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THE SURVIVAL OF THE UNFITTEST:
EVOLUTIONARY SOCIAL THOUGHT
IN THE WORKS OF HENRY ADAMS

by
David Spear Barber

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A B S T R A C T

THE SURVIVAL OF THE UNFITTEST:

EVOLUTIONARY SOCIAL THOUGHT IN THE WORKS OF HENRY ADAMS

by

David Spear Barber

Chairman: Lyall H. Powers

The influence of evolutionary thought on the social theories in Henry Adams's later writing is widely recognized. Because the earlier works have been relatively neglected, I have emphasized them in following his social theory from the optimistic evolutionism of his youth to the pessimistic catastrophism of his old age. Two background chapters survey the varieties of evolutionary social theory in the nineteenth century, discussing such writers as Comte, Darwin, Spencer, William G. Sumner, and William James. Chapter III concerns Adams's essays from 1858 to 1877; IV, The Life of Albert Gallatin (1879) and Democracy (1880); V, Esther (1884); VI, History of the United States (1889-91); and VII, The Education of Henry Adams (1907) and other later works. In addition to Adams's published works and letters, I have consulted his Harvard Class Day Oration, the Adams Collection at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the microfilmed Adams Papers.

The most important of the evolutionary concepts that Adams applied to social change was that of natural selection. In Democracy he contrasted the "natural world" of politics,

dominated by the struggle for existence, with the civilized world in which morality controlled the urge to power. This vision derived from Darwin's theory that as a nation becomes more civilized, natural selection affects it less. In the History Adams concluded that the struggle for existence is a law of nature which all societies, unlike individuals, must obey. Eventually Adams rejected Darwinism as a scientific theory, mostly for non-scientific reasons. He disliked the theory's common association with progress, the leisurely uniformity of Darwinian evolution, the utilitarianism of Darwinism, and the entire objective Darwinian universe which conflicted with his own growing subjectivism.

Young Adams formed no precise theory of social evolution until his re-introduction to America in 1868-70 made him question America's progress. Then, partly to reduce the significance of her possible failure, he developed a philosophy of social evolutionism which insisted that human society progresses in accordance with natural laws, but not that every society progresses. Progress is inevitable but slow, and government cannot hasten it but may retard it. Gallatin indicates how Adams's evolutionism derived from the Republicanism of Jefferson and Gallatin, which strongly appealed to him. But he eventually gave up this optimistic social theory, realizing (in Esther) that it was a valueless personal philosophy, and doubting more and more that social progress is inevitable or even likely. We can see these doubts intensify in the novels and especially the History, in which Adams

examined the various kinds of progress in America and concluded that they worked against each other. After the 1870's he moved toward a social Darwinism that valued struggle and lacked faith in progress. He stopped assuming that social change was slow, and conceived nature more strongly as man's antagonist, whose processes must not, however, be disturbed. His social Darwinism was mildly imperialist and at times militarist, but not racist, and a fierce commitment to individual freedom was at its center. Eventually Adams rejected social Darwinism insofar as he came to despise capitalism.

The central problem of Adams's social thought is whether the individual should adjust to social forces or resist them. The novels and the Education make clear that he favored resistance, believing that the moral individual cannot conform to society without losing his integrity. Attaining in his old age an existentialist vision of the universe as chaotic and the individual as isolated from a stupid, decadent society, Adams tried to conceive the individual as free from social and natural forces. His search for laws of social and historical development was ultimately an attempt to impose on a society which he rejected limitations which he, the free individual, escaped.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many individuals by their aid and encouragement have helped make the writing of this dissertation a pleasant and useful experience. I am indebted to Austin Warren, in whose class I first became interested in Henry Adams, and to John W. Aldridge, in whose seminar I decided to write my dissertation on Adams. Having made that decision, I was aided in defining my subject by the plentiful information and advice of Joe Lee Davis. My committee chairman, Lyall H. Powers, has patiently criticized and encouraged my work, as have Arno L. Bader and Charles R. O'Donnell. I am especially grateful for the support and helpful advice of Kenneth L. Jones.

The staff of the Massachusetts Historical Society took much time and effort to find books for me from the Adams Collection. The Harvard University Library kindly granted access to Adams's Class Day Oration of 1858. I am grateful to Henry Wasser and the Midcontinent American Studies Journal for permission to read Wasser's unpublished article "The Education of Henry Adams: A Reconsideration," and to Ernest Samuels for carefully answering my inquiry about Adams and Herbert Spencer.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ii

INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter

I. THE EVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT OF COMTE, BUCKLE, SPENCER, AND DARWIN 11

Pre-Darwinian Applications of Science to the Study of Society
Charles Darwin: *The Origin of Species*
Charles Darwin: *The Descent of Man*
Darwin and Spencer
Evolutionary Ethics

II. EVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT IN AMERICA: 1860-1900 . . 35

Darwin in America: Agassiz, Gray, and Wright
The Moral Theory of Dr. Holmes
Social Darwinism in America: William Graham Sumner
John Hay's Upper-Class Social Darwinism
Reactions Against Social Darwinism and Evolutionary Ethics
Science and Pragmatism
Beyond Social Evolutionism

III. FORMING A THEORY OF SOCIAL PROGRESS: 1858-1877 64

The Class Day Oration: 1858
Education in England: 1860-1868
Re-Introduction to America: 1868-1870
Scholarship and Cautious Theorizing: 1870-1877

IV. *THE LIFE OF ALBERT GALLATIN* AND *DEMOCRACY* . . . 92

The Life of Albert Gallatin
Democracy
The Nature of Democracy
The Natural World and the Moral World
Isolation

V. *ESTHER* 126

Determinism and Progress
George Strong's Evolutionism

Chapter Page

Esther's Instinct
The Isolated Individual

VI. HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES 151

Seeing the Present Through the Past
Nature and Idealism
Struggle Among Nations
Progress
Individuals

VII. THE LATER WORKS 180

Society and the Self
The Uses of Science
Progress and Social Darwinism
Capitalism and Socialism
The Great Escape

BIBLIOGRAPHY 220

INTRODUCTION

Because Henry Adams continually altered his ideas, the critic must avoid the temptation to freeze them, to take opinions expressed in any one book as the opinions of Adams. The purpose of my dissertation is to follow one of his most significant lines of thought as it developed in his earlier writing. As a young man Adams absorbed the dominant Anglo-American philosophy of the time: a faith in social evolution which assumed man to be perfectible and social progress inevitable. In the 1860's he read Comte, Buckle, Darwin, Lyell, and other scientific and social thinkers who stimulated in him the urge to apply universal laws to man's development. The slowly evolving Darwinian universe, governed by law but possibly subject at some points to chance, appealed to a young man who appreciated both order and novelty. Adams did not develop any precise social theory, however, until his re-introduction to America in 1868-70 raised doubts in his mind about the nation's progress. Then, to reduce the enormity of America's possible failure he developed a broad faith in human evolution which did not demand that every society progress. In the 1880's, however, this philosophy lost much of its validity for Adams. As he came to doubt that civilization progresses inevitably, he wrote (in Democracy and the History of the United States) of American democracy

as the most advanced phase of Western civilization, on whose development the fate of the Western world depended. Adams did not know where Western society was going, but he was convinced America was at its head.

Adams's early essays and reviews, his two novels, and his History show the influence of evolutionary thought in various ways. The essays and reviews through 1877 reveal a broad theory of social development which, without insisting that society obeys laws of biological evolution, saw in America "a silent pulsation that resembles in its mode of operation the mechanical action of Nature herself."[1] In Democracy (1880) Adams applied the Darwinian theory of natural selection, half literally and half metaphorically, to a society which seemed to be deteriorating. In the struggle for political existence the "fittest" survived by power alone, and in Washington the only progress seemed to be in corruption. But did corruption in the Capitol reflect the entire nation? What force controlled society: the urge for political and social power which characterized the nonmoral world of "natural selection," or the world of integrity and cultural gentility in which the best characters of the novel moved? In his History (1889-91) Adams treated the idea of natural selection more literally, and concluded that the struggle for existence is a law of nature which every society must obey. When applied to nations, he found, natural selection raised entirely

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[1]Henry Adams and Henry Cabot Lodge, "Von Holst's History of the United States," North American Review (1876), p. 361.

different moral questions than when applied to individuals. The History is also Adams's definitive attempt to apply the theory of social progress to the development of an actual society. The study did little to increase his faith in the theory of progress or the future of America, for after isolating the various kinds of social progress, he found that one kind worked against another. The net result appeared not to be progress. In his second novel, Esther (1884), Adams tested evolutionary theory in another way. He examined evolutionism as a philosophy for the individual who lives in the non-progressing present, and found it irrelevant and useless. Esther expresses, far more strongly than Democracy, the nature of his individualism. Already Adams felt that the moral individual was necessarily alienated from modern society. A person in trouble got no help from religion, society, or evolutionism. One had only oneself.

Adams's later work, beginning with "The Tendency of History" in 1894, has received more critical attention than the earlier writing. He continued to apply science, literally and metaphorically, to the study of society, but he turned from biology and the social sciences to the physical sciences for most of his theories and analogies. He ceased to write conventional history and concentrated on vast laws and an all-encompassing philosophy of history. Because of this natural break in Adams's thought and the unevenness of critical attention paid to his works, my dissertation will emphasize the earlier works.

In discussing Adams's social theories, we need to distinguish between social Darwinism and social evolutionism, terms which often are imprecisely used. Social Darwinism was based on the belief that struggle is a universal feature of society and the main force behind social change. It owed little to Darwin's biological theory, since Darwin hardly discovered struggle; but it did use the theory of natural selection as an analogy and a justification for social and economic competition. The social Darwinist did not have to believe that society is governed by laws of upward evolution, so he could, like William Graham Sumner, be skeptical about social progress. Because he glorified the struggle for existence, he insisted on the individual's freedom to struggle as best he could, and therefore opposed government interference in private affairs. He might also insist on the right of a social, national, or racial group to struggle against other groups; then he turned militarist, imperialist, or racist. Social reform he regarded as an intrusion into individual lives and a futile effort to alter nature: nature being defined as "the way things are." Politics and government cannot, he thought, hasten a society's development, though they may slow it down.

The main tenet of social evolutionism was that society does and must follow laws of social progress. But according to Comte and Buckle, for example, these laws need not be the laws of biological evolution or any other laws

which govern the natural world.[1] Though the social evolutionist recognized the function of struggle in social growth, he often insisted that as a society develops, struggle gives way to cooperation among men. He agreed with the social Darwinist that individuals--including politicians--cannot affect social change. But unlike the social Darwinist, he believed that progress is inevitable. He believed also that it is inevitably very slow, and man cannot hasten the process. At different times Henry Adams held ideas of each of these philosophies, though he was never contained in the bounds of either. In general, after the 1870's he moved from an optimistic evolutionism toward a social Darwinism that denied progress and envisioned rapid and catastrophic social change.

This dissertation will deal largely with the influence of various thinkers on Adams. As R. G. Collingwood says, "An intelligent inquiry . . . seeks to discover not the points of agreement, but the way in which the conclusions reached by one thinker give rise to problems for the next."[2] The problems which evolutionary theories of science and society posed for Adams were numerous and complex; some proved

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[1]The belief that man and society follow the laws of biological and cosmic evolution may be called evolutionary naturalism. This philosophy made nature the standard of morality. Herbert Spencer, for example, argued that since nature is the direct source of social progress, and since progress is good, therefore nature is good and to "follow nature" is always the moral course of action. Neither the social Darwinist, who could regard nature as man's antagonist, nor the social evolutionist, who could find in social evolution an exception to nature's laws, was committed to this moral theory.

[2]The Idea of History, p. 313.

insoluble. It is worthwhile to mention some of the most important problems at the start.

1) How to apply theories and methods of evolutionary science to the study of society? Adams proved unable, as had Comte, Darwin, and Spencer, to establish precisely the relations of science and the natural world to human society. The law of natural selection might justify ignoring the poor or rejecting the Enlightenment concept of the Rights of Man; it might justify imperialism, laissez-faire, racism, or war; or it might not. The struggle for existence (or pre-eminence) among individuals has little relation to struggle among nations, cultures, or races, even if the Darwinian law applies only metaphorically to society. But a metaphor, of course, does not need to be scientifically valid.

2) How to decide whether nature (Adams frequently capitalized the word) is morally good or cruel and wasteful? Perhaps her means are bad but her ends good. Perhaps nature has no moral qualities at all, though Adams liked to personify "Nature" and give her moral--or immoral--attributes. His treatment of nature varied according to his purposes in particular works.

3) How to apply evolutionary theory to the brief history of the United States? A historian might look to see the entire range of social development capsulized in America, or he might think that the nation represented one definite stage of development. The social evolutionist thought that change was slow, but Adams eventually found this view too

restricting. American history was brief; and unhurried, even change was to Adams as dull in history as in geology. The chaos of daily and yearly events, moreover, obscured whatever evolutionary laws might control them. One had to peer through the trees to find the forest.

4) How to define progress? Social evolutionists were notorious for ignoring this question. One could hardly know what any nation's material, moral, or intellectual progress was unless he knew what its causes were. Having determined the causes, he might then consider how in a society one kind of progress affects another kind. Adams thought this problem might at bottom be capable of mathematical formulation; but what was the correct formula?

5) How to adjust a general theory of progress to the facts of American history? Or: how to adjust American history to a theory of progress? If America was a radically new kind of society based on a sweeping rejection of European institutions, one might find it difficult to compare her to Europe. Did America represent progress in the history of Western civilization? And did 1870 represent progress from 1789, or Grover Cleveland from John Adams? This last question demanded that Henry Adams evaluate American democracy. He had to reconcile, if he could, his sense of superiority (influenced probably by social-Darwinist elitism as well as by his family background) with his sympathy for democracy. What was democracy, anyway: a quality of America's political system, or its social structure, or the character of

its people, or its economic system, or its geography?

6) How to reconcile his interest in politics and individuals with the social-evolutionist and social-Darwinist theory that individuals and government do not affect social change, except for the worse? The more Adams studied history and politics, the more he doubted that human action affected social change at all. What, then, of the Adams family's faith that moral politicians could guide the country in the direction of progress?

7) How to reconcile the determinism implicit in most evolutionary thought with his insistence on each man's moral responsibility, or with his theory of an elite group that guides society, or with his belief that men need noble ideals in order to survive, or, most important, with his individualism that steadily grew more intense, subjective, and defiant? Inseparable from Adams's interest in finding the laws of history and society was a need to conceive the individual as free from the control of these laws, free from the domination of nature and of society. This need distinguished Adams from many of the great evolutionary theorists of his time, such as Comte and Marx, whom Adams considered "the two writers of his time who most influenced its thought,"[1] and who ignored the individual in their concern with the movement of the social mass. For Marx the individual was negligible, and in Comte's opinion individualism was the disease of modern society. Though they influenced Adams, their concept of the individual

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[1]The Education of Henry Adams, p. 60.

was opposed to his, and it was partly this opposition that turned him against them.

Albert Camus wrote in The Rebel that "There is no such thing as a solitary man, that is the indisputable discovery of the nineteenth century."[1] One does not exist in a void but in society and the natural world. What, then, is the individual's relation to society and nature? According to that apostle of adjustment and individual freedom, Herbert Spencer, freedom increases as society evolves, and through social evolution men become better adjusted to their environment and learn to cooperate freely with each other. Cooperation comes naturally without governmental interference; in the meantime, one's duty to society is to take care of himself and not restrict the liberty of others. The young Henry Adams leaned toward this opinion, but his lifelong urge to resist and oppose society, his scientific and historical study, his observation of social change in America, his frustrated literary ambitions, his general sense of political and social uselessness, and the collapse of his personal life at the suicide of his wife, all combined to convince him that the relations between individual and society and nature were far otherwise than the Spencerians believed. What was one to do: resist social and natural forces, or adjust to them? This is the central problem of Adams's social thought. More and more as he grew older, his heart was in resistance, though he

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[1]Tr. by Anthony Bower (London: Hamish Hamilton, Ltd., 1953), p. 170.

lacked the decisiveness of the heroines of his novels. He hoped that by understanding the social and natural forces of his age, he could overcome them--that is, escape their control. In this respect Adams stood suggestively close to such individualists as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, of whom Karl Jaspers writes:

> They did not feel themselves to be a positive expression of their times; they rather expressed what it was negatively through their very being: an age absolutely rejected by them and seen through in its ruin. Their problem appeared to be to experience this epoch to the end in their own natures, to be it completely in order to overcome it. This happened at first involuntarily, but then consciously through the fact that they were not representatives of their epoch, but needling and scandalous exceptions.[1]

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[1] "Reason and Existenz," tr. by William Earle, in Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, p. 166.

CHAPTER I

THE EVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT OF COMTE, BUCKLE, SPENCER, AND DARWIN

Pre-Darwinian Applications of Science to the Study of Society

To apply principles of the sciences directly to the study of society, and to discover laws of social change by which to explain the present and predict the future, were goals of many nineteenth-century thinkers. Henry Adams wrote in 1894 that "any science of history must be absolute, like other sciences, and must fix with mathematical certainty the path which human society has got to follow."[1] In this essay Adams treated Darwin as the discoverer of a law enabling the scientist infallibly to explain the past and predict the future. Not that Darwin accomplished this, or that Adams really thought he did. Darwin's significance for the nineteenth-century sociologist or historian was rather that he presented laws which seemed applicable to human society as well as to the natural world. The vogue of applying scientific theories and methods to society, however, had been established well before The Origin of Species appeared in 1859.

"Montesquieu; even Macchiavelli; Turgot, Adam Smith,

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[1]"The Tendency of History," in The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma, ed. by Brooks Adams, p. 129.

and the political economists universally, both in France and in England; Bentham, and all thinkers initiated by him,--had a full conviction that social phenomena conform to invariable laws," wrote John Stuart Mill in his book on Comte.[1] Comte made a more sustained effort than anyone before him, however, to find the laws of social change. Much of his achievement was that having envisioned an orderly, unified world, he then told how we can come to know that world.[2] He asserted that we can know only phenomena: "There can be no real knowledge but that which is based on observed facts." We acquire our facts by studying mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and "social physics." Historically, the sciences were developed in this order, and each depends on those preceding it for help in establishing its own truths. "We could not pursue social science," Comte believed, "without having been prepared by the study of phenomena less complicated than those of society, and furnished with a knowledge of laws and anterior facts which have a bearing on social science."[3]

The study of society is most of all the study of ideas and opinions. "Ideas govern the world," Comte asserted, "or throw it into chaos; all social mechanism rests on

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[1] The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, p. 49.

[2] Comte showed his concern for order when he wrote: "The most terrible sensation we are capable of, is that which we experience when any phenomenon seems to arise in violation of the familiar laws of nature." The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, tr. and ed. by Harriet Martineau, I, 20.

[3] Ibid., I, 3, 8.

opinions."[1] For this reason the historical analysis of society, which he considered one of the sociologist's most useful methods, deals mainly with the history of human nature and thought. Through such study Comte discovered what he took to be an absolute law of the human mind and human society. This is the famous law of the three states of society and the individual mind: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. A man in the primitive theological state attributes natural phenomena to the conscious wills of supernatural beings. Monotheism is the most advanced stage of theological thinking. In the transitional metaphysical state, one conceives of abstract "essences" of objects, eternal qualities of which the concrete forms are manifestations. In the final positive state, one examines phenomena--the only knowable reality--in order to determine the laws which govern them. The law of the three stages is not merely a description of human history or the growth of individuals, Comte believed, but an active law which guides social progress. No human force can change the direction of progress which this law determines, though men may slow down the rate. Development ends when society achieves a static condition of near-perfection. Social evolution has an ultimate limit.[2]

Social progress, Comte maintained, is "subject to invariable natural laws, instead of to any will whatever." In such a world individuals count for little; for example, "The

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[1] Ibid., I, 14.

[2] Ibid., II, 88-89.

men of genius, to whom [social] progression has been too exclusively attributed, are essentially only the proper organs of a predetermined movement, which would, in their absence, have found other issues." The individual exists only as a functioning part of society, and the goal of social evolution is to make him an exact microcosm of his society, "to subordinate the satisfaction of the personal instincts to the habitual exercise of the social faculties, . . . with the view of identifying the individual more and more with the species."[1] Comte slighted the individual by reversing, in sociology, the normal order of scientific investigation and proceeding from the compound to the simple, the mass to the individual. Obsessed by a need for order, he feared the disorder inherent in individuality. So he advocated an authoritarian social system (patterned after his former Catholicism) to keep the masses in line. At this point Comte's desire for order shattered his logic, for authoritarianism does not follow from his analysis of the past. Thus Mill complained:

> We fail to see any scientific connexion between his theoretical explanation of the past progress of society, and his proposals for future improvement. The proposals are not, as we might expect, recommended as that towards which human society has been tending and working through the whole of history.[2]

Henry Buckle was the first Englishman to attempt "scientific history" in the sense of searching for laws of

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[1] Ibid., II, 85, 86, 151.

[2] Comte, p. 107.

social and historical change.[1] He learned much from Comte but did not follow him uncritically. Buckle saw the sciences as parallel rather than hierarchical, and, relying on statistical averages, he failed to maintain the distinction between the social and moral world of men and the world of physics. He developed no precise principle like Comte's law of the three stages of thought, nor any clear concept of a perfect society.[2] The idea most often associated with Buckle is that geography and physical environment control the growth of societies. Progress depends on man's overcoming the dominance of nature; the pre-eminence of Europe resulted from the absence of powerful natural forces such as deserts or extreme cold, and the consequent ability of Europeans to dominate nature. The mechanism of human history is the action of man and nature upon one another; the mechanism of progress is man's control over nature.[3]

The historian in search of unity is tempted to reject whatever violates it. So Buckle brushed aside as barren and unprogressive the ideas of moralists, theologians, metaphysicians, and past thinkers in general. The esthetic and moral values of literature he ignored completely: "The value of literature depends on the extent to which it communicates

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[1]Giles St. Aubyn, A Victorian Eminence: The Life and Works of Henry Thomas Buckle, p. 161.

[2]On Buckle's relation to Comte see Mill, Comte, pp. 102-04, and Richard L. Hawkins, Positivism in the United States (1853-1861), pp. 16-17.

[3]Henry Thomas Buckle, History of Civilization in England, I, 142-43.

either a knowledge of the [physical and mental] laws, or the materials by which the laws may be discovered."[1] Buckle asserted, moreover, that the scientific historian should confine himself to illustrating a particular law by choosing that country or society which it has influenced most directly. America, for example, was ideal for a study of the "way in which the average temperature of a country affects its civilization." Buckle did not want, however, to skip from one country to another examining scattered laws; he wanted to concentrate on one society. The problem is, how does the historian choose his society? Buckle decided that

> Inasmuch as the great advantage of studying past events consists in the possibility of ascertaining the laws by which they were governed, the history of any people will become more valuable in proportion as their movements have been least disturbed by agencies not arising from themselves. Every foreign or external influence which is brought to bear upon a nation is an interference with its natural development, and therefore complicates the circumstances we seek to investigate. To simplify conditions, is, in all branches of knowledge, the first essential of success.[2]

He concluded that England was most fruitful for study, because its natural progress had not been much disturbed by outside forces. That such interference might be full-fledged history Buckle did not consider, because he was not interested in any society except as an illustration of laws of social development.

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[1] Ibid., I, 246. On Buckle's view of the past see ibid., I, 122-25. On his opinion of moralists et al. see I, 31-32.

[2] Ibid., I, 86, 211.

Buckle believed that moral laws are unprogressive. The ancients knew as many moral truths as we, but we know many more intellectual truths, so intellectual truths are superior to moral ones.[1] John Stuart Mill considered this attitude one of two major flaws in Buckle's thought. The other was his inclination to "ascribe all to general causes, and imagine that neither casual circumstances, nor governments by their acts, nor individuals of genius by their thoughts, materially accelerate or retard human progress."[2] More than Comte, who allowed at least for varying rates of change, Buckle saw society as inexorably grinding out progress unaffected by individuals. This idea derived from his faith in statistics. His statistical method absorbs and eliminates differences among individuals. Like Comte, Buckle began with the compound, not the simple; it is a delusion of the metaphysician that "by studying a single mind, he can get the laws of all minds."[3]

Though his method ignores individuals, Buckle valued individual freedom. He regarded the "protective spirit; by which I mean the notion that society cannot prosper, unless the affairs of life are watched over and protected at nearly every turn by the state and the church" as the great enemy of civilization. He was nearly as hostile to government as was Spencer. "To maintain order," Buckle concluded, "to prevent

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[1] Ibid., pp. 164-66.

