*, "was singularly wanting in enthusiasm"—though "one of the elderly gentlemen noticed the orator's 'perfect self-possession.' Self-possession indeed! If Harvard College gave nothing else, it gave calm." In retrospect, Adams saw himself as a priggish, pale reflection of his father, performing a series of filial submissions that left his own identity unformed and progressive platitudes unchallenged. After seven years under the paternal thumb in London, Adams returned to Washington and briefly jostled against corruption, earning some reputation (though little money) as a crusading journalist. Finally, he bowed to his father's urgings and returned to Harvard as a member of the history faculty in 1870.

By this time, popularized distortions of Darwinian evolutionary theory had provided scientific sanction for faith in progress and made



A relief figure of the Virgin from Chartres. Adams idealized Mary as the source of medieval "unity."

"a new religion of history." As Adams noted dryly, "Never had the sun of progress shone so fair. Evolution from lower to higher raged like an epidemic." From the perspective of *The Education*, a professor of history at confident, Unitarian Harvard could be little more than "a school master . . . a man employed to tell lies to little boys." No wonder Adams titled the chapter on his return to Harvard "Failure."

Yet even in the early years, there were hints that Adams had not entirely submitted to his father's world view. Travel had promoted perplexity. Rome, for example, where Adams journeyed in 1860, "could not be fitted into an orderly, middle-class, Bostonian systematic scheme of evolution." And science could be turned against itself, as Adams learned when he discovered the existence of the fish *Pteraspis*, the first vertebrate, which despite its position "at the top of the column of organic evolution" had vanished some 400 million years ago. To Adams, the *Pteraspis* became an emblem of the flaws in evolutionary theory as well as an ironic father-symbol: "To an American in search of a father, it mattered nothing whether the father breathed through lungs, or walked on fins, or on feet." Substituting *Pteraspis* for his father, he implied a rejection of his father's faith in a progressive, orderly cosmos. Embracing contradiction and paradox, he abandoned the certainties of 19th-century science.

Toward the end of *The Education*, Adams increasingly questioned

the assumptions of popular scientific thought. Amid new discoveries, the attempt to form universal scientific laws—especially the law of progress—began to seem quixotic. Adams read Karl Pearson on the limits of scientific research and Henri Poincaré on the notion of hypothesis as convenience; to Adams, both undermined the 19th-century faith that scientific advance would soon explain the universe through the steady accretion of knowledge.

Adams also discovered that the experiments of Marie Curie and Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen with radiation and those of Michael Faraday with electricity suggested the existence of forces which could not be mechanically measured. Adams believed the new forces fatally weakened scientists' claims to certainty. Nineteenth-century science had provided a kind of surrogate religion, unifying and explaining the cosmos; that explanation had been shattered by "the sudden irruption of forces totally new." The false unity and order proposed by evolutionary optimism was giving way to the multiplicity and randomness acknowledged by 20th-century science. For Adams, the master symbol of the powerful new forces was the dynamo, which he first encountered at the Paris Exposition of 1900. The dynamo generated extraordinary amounts of electric power while "scarcely humming an audible warning"; its murmuring bulk expressed "ultimate energy"—a disturbing new "kingdom of force" that was more powerful than the men entrusted to govern it.



And if the new physics had undermined the concept of a unified cosmos, the new psychology had discredited the idea of a unified self. Like many of his contemporaries, Adams was fascinated with unconscious dreams and fantasies, with multiple personalities and other mysteries of divided selfhood. It was not accidental that *The Education* emphasized his own sense of psychic fragmentation in contrast to the willed unity of his father's character. In Adams's view, the modern personality "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 only absolute truth was the subconscious chaos below, which everyone could feel when he sought it." Normal waking consciousness was a product of "artificial balance," and the "perfect poise" of 19th-century men like Adams's father was even more precarious. The apparently rational man, Adams wrote, "was an acrobat, with a dwarf on his back, crossing a chasm on a slack-rope, and commonly breaking his neck."

Preoccupied by subconscious and cosmic chaos, the mature Henry Adams was remarkably attuned to some of the deepest intellectual currents of his age. Translating his personal quarrel with his paternity into an enduring critique of modern culture, he concluded that "Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man." Yet Adams continued to dream of unity amid modern confusion. His search for meaning and

purpose led him away from what he saw as the "masculine" world of systematic achievement into the "feminine" realm of sensuous responsiveness, aesthetic sensitivity, and religious faith. *The Education* recounts that quest as well.