[2] Mill, Comte, p. 102.

[3] Buckle, Civilization in England, I, 144.

the strong from oppressing the weak, and to adopt certain precautions respecting the public health, are the only services which any government can render to the interests of civilization."[1]

Herbert Spencer's Social Statics (1851) is a ponderous hymn in praise of nature and the free individual. Like Comte and Buckle, Spencer used scientific theories to discover the laws of social evolution; but Spencer's faith in biological and cosmic evolution separates his social theory markedly from those of Comte and Buckle. Though Spencer did not say so, his theory of inevitable social progress stands or falls with Lamarckian evolution. Social progress is determined by the evolution of individuals, and "organs, faculties, powers, capacities, or whatever else we call them, grow by use and diminish from disuse."[2] According to Spencer, social evolution depends not on laws of the mind or on climate, but on the inheritable effects of use and disuse among individuals. Society is more, however, than a collection of individuals: "Instead of civilization being artificial, it is a part of nature; all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower." Thus Spencer identified society with the rest of nature more closely than did Comte and Buckle. The individual himself, whose freedom Spencer guarded so zealously, is but "an agent through whom nature works; and when nature gives birth in him to a certain belief, she

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[1] Ibid., II, 1; I, 257-58.

[2] Social Statics, p. 65.

thereby authorizes him to profess and to act out that belief."[1] In such a world the character of this vaguely personified "nature" is all-important. Nature is Spencer's moral ideal; she is good, if slightly inefficient, and her means are cruel because her ends are kind.[2] Struggle and competition will always be necessary until the "best" individuals become dominant.

Nature, then, is moral; in fact, all morality, deriving from nature, "is essentially one with physical truth--is, in fact, a species of transcendental physiology."[3] This intriguing theory rests on Spencer's assumption that whatever is unchanging and eternal supplies the standard by which to judge all else. But what, in an evolving world, remains unchanged? Certainly not human nature. Only the laws of physical nature stand eternal. So nature provides the standard, and is beyond criticism; whatever is, is right; man goes wrong by failing to adjust to natural conditions. "All evil," Spencer insisted, "results from the non-adaptation of constitution to conditions. This is true of everything that lives."[4] Here is a marvelously simple and orderly world, unburdened by sin.

Spencer's approval of unlimited struggle in nature probably intensified his insistence on the freedom of the

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[1] Ibid., pp. 65, 475.

[2] Ibid., p. 322.

[3] Ibid., p. 436.

[4] Ibid., pp. 34-37, 59.

individual, but this insistence did not derive from his scientific theories. The goal of civilization is the "entire satisfaction of every desire, or perfect fulfillment of individual life"; and the first principle of society is that "every man may claim the fullest liberty to exercise his faculties compatible with the possession of like liberty by every other man."[1] Society progresses as its individuals gain more and more freedom. (Government gradually withers away.) Spencer's concern for the individual is reflected in his belief, which he supported by analogies from physics, that "there is no way of coming at a true theory of society, but by inquiring into the nature of its component individuals."[2] Not that Spencer actually proceeded in this way; he began rather with "first principles" from which he tried to draw inevitable conclusions by any logical device available. But at least he showed that, in laboring to prove society's conformity to immutable natural laws, the scientific sociologist need not ignore the individual man.

Charles Darwin: The Origin of Species

The Origin of Species (1859) seems a vast inductive structure based on multitudes of facts. "When on board H. M. S. 'Beagle' as naturalist," Darwin began, "I was much struck with certain facts. . . ."[3] The stream of facts from

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[1] Ibid., pp. 434, 78.

[2] Ibid., pp. 12, 16-17.

[3] The Origin of Species, reprint of first edition, p.1.

which Darwin drew his laws never stops flowing, and their very number makes it difficult--logic aside--for the reader to disagree with him. Darwin kept logical relations in the foreground, always making clear what fact supports what theory, what cause has what effect. His main logical method is comparison. His case might disappear, in fact, without such comparisons and analogies as the relation between man's effect on domesticated animals and nature's effect on wild ones, or the application of Malthus's doctrine to plants and animals, or the comparisons supplied by morphology, embryology, and rudimentary organs. Other comparisons are mainly decorative, such as that between the eye and the telescope, or between species and languages.[1] Some of the most interesting comparisons are metaphors: inadvertant personifications of animals and of nature, and carefully thought-out metaphors such as "the great Tree of Life." Darwin's metaphors, the delight of literary critics like Stanley Edgar Hyman, may confuse the reader who is looking only for scientific explanations.[2]

Like the older Henry Adams, Darwin was able to make little evidence go a long way. He took the fact, for example, that experts could not agree on the definition of a

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[1]For Darwin's ideas on Malthus see ibid., pp. 4, 55. For Darwin on telescopes and languages see ibid., pp. 162, 358.

[2]On Darwin's personifications of animals see Hyman, The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer, and Freud as Imaginative writers, p. 31. On the "Great Tree of Life" see Origin, first ed., pp. 112-13. In the third edition of the Origin (1861) Darwin added a paragraph justifying his metaphors. His admission that "analogy may be a deceitful guide" is in all editions. The Origin of Species by Charles Darwin, a Variorum Text, ed. by Morse Peckham, pp. 164-66, 752.

species as support for his own concept of species. Devoting a chapter to "the imperfection of the geological record," he managed to make the lack of geological evidence seem a point in his favor. Since he was a pioneer in a new field, he could admit ignorance without seriously weakening his position; and whatever the imperfections of his theory, he could easily point out that it explained the facts better than the only rival doctrine, that of "special creations."[1] Darwin was a master at marshalling facts and at drawing deductions from these facts, but his deductions could not be decisively proved. And if a theory depends on a series of uncertain deductions, each uncertainty weakens the theory. "The logic of the Origin," Gertrude Himmelfarb asserts, "was one in which possibilities were assumed to add up to probabilities." She goes on to assert, with some exaggeration, that "As possibilities were promoted into probabilities, and probabilities into certainties, so ignorance itself was raised to a position only once removed from certain knowledge."[2]

What Mill said of Comte, that he confused the ideas of sequence and cause, can be said of Darwin also. As Ernst Cassirer writes,

> There was a great difference between simply following an event in its temporal course and being able to distinguish the separate states of this course, on the one hand, and on the other, understanding it causally. Here we are dealing not with the study of merely factual questions, . . . but rather with the epistemological question

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[1]Darwin on species: Origin, first ed., pp. 14, 41. Darwin on "special creations": ibid., pp. 144, 369, 399.

[2]Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution, pp. 274-75.

> of what is meant by the idea of cause and under what conditions the concept may be employed in biology.

The next question is whether the descriptive historical method or the causal analytical method is better in biology. Merely to state the distinction, which Darwin failed to see, was a gain for nineteenth-century science. "The 'historical,'" writes Cassirer, "has its rights in every explanation of the phenomena of life, but it does not contain forthwith the whole explanation and it cannot answer every question of 'why.'"[1] To ask "why" is to ask what are the laws of causation and the forces through which they work. The question leads eventually to the concept of teleology. Darwin's letters suggest strongly that he rejected supernatural design,[2] and if he did not, his theory does: supernatural selection would make natural selection superfluous. It is reasonable to read the Origin as anti-teleological. But there is a mechanistic teleology compatible with the book, for the mechanism of natural selection has fixed, all unknowing, a design upon the world. Cassirer suggests that

> No earlier biological theory ascribed quite so much significance to the idea of purpose, or advocated it so emphatically, since not only individuals but absolutely all the phenomena of life are regarded from the standpoint of their survival value. All other questions retreat into the background before this one.[3]

But there is little comfort for most men in the idea of a

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[1]The Problem of Knowledge, pp. 179, 183.

[2]Charles Darwin, His Life Told in an Autobiographical Chapter and in a Selected Series of His Published Letters, ed. by Francis Darwin, pp. 59-69, 247-49, 263-64.

[3]Cassirer, Problem of Knowledge, p. 179.

purely mechanistic teleology. To avoid a rigid determinism, one must insist on the working of chance in the universe. In the Origin Darwin used "chance" to express our ignorance of law; but at least there is something like spontaneity in the Darwinian world, and where we cannot prove that law governs we cannot disprove the possibility of chance.

The popularity in the nineteenth century of the "genetic fallacy"--explaining things strictly by their origins--owed something to Darwin's idea of causality in the Origin:

> When we regard every production of nature as one which has had a history; when we contemplate every complex structure and instinct as the summing up of many contrivances, each useful to the possessor, nearly in the same way as when we look at any great mechanical invention as the summing up of the labour, the experience, the reason, and even the blunders of numerous workmen; when we thus view each organic being, how far more interesting--I speak from experience--will the study of natural history become.[1]

It is this sort of idea which makes Jacques Barzun say, "With its mechanical and historical bias, evolution reduced everything to something else."[2] To explain the present in terms of the past was, however, the legitimate business of the Origin. Darwin happily avoided predicting the future, except once near the book's end when he surmised that "as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection." When Darwin used "good" in such contexts, it meant

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[1]Darwin, Origin, first ed., p. 411.

[2]Jacques Barzun, Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage, p. 97. But Barzun blames mainly Comte for the genetic fallacy.

"biologically advantageous," but he could hardly expect his readers to avoid thinking of moral good, or to avoid attaching moral meanings to "progress" and "perfection." Darwin's prediction suggested to many that nature is morally good and that human progress will end in man's perfection. But elsewhere Darwin cautioned the reader not to be disturbed if some aspects of nature "be abhorrent to our ideas of fitness," and he admitted the impossibility of defining "higher" and "lower." Nor did he really believe in unlimited perfection, since "natural selection tends only to make each organic being as perfect as, or slightly more perfect than, the other inhabitants of the same country with which it has to struggle for existence. And we see that this is the degree of perfection attained under nature."[1] It seems that Darwin was carried away for one instant by a Spencerian exuberance, the recklessness of the prophet.

Charles Darwin: The Descent of Man

In The Descent of Man (1871) Darwin subjected mankind to his evolutionary theory. The question of progress took on increased importance, but he still refused to dogmatize. Having risen high in "the organic scale," man may "hope for a still higher destiny in the distant future."[2] As for social evolution, it may be progressive, but history refutes the notion that progress is normal in human societies.[3] Darwin saw

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[1]Darwin, Origin, pp. 414, 374, 172-73.

[2]The Descent of Man, p. 707.

[3]Ibid., p. 150.

social evolution as part of organic evolution, and believed that the law of natural selection strongly influences man's mental and social development, especially in a society's earlier stages. Through natural selection civilized nations overcome barbaric ones: in the struggle for existence, the strongest societies prevail. They do so by means of industrial and military "arts" (Darwin's word), which are products of the intellect. "It is, therefore, highly probable," he concluded, "that with mankind the intellectual faculties have been mainly and gradually perfected through natural selection." Natural selection is responsible for "the wonderful progress of the United States, as well as the character of the people, . . . The more energetic, restless, and courageous men from all parts of Europe have emigrated . . . and have [in America] succeeded best." Darwin also saw natural selection, in a partly metaphorical sense, as the force behind the development of language: the most useful words and grammatical forms survive.[1]

As a society becomes more advanced, natural selection affects it less.

> With highly civilized nations continued progress depends in a subordinate degree on natural selection; for such nations do not supplant and exterminate one another as do savage tribes. Nevertheless the more intelligent members within the same community will succeed better in the long run than the inferior, and leave a more numerous progeny, and this is a form of natural selection. The more efficient causes of progress seem to consist of a good education . . . and of a high standard of excellence, inculcated by the ablest and best men, embodied in the laws, customs and tradition, and enforced by public opinion.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 146, 160-61, 102-03.

Darwin held, nevertheless, that natural selection had produced all of the "social instincts"--sympathy, rationality, the desire to imitate and to learn--on which all our morality rests. After natural selection strengthens the social instincts, they, "with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, 'As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise'; and this lies at the foundation of morality."[1]

A consistent evolutionary naturalist could not accept the golden rule as a moral standard, for if social progress follows the path of biological evolution, then the social good (which is the only moral good) is always the biological good. Moral values must conform to biological advantage, and the "fit" must not apply the golden rule to the "unfit." Darwin apparently did not realize that he rejected the golden rule when he condemned asylums, poor-laws, and vaccination, concluding, "Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man."[2] Here Darwin showed a naive faith in the benevolent effects of competition in nature and society. In the next paragraph, however, Darwin insisted that we must aid the weak. Not to do so would injure the noblest part of our nature: the moral sense. Thus Darwin abandoned the morality of evolutionary naturalism. He stated, moreover,

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[1] Ibid., pp. 162, 143.

[2] Ibid., pp. 151-52.

that "If we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless, it could only be for a contingent benefit, with an overwhelming present evil."[1] Here he contradicted social evolutionism, by asserting the claims of the present against those of the future. Darwin avoided the greatest failing of Marxists and social evolutionists: that they condone present evil for the sake of some tentative future advantage.

Darwin and Spencer

Darwin made his "social Darwinist" comments tentatively and speculatively, but Herbert Spencer argued with all the vehemence and certainty he could muster. For example, he wrote:

> Fostering the good-for-nothing at the expense of the good, is an extreme cruelty. It is the deliberate storing-up of miseries for future generations. There is no greater curse to posterity than that of bequeathing them an increasing population of imbeciles and idlers and criminals. To aid the bad in multiplying, is, in effect, the same as maliciously providing for our descendants a multitude of enemies.[2]

It is partly because Spencer sounds so aggressively sure of his standards that he seems more callous than Darwin. In fact, he was; but neither was a brutal man, and we may find it hard to appreciate how plausible the social Darwinian attitude seemed in the last century. Darwin and Spencer based their attitude on a belief in the Lamarckian inheritance of acquired characteristics. Disease, incompetence, and vice in all forms are inheritable. Whether the sick or "the bad" are

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[1] Ibid., p. 152. Italics mine.

[2] The Study of Sociology, p. 314.

to blame for their faults is irrelevant; the job of natural selection in society is to weed out inferior qualities, whatever their cause. That by helping "bad" people society might make them better, Spencer and Darwin seem not to have considered.

Like Darwin, Spencer relied heavily on the comparative method, but he handled it less precisely. His comparison of the individual organism to the social "organism," for example, is simplistic. "Society as a whole, considered apart from its living units, presents phenomena of growth, structure, and function, like those of growth, structure, and function in an individual body."[1] Spencer pushed the analogy hard when explaining his concept of progress. As the organism inevitably grows, so does society. As the organism grows slowly, so does society. Social progress cannot be hurried; but, just as the individual's growth can be stunted and distorted, so can social progress (generally by governmental interference with natural selection).[2] It was when Spencer described the precise nature of social progress that his analogy between society and the individual failed. He did not know how to handle death when he discussed his hypothetically progressing society. More important, he did not realize that individual

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[1] Ibid., p. 301.

[2] Thus it seems that men are free only to harm themselves. Spencer tried to maintain a broader free will in his universe, however, by making voluntary action the effective means of progress. Men have free will--but their will is controlled by their human nature, which is controlled by natural law. So the will is not really free; Spencer could not avoid a rigid biological determinism. See ibid., 375-76.

freedom in his ideal society cannot be reconciled with the extreme centralism in the biological organism: its subordination of the parts to the whole.[1]

Spencer's ultimate purpose, he said, was "that of finding for the principles of right and wrong in conduct at large, a scientific basis."[2] Both Spencer and Darwin began with a basically Christian ethic and looked to science for support. But whereas Darwin wanted to apply the golden rule to contemporary society, Spencer believed that the golden rule must be suspended until the unfit have been eliminated. Even he, however, insisted on cooperation and mutual aid among individuals. In a way, Spencer and Darwin were sentimentalists in their need to give survival a moral value. This need led Spencer to say such things as "success, even of a material kind, greatly depending as it does on the good offices of others, is furthered by whatever creates goodwill in others."[3] Both men believed or hoped that as society became more perfect, goodwill and altruism would increase. The struggle for existence would cease.[4]

Evolutionary Ethics

To attempt a "science of ethics" demands great faith in science. The Spencerian evolutionist believed that we can

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[1]Lester Ward emphasized this point. See Richard Hofstadter, Social Darwinism in American Thought, p. 80.

[2]The Data of Ethics, p. v.

[3]Ibid., p. 211.

[4]John C. Greene, The Death of Adam, pp. 328-29.

know only those facts which science discovers, and that through science we can know all reality. Furthermore he assumed that whatever is natural is right, borrowing the centuries-old argument by which Christian "optimists" justified evil in God's world, but substituting evolution for God. As William F. Quillian points out, evolutionary ethics performed some valuable services. It emphasized, first of all, that moral standards and customs are products of long development and differ strikingly in different societies. Evolutionary ethics also revealed the role of natural selection and the instincts in the development of morality. Most important, Quillian thinks, is the emphasis that evolutionary ethics placed on society; it concentrated on the group, the social unit.[1]

These services of evolutionary ethics were balanced, however, by corresponding defects. Emphasizing the role of instincts and emotions in the development of morality, for example, led to misconceptions. Believing that conduct is determined solely by sensations of pain and pleasure, the evolutionary naturalist reduced feelings to physical forces and made morality a subdivision of physiology. Thus he diminished the role of the intellect and ignored will and spiritual motivation. He left out of account, in short, most of what we think of as distinctive in man's nature.[2] Evolutionary

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[1] The Moral Theory of Evolutionary Naturalism, pp. 73-74. This section on evolutionary ethics relies heavily on Quillian's book. Barzun's Darwin, Marx, Wagner makes many of the same points but with less precision.

[2] Quillian, Moral Theory, pp. vii, 104.

ethics could not achieve an adequate understanding of the individual, because its naturalistic bias oversimplified human nature, and because in concentrating on society it ignored the individual.

The evolutionist tended to see the self as merely a collection of inherited and acquired tendencies; he ignored the organization and subtlety of human character, which cannot be fully explained by listing its components. The evolutionist could not explain human guilt, or the persistent strength of moral demands, or the individual's strong sense of responsibility. Finally, evolutionary ethics, basing its criteria of morality on the welfare of society and the preservation of life, considered only the results of actions, not the intentions of the doer. Thus, as a critic of Spencer argued, if a man tries to murder me by stabbing me, but only opens a tumor and thereby restores my health, I must consider his act as morally good.[1]

Evolutionary moral theorists made several dubious logical connections. Among the most important of these was a switch, at some point in the theory, from descriptive ideas to prescriptive, or normative, ones. That is, he began by describing the evolution of morality in society. He asserted that those moral concepts and customs which have been most helpful to society have survived longest. This is a mere statement of fact; but then the theorist slipped in a value

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[1] Ibid., p. 85. Quillian is paraphrasing a statement made by A. C. Sewell in 1883.

judgment: namely, that whatever helps to preserve society is morally good. Preservation, then, became the sole moral value in evolutionary ethics; utility in preserving life became moral value, and the "fittest" in the struggle for survival turned out to be the morally best.[1]

The weakness of evolutionary ethics is in the assumption that one can know all reality through scientific investigation. We can agree that man is subject to natural laws and processes, however, without accepting the evolutionist's contention that man is "nothing but" a physical phenomenon who can know only his own feelings in reaction to other phenomena. This concept denies man's intellectual powers, his will, his understanding of moral questions, his sense of obligation and of moral inadequacy. A man could have no moral consciousness if he were merely a bundle of physical forces capable only of reacting to physical urges. If we believe man does have a moral consciousness, we must reject the evolutionary naturalist's view of man, or at least insist that it is incomplete. "Just as the mere analysis of Kreisler's music," Quillian writes, "as the 'dragging of the tail of a dead horse across the intestines of a dead cat' does not give the reality of that music, similarly, the analysis of the moral life as the expression of natural urges and sentiment does not give its reality."[2]

Believing that the present can always be explained

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[1] Ibid., pp. 60, 83-84.

[2] Ibid., pp. 106-07.

in terms of the past, the evolutionary moralist derived the essence of morality from the non-moral naturalistic past. Most naturalists (including Darwin) refused to allow moral qualities to animals, yet they traced the development of human morality from its origins in animal instincts. A version of the genetic fallacy is involved here. Evolutionists tended to reduce things to their lowest terms and their earliest antecedents, assuming that the present is merely a compound of past influences. Thus they often missed what is most distinctive about a present condition. In their ethical theory, they failed to ask what the moral sense is, what is meant by moral standards, and how we should evaluate moral standards. Not that they could have answered these questions if they had asked them; for the morality of an act cannot be considered apart from the intentions of the doer, and the evolutionary moralist ignored intentions.

CHAPTER II

EVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT IN AMERICA: 1860-1900

Darwin in America: Agassiz, Gray, and Wright

In a nation beset by civil war, The Origin of Species had little impact. The scientists, naturally, paid closest attention to it. Louis Agassiz and Asa Gray (teachers of Henry Adams at Harvard) each reacted in a distinctly American way to Darwin's book, and their articles of 1860 directed the course of early Darwinian thought in America. Agassiz reported that Darwin's theories "have not made the slightest impression on my mind." He argued that "if species do not exist at all, as the supporters of the transmutation theory maintain, how can they vary? and if individuals alone exist, how can the differences which may be observed among them prove the variability of species?" This approached sophistry, since Darwin denied only that species are fixed, not that they exist. Agassiz held that only individuals have a material existence; species exist as "categories of thought," fixed Platonic forms. Variations, which comprise individuality, are not comprehended within these forms; that is, they are not inheritable. "All that is not individual peculiarity is unceasingly and integrally reproduced while all that constitutes individuality, as such, contantly

disappears." Agassiz interpreted Darwin, who denied the fixity of species, as thereby denying order in the universe. Darwin erred in believing that "the most complicated system of combined thoughts can be the result of accidental causes. . . . Selection implies design; the powers to which Darwin refers the order of species, can design nothing."[1] This was a tenable point, but Agassiz hurt his argument for design by maintaining that species are created anew after each geological catastrophe, in slightly more advanced forms each time. Such a theory was so strongly supernaturalistic that, as Woodbridge Riley points out, Agassiz lost the arguments from design in nature by which scientists and deists had traditionally kept God in the universe. As a result, Riley asserts, Agassiz's pupils deserted en masse to Darwinism.[2]

In his review Agassiz did not discuss the Origin's implications for mankind. But Asa Gray, also writing in 1860, decided that we "must needs believe in the separate and special creation of man." Thus he could support the Origin without hopelessly offending the orthodox. Conceding that Darwin had not proved his case, Gray asserted that tentative hypotheses are valuable to science if they explain phenomena. Darwin's theory did this splendidly, and "what more than this could be said for such an hypothesis?" In opposition to Agassiz, Gray argued that individual differences are

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[1]"Prof. Agassiz on the Origin of Species," The American Journal of Science and Arts (1860), pp. 143, 150, 147.

[2]American Thought From Puritanism to Pragmatism, p. 187.

inheritable, and that no form of "thought," human, divine, or Platonic, prevents species from changing their forms. Gray's main complaint against Agassiz and other hostile reviewers of the Origin was that they tried to prove that Darwin's thesis "ought not to be true, or is not possible, philosophical, or theistic,"[1] because it destroyed supernatural design in the universe. Gray set out to show, however, that accidental means are compatible with designed ends, giving as an example peat bogs, which are produced by blind physical forces, but designed--theists believe--for the use of man. Gray did not commit Darwin to theism, but gave him this advice:

> Wherefore, so long as gradatory, orderly, and adapted forms in nature argue design, and at least while the physical cause of variation is utterly unknown and mysterious, we should advise Mr. Darwin to assume, in the philosophy of his hypothesis, that variation has been led along certain beneficial lines.[2]

Though Darwin did not take the tip, most Americans did, including Spencerians like John Fiske.

Chauncey Wright, like Henry Adams a pupil of Asa Gray, was no typical American thinker. He was virtually the only nineteenth-century American to insist on separating scientific questions from ethical and theological ones. William James said of Wright that "when the mere actuality of phenomena will suffice to describe them, he held it pure excess and superstition to speak of a metaphysical whence or whither,

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[1]"Natural Selection Not Inconsistent With Natural Theology," Darwiniana: Essays and Reviews Pertaining to Darwinism, pp. 92, 108-09, 137.

[2]"Ibid.," pp. 155, 148.

or a substance, a meaning, or an end."[1] Wright did not deny, however, that facts may be used in determining our ethics. As he advised a friend:

> True science deals with nothing but questions of facts,--and in terms, if possible, which shall not determine beforehand how we ought to feel about the facts; for this is one of the most certain and fatal means of corrupting evidence.
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> If the facts are determined, and, as far as may be, free from moral biases, then practical science [ethics] comes in to determine what, in view of the facts, our feelings and rules of conduct ought to be; but practical science has no inherent postulates any more than speculative science. Its ultimate grounds are the particular goods or ends of human life.

These goods and ends include more than mere survival.

One of Darwin's earliest American supporters, Wright always assumed evolution to be strictly a scientific hypothesis. Thus he was inevitably anti-Spencerian. Relying on "the too little regarded doctrine of Aristotle, which banishes cosmology from the realm of scientific inquiry," Wright supported not the cosmological "development hypothesis," but what he called the "derivative hypothesis," "which implies only continuity, not growth or progress, in the succession of races on the surface of the earth." Behind this rare interpretation of Darwinism was Wright's theory of "counter-movements," the principle that "there is no action in nature to which there is not some counter-action, and no production in nature by which in infinite ages there can result an

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[1]Joseph L. Blau, Men and Movements in American Philosophy, p. 170.

[2]Philip P. Wiener, Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism, pp. 44-45.

infinite product." Evolution has no eternal pattern, only "cosmical weather."[1]

Wright is important because of the sanity with which he judged evolutionary theories and separated scientific from ethical subjects. But the trend in America was against him. America, in Richard Hofstadter's description, "was like a vast human caricature of the Darwinian struggle for existence."[2] Spencer's social evolutionism with its approval of competition exactly suited the nation's economic frenzy and traditional Puritan ethic. Americans succumbed to such utopian versions of Darwinism as that of Charles Loring Brace, who believed that "if the Darwinian theory be true, the law of natural selection applies to all the moral history of mankind, as well as the physical. Evil must die ultimately as the weaker element, in the struggle with good."[3] Enlisted in the cause of good was the growing power of American industry.

The Moral Theory of Dr. Holmes

Of all the popular American writers in the 1860's, probably Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., knew most about science. Rebelling against his father's Calvinism, Dr. Holmes believed that intellectual change guaranteed the progress of science and society, and he held those who feared such change in good-humored contempt. He enjoyed shocking and amusing his readers

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[1][Chauncey Wright], "A Physical Theory of the Universe," North American Review (1864), pp. 7-10, 17.

[2]Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, p. 44.

[3]Ibid., p. 16.

with scientific and pseudo-scientific references. Elsie Venner (1861), for example, is full of cavalier analogies between people and aspects of nature: families and plants, individuals and plant grafts, glass blowers and "Nature," souls and rivers.[1] He often discussed mankind facetiously as an evolving species, as when the hero of Elsie Venner, detesting the rat-like principal of his school, feels "the impulse of extermination, a divine instinct, intended to keep down vermin of all classes to their working averages in the economy of nature." Holmes, who read The Origin of Species as soon as soon as it reached the American shore, remarked that young ladies at dances must learn that "the 'struggle for life' that Mr. Charles Darwin talks about reaches to vertebrates clad in crinoline, as well as to mollusks in shells, or articulates in jointed scales, or anything that fights for breathing room and food and love in any coat of fur or feather."[2]

Playing with evolutionary ideas was good fun, but Holmes had a serious purpose as well: he was using such ideas to develop an ethical theory which mediated between religious and evolutionary ethics. In Elsie Venner he kept reminding us of the biological aspects of man in order to reinforce the central moral point of the novel. Its heroine, as Holmes stated in his "Second Preface," "found her origin, not in a

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[1]Elsie Venner, in The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes, V, 152, 26-27, 7, 74.

[2]Ibid., pp. 168, 94.

fable or romance, but in a physiological conception fertilized by a theological dogma."[1] The "conception" is that of prenatal influence: a snake bit Elsie's mother during pregnancy, and this misfortune was responsible for all of Elsie's faults. The "dogma" is Original Sin. According to the dogma we all inherit sin; according to Holmes we may inherit tendencies, aptitudes, and flaws, but never sin. Only what one can control can be sin, for the moral life is limited by the bounds of free will. In his novels Holmes was primarily a moralist, attempting to define the limits of moral responsibility. The effect of his references to nature in Elsie Venner is to emphasize the pervasive influence of the natural world on men, and the limits it imposes upon free will.

In The Guardian Angel (1867) Dr. Holmes tried to define the limits which heredity and upbringing impose on moral responsibility. Unfortunately he failed to dramatize the theme adequately, for the hereditary influences on the book's heroine, Myrtle Hazard, are beneficial, and her guardians' mistreatment does her no lasting harm. Unlike Elsie, moreover, Myrtle never does anything wrong, so we never even feel the need to absolve her of moral blame. But this flaw does not negate Holmes's thesis that heredity limits the range of moral choice, or the assumption behind it that the individual is only a part of the race, formed and controlled by ancestral influences. As a character explains in Elsie Venner, "Each of us is only the footing-up of a double column of figures

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[1] Ibid., p. x.

that goes back to the first pair. . . . We are mainly nothing but the answer to a long sum in addition and subtraction."[1] Thus Holmes subordinated the individual to the race, though without negating the individual, since each digit changes the sum.

But in the moral world, there is no sum, only the digit. It was by separating the individual's moral world from the natural world that Holmes escaped both the moral determinism of Calvinism and the mechanistic determinism of the positivists and Spencerians. As he insisted in "Mechanism in Thought and Morals" (1870):

> I reject, therefore, the mechanical doctrine which makes me the slave of outside influences, whether it work with the logic of Edwards, or the averages of Buckle . . . but I claim the right to eliminate all mechanical ideas which have crowded into the sphere of intelligent choice between right and wrong. The pound of flesh I will grant to Nemesis; but, in the name of human nature, not one drop of blood,--not one drop.[2]

Holmes avoided an evolutionary ethics, for he did not regard moral standards as products of social evolution; nor did he attach moral attributes to nature. He did not question the sources of moral standards; the individual acts freely, basing his moral choice on eternal moral ideals. The only difficulty with Holmes's theory is that the limits of the natural world's influence are nearly impossible to define. In his concern for isolating the moral world, Holmes drastically reduced its scope, and the reader of his novels may

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[1] Ibid., p. 74.

[2] Pages From an Old Volume of Life, in The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes, VIII, 303.

wonder if he did not in fact reduce the moral world almost to nothing at all.

Social Darwinism in America: William Graham Sumner

William Graham Sumner was the most influential social Darwinist in nineteenth-century America. We cannot call him a social evolutionist, however, for as Richard Hofstadter writes, he "did not accept Spencer's identification of evolution with progress, and Spencer's optimism was meaningless to him."[1] The ideas of struggle and natural selection in society dominated his thought, but he doubted that progress inevitably results from the struggle. Progress, such as there is, depends on our following the law of the survival of the fittest, which, Sumner asserted, "was not made by man and cannot be abrogated by man. We can only, by interfering with it, produce the survival of the unfittest." But unlike Spencer, who believed that man progresses in cooperation with beneficent Nature, Sumner saw man's progress as victory over a stern and stingy Nature. Society improves through advances "in the arts, in science, in morals, in political institutions, to widen and strengthen the power of man over nature."[2] Progress in society's struggle with nature means that individuals have more chances to succeed. But competition never ends, and the best always succeed best.[3]

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[1] Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, p. 223.

[2] "Sociology," Selected Essays of William Graham Sumner, ed. by Stow Persons, pp. 17, 24. My Italics.

[3] What Social Classes Owe to Each Other (1883), pp. 167-69.

Sumner, less concerned than Spencer about order and symmetry, did not try to fit all phenomena into a vast organic or cosmic scheme. He was as strongly individualistic as Spencer, believing that "One man, in a free state, cannot claim help from, and cannot be charged to give help to, another."[1] While insisting that social change must be slow, Sumner did not support this theory with the Spencerian analogy between the social and the individual organism. Sumner used, in fact, a distinction between the two to explain why social reformers should not try to make quick social changes: "It cannot pay to experiment with a society, because the society does not die and can afford to wait." Perhaps the most fruitful comparison between Sumner and Spencer is that both saw themselves primarily as revolutionary moralists, trying to base standards of conduct on the natural and the social worlds, as understood by science. The "practical utility" of sociology, Sumner wrote confidently,

> consists in deriving the rules of right social living from the facts and laws which prevail by nature in the constitution and functions of society. It must, without doubt, come into collision with all other theories of right living which are founded on authority, tradition, arbitrary invention, or poetic imagination.[2]

Sumner's thought comprehends the American pioneer tradition, a vaguely Calvinistic determinism and pessimism, the Puritan ethic of material reward for virtue, a democratic insistence on individual freedom, and an abiding distrust of

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[1] Ibid., p. 27.

[2] "Sociology," pp. 13, 10.

the State. His acceptance of hardship as a condition of life is in the tradition of the settlers and pioneers who fought the natural world in order to survive. "Nature's forces know no pity," Sumner believed, but he considered nature perfectly fair though stern.

> Nature's remedies against vice are terrible. She removes the victims without pity. A drunkard in the gutter is just where he ought to be, according to the fitness and tendency of things. Nature has set up on him the process of decline and dissolution by which she removes things which have survived their own usefulness.

In such a world one has no "natural rights"--Sumner denied this concept of the Enlightenment. One gets nothing for nothing; one has only duties, and especially the great social duty: to take care of oneself. Here the ethic of Puritans and pioneers is given a strictly naturalistic basis. Hardship is the price of individual freedom. Nature has arranged it so. If the silly social reformers will not bother us, "We shall have no troubles but what belong to Nature. Those we will endure or combat as best we can."[1]

Man, Sumner believed, is an economic animal. He even stated that only the ability to acquire capital distinguishes man from the lower animals. The most important virtues for Sumner are the economic ones: thrift, industriousness, moderation. These, the virtues of traditional Protestantism, are the self-centered values, the ones that Darwin called "lower." Sumner lacked Spencer's faith that altruism increases as society progresses; for Sumner it would always be true that "the

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[1]_What Social Classes Owe_, pp. 154, 131, 113, 121-22.

relations of sympathy and sentiment are essentially limited to two persons only, and they cannot be made a basis for the relations of groups of persons."[1] Competition can be the only basis. Thus Sumner offered even more comfort than Spencer to the advocate of laissez faire.

Sumner held three ideals which are solidly in the tradition of American democracy. One was a deep distrust of the State, which he would allow only to protect property and women's honor. The second, his individualism, assumed that good men want to be independent, and that collective social aid is an injury and an affront to both givers and receivers. "Such projects debase both parties, flattering the vanity of one and condemning the self-respect of the other."[2] The third ideal was Sumner's egalitarianism. He believed in equality not of possessions but of opportunity, and in "the democratic principle" that "each man should be esteemed for his merit and worth, for just what he is, without regard to birth, wealth, rank, or other adventitious circumstances." Men are not equal, of course, in merit, and one has no control over his worth. We can detect here remnants of the Calvinist doctrine of the "elect." It is, as Sumner coolly observed, "a tough old world."[3]

Sympathetic as he was to American democracy, Sumner

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[1] Ibid., pp. 59-60, 160.

[2] Ibid., pp. 101, 128.

[3] "The Absurd Effort to Make the World Over," Forum (1894), p. 101.

was one of the first American skeptics regarding that tradition. He did not consider democracy the most advanced political form, but rather a quality of underpopulated states, in which opportunity ensures equality.[1] "Democracy is rooted in the physical, economic, and social circumstances of the United States. This country cannot be other than democratic for an indefinite period in the future." Sumner respected democracy but saw grave weaknesses in it. One danger was that the lower classes would gain political power and "assume all the rights and reject all the duties--that is, they will use the political power to plunder those-who-have."[2] Another was that the wealthy would grab power and turn the democracy into a plutocracy. Sumner was too much a democrat to allow this. He believed that to use wealth to gain political power is illegitimate, a usurpation of rights without acceptance of duties.

Politicians especially like to usurp rights without accepting duties, and when they do, Sumner felt, the people who elected them have only themselves to blame. But Sumner feared that Americans were in uniquely grave danger of getting the rulers they deserve, because Americans had an inflated idea of their country.

> One of the oldest and most mischievous fallacies in this country has been the notion that we are better than other nations, and that Government has a smaller and easier task than elsewhere. This fallacy has kept us from recognizing our old foes as soon as we should have done.[3]

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[1] "Sociology," pp. 22-23.

[2] What Social Classes Owe, pp. 106, 37.

[3] Ibid., p. 109.

The foes, always for Sumner, were those who upset the natural order in which justice and merit reign.

John Hay's Upper-Class Social Darwinism

Bread-Winners (1884) is an anonymous novel by Henry Adams's good friend John Hay which discusses economic, social, and political problems. The moral of Hay's story is that the lower classes should work hard and accept their station in life. Merit brings reward, but it is best to inherit one's money, since business is vulgar; the capitalistic system is basically sound, however, and only worthless misfits reject it. In this system the government's only domestic task is to protect property. Bread-Winners shows the effects of social Darwinian thinking on a man who distrusted the laboring masses and regarded the business world as a vulgar (though productive) blight upon the land. Hay was an upper-class social Darwinist: he approved of economic and social competition among the masses, but thought it crude and beneath the best people.

The theory of natural selection, loosely applied, stimulated snobbery in many people, who considered themselves socially elite because they were surviving so successfully.[1] That Hay had this sense of social fitness is suggested by the background of his novel's hero, Arthur Farnham. Farnham is a Civil War veteran and a pioneer who has known extreme hardship and has splendidly survived it all. He has earned his current leisure, and does little work except to dabble in

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[1]See Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought, pp. 641-44.

political reform, direct a library, and indulge in philanthropy. Having inherited his wealth, Farnham is untouched by business concerns, though he accepts rent from the tenants on his lands. He is a cultivated man, "delicately bred," "equally at home in field and court," whose hands "had the firm, hard symmetry which showed they had done no work." Despite his past heroics, Farnham is essentially "one of those fortunate natures, who, however born, are always well bred, and come by prescription to most of the good things the world can give."[1] He is Hay's moral and social ideal.

Hay felt that American society was in a dangerous state, since the young people of the laboring classes lacked the industriousness and humility of their elders. In Bread-Winners, the children of Saul Matchin, a hard-working carpenter, have all turned out badly. His daughter Maud is especially unsatisfactory; she resents being the daughter of a mere carpenter, has the presumption to go to high school and to propose marriage to Farnham. There is only one noble lower-class soul in the book, and he is stupid. This is Sam Sleeny, the joiner: industrious, skilled, humble, and polite,--but even he suffers a brief lapse when he is hoodwinked into joining a strike.

Hay insisted on social order and stability, by which he meant that laborers should be satisfied with their lot. Whether he conceived of society as part of the natural order is hard to say; perhaps not, since his social ideals have no

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[1] Bread-Winners: A Social Study, pp. 5-6.

apparent foundation in the natural world. The struggle for economic existence leaves one with dirty hands, and the goal of the cultivated man is to keep his hands clean. The impulse to struggle, sacred to Sumner, was a very mixed blessing to Hay. "The restless haste and hunger to rise" which is typical of Americans, he believed, was "the source of much that is good and most that is evil in American life." Hay never suggested that struggle would lead to social progress, but he nevertheless approved of capitalism. Those who reject the system, members of the "Brotherhood of Bread-Winners," are "the laziest and most incapable workmen in the town." To the hard-working Sam Sleeny, whose "daily life was a practical argument against socialism," the membership reads like "a roll-call of shirks." Of these, the worst is Andrew Jackson Offit, an "agitator" who lives off union dues. Offit opposes social order, religion, and marriage as inventions "of priests and tyrants to enslave and degrade mankind."[1] "We are goin' to make war on capital," he says, and he does, and loses.

That government has failed in its task of maintaining economic stability is a major theme of Bread-Winners. Neither government officials nor the threatened rich people recognize the danger presented by anarchic strikers. After the strike,

> The rich and prosperous people, as their manner is, congratulated themselves on their escape, and gave no thought to the questions which had come so near to an issue of fire and blood. In this city of two hundred thousand people, two or three dozen politicians continued as before to govern it, to assess and to spend its taxes, to

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[1] Ibid., pp. 19, 82, 86, 87.

> use it as their property and their chattel. The rich and intelligent kept on making money, building fine houses, and bringing up children to hate politics as they did, and in fine to fatten themselves as sheep which should be mutton whenever the butcher was ready.

The danger to society is a danger to capital and the rich. The cause of government's ineptitude is that in our democracy the masses elect the officials, and the officials therefore favor the masses. Unlike Spencer and Sumner, who distrusted government as an artificial intrusion into the natural workings of society, Hay distrusted government because it represented the masses. In American democracy those who are fittest for politics are moral wretches like Offit, who "never had an opinion he was not willing to sell; he was always prepared to sacrifice a friend, if required, and to ask favors from his worst enemies." Reform in politics, then, is a matter of replacing corrupt officials (since the masses are incorrigible). Farnham is a reformer in this sense; he has tried unsuccessfully to oust a political boss, a popular opponent of "the wealth and aristocracy" of the Bluffland elite, whose supporters the narrator calls "a floating crowd of publicans and sinners." Social reform for the benefit of publicans and sinners is an absurd idea to self-sufficient men like Sleeny, who knows that "he could earn a good living by his trade no matter who went to Congress, and he hated those 'chinny bummers,' as he called them, who talked about 'State help and self help' over their beer."[1] All one needs is a good trade and no ambitions.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 246-47, 89, 55-57, 81.

Since Hay made no connections between the social and natural order or between social and organic evolution, and since he did not value competition very highly, he cannot be called an orthodox social evolutionist or social Darwinist. He did not, like some of the naturalist novelists who come after him, see man as an animal helpless in the grip of natural forces. The world of Bread-Winners is not deterministic; the book's philosophy is not materialistic; its people (except the villains) are not beasts. Most significantly, Hay's novel lacks the pervasive sense of despair and outrage which Sumner felt at threats to the individual's integrity, or which the naturalist novelists felt regarding the universe generally, or which Henry Adams felt at the corrupt workings of democracy and the crumbling of the social order. The dominant mood of Bread-Winners is a crotchety irritation at the lower classes for disturbing the tranquillity of the socially and economically fit.

Reactions Against Social Darwinism and Evolutionary Ethics

The unwillingness of social thinkers to interfere with "primeval nature," Loren Eiseley writes, was "the greatest persistent blind spot in the thinking of the nineteenth century."[1] As the century neared its close, however, men saw less and less reason to regard social reform as unnatural, futile, or immoral. The contention that, because animals

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[1]Darwin's Century: Evolution and the Men Who Discovered It, p. 348.

have evolved through competition and natural selection, society must progress in the same way, came to be widely seen as a dangerous folly. Lester Ward, the antagonist of W. G. Sumner, emphasized struggle among different species (societies), rather than among individuals of the same species, and asserted that in society competition actually keeps the fittest from surviving.[1] Ward tried to reconcile his theory and Darwin's by regarding society as a sort of individual rather than a species. Society "should imagine itself as an individual, with all the interests of an individual, and becoming fully conscious of these interests should pursue them with the same indomitable will with which the individual pursues his interests."[2] Ward saw society as an organic unit, but unlike Spencer, he realized that the idea of the social organism implies not individualism in society but extreme centralization.[3] Therefore he did not press the idea very far.

Like Spencer, Ward believed in universal evolution and the unity of the various branches of knowledge. But he contrasted the animal's adjustment to environment through natural selection to man's ability to adjust the environment to himself through social action.[4] This is turning Darwinism on its head. The idea also implies a healthy disrespect for

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[1]Blau, American Philosophy, p. 159. Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, pp. 74-75.

[2]Lester Ward, The Psychic Factors of Civilization, p. 324.

[3]Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, p. 80.

[4]Ibid., pp. 84, 74.

nature: "These much-talked-of laws of nature are violated every time the highway robber is arrested and sent to jail."[1] Nature is wasteful, moreover, and Ward believed that we can improve on her methods; we are not her slaves.[2] His attitude was roughly that of Henry George, who held that social evolution begins where organic evolution ends and that civilized man could improve society--if he would only try harder. "Did you ever see a pail of swill given to a pen of hungry hogs? That is society as it is. Did you ever see a company of well-bred men and women sitting down to a good dinner . . .? That is human society as it might be."[3]

Evolutionary ethics declined along with the belief that social reform should be left to nature, as men increasingly rejected evolutionary accounts of the origin and develoment of morals. William James, for example, doubted that animal gregariousness was the direct ancestor of human sympathy, and he questioned the inheritance of acquired characteristics as an explanation of the development of instincts.[4] His reasons for rejecting these ideas had less to do with science than with his concept of the individual man. Believing that each individual is free, unique, and morally accountable for his actions, James needed to reject theories which emphasized ancestral influence on individuals. For this reason

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[1]Ward, Psychic Factors of Civilization, p. 322.

[2]Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, pp. 73, 81.

[3]Social Problems, pp. 102-03.

[4]Wiener, Evolution and Pragmatism, pp. 114-15.

he made much of the Darwinian idea of spontaneous, uncaused (as far as we know) variations.

Many who agreed that science can explain the development of man's moral sense denied that science can tell us what the moral sense is or what our moral standards should be. T. H. Huxley maintained that "cosmic evolution may teach us how the good and the evil tendencies of man may have come about, but, in itself, it is incompetent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil than we had before."[1] The evolutionary moralists attempted to furnish such reasons by assuming that whatever is natural is also good, that survival is good, and that evil is maladjustment to nature and failure in the struggle for existence. This position was vigorously attacked on all sides. To William James nature contains all good and all evil:

> Truly, all we know of good and duty proceeds from nature; but none the less so all we know of evil. Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference--a moral multiverse, as one might call it, and not a moral universe. To such a harlot we owe no allegiance; with her as a whole we can establish no moral communion; and we are free in our dealings with her several parts to obey or destroy, and to follow no law but that of prudence in coming to terms with such of her particular features as will help us to our private ends.[2]

The natural world, according to Huxley, is both divorced from ethics and inimical to social progress. He believed that "Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at

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[1]T. H. Huxley, "Evolution and Ethics," Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays, p. 80.

[2]William James, "Is Life Worth Living?" The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, pp. 43-44.

every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process; the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest . . . but of those who are ethically the best."[1] Henry George and Lester Ward, concentrating on social problems, denied that survival is virtue or that maladjustment is vice. "At the bottom of every social problem," George insisted, "we will find a social wrong."[2] "The survival of the fittest," according to Ward, "is simply the survival of the strong, which implies and would better be called the destruction of the weak. If nature progresses through the destruction of the weak, man progresses through the protection of the weak."[3]

Social evolutionism declined for two reasons, one of which was its implausibility. However firmly one believed in evolution, it was difficult to maintain faith in universal progress; the evidence offered by history and science was not encouraging. The other reason was that social evolutionism gave little comfort, held no great hope, and was a rather pale cosmic vision. If we cannot influence events, if we do not benefit from the long, slow process of evolution, why should we care? As Charles L. Brace complained,

> Would not mankind take chloroform if they had no future but Spencer's? No individual continuance, no God, no superior powers, only evolution working towards a benevolent society here and perfection on earth, with great

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[1]"Evolution and Ethics," p. 81.

[2]Social Problems, p. 21.

[3]Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, p. 79.