Adams's reverence for the "feminine" realm sprang from labyrinthine sources. He had always disliked "the strife of the world," preferring "taste and dexterity" to strength. He adored his sister Louisa and persistently sought female friends. In Marian Hooper, whom he married in 1872, he found a witty and willful female partner. (Charles Francis Adams, Sr., never liked her.) To Adams's painful disappointment, the couple was childless. An equally serious problem was that Marian, an accomplished photographer, seemed to draw nearly all her strength from her father, and little or none from her husband. After her father, a prominent Boston doctor, died in 1885, Marian entered a depression that led to suicide at the end of that year.

Adams's life was "cut in halves." Gradually he emerged from mourning to finish his *History* and to embark on the years of travel and study that produced *Mont-Saint-Michel* and *The Education*. Frustrated by his own childlessness, Adams was saddened beyond words by the loss of his wife. He never mentioned her in *The Education*, but her presence brooded over many a page, providing the emotional impetus for his apotheosis of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin possessed a special (and certainly unorthodox) significance for Adams. In *Mont-Saint-Michel*, he had exalted her as a kind of vital force, a mother-goddess who embodied a religion of love rather than law, and whose queenly power unified medieval culture for a brief historical moment—until men lost their faith by trying to codify it in syllogisms. In *The Education*, Mary preserved this significance and became a kind of heavenly counterpoint to the demonic energy of the dynamo.

Adams's celebration of Mary as an emblem of emotional and instinctual vitality stemmed from his own idiosyncratic needs, but it was also part of a much wider restiveness at the turn of the century: a desire to escape the sexless aridity of the Victorian world view and to seek intense, immediate experience. This "vitalist" strain linked Adams with philosophers (William James, Henri Bergson), literati (Guillaume Apollinaire, e.e. cummings), and a host of popular therapists promising to heal the wounds in the modern psyche through the cultivation of an authentic "real life." For some, the pursuit of intense experience involved "masculine" commitment to Theodore Roosevelt's cult of "the strenuous life"; for others—like Henry Adams—it meant escape to a wider "feminine" world. Whatever paths it took in particular cases, in the United States as a whole the quest energized a broad cultural revival that helped ensure the resilience of the Protestant upper class. Adams was both exemplar and critic of that revival; *The Education* was its most sophisticated manifestation.

Alongside its criticism of Adams's paternal heritage, *The Education* contained a retrospective record of his effort to create a richer sense of self than Boston Brahmin culture approved. As a boy, he preferred summer to winter, the country to the town, the "smell of hot pine-woods and sweet-fern" in Quincy to the "thick, muddy thaws" in Boston.

A BRAHMIN IN SAMOA

Five years after his wife's death, a still-grieving Adams traveled to the South Pacific. This 1890 letter to his friend Anna Lodge reveals a keen eye as well as a marked improvement in the author's spirits:

Samoa is very little changed from what it was in pagan times. The Christianity is native, and differs little from the native paganism except that more customs are kept secret. I am not sure but that if we stayed here a few months anywhere except in Apia, we should be obliged, in order to maintain our dignity as chiefs of America, to take wives and contract alliances with neighboring chiefs. The relation need not be permanent, and our partners at our departure would be regarded with great respect and would probably marry native missionaries instead of pining for us. . . .

Every married woman here, after a few years' residence with her husband, returns to her father with half the children, and lives as she likes. I think the custom will commend itself at once to New York society, not to mention that of Washington. . . .

Our European rival, Robert Louis Stevenson, lives in the hills and forest, where he cannot rival us in social gaiety. We have been to see him, and found him, as he declared, very well. I should need to be extremely well to live the life he has led and is still leading, but a Scotchman with consumption can defy every fatigue and danger. His place is, as he says, "full of Rousseaus," meaning picturesque landscapes. I saw no Rousseaus, the day being unfavorable, but I saw a very dirty board cabin, with a still dirtier man and woman in it, in the middle of several hundred burned tree-stumps. Both the man and woman were lively, and, in their respective way, amusing; but they did not seem passionately eager for constant association with us, and poor Stevenson can't talk and write too. He naturally prefers writing. . . .