> doubt whether it could succeed, and, if it succeeded, whether the end would pay.[1]

The thought of a stable, perfect society on earth or elsewhere stimulated in William James a great cosmic yawn. "The white-robed harp-playing heaven of our sabbath-schools, and the tea-table elysium represented in Mr. Spencer's Data of Ethics, as the final consummation of progress, are . . . lubberlands, pure and simple, one and all."[2] James valued the richness and fascination of life, and grandiose schemes of progress bored him. "The Spencerian 'philosophy' of social and intellectual progress is an obsolete anachronism," he thought, "reverting to a pre-Darwinian type of thought."[3]

Science and Pragmatism

Late in the nineteenth century the theories that the earth was only a few million years old and that the usable energy of the universe was steadily decreasing came to dominate physics, geology, and biology. Darwinism was threatened because natural selection needed more time than that to accomplish its work. Spencerian evolutionism was threatened because, if the universe is running down, unlimited progress is impossible. In the closing years of the century the mechanistic and deterministic physics of Lord Kelvin was helping

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[1] Ibid., pp. 86-87. For Brace's optimistic earlier view, see above, p. 39.

[2] "The Dilemma of Determinism," The Will to Believe, p. 254.

[3] "Great Men and Their Environment," The Will to Believe, p. 254.

to destroy Victorian optimism. In America, the decline of Spencerianism helps explain why naturalist novelists such as London and Dreiser, men who in their youth had been enthralled by Spencer, developed pessimistic views of life. In varying degrees they lost faith in progress, abandoned the idea of human responsibility, and regarded man as a pitiable animal. Their difficulty, as Malcolm Cowley points out, did not result primarily from scientific or sociological theory. They were rebelling against the genteel tradition in American literature and, more importantly, against the sordidness and mediocrity of so much of American life. "A great deal of naturalistic writing," Malcolm Cowley observes, "is an eloquent hymn to loneliness and failure as the destiny, in America, of most superior men."[1] Darwinism did not make them naturalists, but evolutionary thought encouraged attitudes like their tendency "always to explain the complex in terms of the simple," and their suspicion that man is a helpless slave of natural (including social) laws.[2]

The American pragmatists made the most successful escape from pessimistic determinism. Pragmatism, according to William James, was not a doctrine but an attitude, "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts."[3] This was a flat

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[1]"Naturalism in American Literature," in Evolutionary Thought in America, ed. by Stow Persons, p. 321.

[2]"Ibid.," 313-15, 328-30.

[3]Pragmatism: A New Name For Some Old Ways of Thinking, pp. 54-55.

rejection of Spencer, as was the related concept that James called indeterminism.

> Indeterminism . . . says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. It admits that possibilities may be in excess of actualities, and that things not yet revealed to our knowledge may really in themselves be ambiguous. . . . Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbending unit of fact. It says there is a certain ultimate pluralism in it.[1]

The pragmatists believed that man can manipulate and improve his environment. The mind does nothing, in Spencer's opinion, but passively adjust to its environment; but Charles S. Peirce, for example, held that the mind is an active force: "The whole function of thought is to produce habits of action," and action can change the environment.[2] James, rejecting the Spencerian view that even great men are strictly products of the environment, compared great men to Darwinian spontaneous variations:

> I affirm that the relation of the visible environment to the great man is in the main exactly what it is to the 'variation' in the Darwinian philosophy. It chiefly adopts or rejects, preserves or destroys, in short <u>selects</u> him. And whenever it adopts and preserves the great man, it becomes modified by his influence in an entirely original and peculiar way.[3]

James was assuming that variations appear by chance, although Darwin believed they are governed by undiscovered laws. Peirce and James further diminished the importance of

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[1]"The Dilemma of Determinism," pp. 150-51.

[2]Charles S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in <u>Popular Science Monthly</u> (1878), p. 292.

[3]"Great Men and Their Environment," p. 226.

physical laws--and in so doing increased the theoretical range of man's freedom--, by conceiving laws as mere approximations, statements of probabilities rather than of unalterable relationships. Peirce pointed out that individual facts depart from laws, implying that whatever is true of phenomena on a large scale is not necessarily true of smaller units.[1] James, in making the same points, managed to put himself, he thought, in the vanguard of scientific thought. When men discovered the first laws,

> they believed themselves to have deciphered authentically the eternal thoughts of the Almighty. His mind also thundered and reverberated in syllogisms. He also thought in conic sections, squares and roots and ratios. . . . But as the sciences have developed further, the notion has gained ground that most, perhaps all, of our laws are only approximations. The laws themselves, moreover, have grown so numerous that there is no counting them; and so many rival formulations are proposed in all the branches of science that investigators have become accustomed to the notion that no theory is absolutely a transcript of reality, but that any one of them may from some point of view be useful. Their great use is to summarize old facts and to lead to new ones. They are only a man-made language, a conceptual shorthand, as some one calls them, in which we write our reports of nature; and languages, as is well known, tolerate much choice of expression and many dialects.[2]

James applied this line of thought not only to philosophers and scientists, but also to historians. "It is folly," he asserted, "to speak of the 'laws of history' as of something inevitable, which science has only to discover, and whose consequences any one can then foretell but do nothing to alter or avert."[3]

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[1]Hofstadter, Social Darwinism, pp. 126-27. Wiener, Evolution and Pragmatism, p. 200.

[2]Pragmatism, p. 56.

[3]"Great Men and Their Environment," p. 244.

William James wrote for those who (like Henry James's Isabel Archer) insist on mattering, who believe in free will and responsibility, and who hope to improve the world. He fought determinism because "in denying that anything else can be in its stead, [it] virtually defines the universe as a place in which what ought to be is impossible." In such a world, one has only two choices: pessimism, or the "optimism" that sees evil as an inevitable part of the natural order. The latter position, which was Spencer's, dulls the sympathies, dehumanizes. James warned that "when murders and treacheries cease to be sins, regrets are theoretical absurdities and errors."[1] Since evil is real, regret is essential; without accepting sin and regretting our sins, we lose our grip on the world. James faced life honestly but without pessimism, an unusual achievement for an American in the late nineteenth century.

Beyond Social Evolutionism

Social evolutionism eventually ceased to be the special property of those who, like Spencer, distrusted the state and valued individual freedom above all. Various socialists applied Darwinism to society. Marx altered Darwin's idea of struggle to emphasize struggle among rather than within classes (the human equivalent, for Marx, of species). He altered Darwinism further by conceiving social change in abrupt leaps (mutations) rather than gradual change, and by

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[1] "The Dilemma of Determinism," pp. 161-62, 163.

postulating the end of evolution at some time.[1] Non-Marxist socialists urged an end to economic struggle in society through cooperation. Capitalists, emphasizing struggle among nations and societies (their equivalent of species), enlisted social Darwinism in the service of imperialism and racism. The justice of imperialism and the racial superiority of Caucasians were widely taken for granted; the racist variety of social Darwinism died in England and America only when the Germans usurped the doctrine.

Most Americans continued to insert supernatural design into the evolutionary process, thus maintaining religion's grip on the universe. Religious benevolence gradually overcame the individualistic social Darwinian ethic. The social gospel movement, a religious reaction against social Darwinism, recognized the obligations of the fortunate to the unfortunate, and helped discredit the equation between "poor" and "unfit." Most people realized that religion must learn to live with evolution, but the more ambitious attempts to base religious doctrine on evolutionary ideas failed. James McCosh, for example, used the idea of spontaneous variations in a world otherwise governed by law to support Calvinist doctrines of arbitrary election, God's special providence, and a world in which determinism and individual responsibility co-exist.[2] Few were convinced. Francis

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[1]Himmelfarb, Darwin, pp. 347-49.

[2]Herbert W. Schneider, A History of American Philosophy, p. 395. Himmelfarb, Darwin, pp. 325-26.

Ellington Abbot founded the Free Religious Association in 1866 in an attempt to base a religion on evolutionary thought; it was the only such effort in America, and the Association failed within a few years. Perhaps the most important of the religious implications of evolutionary thought was the failure of evolutionism as religion. The dream of uncovering the metaphysical and ethical secrets of nature had to end; all who lived into the new century had to wake up.[1] One could then retreat to orthodox religion. Or one could follow the pragmatists and, believing that the cosmos lacks unity and certainty, seek his values not in science or the natural world but in individual experience and the struggles of the moral life. But not everyone could stand the Jamesian universe; to some, such as a friend whom James mentions, with minds "possessed of the love of unity at any cost, it will, no doubt, remain forever unacceptable." This friend, who may remind us of Henry Adams, once told James that "the thought of my universe made him sick, like the sight of the horrible motion of a mass of maggots in their carrion bed."[2] What philosophy, indeed, at the turn of the century could satisfy such a mind?

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[1]Himmelfarb, Darwin, p. 339.

[2]"The Dilemma of Determinism," p. 177.

CHAPTER III

FORMING A THEORY OF SOCIAL PROGRESS: 1858-1877

The Class Day Oration: 1858

Violating a Harvard tradition that the Class Day Oration should discuss the pleasures of college life, Henry Adams used the occasion to attack the values of his countrymen. The oration expresses his awareness that the individual cannot easily conform to society's standards without losing his integrity. It also shows his familiarity with ideas (if not the book itself) which Buckle had made popular the year before in his History of Civilization in England. A section of the oration reads like a direct commentary on Buckle's expressed contempt for the past and his belief that human progress depends not on moral improvement but on intellectual and scientific advances:

> We have learned a certain sort of respect, even for past ages; which is the more remarkable because the tendency of the world in this century, is in the other direction. It is puffed up by its self-conceit because a certain Francis Bacon, some two centuries ago, happened to put it upon the right track and it has run along down the hill ever since. It is the custom of the present day to say that we know more than our fathers, and our fathers knew more than their ancestors. We acquiesce in this, although we thereby show great disrespect to some of our acquaintance, whose ancestors must have had a very limited share of knowledge to judge from their descendants.[1]

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[1]Unpublished. In the Archives of the Harvard University Library.

Here the orator was trying to work out a compromise between the opinions of his Boston listeners and those of the positivist philosophers. Respect for the past was an inherited reflex of his New England audience. Professor Louis Agassiz might, as Ernest Samuels speculates, have nodded in solemn agreement with Adams's criticism of the "self-conceit" of the age. Yet the key word in that sentence is "right." The world, now on the right track, is running down hill--moving faster and more easily. Adams's assertion of intellectual progress is accompanied by a sarcastic comment not on science but on New England education and his fellow students. Adams respected the ancients for their achievements in philosophy, art, and morals, but not in science. This does not mean that he believed progress comes purely through intellectual and scientific advances in knowledge, though he did emphasize science in outlining the conditions of future social advancement.

> We have learned that though man has reduced the universe to a machine, there is something wanting still; that there are secrets of nature which have puzzled chemist and philosopher even in these days of science, and which still wait for a solution; that there are nebulae in the sky which no telescope that the genius of astronomers as yet has created, has been able to resolve into its group of single stars; that there are problems in the relations of man to man which political economy has tried to solve again and again and never succeeded; that there are questions in the relations of man to the universe and to the future, which all metaphysicians from Thales downwards have worn away their whole lives in striving to answer, but have failed, always failed.
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> And so we have arrived at the knowledge of how very little we really do know, and how wide a field is still open in every branch of science and art. We cannot believe that the world has been growing for half-a-million years or more, and only to produce at last such questionable fruits as we are. We have been taught to look forward to a better age, and to hope for a higher civilization.

Adams's vague merging of biological (or cosmic) growth with social development suggests that he saw humanity as a division of the natural world; but mostly it shows that he enjoyed rhetorical metaphors. What is most significant is that he entrusted "the relations of man to man" to political economy; in this passage about human progress he did not mention human relations in their moral aspects. It is a plausible inference that young Adams, like Buckle, did not see morality as a cause of social progress.

Adams devoted much time to characterizing and defending his classmates from the predictable charges of their elders. "Though we acknowledge our own ignorance, we know that every one else is ignorant also." He presented his class as a group of normal young men who had been shaped by their society. "We are not originals nor geniuses, but only an ordinary set of young men with fair acquirements and average abilities, who have got to hammer out their fortunes as well as they can." And what had society, as represented by Harvard, done to them? Adams contended that it had made them docile, conforming, materialistic, and dull. The ambitions of modern Harvard youth were depressingly low.

> The greater part of us are unwilling to acknowledge having what are called the hopes of youth. Their ambition is wealth and the position which wealth gives. They wish to lead lives devoted neither to the welfare nor to the harm of others, but simply to going along through the world as comfortably as may be; to working to the best of their ability for themselves; to doing as little evil and as much good as they easily can; and to becoming as wealthy, as self-satisfied and as strictly respectable as Fortune will permit.

These youths rejected literature, science, and the clerical life as not leading to practical success. The blame for such low ambitions, Adams thought, rested with their elders, who sneered at the ideals of youth.

> It is what many so-called philosophers have taught by groaning over the bitterness and the emptiness of life, and the disenchanting power of experience. It is what some of our studies have taught us. Political Economy for instance, when it declares that national wealth is the surest guarantee of individual prosperity and happiness, and then leaves it to us to infer that the best charity and philanthropy is to increase the worth of what we have, as fast as we can. . . .
>
> How long it will take us to outgrow these ideas, is a question for our elders to answer. However bitter the experience of life may be, let us hope that it is wholesome enough to cure us of these fancies. But we ought never to have had them.

The ideal of most Harvard men was "their own comfort" and "a respectable income," but some did hope for more, and some "believe that their duties lie in a higher sphere than that of mere selfishness, and that no fear of the future should prevent them from at least trying to aid the hopes of humanity even if they are laughed at for the wildness of their fancies." Their fancies, however, were not really wild, and in America noble ideals were not to be wasted. Adams distinguished between his countrymen and his country when he insisted that "this nation of ours furnishes the grandest theatre in the world for the exercise of that refinement of mind and those high principles which it is a disgrace to us if we have not acquired. There are still some, who believe it to be true that Knowledge is Power no less in this country and in this age than in other lands and in past times; and these at least will still have trust in what they were taught to

think the noblest ambitions that are permitted to man." Thus Adams asserted his faith that America would not betray its best people. Nevertheless, a pathetic suspicion pervades the oration that the ideals of moral men are not those of their society. There is also a naïveté in Adams's blindness to the probability that science would cooperate with the materialistic spirit, as well as in the facile optimism with which he looked forward to social progress. Read in the light of Adams's later career, the oration, a young man's plea that his nation be worthy of its best people, seems an ironic joke on the speaker.

Education in England: 1860-1868

> Then came the journey up to London through Birmingham and the Black District, another lesson, which needed much more to be rightly felt. The plunge into darkness lurid with flames; the sense of unknown horror in this weird gloom which then existed nowhere else, . . .--the revelation of an unknown society of the pit--made a boy uncomfortable, though he had no idea that Karl Marx was standing there waiting for him, . . . The Black District was a practical education, but it was infinitely far in the distance. The boy ran away from it, as he ran away from everything he disliked.[1]

Adams never stopped running from such glimpses of wretched people and places, phenomena that should not exist in a world of social progress. He avoided examining social problems too closely; when not pondering the problems of the isolated individual, he preferred to consider broad social and historical movements to which the sufferings of humanity seemed irrelevant. Intellectual trends of the 1860's prepared Adams for his life-long attitudes; neither Buckle

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[1]Adams, Education, pp. 72-73.

nor Comte encouraged a young man to meditate on the Black District. Adams gained something quite different from such writers as these. It was Comte, in particular, who impressed upon his mind the concept of social evolution governed by natural laws which could be studied scientifically.[1] Comte may also have influenced Adams's attitude toward science; at the least, the two were kindred spirits, as Adams's mark by this passage of The Positive Philosophy suggests: "They [scientists] are themselves defective in scientific discipline. They abhor generalities, and have a sympathetic predilection for specialties."[2] Adams loved generalities, which was partly why geology, his favorite subject at Harvard, continued to interest him in the 1860's. When he read in 1863 Sir Charles Lyell's The Antiquity of Man, he found human progress treated as a process analogous to that of physical change. Lyell did not hesitate to apply mathematical laws to man's cultural and intellectual development, asserting that"in our own times . . . the rate of progress in the arts and sciences proceeds in a geometrical ratio as knowledge increases, and so, when we carry back our retrospect into the past, we must be prepared to find the signs

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[1]A letter to his brother Charles indicates Comte's influence on Adams: "The truth is, as you justly observe, the world is in a transitional state and no fellow can tell the result. But my studies of Auguste Comte and his allies lead me to doubt very much whether your charming fatalistico-optimistico-scientifico-philosophy is either in his spirit, or logically defensible." April 30, 1867, in the Adams Papers, Microfilm #582.

[2]Positive Philosophy of Comte, tr. by Martineau. Adams's copy is in the Adams Collection at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

of retardation augmenting in a like geometrical ratio." Most relevant to Adams's later writing were Lyell's applications of Darwinian thought to social change and his insistence that evolution need not always constitute progress.

> The more civilization advances the less will mere bodily strength and acuteness of the senses confer social superiority. But still, as Darwin says, there is no fixed and necessary law of progress. The institutions of a country may be so framed that individuals possessing moderate or even inferior qualities may have the best chance of surviving. . . . [Here Lyell gives the example of the Spanish Inquisition.] But such exceptional institutions will not arrest the onward march of the human race.[1]

Reading Richard Owen's Paleontology in 1867, Adams picked up another idea which he would use in later years. Owen believed that evolution was a process of mutation, not of progression. Such evolution could be much swifter than Darwin's theory allowed--a swiftness that Adams's later speculations would demand.[2] We know from the Education and from his 1868 review of Lyell's Principles of Geology that Adams read The Origin of Species about this time. Since Adams in his review tried to remain scrupulously objective, his opinions on Darwinism are not easy to determine. Ernest Samuels decided in 1948 that Adams favored Agassiz over Darwin and Lyell. William Jordy disagreed in 1952, citing Adams's letter to Charles Eliot Norton in which Adams wrote that "My own

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[1]Sir Charles Lyell, The Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man, pp. 422, 489.

[2]Paleontology, Or a Systematic Summary of Extinct Animals and Their Geological Relations (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.). Adams's marks in the book and in the privately printed 1907 edition of the Education indicate that it was Owen (not Huxley, as the Education states) who provided Adams with his symbol of Pteraspis the ganoid fish.

leaning, though not strong, is still towards" Darwin and Lyell. Samuels had the last word, arguing in 1964 that Adams, who did his final research and writing of the essay after his letter to Norton, changed his mind in the process.[1] The problem does seem insoluble. Adams carefully suspended judgment on Darwin's theory. Since he took care to reject Agassiz's theory of "special creation," he must have accepted evolution--there being no third choice--, but not necessarily Darwin's version. In any case, Adams assured his readers that "the race of man among the rest may expect to carry on its development."[2] Acceptance of human evolution came easily to him.

In the Education Adams associated Darwinism, Marxism, and Comtism as three theories of social change. If he had not heard of Marx yet in the 1860's, the reason was not that he failed to investigate social theories. As he wrote to his brother Charles, "I am in theory a violent radical, inclined toward every "ism" in the faint hope of detecting within it some key to the everlasting enigma of progress. How the devil does one add two and two, and what is the answer?"[3] Science provided vague clues, he thought.

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[1]See Ernest Samuels, The Young Henry Adams, pp. 163-67; William H. Jordy, Henry Adams: Scientific Historian, pp. 178-79; Ernest Samuels, Henry Adams: The Major Phase, p. 638. The evidence of the Education favors Samuels, though he does not mention it; for in Adams's recollection it was after undertaking to write the review of Lyell that he had his first doubts about Darwinism. Education, pp. 226-31.

[2]Henry Adams, "Lyell's Principles of Geology," North American Review (1868), pp. 501, 469-70, 481.

[3]May 10, 1865, in Adams Papers, Microfilm #575. Italics mine.

> Everything in this universe has its regular tides and waves. Electricity, sound, the wind, and I believe every part of organic nature will be brought some day within this law. But my philosophy teaches me, and I firmly believe it, that the laws which govern animated beings will be ultimately found to be at bottom the same with those which rule inanimate nature. . . . I look for regular tides in the affairs of men, and of course, in our own affairs. In every progression, somehow or other, the nations move by the same process which has never been explained but is evident in the ocean and the air.

But then, realizing the implications of binding humanity and individual events with immutable physical laws, he backed away from his thought. "On this theory I should expect at about this time [1863], a turn which would carry us backward. The devil of it is, supposing there comes a time when the rebs suddenly cave in, how am I to explain that?"[1]

Adams saw that a cyclic theory was too precise, called for too much regularity, to be workable: the failure of one turn in the cycle threw off the theory; human affairs, at least over short periods of time, cannot be made to fit any neat pattern. More important, such a theory eliminated the influence of men, and young Adams could not yet tolerate the idea of himself or his social class being deprived of power by any forces, physical or human. Talk as he did occasionally of natural laws governing mankind, a more frequent theme in his early letters was that he and his elite peers were the free guides of American society. "In America the man who can't guide had better sit still and look on." (1859) The task of New Englanders, "so far as we attempt a public work, is to

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[1] A Cycle of Adams Letters: 1861-1865, ed. by Worthington C. Ford, II, 89-90.

blow up sophistry and jam down hard on morality." (1860)[1] "We want a national set of young men like ourselves or better, to start new influences not only in politics, but in literature, in law, in society, and throughout the whole social organism." (1862)[2] "When I think of the legislation since last year, my blood boils. . . . Depend upon it that what affects me so violently will affect the average man at last." (1867) Such an attitude demands a high opinion of oneself and a rather low one of the mass of humanity. We must concede that Henry Adams, who observed to his brother Charles in 1869 that "we are small enough creatures absolutely, but relatively to the mass of folls who make mankind, we are at the top of the ladder,"[3] qualified on both counts.

The elite guides could not alter America's preordained "true course"; the job of "the New England element" was, rather, to keep her on this course by guiding the masses. Whether Adams thought this course was dictated by natural laws or by some human trait or national quality is not clear from his letters of this period. It is clear, however, that he saw America as the pattern of progress toward which European nations were striving to move. Exulting over the re-election of Lincoln, he wrote to Charles:

> I never yet have felt so proud as now of the great qualities of our race, or so confident of the capacity of men

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[1]Letters of Henry Adams: 1858-1918, ed. by Worthington C. Ford, I, 53, 58.

[2]Ford, Cycle of Adams Letters, I, 196.

[3]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, I, 126, 151.

> to develop their faculties in the mass. I believe that a new era of the movement of the world will date from that day, which will drag nations up still another step, and carry us out of a quantity of old fogs. Europe has a long way to go yet to catch us up.[1]

Elsewhere in the letter he gave credit to the American system of government, rather than the "race." And at other times, as in a letter of 1860 about Garibaldi, Adams attributed America's pre-eminence to the political and social ideas of her people. "To us Americans, all these Italian troubles reduce themselves simply to a single process, by which one more of the civilized races is forming itself on the ground that we have always stood on, and taking up as its creed the same list of ideas that we have always declared to be the heart and soul of modern civilization."[2]

Behind America's eminence there seemed some kind of moral and cultural ideal, embodied especially in the nation's best people. Some critics, George Hochfield in particular, treat Adams's concepts of morality as fixed Platonic principles which existed, Adams thought, beyond the real world and which, when shattered, left an unfillable void in his mind. I think, however, that Adams was too much aware of the new concepts of evolving morality to be so rigid. In 1865 he stated his attitude toward moral laws: "He [Charles Francis Adams, Sr.] bases his world upon moral laws. I rank moral

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[1]Ford, Cycle of Adams Letters, I, 152; II, 229. Adams used the word "race" in a non-biological sense. A race was a large group of people with a common cultural background.

[2]"Henry Adams and Garibaldi, 1860," in American Historical Review (1920), pp. 253-54.

laws with all other laws, as matter for study, development and perhaps of change. I am continually puzzled to know how we get along together."[1] Adams had no mystique about moral absolutes, though here he vaguely equated moral with physical laws. His concern, quite pronounced in the 1860's, about the world's flaws, came not from any particular moral standard so much as from his very personal suspicion that he was unsuited for success in this world. Feeling a danger to himself, he began to search for theoretical ways to free the individual from the tyranny of social and natural forces. (The warnings of Mill and De Tocqueville on the growing insignificance of the individual in modern democracy certainly influenced his thinking.) Sometimes his unease took the form of mere griping, as in a letter of 1862 which inspired this reply from his brother Charles:

> You are beaten back everywhere before you are twenty-four, and finally writing philosophical letters you grumble at the strange madness of the times and haven't even faith in God and the spirit of your age. What do you mean by thinking, much less writing such stuff? 'No longer any chance left of settled lives and Christian careers!' Do you suppose the world is coming to an end now?

At other times Henry attained a calmer perspective, as in his letter of 1863 to Charles describing his new fatalism. "The world grows just like a cabbage," he began, "or, if the simile is vulgar, we'll say, like an oak. The result will come when the time is ripe, and the only thing that disgusts me much is the consciousness that we are unable to govern it." The

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[1]Letter from Henry Adams to Charles F. Adams, Jr., July 14, 1865, in Adams Papers, Microfilm #576.

concept of slow and inevitable change is at the center of social evolutionism, but Adams's reservations about his theory are more significant than the theory itself. He continued:

> It does very well for a theory of existence so long as it has no occasion to regulate the relation between one man and another. But there, I confess, it rubs, and naturally enough. . . . The race will go on all right or wrong; either way it's the result of causes existing, but not within our reach; but unfortunately, if you were to get into trouble, you might not go on at all, which . . . would not admit of that application of your old though fallacious maxim that life is a system of compensations, a maxim probably just, if we speak of the race as a unit.[1]

But one can think of the race as a unit only at a safe distance. The idea of human powerlessness in a deterministic world is intolerable when one applies it to individuals. Adams discussed this theme lightly in 1863; later he would develop it more seriously in Esther.

Adams's social theory in the 1860's was not very fully developed. He believed that America was subject to a vaguely pre-ordained course of development which made it superior to European nations. The Civil War had threatened this development, but under the influence of her best people, the nation could regain her course. In dubious harmony with these ideas was Adams's theory that natural law controls the movement of nations and masses (though not of individuals). This last idea is vague, however, and Adams did not, in accepting it, postulate any laws of social progress. If he found any "key to the everlasting enigma of progress," he kept it to himself. But no matter how sophisticated his thoughts might

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[1]Ford, Cycle of Adams Letters, I, 102-03; II, 96-97.

have been, it was inevitable that the return to America and Grant's Washington should radically alter them.

Re-Introduction to America: 1868-1870

Soon after the family returned from England in 1868, Henry Adams went to Washington to learn the workings of American politics and society. The shock his notions of progress received when President Grant announced his cabinet is recorded in The Education of Henry Adams, where he concluded that "the progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin."[1] The articles of 1869 and 1870 leave no doubt that the shock was a severe one, and they clarify far better than the Education just what Adams found so repulsive and primitive in Grant. Grant's mortal sin was that he failed to uphold what Adams considered the moral ideal of the American Constitution. Adams best explained this ideal in his article "The Session: 1869-70."

> Supreme, irresistible authority must exist somewhere in every government--was the European political belief; and England solved her problem by intrusting it to a representative assembly to be used according to the best judgment of the nation. America, on the other hand, asserted that the principle was not true; that no such supreme power need exist in a government; that in the American government none such should be allowed to exist, because absolute power in any form was inconsistent with freedom, and that the new government should start from the idea that the public liberties depended upon denying uncontrolled authority to the political system in its parts or in its whole.[2]

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[1]Adams, Education, p. 266.

[2]North American Review (1870), p. 30.

The effect of Adams's two years in Washington was to destroy his belief that politicians could live up to this ideal of the Constitution, and he blamed mainly Grant for having allowed the Legislature to usurp too much power. We must "confront face to face the bald and disgusting fact that members of Congress cannot be honest with such a power in their hands." But Adams's opinion of Congressman was so low that he did not quite hold them responsible for the problem: "It is not Congress that has betrayed the executive, but a long line of Presidents who have failed to respect their trust."[1]

In 1906 it seemed to Adams that Grant had been America's last chance to save the old Republic. But in 1869, when he wrote "Civil Service Reform," Adams had not yet given up on the Constitution. The balance and limitation of powers could be restored, he thought, by "the creation of such a sound public opinion as will hold future Presidents more closely to their charge."

> To effect this there is no way but to attack corruption in all its holes, to drag it before the public eye, to dissect it and hold the diseased members up to popular disgust, to give the national conscience no rest nor peace until mere vehemence of the passion overcomes the sluggish self-complacency of the public mind.[2]

It would take a long time for the elite and the reformers to persuade the public; "such a movement must necessarily be slow." By the next year (in "The Session, 1869-70") his opinion had shifted significantly. He believed the Constitution

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[1]Henry Adams, "Civil Service Reform," North American Review (1869), pp. 451, 460.

[2]"Ibid.," pp. 460, 474-75.

had failed, and his criticism of Grant for allowing the failure was severe; but he also saw something inevitable and beyond human control in the Constitution's decline. "The original basis of reserved powers on which the Constitution was framed has yielded and is yielding to the natural pressure, and the gradual concession of power to the central government has already gone so far as to leave little doubt that the great political problem of all ages cannot, at least in a community like that of the future America, be solved by the theory of the American Constitution." Moreover, he had so far lost his faith in the ability of intelligent men to guide current public opinion that he directed his appeal to all ages and all humanity. The last sentences of "The Session: 1869-70" provide an excellent introduction to The Education of Henry Adams.

> The system of separate responsibility realized in the mechanism of the American government as a consequence of the jealous restriction of substantial powers will inevitably yield, as its foundation has yielded, to the pressure of necessity. The result is not pleasant to contemplate. . . . The discussion of so large a subject is matter for a lifetime, and will occupy generations. The American statesman or philosopher who enters upon this debate must make his appeal, not to the public opinion of a day or of a nation, however large or intelligent, but to the minds of those persons who in every age and in all countries attach their chief interest to working out the problems of human society.[1]

George Hochfield sees Adams as suffering from a succession of ruined ideals which, bursting like balloons, left voids that Adams could never fill.[2] Adams's Constitutional

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[1]"The Session: 1869-70," pp. 61-62.

[2]Henry Adams: An Introduction and Interpretation, pp. 1-10. "Introduction" to The Great Secession Winter and Other Essays by Henry Adams, ed. by George Hochfield, pp. xv-xviii.

ideal was one of those that failed, certainly; but I believe he succeeded at least partially in replacing it with another: a theory of social evolutionism. The principle of limited governmental power, we should note, is perfectly compatible with social evolutionism. When Adams decided that government could not operate without any faction gaining undue power, he had to re-examine the role of government in social progress. Believing that a government dominated by Congressmen could do no good, he could not maintain faith in the nation's unique capacity for progress unless he dissociated social movement from the power of government--as the social evolutionists did. Social evolutionism had much to recommend it to a frustrated political idealist who had just witnessed governmental incompetence at first hand. I will not argue that Adams successfully quieted his doubts about America by revising a few ideas in the 1870's. But at least, by emphasizing more fully the general progress of humanity, he could maintain a theory of progress no matter what happened to America. This focus on the mass of humanity encouraged, perhaps forced Adams to believe that natural forces, not morality or individual action, controlled social progress. To maintain his conception of America's pre-eminence, he would now need to know that America responded more positively than other nations to the natural forces behind social change. But he was not at all sure what these forces were.

Scholarship and Cautious Theorizing: 1870-1877

As professor of history at Harvard and editor of the North American Review, Adams wrote no more political articles. In 1876 he made one last attempt at direct political influence by organizing a reform group in support of Carl Schurz, but Schurz defected back to the Republicans, and the disappointed Adams took refuge in condescension: "The political field is amusing though somewhat saddening to the believer in human perfectibility." He directed his irony here at the idea of perfectibility as well as at politicians; but during these years generally his confidence in the future of humanity seemed firm. This confidence showed through his frequent impatience with the American public. He wrote after the reform fiasco that

> the only good result of all the past eighteen months of works has been the savage hunting-down of powerful scoundrels and the display of awful corruption of our system in root and branch. But our people as yet seem quite callous. If any storm of popular disgust is impending, no sign of it as yet darkens the air. We shall keep at it, and good will come in time.[1]

The passage shows that Adams kept his old interest in politics, but we can also see in him a growing awareness of social development as a force beyond political and all human control, even though men supply the power for social change. An unpublished letter of 1874 shows that Adams was beginning to see the activities of masses of man as irresistible natural forces. His fear of the laboring masses and the capitalistic establishment is apparent. Here, perhaps for the first time,

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, pp. 297, 288-89.

we see Adams of the old aristocratic order feeling threatened not by political corruption but by the rise of two new and frightening powers in the land:

> I confess that the future seems to me at this distance sufficiently vague. There is only one danger that I can see, which is that the laboring class and the capitalists may ultimately make the liberal and conservative parties, respectively. If that happens, nothing but a clean sweep of old institutions can be the result. But I am beginning already to see the hope that our generation has seen its greatest revolutions and that railways and the telegraph have exercised nearly all the immediate influence they can.

Adams did not express any hope that morality or individual action could affect this uncertain situation. The effective forces were the masses, the capitalists, and--in apparent opposition to these--science and technology. "Science," Adams concluded, "must help us out."[1]

We might compare this fatalistic appeal to science with Ernest Samuels's statement that "Henry clung to the family belief that the remedy for the abuse of economic power lay in private morality. Essentially it was a religious conception, for it exhorted each man to reform from within, disregarding the actual system of rewards and punishments decreed by the marketplace."[2] Both the appeal to science and to private morality were characteristic of social evolutionism in the 1870's. Disturbed by the discontented masses and the powerful capitalists, and wanting to keep them from power in government, Adams nevertheless did not, like John Hay,

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[1]Letter to Robert A. Cunliffe, July 6, 1874, in Adams Papers, Microfilm #594.

[2]Samuels, Young Henry Adams, p. 195.

suggest that government should try to keep them in their place. Whether relying on science or on the moral individual, he ignored government. The individualism of the Adams family agreed with that of Spencer and Sumner. Eventually Adams would cease to believe that political, economic, social abuses are correctible at all in a capitalistic society. The individual, he would feel, can correct only himself.

In the 1870's, however, Adams was reluctant to conclude that individuals could not control social forces. Yet even a king with the power of Louis XIV could not overcome "the natural forces which were unceasingly in action to neutralize the king's efforts and to undo his work. Of these the two most potent appear to have been the beaver-trade and the Indian woman."[1] Such forces posed no threat to the freedom of any individual except one who, like Louis XIV, tried to combat them. (The king, in fact, held his own against these forces; perhaps Adams thought of him, with the power of his nation behind him, as a force analogous to "the beaver trade.") Adams expressed no fears for the individual when in 1876 he found in "the national movement" of America "a silent pulsation that commands his respect, a steady movement that resembles in its mode of operation the mechanical action of Nature herself."[2]

In the same review Adams discussed the Constitution

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[1]"Parkman's Old Regime in Canada," North American Review (1875), p. 176.

[2]"Von Holst's History," p. 361.

as an effective working force behind the movement of American society; but now he saw the Constitution not as a moral but as a natural force, or rather, a human document which was consistent with natural forces. This is not to say that he rejected moral standards in evaluating the national movement, but that he approved morally of the way "Nature" works, at least when he was not examining American society and politics very closely. The Constitution, once for Adams the source of moral standards, was now to be valued because it did not pull against the natural course of events. Politics faded into the background, and such a contrast as he noted in 1874--"We are growing rapidly in wealth, education, even in the higher refinements of taste, but politically we never were so low as now"--was little cause for worry.[1] Adams worried anyway, since he had been brought up to care about politics; but he agreed with the social evolutionists that social progress proceeds on its own. Government cannot help, and with luck will not hinder, progress.

At Harvard Adams tried industriously to interpret history as an evolutionary process. He followed the "Teutonic" theory of the origins of Western democracy, trying to trace the beginnings of legal and democratic institutions to the early Anglo-Saxons. Here was a tentative clue to social development. "The Aryans are the creators of civil law," he wrote tentatively to Lewis Henry Morgan; "The Aryan mind seems to have a natural bent towards it. So these complicated

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[1]Letter to Cunliffe, July 6, 1874, in Adams Papers.

influences act and react in the history of human progress."[1] Research into Teutonic origins led Adams to examine the role of the family and the desire for property in social progress. In 1876 he expressed his conclusions in a lecture entitled "Primitive Rights of Women." Adams showed that women's legal rights were always strong in primitive societies, but that the medieval Church took away most of these rights, which women had only recently regained. This kind of social change seemed more cyclic than progressive. Adams, who disdained the feminist movement and apparently saw no reason why women should vote,[2] advocated women's legal rights so long as they did not diminish the strength of the family. A society must achieve the right balance, as many primitive societies had done, between the health of the family and the rights of the woman. Looking ahead to Adams's two novels, most of whose characters have weak or no family ties, we should note how strongly Adams

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[1] Henry Adams and His Friends, ed. by Harold D. Cater, p. 84. It is worth noting here that although the Teutonic theory of history provided support for the racist variety of social Darwinism, Adams never used it so. His anti-Semitism was like that of Henry James: both men, representing a dying social order, resented intrusions upon their orderly, aristocratic world. See Edward N. Saveth, "Henry Adams's Norman Ancestors," in his American Historians and European Immigrants, pp. 65-89; and Leo B. Levy, "Henry James and the Jews," in Commentary (1958), pp. 243-49.

[2] Adams wrote to Charles M. Gaskell: "The women's rights people have made themselves so odious [about the Henry B. Ward scandal] that I think we are rid of them forever. And I assure you that this is a joyful riddance." August 18, 1874, in the Adams Papers, Microfilm #594. Adams read and took notes in Horace Bushnell's Women's Suffrage: The Reform Against Nature (1869), in which Bushnell argued that women by nature are non-combatant and subservient, and that their attaining the vote would ruin American society (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.).

felt in 1876 about the family:

> All new discoveries in the record of human development point to the familiar facts that the most powerful instincts in man are his affections and his love of property; that on these the family is built; that no other institution can be raised on the same or on equally strong foundations; that for this reason the family is the strongest and healthiest of all human fabrics; that it always has and probably always will trample every rival system under its feet; and finally, that just in the measure that society has on the one side carried the theory of the family to an exaggeration, or has allowed it to fall into contempt, has been the violence of the reaction.[1]

Here Adams insisted on a balance of powers between society (the family) and the individual. Government is nowhere involved; all is "natural."

The theory that property is one of the basic human desires, though not an idea of Darwin, was held firmly by social Darwinists. Adams thought the love of property was an instinct which (like Darwin's "social instincts") developed as a society became more civilized. Primitive societies were often communistic, a state that worked well enough for them; but the desire to acquire property was essential for the growth of society, because property stimulated the growth of law, industrialization, and technology. Adams developed his ideas with the help of Sir Henry Maine, John McLennan, and Lewis Henry Morgan. When Morgan published Ancient Society in 1877, Adams read it immediately and wrote such detailed questions to Morgan that Morgan's biographer Carl Resek concluded he "had no more confirmed disciple in Boston than Henry Adams."[2]

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[1]"Primitive Rights of Women," in Henry Adams, Historical Essays (1891). The published essay is a revision of the lecture of 1876, which is lost, pp. 40-41.

[2]Lewis Henry Morgan, American Scholar, p. 149.

The point is interesting because Morgan's variety of social evolution combined an approval of democracy with suggestions that socialism may be a more advanced social system. Morgan expressed his central thesis this way: "Savagery preceded barbarism in all the tribes of mankind, as barbarism is known to have preceded civilization. The history of the human race is one in source, one in experience, one in progress." He then went on to define the many stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization at length, implying that the progression of these stages is a priori inevitable. The instinct of desiring property, he thought, is essential to man's progress: "Springing into life in savagery, it required all the experience of this period and of the subsequent period of barbarism to develop the germ, and to prepare the human brain for the acceptance of its controlling influence. Its dominance as a passion over all other passions marks the commencement of civilization." Thus far Morgan's opinions coincided with Adams's. But at the book's end Morgan expressed ideas about property which indicate why Engels wrote an appreciative book about him.

> Since the advent of civilization, the outgrowth of property has been so immense, its forms so diversified, its uses so expanding and its management so intelligent in the interests of its owners, that it has become, on the part of the people, an unmanageable power. The human mind stands bewildered in the presence of its own creation. The time will come, nevertheless, when human intelligence will rise to the mastery over property, and define the relations of the state to the property it protects, as well as the obligations and the limitations of the rights of its owners. . . . The dissolution of society bids fair to become the termination of a career of which property is the end and aim; because such a career contains the elements of self-destruction. Democracy in

> government, brotherhood in society, equality in rights and privileges, and universal education, foreshadow the next higher plane of society to which experience, intelligence and knowledge are steadily tending.[1]

This passage is more open to a socialistic than a Spencerian interpretation. It is clear, in any case, that the kinds of reform Adams desired--defeating irresponsible politicians and limiting the power of corporations--either are not sufficient for the progress Morgan looked forward to, or are irrelevant to its achievement. Adams never said what he thought of this passage, but he respected the book greatly. About fifteen years later he began to express fears--eventually to become obsessive--that the Western world was headed for socialism through the destruction of decadent capitalism. Such a development did not strike him as progress.

"A scientific training is as necessary to the historian as to the mathematician,"[2] wrote Adams in 1874, but he was doing little scientific reading except in anthropology. He shows no particular influence of The Descent of Man. Of Spencer's work, we know only that Adams read "The Philosophy of Style" in 1874, and disliked it.[3] He did pay attention to

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[1]Lewis Henry Morgan, Ancient Society, pp. v-vi, 5-6, 561-62.

[2]"Stubbs's Constitutional History of England," North American Review (1874), p. 233.

[3]After reading the essay, Adams concluded: "I am not encouraged to read his larger works." Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, I, 261-62. There is little evidence that Adams ever studied Spencer with care, though he did take notes in his 1882 edition of First Principles (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.). He thought Spencer was a European fashion, one of the staples of Boston "culture." See letter to Robert A. Cunliffe, August 31, 1875, in the Adams Papers, Microfilm #594.

Clarence King's essay "Catastrophism and the Evolution of Environment," in which King argued that organisms can adapt quickly to environmental changes during geological upheavals. This theory of evolution, applied to society, might have altered Adams's thinking about the rate of social progress. Since King postulated a vague kind of emergent evolution, moreover, suggesting that organisms change by their own power and initiative, one could read free will into King's world. But Adams, reviewing the essay in The Nation, confined himself to scientific questions.[1]

Adams was a rather cautious thinker during these years, partly, I imagine, because in his reviews he tried to qualify or dispute the theories of other men, and therefore was wary of his own. In his reviews Adams managed to find flaws in the systems of most of the writers he discussed, and occasionally the mere attempt to develop systems of social change wearied him. Thus he wrote in 1875:

> The mania for producing philosophical systems of social development, like that of Auguste Comte; the temptation to make such a system symmetrical and to pass every individual being through every phase which has left a trace of its existence behind it; the fervor with which each new investigator pursues his own historical novelty;--this is merely the symptom of advancing knowledge, but has little intrinsic value.[2]

There is no doubt, however, that Adams, while wary of oversimplification and eager to find exceptions to any formulated

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[1]King's essay was an address to the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale College, June 26, 1877 (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.) See Adams's review in The Nation (August 30, 1877), p. 137.

[2]"Maine's Early History of Institutions," North American Review (1875), p. 437.

laws, was himself looking for a coherent theory of social change. He continued to believe that social development must be slow, and that it obeys natural laws.[1] Otherwise he could not have read Morgan as enthusiastically as he did. He realized, far more thoroughly than the Spencerians, that the laws of change are extremely complex. Adams in the 1870's had high standards of scholarship. At times, whenever he looked closely at contemporary events, his inability to fit them into any scheme of slow progress disturbed him, as his letters show. Like all believers in social progress, Adams had to reconcile the telescopic view, in which individual men and events merged into broad trends and disappeared, and the microscopic view, in which the trends could not be seen among the details. In the 1870's Adams thought he could keep the two views separate, letting the optimistic concept of progress soften the discouraging political and social situation. He never maintained, before or after, such a consistently optimistic attitude toward the contemporary scene as during the Harvard years. The indignation of the Class Day oration; his sense in the 1860's of a crumbling world which he, closeted in the London Legation, could do nothing to save; his growing despair in the 1880's

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[1] On Adams's idea of the rate of social change, see "Parkman's Old Regime in Canada," and Adams's "The Independents in the Canvass," North American Review (1876), p. 454.

In a systematic attempt to determine the progress of the United States in her first hundred years, Adams rounded up an impressive group of writers to analyze progress in various fields for a Centennial issue of the North American Review. He planned "to measure the progress of our country by the only standard I know of, worth applying to mankind, its thought." The result, as Samuels explains, was equivocal; only in law was unqualified progress clear. Samuels feels that the Centennial issue "voiced his deepest fears." Young Henry Adams, p. 276. If so, Adams showed no signs of despair.

over the moral individual's isolation in America; and the old man's premonition of universal catastrophe: all are absent from his articles and letters in the 1870's. These were probably Adams's most satisfying years. He married in 1872 a young woman who seemed ideally suited to him. At Harvard he was extremely busy, as he always needed to be, and successful at teaching and editing--as he knew perfectly well. Living in a peaceful town, he studied historical change in an age when most men assumed that change was progress. The brutalities of Washington politics were far removed. Nothing in his personal life gave Adams cause to worry about the individual's relation to society. Life was pleasant in Cambridge, though eventually it proved dull and Adams decided to return to Washington.

CHAPTER IV

THE LIFE OF ALBERT GALLATIN AND DEMOCRACY

The Life of Albert Gallatin

When in 1877 Adams gravitated to Washington "by a primary law of nature," as he said, his attitude toward American democracy was emphatically positive. "As I belong to the class of people who have great faith in this country," he wrote to his friend Charles M. Gaskell, "and who believe that in another century it will be saying in its turn the last word of civilization, I enjoy the expectation of the coming day, and try to imagine that I am myself, with my fellow gelehrte here, the first faint rays of that great light which is to dazzle and set the world on fire thereafter."[1] Adams returned to the Capitol not as a journalist but as a professional historian, and the historian's job, as he advised Henry Cabot Lodge, was to find "some theory of the progress of civilization which is outside and above all temporary questions of policy." Having gained access to the Gallatin papers, Adams could now pursue his two main interests: studying the workings of past and present politics, and searching for a theory of progress by which to make sense of history. And The Life of Albert Gallatin (1879) shows

[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, I, 302.

that Adams did not let the mass of political events during the age of Jefferson thwart his search for the prize he still sought, a key to "the everlasting enigma of progress."

Gallatin and his teen-age Swiss friends were "essentially visionaries. . . . They believed in human nature, and believed that human nature free from social trammels would display nobler qualities and achieve vaster results, not only in the physical but also in the moral world." Gallatin brought this faith to the New World with him; in fact, the faith may have stimulated his voyage since, as Adams wrote, the New World seemed to Gallatin to "offer the human race the first example of man in his best condition, free from all the evils which infected Europe, and intent only on his own improvement."[1] Such a view is in a sense non-evolutionary; Gallatin thought human nature good enough already, needing only the right conditions to blossom. The theory also implied that social progress could occur very fast, once the "social trammels" were removed. Gallatin and the other Jeffersonians looked forward to rapid progress when they came into power in 1801. Adams credited Gallatin with a "cooler head" than Jefferson's, but even that cool head "felt the power of the strong wine success. He too believed that human nature was to show itself in new aspects, and that the failures of the past were due to the faults of the past." With a strict interpretation of the Constitution, a minimum of governmental activity, guarantees of individual freedom, and a frugal fiscal policy dedicated

[1]The Life of Albert Gallatin, pp. 16, 272-73.

to paying all debts, they could produce (in Adams's phrase) "a fresh race of men." Government would help by creating a national university (for moral progress) and building roads and bridges (for material progress).[1]

The diplomatic troubles leading to the Embargo Act in 1808 ruined Jefferson and Gallatin's scheme for internal improvement, and provided the most painful example of society's failure to improve at the desired rate. Gallatin's hopes and principles necessarily failed him, because he hoped for too much; as Adams noted, he "put too high an estimate on human nature."[2] His theories could not work, moreover, because they were out of key with the dominant human forces controlling the national fortunes. The strongest of these forces were the economic growth of the United States, which required economic relations with Europe, and the hostile and opportunistic policies of England and France, bent on taking advantage of America's weakness. To put economic pressure on Europe, Jefferson and Gallatin implemented the Embargo Act.[3] In doing so they violated their Republican principles. "The apostles of strict construction, of narrow grants, the men who of all others were the incarnation of that theory which represented mankind as too much governed" took upon themselves

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[1] Ibid., pp. 266, 491, 349-51.