I mean to enclose some photographs if I can get them, to show what is the matter with us; but remember that the photograph takes all the fun out of the tropics. Especially it vulgarises the women, whose charm is chiefly in their size and proportions, their lines, the freedom of their movements, the color of their skin, and their good-natured smile. . . . The softness of lights and colors, the motion of the palms, the delicacy and tenderness of the mornings and evenings, the moisture of the atmosphere, and all the other qualities which charm one here, are not to be put into a photograph, which simply gives one conventional character to New England and Samoa alike.

Summer was a riot of immediate sense experience; "winter was school." Yet the pull of winter, and of Bostonian duty, remained. "Life was a double thing."

If Adams's masculine upbringing was marked by a series of failures, the cultivation of his "feminine" side was characterized by mystery and delight. Even in the early years, there were intimations of a world of experience beyond the boundaries of Boston gentility; not only in Quincy, but in the Southern town of Washington, D.C., where "the

brooding indolence of a warm climate and a negro population hung in the atmosphere heavier than the catalpas." In the South, "the want of barriers, of pavements, of forms" soothed his anxious spirit. Rome brought "soft forms felt by lost senses." And in Berlin, "he was one day surprised to notice that his mind followed the movement of a Sinfonie. . . . A prison-wall that barred his senses on one side of life, suddenly fell . . . a new sense burst out like a flower in his life, so superior to the old senses, so bewildering, so astonished at its own existence, that he could not credit it, and watched it as something apart, accidental, and not to be trusted. . . . Mere mechanical repetition of certain sounds had stuck to his unconscious mind." Like other *fin de siècle* vitalists, Adams looked to the unconscious as a source of imaginative impulses denied by an overly genteel society.

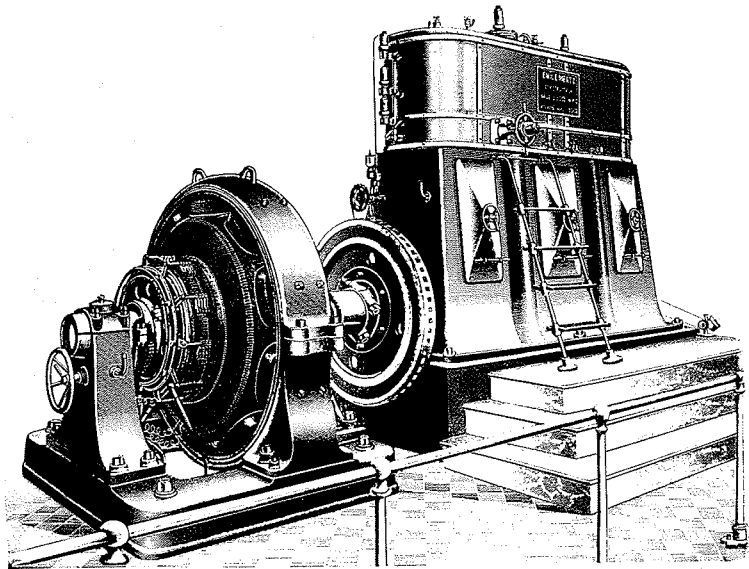
But unlike some of his peers, Adams never sentimentalized the realm of instinct or "nature." Recollecting his youthful response to Europe's medieval lights and shadows, Adams remarked that "he merely got drunk on his emotions. . . ." Without a larger framework of meaning, vitalism degenerated into an aimless cult of experience. This lesson became even clearer at the bedside of his sister Louisa, dying of lockjaw in an Italian hotel room in 1870. "Death took features altogether new to him, in these rich and sensuous surroundings. Nature enjoyed it, played with it, the horror added to her charm, she liked the torture, and smothered her victim with caresses."



Nature, the Great Mother, was both creator and destroyer. After the nightmare of his sister's death, Adams could never celebrate "the natural" as did many of his vitalist contemporaries and their successors. "For the first time in his life, Mont Blanc for a moment looked to him what it was—a chaos of anarchic and purposeless forces," he wrote.