[2] Ibid., p. 492.

[3] Gallatin, it is true, had "no faith in the embargo as a measure of constraint upon the belligerent powers, . . . but he accepted the policy fixed by his party and by Congress . . . as the only apparent alternative to war, but not as a permanent alternative." Ibid., p. 368.

"powers by the Embargo Act which placed the fortunes of at least half the community under their control."[1] The Embargo Act could have provided Herbert Spencer with a fine example of the futility and harmfulness of governmental action, for it crippled both the economy of the United States and the morale of its people. Gallatin realized, when his hopes were "dashed away," that he was up against forces that politicians and principles could not control. He discovered "that the failures of the past were not due to the faults of the past only, and that circumstances must by their nature be stronger and more permanent than men." As his principles crumbled along with the national university, and the roads and bridges remained unbuilt, Gallatin learned "the omnipotence of circumstance."[2]

It is a mistake, made notably by George Hochfield in his Henry Adams, to identify Adams's principles with Gallatin's and deduce the failure of Adams's ideals from the failure of his book's hero. Adams still believed that social change must occur slowly, and though he held on to the conviction that moral men can influence public opinion, he was fully aware before 1879 that the "natural" forces generated by events and masses of men are generally beyond the power of politicians to control. In Gallatin Adams still used the organismic metaphor of society which implied inevitable growth according to

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[1] Ibid., p. 369.

[2] Ibid., p. 379. Elsewhere Adams attributed Gallatin's failure to "forces which neither he nor any other man or combination of men, neither his policy nor any other policy or resource of human wisdom, could control." Ibid., p. 355.

natural laws. "When studied as a mere matter of political philosophy," he wrote, "it is clear enough that this painful period of paralysis [1808-1811] was an inevitable stage in the national development." This was before nationalism had united the country; and from the stagnant years during this period "the nation could rescue itself only by a slow process of growth." Pondering near the book's end the "degradation" of the years between 1830 and 1850, Adams again described the national unit as an organism passing through an illness: "There can be no philosophy of history that would not require some vast derangement of the national health to account for that mortal convulsion [the Civil War] with which that health was at last in part restored."[1]

All this is not to deny Adams's sympathies with the Republican idealism of Jefferson and Gallatin. This idealism was consistent, except in its veneration for human nature and faith in rapid social change, with social evolutionism: the rejection of governmental power, insistance on individual freedom, and even frugality and abhorrence of debt, which both Republicans and social evolutionists considered a cardinal moral virtue. The social evolutionist's great advantage was that he could consider man perfectible without taking human nature as perfect yet; he was patient and did not expect to greet the millenium personally. But he too wanted to see man free of "social trammels," and he respected the people without assuming that they needed help or that

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[1] Ibid., pp. 397-98, 636.

government could provide it if they did. Adams did not go so far as to deny that government can influence a nation's course, but he recognized that sometimes if the people are "left to themselves, they will blunder through all obstacles, blindly enough, it is true, but effectually." At times "great results can be reached only by small men," and by small men Adams meant not small politicians but the masses. Implicit in this view is the concept of a vague natural force that guides the people and the nation safely through crises. It may surprise the reader of Adams's later work to notice how approvingly he looked upon the common people in Gallatin. Perhaps a romantic view of the American past increased his sympathy for the mass of early Americans; but a similar approval--or at least an absence of condescension and contempt--colored his few comments on contemporary society, as when he asserted that "The people of the United States have learned . . . that they hold all corporations at their mercy, and that if there is any danger to liberty it is quite as likely to be the liberties of corporations as those of the people which suffer."[1] (The suggestion here is that the masses were gaining some conscious control of their own development.) Adams seems to have absorbed, for the time at least, some of the Republicans' confidence in man.

In Gallatin we see only a few hints of a Darwinian influence on Adams's social theory. Natural selection apparently had less relevance to early American history than to

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[1] Ibid., pp. 432, 639.

ancient and medieval history. But Adams, preoccupied by the problem of power, was always aware of struggles for existence. During the embargo New England "resisted, revolted, . . . Her struggle saved her; necessity taught her new modes of existence and made her at length almost independent of the sea. Virginia, however, . . . submitted, . . . Her ruin was accelerated because she made no struggle for life."[1] This passage is interesting for more than its Darwinian metaphor. Adams generally treated New England in Gallatin with lofty contempt; that in this passage he mentioned New England respectfully for its ability to struggle suggests a kind of moral ambivalence which all social evolutionists confronted and which was to disturb Adams often in succeeding years. Struggle is necessary for survival and therefore valuable, but it may also be immoral if it hurts others. Most social Darwinists, justifying struggle and competition as necessary in this hard-bitten world, looked ahead to a time when struggle would no longer be necessary for the welfare of society. Adams grew steadily more appalled at the struggles of unprincipled politicians, financiers, and industrialists, but he also regarded struggle as a positive force, essential not only for society's health but for the individual's mental energy and independence. He condemned New England's resistance to the War of 1812 because it hurt the country. Her resistance to the embargo, however, did no harm to America.

The struggle of politicians to control events

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[1] Ibid., p. 380.

emphasizes the paradox that politicians, who yearn more than other men for power, are the most powerless of men in the sense that they try to control social forces that prove to be beyond their control. Once a man leaves private life and the personal events which most men spend their energies trying to control, and concentrates instead on public events, he is doomed to failure. Having no real power, he loses his freedom, all he acquires is a susceptibility to corruption. In a letter which Adams quotes both in Gallatin and his John Randolph, Randolph suggests the effects of this situation on the individual:

> The longer I live, the more do I incline to somebody's opinion, that there is in the affairs of this world a mechanism of which the very agents themselves are ignorant, and which, of course, they can neither calculate nor control. As much free will as you please in everything else, but in politics I must ever be a necessitarian. And this comfortable doctrine saves me a deal of trouble and many a twinge of conscience for my heedless indolence.[1]

There was more on Randolph's conscience than indolence, Adams thought, but Randolph touched inadvertantly on a useful lesson, which the Presidencies of John Adams and John Quincy Adams also taught: politics destroys the politician's freedom.

It is tempting to identify the older Gallatin's attitudes with those of Adams. We may plausibly do so, if we remember that what Gallatin learned in his old age Adams knew as a young man. Gallatin learned late, for example, that deep social problems cannot be solved by government, only by

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[1] Ibid., p. 324.

the people, and that political reform does not get at the heart of social ills:

> I find no one who suffers in mind as I do at the corruption and degeneracy of our government. But I do not despair, and cannot believe that we have lived under a perpetual delusion, and that the people will not themselves ultimately cure the evils under which we labor. There is something more wanted than improved forms of government. There is something wrong in the social state. Moral still more than intellectual education and habits are wanted. Had I another life before me, my faculties would be turned towards that object much rather than to political pursuits.

Gallatin knew what the main problem was: materialism and its harmful effect on the national morals. "The energy of this nation is not to be controlled," he observed in 1836; "it is at present exclusively applied to the acquisition of wealth and to improvements of stupendous magnitude. . . . The apparent prosperity and the progress of cultivation, population, commerce, and improvement are beyond expectation. But it seems to me as if general demoralization was the consequence; I doubt whether general happiness is increased; and I would have preferred a gradual, slower, and more secure progress." Decades later Henry Adams saw America in a similar state, and applied similar standards and remedies to it. These were not very dynamic. Like Gallatin, who responded to the proofs of greed and corruption only by insisting that "We cannot and ought not to restrain by legislative enactments the marvellous energy of this nation and the natural course of things,"[1] Adams took refuge from the contemporary scene in a vast and vague conception of the nation's "natural" course. All works

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[1] Ibid., pp. 650, 653, 664.

for the best in the end; this was the social evolutionist's credo. It was not one, however, which Adams could hold indefinitely. His doubts about it appear in his first novel, Democracy.

Democracy

The Nature of Democracy

Adams's first novel Democracy (1880) seems a mass of contradictions. The reader cannot easily separate Adams's opinions from those of his characters, even regarding the novel's central subject, democracy. It is widely remarked that Europe brought out the democrat in Adams, and America the aristocrat. Most of his optimistic comments on democracy in his letters, for example, are directed at Gaskell and other English friends. In Democracy, a satirical novel aimed at an American audience, Adams naturally took a more critical view. So we should take the novel's criticism of American democracy with a grain of optimism. Here is probably the harshest criticism of America in the book:

> You Americans believe yourselves to be excepted from the operations of natural laws. You care not for experience. . . . Well, I declare to you that in all my experience I have found no society which has elements of corruption like the United States. The children in the street are corrupt, and know how to cheat me. The cities are all corrupt, and also the towns and the counties and the States' legislatures and the judges. Every day men betray trusts both public and private, steal money, run away with public funds. Only in the Senate men take no money.

That the speaker, who goes on to predict escalating corruption in America, is the foreign minister from Bulgaria, matters; we should take his view as a foreigner's and therefore

a very partial truth. On the other hand, when Madeleine Lee, the novel's heroine, says that "'Society' in America means all the honest, kindly-mannered, pleasant-voiced women, and all the good, brave, unassuming men, between the Atlantic and the Pacific," it matters that she is speaking to an Italian, "one of those bland young Secretaries of Legation [who] seemed to acquiesce far too much as a matter of course in the idea that there was no society except in the old world." As Madeleine's sister Sybil observes to herself, "It was not often that her sister waved the stars and stripes so energetically."[1]

Madeleine here is describing democracy as the American way of life, not as a form of government. The two senses of democracy, one emphasizing the whole society and the other the individuals who run the government, are equally important in Democracy. The historian and ambassador Nathan Gore, whom critics often identify as Adams's spokesman, stresses democracy in the former sense. He believes democracy to be the most advanced social structure, an experiment in political and social evolution which depends on the masses, not the politicians, for its success.

> I believe in democracy. I accept it. I will faithfully serve and defend it. I believe in it because it appears to me the inevitable consequence of what has gone before it. Democracy asserts the fact that the masses are now raised to higher intelligence than formerly. All our civilization aims at this mark. We want to do what we can to help it. I myself want to see the result. I grant it is an experiment, but it is the only direction society can take that is worth its taking; the only conception of its duty large enough to satisfy its instincts;

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[1]Democracy, An American Novel, pp. 72, 46, 47.

> the only result that is worth an effort or a risk. Every other possible step is backward, and I do not care to repeat the past.[1]

Of this attitude, Ernest Samuels writes: "There can be little doubt that the 'catechism' came from the depths of Adams's heart."[2]

Testing Gore's beliefs against Madeleine's, however, we see that there is much room for contradiction in the depths of Adams's heart. Madeleine lacks Gore's faith in human nature and in the masses; her opinion follows that of the older Albert Gallatin. She cannot "accept the Brobdingnagian doctrine that he who made two blades of grass grow where only one grew before deserved better of mankind than the whole race of politicians." She desires the improvement of humanity but the prospect seems to her remote, and her experience in Washington merely confirms her low view of human nature and the "great million-armed monster." Madeleine does not often think about the masses or society at large, especially while she lives in Washington, but rather about individuals. She is looking for somebody to "grow to be a tree and cast a shadow."[3] She thinks of democracy in terms of the men who run the government, and assumes that by examining them she is examining democracy. Adams made this clear in the first chapter, where he outlined her systematic rejection of finance, philosophy, culture, philanthropy, religion, the search

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[1] Ibid., p. 77.

[2] Henry Adams: The Middle Years, p. 86.

[3] Democracy, pp. 7, 3, 9.

for social position and wealth (she already has these), and education as worthy objects of study and self-sacrifice. So it is not surprising that Madeleine thinks very little about social progress, and seems to have no faith. When Gore recites his catechism, she asks: "And suppose your experiment fails, . . . suppose society destroys itself with universal suffrage, corruption, and communism." We can infer from Adams's other writings that the objection came from the depths of Adams's heart. Gore replies: "I have faith; not perhaps in the old dogmas, but in the new ones; faith in human nature; faith in science; faith in tne survival of the fittest. Let us be true to our time, Mrs. Lee! If our age is to be beaten, let us die in the ranks. If it is to be victorious, let us be first to lead the column. Anyway, let us not be skulkers or grumblers."[1] Madeleine continues to grumble, however, and the novel's only other character who expresses much faith in human nature is that monument to corruption, Senator Ratcliffe.

Madeleine conceives society in terms of representative individuals and assumes, for a time at least, that politicians are representative. "Half our wise men declare," she says, "that the world is going straight to perdition; the other half that it is fast becoming perfect. Both cannot be right. . . . I must know whether America is right or wrong. Just now this question is a very practical one, for I really want to know whether to believe in Mr. Ratcliffe. If I throw

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[1] Ibid., pp. 78-79.

him overboard, everything must go, for he is only a specimen." Madeleine assumes here that politicians like Ratcliffe reflect rather than direct society. In the end, however, she concludes that they neither control nor represent it. Even politicians hold this view, from Ratcliffe, who "agreed that the country could do very well without him," to the President, who believed that "his hand was guiding the destinies of America to his own reelection."[1] Mr. Gore, somewhat embittered by his failure to be appointed minister to Spain, emphasizes the uselessness and irrelevance of politics; he claims politics is not the center of society at all, but merely "wasted effort and clumsy intrigue." Better to be a bank-clerk or printer, he thinks. Gore dismisses Madeleine's interest in politics and Ratcliffe with a Spanish proverb: "The man who washes his donkey's head, loses time and soap." She later comes to a similar view. The power which seemed at first to have some relation to the nation turns out to be power only to control other individuals in politics and to serve oneself. At best, democratic government is "nothing more than government of any other kind," and Madeleine is "glad to quit the masquerade; to return to the true democracy of life, her paupers and her prisons, her schools and her hospitals."[2]

This phrase "the true democracy of life" is too facile, comes too easily, but it indicates one reason why Adams was not about to give up on the American experiment. Henry

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[1] Ibid., pp. 75-76, 85, 184.

[2] Ibid., pp. 200. 342.

Wasser's assertion that "The test of the democratic process to [Adams] was whether or not the seat of power attracts the scrupulous intelligence and gives it full freedom"[1] is true enough of democracy as a political system; and the system, Adams felt, was failing the test. Power corrupts, and where there are many politicians power corrupts many. But Wasser's further statement that for Adams "The final goal in society was the responsible control of political power" is wrong, at least so far as Democracy is concerned. (Wasser himself is thinking mostly about the Education.) Adams's final goal for society, as we shall see, was the moral and esthetic improvement of its people. Madeleine's return to "the true democracy of life" suggests her return to the real center of society, and also discourages us from seeing her flight to Europe as a rejection of American society. Madeleine leaves to purify herself of the taint of politics. But democracy means more than politics; it means, in fact (or used to mean), that government's power is strictly limited, that the individual is free to follow his own interests, and that the people ultimately control their own development. That Adams felt such a society has the best chance to progress, and felt America was such a society, is suggested by the narrator's only detailed comment on democracy in the book:

> Of all titles ever assumed by prince or potentate, the proudest is that of the Roman pontiffs: "Servus servorum Dei"--"Servant of the servants of God." In former days

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[1] "The Education of Henry Adams: A Reconsideration," to be published by Midcontinent American Studies Journal.

> it was not admitted that the devil's servants could by right have any share in government. They were to be shut out, punished, exiled, maimed, and burned. The devil has no servants now; only the people have servants. There may be some mistake about a doctrine which makes the wicked, when a majority, the mouthpiece of God against the virtuous, but the hopes of mankind are staked on it; and if the weak in faith sometimes quail when they see humanity floating in a shoreless ocean, on this plank, which experience and religion long since condemned as rotten, mistake or not, men have thus far floated better by its aid, than the popes ever did with their prettier principle; so that it will be a long time yet before society repents.[1]

It should not surprise us to find Adams writing in 1880 (to Gaskell), that "Europe has got to do some heavy revoluting in the next twenty years, and America has a long start."[2]

Adams never showed much interest in the true democracy of life, defined as it is in Democracy. On the other hand, he avoided the extent of condescension and contempt toward the masses that mars his friend John Hay's Bread-Winners. Ernest Samuels identifies Adams's views of the time with those of Sumner, Malthus, and Spencer, and essentially he is correct; but there is something rather broad-minded--for Adams's time and social station--in his attitude toward the industrial riots of 1877: "To the man caught on a stool high enough to see over the crowd, the spectacle is not without entertainment. But this process of elevation requires that one's head should be in the clouds; that is, a trifle solitary and cool. I am used to it and 'rather like it,' but it does not suit everyone."[3] The comment does not indicate how

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[1] Democracy, pp. 181-82.

[2] Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, I, 325.

[3] Samuels, Middle Years, p. 19.

he felt toward the poor and the masses, however, and the problem needs further examination as a key to Adams's social theory.

In the first chapter of Democracy, Adams tells us that after the death of her husband and child Madeleine devoted much of her time to the poor. She studied Spencer, and then

> did her best to turn her study to practical use. She plunged into philanthropy, visited prisons, inspected hospitals, read the literature of pauperism and crime, saturated herself with the statistics of vice, until her mind had nearly lost sight of virtue. At last it rose in rebellion against her, and she came to the limit of her strength. This path, too, seemed to lead nowhere. She declared that she had lost the sense of duty, and that, so far as concerned her, all the paupers and criminals in New York might henceforward rise in their majesty and manage every railway on the continent. Why should she care?

The implication here is that the poorer classes ought not to have economic power (though Adams's opinion of American rail companies suggests the ironic meaning also). Having studied the condition of the poor and unrespectable, Madeleine questions whether spending her money on charity and public works was wise. "Mrs. Lee had read enough political economy and pauper reports to be nearly convinced that public work should be public duty, and that great benefactions do harm as well as good."[1] And she goes on to reflect that such charity, though it might help people to live, would only "increase and perpetuate that same kind of human nature which was her great grievance." Madeleine subordinates whatever moral obligation she feels to help people live to her esthetic repugnance

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[1] Democracy, pp. 2-3, 6-7.

for the common people. But what would improve the people? Not education: Madeleine's ideas about education concern a level of cultivation which is irrelevant to the masses. Money alone is worse than useless, or so she rationalizes. To be "nearly convinced that public work should be public duty" is only a way for the rich to save their consciences along with their money; the cliché is rendered meaningless by the next clause, for if private money will do harm, so will public money. Madeleine knows that the public is not about to accept any such duty. Her attitude adds up to orthodox social Darwinism, the belief that the masses should be left to their own devices and let the fittest survive. The harm done by great benefactions is that of helping the economically weak to live longer; it never enters her head (nor probably Adams's) that public or private action may make the weak stronger. When social Darwinism is held by the upper classes, it is most vicious, for they consider themselves above the struggle for existence. But we cannot apply this judgment unreservedly to Madeleine, first because she is a woman (whose money has come to her at the price of a personal tragedy), second because Adams stresses her coldness and weariness in order to explain why she wants to go to Washington, and third because she returns to her poor people at the end. Apparently she regains the sense of duty, though we are never told exactly what she thinks her duty is. (It may be a duty to keep the masses in their place.)

Did Adams himself take the social Darwinist view of

the masses? Since Madeleine is an unreliable spokesman, we can turn to Senator Ratcliffe as anti-spokesman, and see if Adams presents opinions opposed to his. When Ratcliffe notices one of Darwin's books (apparently The Descent of Man) on Madeleine's table, he asks her if she thinks she is descended from monkeys, and her reply ("Why not?") brings on his Websterian oratory.

> Such books, he began, disgrace our civilization; they degrade and stultify our divine nature; they are only suited for Asiatic despotisms where men are reduced to the level of beasts; that they should be accepted by a man like Baron Jacobi, I can understand; he and his masters have nothing to do in the world but to trample on human rights. Mr. Carrington, of course, would approve these ideas; he believes in the divine doctrine of flogging negroes; but that you, who profess philanthropy and free principles, should go with them, is astonishing; it is incredible; it is unworthy of you.[1]

Ratcliffe thinks Darwinism denies that the masses have rights against the rich and fortunate of the world. He is not entirely right about Darwin, but he has described the spirit of the social Darwinists well enough. Whenever a social Darwinist smiled on private aid to the poor, he did so mainly for the benefit of the benefactor's conscience. To help substantially the poor was to hinder the operation of natural selection. This point of view can be defended, but it ought not to be granted without question; in short, Ratcliffe has a point that deserves to be answered. Madeleine, however, brushes off the subject with a joke. The suspicion lingers that Adams had no reply to Ratcliffe's position, that he could rebut it only by softening the phrasing to make Ratcliffe's

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[1] Ibid., p. 102.

truth about social Darwinism seem less brutal. The scene suggests that though Adams held social Darwinist principles he did not like to talk about them.

In a recent book William H. Marnell describes the type of reform advocated by social Darwinists.

> The reformer who applauds the reform already accomplished and in hardheaded fashion holds to what is now the tried and true has the best of two worlds. He has the inner satisfaction of being acclaimed such by those who admire reform (all right-thinking men do, of course), and yet he has the reality which really attracts him, the status quo. . . . The American Philistine was satisfied with the set of reforms effected under the banners of George Washington.[1]

Adams fits the description rather well. His proposed reforms worked within the governmental system set up by the Founding Fathers. Adams's principles were that a man should be thrown out of public office if he cheats, steals, or takes bribes. No one is going to criticize these standards as far as they go, but it is remarkable in Democracy how little connection Adams saw between the conduct of politicians and the welfare of society, how little, in fact, he thought about the welfare of society. His interest was all in individuals; morality in public life was a matter of good form. Reform is not discussed in the novel with any seriousness, and the characters seldom mention the subject except in passing. At a dinner Ratcliffe refutes Mr. French, a "light weight" advocate of civil service reform, by saying: "Ask my brother senators here what chance there is for your Reforms so long as the

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[1]Man-Made Morals: Four Philosophies That Shaped America, p. 238.

American citizen is what he is." The subject is then dropped, but later when Madeleine presses the point Ratcliffe elaborates: "No representative government can long be much better or much worse than the society it represents. Purify society and you purify the government. But try to purify the government artificially and you only aggravate failure."[1] This argument might have been lifted from William Graham Sumner, but, as has been observed,[2] it can also be traced to Emerson and Thoreau. Ratcliffe's thesis deserves discussion in a book about democracy, but Adams again slides off the subject. In demanding the moral reform of society, of course, Ratcliffe is merely trying to put off political reform, knowing that no one in the group is seriously interested in social reform or has any ideas about it. Nothing in the book suggests that Adams himself believed anything could be done to improve society. Democracy does not examine this or any other important attitude toward social change. Adams's ultimate analysis of society in the book rests, as we shall see below, on social elitism, moral standards which turn out partly to be esthetic standards, and the distortion of a Darwinian idea.

The Natural World and the Moral World

Charles Darwin was not given to irony. The American reader of The Descent of Man, however, may sense irony in

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[1] Democracy, pp. 63, 71.

[2] Michael Colacurcio, "Democracy and Esther: Henry Adams's Flirtation With Pragmatism," in American Quarterly (1967), p. 56.

Darwin's praise of "the wonderful progress of the United States, as well as the character of the people. . . . The more energetic, restless, and courageous men from all parts of Europe have emigrated . . . and have [in America] succeeded best."[1] This sounds perfectly straightforward until we recall that Darwin was attributing America's progress to the action of natural selection, and that natural selection was a powerful force, he thought, only in uncultured or primitive societies. Darwin believed also that man's moral sense is what mainly distinguishes him from the lower animals, and the Descent implies that advanced human civilization, based largely on the moral sense, overcomes nature in that society releases itself from the laws and motivations that control the natural world. The human, moral world has grown away from the natural world and is distinct from it. The United States, Darwin seemed to think, had not yet attained this level. Whether it is significant in Democracy that Adams's heroine approves of Darwin while his villain detests him, and whether Adams consciously used Darwin's concept of social progress, the distinction in Adams's novel between the natural world and the civilized, moral world is essential to its meaning. The basic idea is common enough, and was so even before Huxley made it notorious in the 1890's. Recently it has appeared in existentialist thought; Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, asserts that "Our aim is precisely to establish the human kingdom as a pattern of values in distinction from the natural

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[1] Descent of Man, p. 161.

world."[1] In Democracy Adams made a very specific, partly metaphorical application of the idea to contemporary American politics. He pictured the world of Washington as the natural world, dominated by natural selection and the survival of the fittest (most ruthless). To this world he opposed that of individuals who recognize the claims of morality.[2] The theory is oversimple but forceful, and the novel does attempt to explain why politicians live in the Darwinian natural world rather than the moral world. Adams tried to show through Ratcliffe that modern politics and morality exclude each other.

Silas P. Ratcliffe, the Prairie Giant of Peonia, Illinois, came originally from a "respectable" New England family. In Illinois he became a young abolitionist, and owed his first success in politics to his anti-slavery efforts. This is the laudable background of the demagogue whose present weakness lies "in his blind ignorance of morals." There is a certain beauty, the narrator informs us, "in the skill with which he evaded questions of principle." What made the man go wrong? Nothing in the novel suggests that he was especially unsound to begin with. "Was it politics that caused this atrophy of the moral sense by disuse?" Madeleine asks,

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[1]"Existentialism is a Humanism," tr. by Philip Mairet, in Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre, p. 303.

[2]Adams saw society at large as a third world. Conceiving society not as a collection of individuals but as one huge mass, he found morality an irrelevant concept to society. At least, this is the impression Democracy gives. Certainly he did not think of his important characters as representative of the whole society.

and the novel answers yes. Politicians must have power over others in government, and the irrelevance of morality to the acquisition of power necessarily corrupts those who accept the rules of politics. Ratcliffe admits that "If virtue won't answer our purpose, we must use vice, or our opponents will put us out of office." The practical uselessness of morality in politics, which Madeleine comes to think of as the "organic disease" of politics, almost corrupts even her (as it almost corrupted Adams). She wonders at one point: "Was she, unknown to herself, becoming tainted with the life about her?"[1] She was indeed, and it takes an obvious example of Ratcliffean corruption to save her.

If we doubt that Adams's satire reflects his early thought very accurately, we should consider his advice to Henry Cabot Lodge in 1881, when that young man was embarking on a political career. Adams wrote:

> I suppose every man who has looked on at the game has been struck by the remarkable way in which politics deteriorate the moral tone of everyone who mixes in them. The deterioration is far more marked than in any other occupation I know except the turf, stock-jobbing, and gambling. I imagine the reason in each case to be the same. It is the curse of politics that what one man gains, another man loses. On such conditions you can create not even an average morality. . . . [Politicians] all try to be honest, and then are tripped up by the dishonest; or they try to be dishonest (i.e., practical politicians) and degrade their own natures.[2]

The best proof that Adams was serious in his distinction between the natural and the moral worlds is the thoroughness with which he built his Darwinian metaphor. We find random

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[1] *Democracy*, pp. 71, 160, 353, 141, 252, 144.

[2] Ford, *Letters of Henry Adams*, I, 331.

phrases like "the atrophy of the moral sense by disuse," and we notice Ratcliffe and other politicians being compared to a variety of vicious beasts from dogs and bears to rats and snakes. Ratcliffe's followers, of course, are a "swarm." As she gropes into the secrets of politics, Madeleine begins to think in the Darwinian mode: "Where did the public good enter at all into this maze of personal intrigue, this wilderness of stunted natures where no straight road was to be found, but only the tortuous and aimless tracks of beasts and things that crawl? Where was she to look for a principle to guide?" Adams even used the weather to place nineteenth-century politics in the natural world. During the February of Madeleine's stay in Washington, the weather softens to "a deceptive gleam of summer, in between heavy snowstorms of sleet and snow." It is a pleasant, even sensuous season, and "the struggle for existence seems to abate." But as in politics, the sweetness is all a facade. "In such a world," the narrator goes on, "there should be no guile--but there is a great deal of it notwithstanding. Indeed, at no other season is there so much. This is the moment when the two whited sepulchres at either end of the Avenue reek with the sick atmosphere of bargain and sale." We are immediately taken to the scene of Ratcliffe's current intrigues, and the fight for survival is on. No wonder that Madeleine, when she finally rejects Ratcliffe and through him politics, puts her decision in Darwinian language: "I am not fitted for politics."[1]

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[1] Democracy, pp. 174, 113-14, 359.

Adams's moral position suggests such similarities to Darwin's idea that morality grows along with civilization that, whether Darwin actually influenced Adams or not, the comparison is useful. Darwin did not presume to say whether morality advances civilization, or just what the relation was, but Adams assumed that civilization is the cause of morality. He seemed to narrow the idea of civilization, however, into one of personal cultivation and good manners, and to assume that such cultivation sharpens the moral sense. Adams often seemed to equate morality with manners, and the reader may have difficulty distinguishing the two.

Adams was hardly unique in this apparent confusion between morals and manners. It is much more obvious, for example, in Hay's Bread-Winners, or in this passage from Henry James's autobiography. After discussing the death of Lincoln, James turned to Andrew Johnson and delivered this judgment:

> We had given ourselves a figure-head, and the figure-head sat there in its habit as it lived, and we were to have it in our eyes for three or four years and to ask ourselves in horror what monstrous thing we had done. . . . What, however, on the further view, was to be more refreshing than to find that there were excesses of native habit which truly we couldn't bear? so that it was for the next two or three years fairly sustaining to consider that, let the reasons publicly given for the impeachment of the official in question be any that would serve, the grand inward logic or mystic law had been that we really couldn't go on offering each other before the nations the consciousness of such a presence.[1]

At times both James and Adams confused esthetics with ethics. Irving Howe observes that Adams's writing style in Democracy "makes his response to politics that of an esthete rather

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[1]Notes of a Son and Brother, pp. 431-32.

than a moralist, giving him too high-perched and nose-pinched an air."[1] This observation does not, however, exhaust the subject. Adams's good people are also cultivated and upper-class, and the bad ones are vulgar or lower-class. There are a few partial exceptions: Miss Victoria Dare is unconventional, but she is never crude; Mr. French, the reformer, is a little vulgar, but he is also a "light weight" reformer. Adams harps on Ratcliffe's gaucheness and ignorance of art and literature. "There was a little touch of mortification in the idea that he was not quite at home among fashionable people, and at this instant [at a social dinner] he felt that true happiness was only to be found among the simple and honest sons and daughters of toil." But Ratcliffe comes from New England, and Adams grants him "instincts of refinement"; they surface, however, only when his political affairs are going poorly. Upon leaving the crudities of the Senate for the Treasure Department, he loses some of his worst qualities, but his last act in the novel, however, is to shove aside an old man. The President is boorishness incarnate; it is difficult to choose wines "coarse enough to suit [his] palate." An honest son of toil, the President takes "great pride in his home-spun honesty, which is a quality peculiar to nature's noblemen."[2] He commits his first corrupt act after a week in office.

Such characterizations, however, are not so instructive

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[1]"Henry Adams, Political Novelist," New Republic (1952), p. 25.

[2]Democracy, pp. 30, 150, 187, 163.

as Adams's reactions and those of his good people to situations which involve ethical judgments or human sympathy. As we have seen, the common people of New York offend Madeleine's taste and bore her. Washington has such people, too; the city "swarms with simple-minded exhibitions of human nature; men and women curiously out of place, whom it would be cruel to ridicule and ridiculous to weep over. The sadder exhibitions are fortunately seldom seen by respectable people." These are the people who disgust Madeleine when she sees the President and his wife shaking hands with them, people on whose supposed behalf Adams condemned the corruption of politicians. It is apparent, however, that Adams's outrage derives partly from an esthetic abhorrence of corruption; it is not respectable, it is bad form. Even George Washington and his society are judged largely on esthetic standards. And Madeleine's sister Sybil, touring Arlington Cemetery and the Lee mansion, attains her deepest appreciation of the horrors of war "not because of the graves in Arlington, but the thought of the Lees being turned out of their lovely house, and all the pretty old furniture swept away before a horde of coarse invaders [tourists]."[1]

The trip to Mount Vernon (in the sixth chapter) opens the question of America's progress or lack of it. Has the country deteriorated from the moral and social level of Washington's time, or is it true, as the Englishman Lord Skye suggests, that George Washington, "belonging, as he did, to

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[1] Ibid., pp. 85, 220.

the universe, was in his taste an exception to local rules"? Was the moral and social crudity of nineteenth-century America, in other words, simply a reflection of its youth? Was Darwin's praise of America's rapid progress colored by confidence that this nation would soon acquire the fruits of civilization? Could Adams accept George Washington as an unrepresentative phenomenon in American history, and look forward to future progress? Democracy does not on the whole encourage such a view, since the natural worlds of politics and the masses do not supply the cultivation that Adams found necessary for morality to flourish. But the novel does have its optimistic moments, and in one of these Madeleine defends America on the grounds of its youth. The issue is an esthetic one, but has clear moral implications. When Lord Skye complains that the American national mind cannot appreciate such subtle beauty as that of Virginia in winter, Madeleine asserts that America has still "her story to tell," that it awaits the artists who can celebrate its beauties. "'You want peaches in spring,' said she. 'Give us our thousand years of summer, and then complain, if you please, that our peach is not as mellow as yours. Even our voices may be soft then.'"[1] This kind of suggestion prevents us from reading unrelieved despair into Democracy's satire. Whatever the reader thinks of Adams's values, he must not ignore the signs of Adams's hope. The United States might grow in grace and morality, and the natural world of Gilded Age politics, in which

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[1] Ibid., pp. 132, 126-27.

natural selection governed the struggle for power, might give way to the civilized world in which its best people already moved. It might happen.

Isolation

If Adams had not accepted a teaching position at Harvard, he might not have become a professional historian and might have taken a more active part in politics. He could hardly have avoided some historical study, however, if only because of his education, his family's importance in American history, and his own involvement in diplomacy during the Civil War. There is another reason also for Adams's interest in history. I often feel, reading Adams's works and letters, that the question of how the individual should live in modern society was one he avoided when he could. His moral judgments were vague, and he often took refuge in class snobbery and standards of good breeding when questions of conduct confronted him. He also seemed to take refuge in history, discovering that immersion in the past allows one to ignore the problems of the present. This is especially true if one holds a deterministic theory of history, which makes it easy enough to ignore human responsibility.

But a novel set in the present time allows no such protection. "The past, being determinate," J. C. Levenson writes, "lent itself to [Adams's] determinist assumptions in a way that the present or future did not."[1] The individual,

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[1]The Mind and Art of Henry Adams, p. 26.

after all, lives outside of history, and deterministic theories of historical progress are no help to him in deciding how to live. The early political essays dealt with the present time, but since they confined themselves to political figures and financiers, they never quite touched on Adams's own situation. Democracy, however, concerned the private individual in society and politics, and was directly relevant to Adams's way of life. Perhaps it was too relevant, so he compensated by making his central character a woman, submerging his moral judgments in social distinctions, and writing anonymously. Adams deserves credit for discussing at all the individual's relation to society, since it was a problem he shied away from; but he reached no satisfactory solutions. It is not so much that the novel's two exemplars of morality are flawed in ways that Adams apparently did not realize. (Carrington betrayed a professional trust in Ratcliffe's own pragmatic spirit in order to save Madeleine from Ratcliffe. Madeleine committed the personal sin of treating people as things when she coldly decided to use Ratcliffe, "to turn him inside out; to experiment on him and use him as young physiologists use frogs and kittens.") Nor is it that Adams overdramatised his moral by having Madeleine flee at the end; her flight is probably an accurate reflection of Adams's feeling. The difficulty is rather that Madeleine's situation throughout the novel obscures the significance of her actions. Being a woman, she cannot participate directly in politics; she has no power except to join with power, and therefore no

chance to apply moral principles to politics. Once she sees Ratcliffe for what he is, Madeleine has nothing to lose; therefore, in leaving she gives up nothing, and gains only the self-evident lesson that "To marry a murderer or a thief was not a sure way of diminishing crime."[1] Madeleine will probably return to her paupers and prisons, but will she do so for any other reason than the reason why she came to Washington, that she is bored? In short, her decision not to marry Ratcliffe but to flee suggests little about how the moral individual should live in nineteenth-century America. One may agree with R. P. Blackmur that Democracy "shows the intelligence which is willing to tamper with the actual without being willing to seize it, as properly humiliated and sent flying."[2]

Democracy suggests that Adams simply did not know how the individual could get along and maintain his integrity in his materialistic and gross age. His puzzlement adds to the very negative tone, even for a satire, that most readers find in the book. According to Henry Wasser, Adams decided to "work on society from the outside, accepting his final defeat at the beginning and express the society rather than attempt to control it," becoming "the stoic, even existential intellectual."[3] This formulation is truer of Adams later in

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[1]Democracy, pp. 36-37, 362.

[2]"The Novels of Henry Adams," Sewanee Review (1943), p. 294.

[3]"The Education of Henry Adams: A Reconsideration."

his life than in 1879 when his hope for social progress had not yet been crushed by the society around him. But Wasser's thesis is partly valid for the younger Adams also, and it has the added advantage, for the sympathetic reader of Democracy, of minimizing Adams's inability to tell how the individual should respond to the failures of American society. He at least expressed some of the difficulties. His presentation of the plight of the modern woman, and by implication of the modern family, is as interesting as anything he says about politics. If we except Madeleine's relation with her sister Sybil, we find no family relations at all in the novel. Everyone exists alone. The fact may say something about Adam's reaction against his family, or his wife; more helpfully, it suggests that he thought American society was in trouble. We saw in the preceding chapter how important Adams thought the family was to the health of a society. Democracy suggests that the family was losing its strength. With the Education in mind, one may ask if Adams blamed the decline of the family on the American man's obsession with business. The answer is that, though business is a common target of satire in the novel, he did not make any connections. His only clear conclusion about the family is that women need it. Madeleine asks herself, "Was the family all that life had to offer? could she find no interest outside the household?"[1] She finds nothing. Adams may be saying that the American family is deteriorating, but the reader can attribute the entire problem

[1]Democracy, p. 334.

to the influence of politics. Perhaps the point is that in a mechanized, brutalized society everyone is terribly alone. The best one can do is to avoid the natural world of politics where the struggle for existence pits each man against every other and robs each of his integrity and ability to make moral choices. What happens to the individual who is completely removed from the political world is the subject of Esther.

CHAPTER V

ESTHER

Determinism and Progress

In 1881 John T. Morse, editor of the American Statesmen Series, asked Adams to do a biography of John Randolph. Both Morse and Adams came to regret the arrangement, for Adams's New England shone too brightly in the book, but at least it was livelier and more entertaining than anything Adams had written before. John Randolph (1882) is a facile study of the period in American history that Adams had treated more thoroughly in Gallatin. Again we see Jefferson and his party begin their rule in "entire confidence that a new era of civilization and liberty had dawned on earth," and once more we see them come to grief; but this time Adams was so eager to catalogue his subject's sins and eccentricities that he mostly ignored the condition of the social state. Adams's concept of democracy as a relentless social movement had not changed, however; "the force of northern democracy," he wrote, "lay not in its leaders or its political organization, but in its social and industrial momentum, and this was a force against which mere individuality strove in vain."[1]

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[1] John Randolph, pp. 58, 39.

The parallels of biography and personality between Gallatin and Adams so struck Adams in Gallatin that he may have overstressed them. He was less likely to notice similarities between Randolph, whom he despised, and himself. The reader may observe, however, that if Randolph failed, as Adams wrote, to put his mind "in sympathy with the movement of his country," or if he did not realize the "false position" he was in "between his aristocratic prejudices and his democratic theories,"[1] very similar problems faced Henry Adams in the 1880's. Disturbed by the materialism of the age, the power of the masses, and the inefficiency and corruption of politics, he adopted a mildly cynical and defensively superior tone in the political and social comments of his letters. His faith in the country's future progress seemed to dwindle to a confidence in material and economic progress, and on this subject an ironic edge sometimes crept into his voice. Thus he wrote to Gaskell: "There are some difficulties in the path of all pessimistic reasoning which makes its conclusions doubtful, and for some centuries yet may seem to confute its truth. Man is still going fast upward. For example, beef has within two years risen here in price. . . ."[2]

The deterministic streak in Adam's evolutionary thought persisted in the early 1880's. "The purely mechanical development of the human mind in society," he

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[1] Ibid., pp. 13, 25.

[2] Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, I, 339. See also pp. 349, 357.

wrote in 1884 to Francis Parkman, "must appear in a great democracy so clearly, for want of disturbing elements, that in another generation psychology, physiology, and history will join in proving man to have as fixed and necessary development as that of a tree; and almost as unconscious." But such historical determinism was not necessarily relevant to individuals; nor was Adams's opinion in 1883 that "History is simply social development along the lines of weakest resistance, and that in most cases the line of weakest resistance is found as unconsciously by society as by water."[1] Only with William James did Adams debate the individual's free will. "As I understand your Faith," he wrote, "your X, your reaction of the individual on the cosmos, it is the old question of Free Will over again. You choose to assume that the will is free. Good! Reason proves that the Will cannot be free. Equally good! Free or not, the mere fact that a doubt can exist, proves that X must be a very microscopic quantity."[2]

Few critics if any believe that Adams held a completely determinist view of the individual will in these years. His second novel Esther (1884) is evidence that he did not. As Robert E. Spiller notes, "Adams's psychology, at this stage of his development, is non-evolutionary; he

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[1]Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends, pp. 134, 126. J. C. Levenson suggests that Adams used "unconscious" to mean "ignorant." Mind and Art of Henry Adams, p. 140.

[2]Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends, p. 121.

in no sense anticipates the naturalists."[1] Like Democracy, Esther centers around a choice that its heroine must make, and her freedom to make that choice is limited only by her conscience and character.[2] But in emphasizing Esther's choice Adams has not ignored the subject of America's social development. Esther is described as an "American type," and one character is caught wondering "whether American types are going to supplant the old ones."[3] (The old ones presumably are Europeans.) In his portrayal of contemporary America, Adams suggested that the country was suffering a loss of values and ideals in a scientific, secular, materialistic age. In the novel's climactic scene, moreover, George Strong (who is often taken to be Adams's spokesman) presents to Esther a theory of human evolution which suggests that Adams has significantly changed his attitude toward social evolutionism. It is this theory that we need to examine first.

George Strong's Evolutionism

Esther's problem is that she is engaged to marry the Reverend Stephen Hazard, although she has instinctively

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[1] "Introduction" to Esther, A Novel, by Frances Snow Compton /Henry Adams/, pp. x-xi.

[2] Michael Colacurcio, however, suggests a kind of psychological determinism in Esther. Given Esther's nature, religion was not a "live option" for her. She lacked "the will to believe." "Adams's Flirtation With Pragmatism," p. 68.

[3] Esther, p. 26.

known from the first that her inability to respect his religion would destroy their relationship. Her efforts to understand Christian doctrine accomplish only tears and headaches, so she turns for advice to her cousin George Strong, a professor of paleontology with an agnostic's tolerant contempt for religion. Because he wants to aid his friend Hazard by calming Esther's hysterical confusion about religion, George tells Esther that faith in science is as difficult as faith in religion.

> You are bothered, I suppose, by the idea that you can't possibly believe in miracles and mysteries, and therefore can't make a good wife for Hazard. You might just as well make yourself unhappy by doubting whether you would make a good wife to me because you can't believe the first axiom in Euclid. There is no science which does not begin by requiring you to believe the incredible.

Esther makes the obvious rebuttal that Strong, unlike Hazard, does not have or need an emotional commitment to his axioms. Thus beaten, Strong gives up the argument, but later when Esther inquires after his own philosophy, he tries in another way to equate his science with Hazard's religion. "Except for the rubbish, I don't think I am so very far away from him," he says. Hazard explained his theology, which George claims is similar to his own beliefs, in a sermon in the novel's first chapter. All the thoughts, acts, and creations of man, Hazard explained, are "emanations of divine thought, doing their appointed work." Hazard used science to support his doctrine: "The church now knows with the certainty of science what she once knew only by the certainty of faith, that you will find enthroned

behind all thought and matter only one central idea,--that idea which the church has never ceased to embody,--I AM."[1] This doctrine is compatible enough with contemporary theological versions of Darwinism, but George Strong strains his point when he tries to identify it with his own agnostic evolutionism in a last effort to reconcile Esther to Hazard's beliefs.

As they stroll near Niagara Falls, where Esther has fled from Hazard, she asks Strong what he thinks about religion. He obliges by denying belief in a personal God or future rewards and punishments, while admitting to faith in the existence of mind and matter. When Esther takes this credo as an assertion that "this life is every thing, and the future nothing," George objects, saying "I rather think the church is right in thinking this life nothing and the future every thing." Pressed to explain, he suggests what he thinks Hazard's "rubbish" is. "If our minds could get hold of one abstract truth, they would be immortal so far as that truth is concerned. My trouble is to find out how we can get hold of the truth at all." Clearly Hazard's rubbish is his belief that immortality has to do with individuals or souls. "The thing is simple enough," George blithely continues. "Hazard and I and every one else agree that thought is eternal. If you can get hold of one true thought, you are immortal as far as that thought goes. The only difficulty is that every fellow thinks his thought the

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[1] Esther, pp. 198-99, 7-8.

true one." But poor Esther still fails to understand and asks how believing Hazard's opinions will make her immortal. "Because then the truth is part of you!" George replies. "If I understand St. Paul, this is sound church doctrine, leaving out the personal part of the Trinity which Hazard insists on tacking to it." This is sophistry, and George seems to realize it, for he turns directly to science and evolutionism to explain his thesis.

> We may some day catch an abstract truth by the tail, and then we shall have our religion and immortality. We have got far more than half way. Infinity is infinitely more intelligible to you than you are to a sponge. If the soul of a sponge can grow to be the soul of a Darwin, why may we not all grow up to abstract truth?

At last Esther thinks she understands: "Does your idea mean that the next world is a sort of great reservoir of truth, and that what is true in us just pours into it like raindrops?"[1] That, George decides, is close enough to his idea.

We have here, according to Ernest Samuels, a "speculative union between Platonism and Darwinian evolution."[2] We can detect here the influence of Louis Agassiz's concept of fixed eternal species as "categories of thought." But there is less of Darwinism or Platonism here than of Spencerian evolutionism, with its cosmic overtones, inevitable progress, and expectation of future perfection built on past development. "The next world" for Spencer and George

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[1] Ibid., pp. 269-71, 272, 273.

[2] Middle Years, p. 258.

Strong is not a separate Platonic world but the perfected descendant of this world. Samuels goes on to say that this union "marked out for Adams the highway of thought which he would thenceforth follow." In asserting this, Samuels assumes that Strong, the "German Darwinist,"[1] speaks for Adams. The assumption, like Samuels's interpretation of Strong's philosophy, is questionable. Perhaps it is impossible to determine precisely Adams's attitude toward Strong's thesis, but we can get some limited help from his letters and his reading. George's idea may have had its origin in 1863 when Adams heard Robert Browning expounding a "spiritual election that would shock the Pope, I fear," as he wrote to brother Charles. "According to him, the minds or souls that really did develop themselves and educate themselves in life, could alone expect to enter a future career for which this life was a preparatory course. . . . This is Calvin's theory, modified; and really it seems not unlikely to me. Thus this earth may serve as a sort of feeder to the next world."[2] It is not far from this idea to Strong's, if one only drops the idea of individual souls. But we do not find Adams approaching Strong's variety of evolutionism until 1882, when he wrote to William James:

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[1]One of the characters in Esther calls Strong "a full-fledged German Darwinist" (p. 207). As Adams must have known, this was Chauncey Wright's derisive label for Spencer and the cosmic evolutionists.

[2]Ford, Cycle of Adams Letters, II, 12.

> A few hundred men represent the entire intellectual activity of the [human race]. What then? They drag us up the cork-screw stair of thought, but they can no more get their brains to run out of their especial convolutions than a railway train (with a free will of half an inch on three thousand miles) can run free up Mount Shasta. Not one of them has ever got so far as to tell us a single vital fact worth knowing.[1]

This seems a preview of the idea that Strong presents to Esther. We should notice, though, that Adams's statement lacks cosmic reverberations. It lacks faith in future progress, in fact; there is no suggestion of growing up to abstract thought or to anything else. The passage can be read as a rebuttal of Strong.