Sentimental vitalism could not bring clarity and order to modern incoherence: That realization drove Adams to seek transcendent meaning in the Virgin Mary—particularly the 13th-century Virgin enshrined in Chartres Cathedral. She alone, he believed, had unified self and cosmos—not by devising scientific laws but by embodying the mystery of maternity. When 13th-century men subordinated themselves to the irrational power of the Virgin, they reached "the point of history when man held the highest idea of himself as a unit in a unified universe." But the moment they abandoned instinctive faith in maternal unity and began trying to impose the masculine unity of rationality, the drift toward 20th-century fragmentation had begun.

Try as he might, Adams could not worship at the Virgin's shrine. He was too "masculine" and too modern. As *The Education* makes clear, even during his later life he still loved to lurk about the corridors of power, plotting geopolitics with Secretary of State John Hay. Though he feared the dynamo, he remained fascinated by the power it embodied. The 20th-century American, Adams announced, "—the child



A steam-driven dynamo of the sort Adams found at the 1900 Paris Exhibition. He saw it as the new symbol of "ultimate energy."

of incalculable coal-power, chemical power, electric power, and radiating energy . . . must be a sort of God compared with any former creation of nature." He remained suspended between dynamo and Virgin, masculine and feminine ideals, longing for a sacred sense of meaning while he pursued the knowledge which corroded it.

It is easy to dismiss Adams as a nostalgic reactionary, unwilling to take on the challenge of the modern adventure. A more sensible reaction would be to acknowledge that Adams had the courage of his contradictions. His willingness to embrace insoluble conflict proved his greatest strength. He concluded that his most honorable course was not to flee modern doubt by creating a sentimental facsimile of medieval belief or by embracing the equally sentimental religion of progress. Nor did he retreat into cynicism. He kept asking ultimate questions. He kept trying to understand the cosmos and to preserve his faith in a supernatural dimension of meaning, without ever ignoring the tangled contradictions of the human condition—above all, the contradiction between the longing for infinite life and the certain fact of death. Facing squarely the tragic limits on human aspiration, Adams sustained his will to believe. For that, he deserves a place alongside Pascal, Kierkegaard, William James, and Miguel de Unamuno: All helped to create an honorable religious viewpoint for skeptical modern believers.

Adams's heterodox religious outlook underlay his critique of Amer-

ica's dominant culture. He realized that the new cult of intense experience was merely a sleeker, therapeutic version of progressive optimism—substituting medical for moral standards of value but preserving the fundamental evasiveness of the national creed. "America has always taken tragedy lightly," he observed. "Too busy to stop the activity of their twenty-million horsepower society, Americans ignore tragic motives that would have overshadowed the Middle Ages; and the world learns to regard assassination as a form of hysteria, and death as neurosis, to be treated by a rest cure." Adams understood that the belief in a progressive march into the future—whether justified in Victorian terms or by a therapeutic idiom—was in part a flight from death itself.

Adams's own view involved more than a pessimistic rejection of official optimism. It also implied a sympathetic awareness of human fallibility and moral complexity, a refusal to join the terrible simplifiers of the world, a distaste for cant and empty ideology. These are essential virtues in the 20th century, when the terrible simplifiers are armed to the teeth.

The final irony, one Adams would have appreciated, is that the progressive flight from death now threatens us with unparalleled death. Twenty years ago, at the height of the fallout shelter boom and Kennedy's confrontation with the Soviets, Lewis Mumford wrote "An Apology to Henry Adams" in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. He was sorry, Mumford said, that he had once dismissed Adams's apocalyptic predictions; now he realized that "the American Nostradamus" had uncannily anticipated the madness of the nuclear arms race.

We stand at a similar historical moment today, and Adams once again bears close reading. He worried about "the effects of unlimited power on limited mind"—a timeless problem but particularly resonant in the 20th century. He was delighted by the smashing of 19th-century certainties, but he knew that 20th-century science demanded "a new social mind" to control it. All the reasonable arguments of the last four decades have not yet created that "mind" among our policymakers—or among those of other powerful nations, for that matter. We badly need a thorough ventilation of what passes for thought in our higher circles of power; we could do worse than start with Adams's tough-minded patrician skepticism.

What was the matter with Henry Adams? He was elitist, ethnocentric, excessively self-conscious, maybe a little diffident. And he knew too much.