Henry Maudsley's Body and Will was published the same year as Esther. Adams marked many passages in his copy, and the absence of critical comments in the margins suggests that generally he agreed with Maudsley; for when Adams took the trouble to mark his books at all, he freely wrote criticisms and questions in them. There is no way to tell when he read Body and Will, but because so many of the markings relate to ideas in Esther, it seems likely that he read it not long after its publication. Adams marked passages which suggest both the use and the fallacy of a philosophy like George Strong's. Maudsley writes, for example, that "It is plainly necessary for mankind to have its ideal, if it is to make progress; when it has lost the imagination of a state of perfection which never is but always is to be, it will have lost the impulse of

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[1]Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends, p. 122.

evolution and have entered on the path of its decline." George tries to supply Esther with such an ideal to replace Hazard's, which she cannot accept. Strong's evolutionism appeals to her, but as we shall see, it does her no good in her crisis. Adams also marked Maudsley's statement that "In its progress thus far mankind has owed perhaps more to beliefs that have turned out not to be true than to the truths that have remained true."[1] Whether the next world is composed of truth or not, in this world human beings depend on ideals and ideas that can help them to live. The trouble with George's philosophy, as he concedes, is that it is no help to individuals: "No one ever took up this doctrine who could help himself."[2] Adams emphasizes the irrelevance of the doctrine to human needs, I think, by arranging the plot so that Esther falls into her final despair immediately after she receives George's theories. So, even if Adams thought that George was right, we should not take him as a spokesman for Adams, who intended to dramatize the impotence of evolutionism as a working philosophy. As such, it is no improvement on modern Christianity.

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[1] Body and Will, Being an Essay Concerning Will in Its Metaphysical, Physiological, and Pathological Aspects (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.), pp. 186, 151.

[2] Esther, p. 270.

Esther's Instinct

When George accepts Esther's paraphrase of his evolutionary philosophy, she exclaims ("with an outburst of energy that made Strong's blood run cold"): "After all I wonder whether that may not be what Niagara has been telling me!"[1] Adams used the Falls to symbolize nature as the force behind all life. The symbol anticipates, as a critic writes, "Adams's final desolating vision of a world moved purely by natural energy."[2] But nature in Esther has none of the sinister quality Adams was to give it in the Education, nor anything to do with the struggle for existence which dominates Democracy. Niagara represents nature in her best dress, untouched by human problems yet somehow benevolent: "Esther's huge playmate rambled on with the story, in the same steady voice, never shrill or angry, never silent or degraded by a sign of human failings, and yet so frank and sympathetic that she had no choice but to like it." Esther and her friend Catherine Brooke (who comes from Colorado and is often compared to a flower) are especially receptive to nature. The artist Wharton says of Catherine that "she stood nearer nature than any woman he knew," and of Esther that she belongs "to the next world which artists want to see, when paganism will come again and we can give a divinity to every waterfall." When her

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[1] Esther, p. 274.

[2] Millicent Bell, "Adams's Esther: The Morality of Taste," New England Quarterly (1962), p. 156.

father is dying and Esther gently declines Hazard's offer of spiritual aid, "She seemed to him like a wandering soul, lost in infinite space, but still floating on, with her quiet air of confidence as though she were a part of nature itself, and felt that all nature moved with her." At this time Esther thinks of herself in a similar way, though she is painfully conscious of her own loneliness: "It made her dizzy, as though she were a solitary bird flying through mid-air, and as she looked ahead on her aërial path, could see no tie more human than that which bound her to Andromeda and Orion."[1] Her father's death seems momentarily to separate her from humanity. If she moves somehow closer to nature, however, the closeness does nothing to alleviate the tragedy of her father's death. She is isolated from all but her grief.

By associating Esther with nature throughout the novel, Adams effectively asserted her separation from the forces of modern society, religion, and science. Adams believed, as Millicent Bell puts it, "that women were still in touch with the primary sources of vitality, whereas men, by what they called civilization, law, institutions, and above all, by the exercise of power--had cut themselves away from these sources. . . . What Adams celebrated, in fact, was an essential primitive quality in all human beings, something antecedent to reason."[2] How contradictory

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[1] Esther, pp. 258, 85, 28-29, 155, 157-58.

[2] Bell, "The Morality of Taste," p. 160.

to Democracy, in which the natural forces corrupt and the forces of civilization ennoble, this statement makes Esther seem. There is no real contradiction, however, since what men call civilization is not the quality of morality and taste that Adams celebrates in both novels, and since Adams simply chose to write about different aspects of nature in Esther than in Democracy. Esther stands close to nature in basing her actions not on conscious reason but on her instinctual sense of taste and morality. We may object that the concept of instinct is obscure in the novel; few people do act according to their reason and, anyway, much of Esther's "instinct" is a product of her education. Adams's point, still, is that Esther maintains the position she intuitively senses is right, even to the point of ruining her life, against the rational or pseudo-rational arguments of Hazard and Strong. She is true to her instinct, true to her nature, true to Nature. This is not necessarily to say that Adams equated morality with instinct, but only that Esther based her moral choices on her instincts. But perhaps morality is instinct to Adams; he did mark, without any comment, Henry Maudsley's statement that "at bottom that which we discern in /man's/ moral instinct is the necessity of nature operating in the evolution of the highest organic matter and so urging or compelling it into more complex combinations and functions."[1] It is clear, in any case, that only those characters in

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[1] Body and Will, p. 96.

Esther who respond to nature base their morality on their instincts. This fact takes on a special significance when we recall that Darwin's concept of instincts as the forces behind human evolution was current in the 1880's. Adams had accepted this view, with modifications, in his "Primitive Rights of Women" (1876), and there is no reason to think he rejected it in 1883. Adams used two common ideas of evolutionary naturalism: when Esther let her instinct guide her, she was following nature, the only sure guide of morality; and in following nature, she was obeying the impulse of human evolution. Esther, out of step with American society and the age, with religion and with science, walked to the rhythm of the creation.

Adams took care not to oversimplify his view of nature in Esther, opposing to the symbol of Niagara that of the sea, which represents nature as "capricious, fickle, angry, fawning, violent, savage, and wanton."[1] In the novel as a whole, however, nature appears as a positive contrast to modern society, religion, and even the rationality of science, all of which have lost the power to respond to the deepest human impulses. It is Esther, alone in society, unable to understand the dogmas of religion and uninterested in the axioms of science, who responds to Niagara, and she who remains true to her principles. (Both Hazard and Strong betray their beliefs; Hazard reduces his

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[1] Esther, p. 258.

theology to "Pascal's wager" in order to persuade Esther after all else fails; Strong overstates the similarities between science and religion for the same purpose.) It is not that Adams was absolutely condemning society, religion,[1] or science, but rather that they have no particular relevance to Esther. Science is not important to her except as a means (which fails) to understand religion. American society at large does not directly affect the characters, though the book does make clear Adams's dismay at the growth of cheap materialism and secularism in the United States. Society is important in the novel mainly because it proves to be the force behind religion. I am not referring to the often-quoted opinion expressed by Esther's father, that religion serves as a "sort of police" in society;[2] in this sense religion is the force behind society. Rather, Esther discovers to her dismay that if she accepts Hazard she must accept the church, and this means in effect that she must bow to the standards of society as represented by his congregation. Esther might have accepted Hazard, despite their disagreement on religion, if he were not so obviously society's servant. She gives up Hazard rather than share him. Thus the child of nature and instinct stays free of the control of church and society--at the price of her happiness and fulfillment.

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[1]Adams clearly saw religion, however, as a primitive force which society would cease to need when it had evolved further. Mr. Dudley, George Strong, and Esther all speak of religion as an anachronistic institution.

[2]Esther, p. 207.

The Isolated Individual

"Adams regarded women," George Hochfield writes, "as especially victimized by the conditions of modern life."[1] This is true but only part of the story; Edward N. Saveth argues that the women in Adams's works have strong urges to dominate, destroy, or victimize men.[2] One reason for this destructiveness is surely that modern society has left them few positive functions. The problem is doubly great for Madeleine Lee and Esther, both of whom reject marriage and family, finding themselves therefore without use or purpose in life and with little desire to go on living. Esther is more than the American woman, however; she exemplifies the modern American trying to find a fulfilling role in a reckless, chaotic society. Adams asked in Esther how an individual could live in a society which was ignoring its moral and intuitive impulses in its rush toward materialistic splendor. Adams had no answer; he could only suggest that America was not, at the time, progressing in any worthwhile sense, and that one would fare better the less bound he was to the forces of society.

While Adams was writing Esther his friend Francis A. Walker found space in a book on political economy to discuss "the solidity of the family as a force against the

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[1] Henry Adams, p. 53.

[2] "The Heroines of Henry Adams," American Quarterly (1956), pp. 231-42.

natural struggle for existence."[1] The importance of the family in society was a commonplace idea which Adams stressed in "Primitive Rights of Women." Since he is not known to have had unorthodox ideas on the subject, it is puzzling that in both his novels the family relations and marital relations are so inadequate. Even in the best relationships one member dominates the other. Only Madeleine and her sister Sybil, and for the most part Esther and her father, have balanced relationships in which each respects the individuality and independence of the other. Without exception the marriages and romances in Esther are flawed. Wharton and Mr. Murray are hapless, dominated husbands; Esther and Hazard prove incompatible, as do Esther and George Strong, and Wharton and Catherine. Since Adams apparently considered Mrs. Murray to be the voice of practical wisdom in the novel, she is as good a bet as anyone to speak for him, and she has devastating opinions on marriage. Mr. Murray is a good husband, she thinks (he is very docile, or, as she puts it, "one man in a million"), but "nothing on earth would induce me to begin over again and take such a risk a second time, with life before me. As for bringing about a marriage, I wouldalmost rather bring about a murder."[2]

Perhaps Adams's personal married life stimulated such a view of marriage, but little evidence for this thesis

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[1] Political Economy (1883) (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.), p. 311.

[2] Esther, p. 41.

exists. Very likely, he already detected the breakdown in American family life which he was to analyze in the Education, and created his characters in Esther to illustrate this social problem. Beyond what the book may tell us about Adams's life or his society, however, it suggests that he conceived individuals as inevitably, by their nature, isolated from each other. Adams seemed partly to approve of this isolation, born in large part of the instinct to resist which he was later to label "a law of New England nature." He thought resistance a fruitful quality in individuals and in society. Herbert Spencer considered evil to be failure to adjust to conditions; to Adams evil was more likely to be failure to resist conditions. Merely in fighting Hazard and his church (her reasons for fighting aside), Esther attains a level of heroism. Hazard, on the other hand, becomes less appealing the more he strives to overcome resistance. Realizing the worthlessness of winning over "the class who took their opinions, like their jewelry, machine-made," he attempts to "get a hold on the rebellious age."[1] But he fails to hold a single rebel, and at the moment of his final defeat when Esther rejects him, Hazard appears a spiteful, petty man. The harder he tries to overpower Esther, the lower he sinks morally.

In Esther the impulse to resist continually subdues the urge to unite,--a happy circumstance, since few of the characters are to be trusted with power over others.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 62-63.

Hazard, Mrs. Murray, Wharton's French wife, all try to bend their partners to their will. Hazard, for one, finds that the will he seeks to control is as strong as his. Esther and Hazard's struggle of wills has a striking effect on them: each loses sight of the other as an individual. Esther begins to see Hazard as an embodiment of the church and society. As his lover's independence of mind becomes apparent, Hazard conceives her less as a person than a force opposed to his religion and a prize to be captured for the church. His suit becomes a holy crusade, and Esther suspects that she is being used. Her individuality becomes irrelevant to her function as trophy. So she flees marriage for a noble, tragic isolation, the bleakness of which is clear to her as she gazes out the window of the train to Niagara at the lights of houses.

> These signs of life behind the veil were like the steady lights of shore to the drowning fisherman off the reef outside. Every common-place kerosene lamp whose rays struggled from distant, snow-clad farms, brought a picture of peace and hope to Esther. Not one of those invisible roofs but might shelter some realized romance, some contented love. In so dark and dreary a world, what a mad act it was to fly from the only happiness life offered! What a strange idea to seek safety by refusing the only protection worth having.[1]

Esther retains only her integrity. As Charles F. Adams, Sr. once wrote to Henry: "The honest man is no more than a cork on the waves of the ocean. But he can float."[2]

Everywhere we look in Esther we see individuals

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[1] Ibid., pp. 247-48.

[2] November 25, 1858, Adams Papers, Microfilm #545.

in isolation. George Strong insists on freedom to do whatever he likes, and even though he proposes marriage to Esther at the end, we have been made to feel that no woman could hold him. It is significant, however, that Strong tries to end his isolation at this point--and significant also that he fails. Hazard tried to do the same earlier: "Do you know how solitary I am?" he appeals to Esther. "Not a human being counts for any thing in my life." Hazard's statement is truer than he knows, for in his possessiveness he lacks respect for the separateness of others. Catherine says to Esther, "Be glad to live in a place where your friends let your soul alone,"[1] but Hazard does not let her soul alone. We can see the curious ambivalence in Adams's individualism. One should remain apart from others and avoid restricting relationships; but separateness pushed to the point of refusing lasting relationships is sterile and tragic, though sometimes necessary to retain one's individuality. Once in his life Adams committed himself to a lasting relationship; he never seemed to regret the choice, but after his wife died he never submitted to another. By taking on the role of Uncle he could avoid personal responsibility to others; freedom and separateness were assured. Such aloofness does not appeal, however, to most young people, who are not often satisfied by moderate, non-committal relationships. Therefore, Esther ends on a note of despair.

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[1] Esther, pp. 236-37, 173.

Esther does not support all of the common generalizations about Adams. Elizabeth Stevenson asserts that "Unlike the great individualists of his time /Adams/ could not conceive of man alone but thought always in terms of man living among his fellow men, and somehow regulating or failing to regulate the energies of society."[1] But in Esther the problem of directing society is ignored, and "man alone" raises his head at intervals. Ernest Samuels recognizes the latter point when he states that "The Nietzschean Strong cannot help her at this juncture /her decision whether to marry Hazard/ for he no longer hovers between two worlds but has become a stoical and solitary wayfarer in the cold wastes of a scientific future, a future which must create its own values and illusions."[2] And Esther herself is in a very similar position. Having rejected all the guides that society and her friends can offer, she can rely only on herself for values and illusions. So it is misleading for George Hochfield to say that "Esther insists, as Adams has heretofore invariably done, that ends must lie beyond the self, sanctioned by what is impersonally real and true."[3] Esther is concerned not with the impersonal truth of goals and ideals, but with their relation to her own needs and character. Her "ends"

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[1] Henry Adams: a Biography, p. x.

[2] Middle Years, p. 248.

[3] Henry Adams, p. 53.

take all their significance from her own character, her self. Samuels falls into a trap when he discusses the possibility expressed in Esther of

> escaping the limitations of the Darwinian self. In the person of the skeptic Strong [Adams] had then written, 'If the soul of a sponge can grow to be the soul of a Darwin, why may we not all grow up to abstract truth?' Why might not a bridge be built between the physical and the metaphysical? The end of the human quest would be to 'catch an abstract truth by the tail' and thus by attaining possession of the absolute, the eternal truth, the mind would itself become eternal.[1]

But what does it mean to say that the mind will become eternal if it grasps a truth, and how does one escape "the Darwinian self"? Adams's comment to James that our brightest men "drag us up the cork-screw stair of thought, but they can no more get their brains to run out of their especial convolutions than a railway train . . . can run free up Mount Shasta" suggests that everyone is imprisoned within his own mind and character. Adams may have wanted to pass beyond the bounds of the individual self, but Esther does not suggest that he gave much thought to this concept. What the book does emphatically suggest is that the individual self is the main source of value and meaning.

The nature of individuality is one of the major subjects of Esther; each major character manages to discuss it. The artist Wharton argues that self-consciousness is "worse than ugliness," because it spoils beauty. Wharton thinks also that art transcends the difference between man

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[1] Major Phase, p. 59.

and woman. Nature overcomes self-consciousness; art eradicates sex: these ideas appeal to Wharton because his own life has been painful and he longs to escape his self. Catherine, without guilt, pain, or regrets, argues on the contrary that nature itself is self-conscious. She has no desire to lose herself in nature, or art--or a man. The possibility of losing oneself in religion never occurs to either of them; in fact, Wharton thinks of religion as becoming immersed in the self. "It all comes to this: is religion a struggle or a joy? To me it is a terrible battle, to be won or lost." Again, Wharton says, "To reach Heaven, you must go through hell, and carry its marks on your face and figure."[1] He is indifferent to religion as objective truth; only religion's effect on the individual matters to him--what one makes of religion, what it makes of him.

George Strong argues for losing the self in the immortality of thoughts which are eternally true. Hazard argues for losing the self in God: "The philosopher says--I am, and the church scouts his philosophy. She answers:--No! you are NOT, you have no existence of your own. You were and are and ever will be only a part of the supreme I AM, of which the church is the emblem." Now Esther approves of effacing the self; that is why Strong's philosophy appeals to her. She rejects Hazard, however, failing to grasp emotionally the concept of losing oneself in the great

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[1] Esther, pp. 83-84, 120, 129.

I AM, and believing that his religion in fact emphasizes rather than effaces the self. "I despise and loathe myself," she tells him, "and yet you thrust self at me from every corner of the church as though I loved and admired it. All religion does nothing but pursue me with self even into the next world."[1] So Esther turns from religion, and the way seems open for her to turn to nature and offer up her individuality to the all-consuming cosmos. According to George Hochfield she does so. Hochfield interprets Esther as part of Adams's

> life-long effort to reconstruct a purposive scheme, if not for himself then for history of which he was a part. . . . The scientism of Esther results in a kind of vitalism in which life is conceived as an eternal flow of energy manifesting itself in particular creatures and building up thereby the transcendent harmony of its own truth. Individual integrity is thus justified by the higher end to which it contributes, and the sense of right and wrong finds a ground, at least in Esther's case, for its choices and decisions.[2]

The novel gives only limited support, however, to such a reading. Hochfield's phrase "if not for himself then for history" ignores one of the book's most appealing qualities: that Adams, for once, stepped outside of history and considered individuals living in the timeless present. The idea, moreover, that "individual integrity is thus justified by the higher end to which it contributes" obscures the novel's ethical philosophy. Nature in Esther does seem to have vitalistic qualities, but it is the in-

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[1] Ibid., pp. 8, 298.

[2] Henry Adams, p. 54.

dividuals who matter; and though the cataract tumbles while Esther is rejecting Hazard and thus destroying her happiness, she does not base her decision on a philosophy of nature, nor do we see any specific "natural" basis for her decision. Throughout the book Adams maintains such a barrier between nature and the individual that we never feel the individual can lose himself in nature or be inspired for long by a doctrine like Strong's. This passage which Adams marked in Maudsley expresses, I think, part of Adams's view of the relation between nature and the individual.

> Individuality is a passing severance from the larger life of nature, deathdoomed therefore by its nature as a severed part. Could a man bring himself into complete harmony of relations with nature in every respect, mental and bodily, identify himself with it thoroughly, he might be immortal, but in that case he would secure immortality at the cost of individuality.[1]

Each individual, then, is on his own, and must find his values in his own experience. George Strong's doctrine of naturalistic immortality may be true but is no help to Esther in her crisis. The novel's last, despairing scene implies the irrelevance of evolutionism to the individual's life. This is the final lesson of Esther, that in the deepest trouble one has only oneself to rely on. There is no escape from the Darwinian self in pseudo-Darwinian philosophy. The honest man remains only a cork on the waves, and must float.

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[1] Body and Will, p. 88.

CHAPTER VI

HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

Seeing the Present Through the Past

Henry Adams's History of the United States During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison (1889-1891), representing more than a decade of effort, is generally considered one of the best historical works ever written in America. In 1879 he began research, finished the first draft in 1888, and published the last volume in 1891. Adams's purpose, as he later described it in the Education, was "to satisfy himself whether, by the severest process of stating, with the least possible comment, such facts as seemed sure, in such order as seemed rigorously consequent, he could fix for a familiar moment a necessary sequence of human development." The result, he thought, failed to satisfy. "Where he saw sequence, other men saw something quite different, and no one saw the same unit of measure."[1] This was only part of the problem, however, involved in fixing a "necessary sequence." The nation had changed drastically since Jefferson's day; could the historian comprehend the earlier, simpler society? Henry Steele Commager puts the question this way: "Had America changed

[1] P. 382.

so fundamentally in a hundred years that the finest intellectual product of the nineteenth century, Henry Adams, could not understand the finest intellectual product of the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson?" A further problem in fixing a sequence was that Adams often let his attention be diverted from broad historical and social trends to the intricacies of politics, diplomacy, and warfare. Therefore he attempted, as Commager observes, "to interpret and portray in terms of politics a democracy essentially social in character."[1] Adams allowed himself to do this even though he knew, as he had known in Democracy, that American democracy was a quality of its people not its politics.

Adams believed that the nature of American character and the direction of the nation's development was determined between 1800 and 1817. We may assume, therefore, that Adams's concept of the national development in 1800-1817 suggests much about his view of the America of his own time. Adams concluded, for example, that "In politics as in theology, the practical system which resulted from sixteen years of experience seemed to rest on the agreement not to press principles to a conclusion."[2] He saw this "system" as a general quality of the American mind, and we may infer that he saw the same quality in America during

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[1] "Introduction" to Henry Adams's History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison (1930), I, x, xii.

[2] History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 9 vols. (1889-91), IX, 192-93.

the 1880's. And when we consider the novels, we find that he apparently wrote them (while working on the History) in order to warn his countrymen of this trend in American thought and morals. For his heroines stand apart from their society precisely because they do press their principles to conclusions.

Adams's social thought in the History did not depart radically from that of his earlier works, but the History shows with a new clarity some of the contradictions that clouded his thinking. The work attempts to characterize what Adams had described in 1876 as "the real majesty and force of the national movement . . . a steady movement that resembles in its mode of operation the mechanical action of Nature itself."[1] But how does this "Nature" affect the nation's growth? The main answer, Adams decided, was that Nature's law of struggle and the survival of the fittest determined America's development despite the early Americans' attempts to evade this law. Nature's law, however, did not guarantee progress. Adams was skeptical about progress in America, and since in the History (unlike the early essays) he regarded America as the most advanced stage of Western civilization ("In a democratic ocean science could see something ultimate"),[2] he seemed to question whether progress was the general condition of human society. Thus we can see Adams's shift from an optimistic social evolutionism

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[1] "Von Holst's History," p. 360.

[2] History of the United States, IX, 225.

to a skeptical social Darwinism which emphasized the persistence of struggle in society. This generalization says little, however, about Adams's concept of progress or his attitude toward the law of struggle in society. Did he develop, for example, a Sumnerian respect for the capitalistic virtues--industriousness, thrift, and self-interest? Did he approve of war? Did he regard struggle and competition as forces of progress? What relation did he now conceive between society and the natural world?

Nature and Idealism

In the preceding chapter we noticed that Adams sometimes described human development by metaphors from the natural world: society develops unconsciously along a fixed line, like a tree, or follows the path of least resistance, like a river. Such metaphors in the History have received close attention from critics who perhaps have the Education and the later essays too much in mind; for the History, especially when compared to Adams's later writing, has few of these analogies. Those it has are mostly ornamental, such as this comment on the embargo: "The law of physics could easily be applied to politics; force could be converted only into its equivalent force. If the embargo--an exertion of force less violent than war--was to do the work of war, it must extend over a longer time the development of equivalent energy." We should recognize this analogy as an attempt to enliven a commonplace observation. Nor is there anything very

scientific in this famous analogy of river and ocean:

> Travellers in Switzerland who stepped across the Rhine where it flowed from its glacier could follow its course among mediaeval towns and feudal ruins, until it became a highway for modern industry, and at last arrived at a permanent equilibrium in the ocean. American history followed the same course. With prehistoric glaciers and mediaeval feudalism the story had little to do; but from the moment it came within sight of the ocean it acquired interest almost painful. A child could find his way in a river-valley, and a boy could float on the waters of Holland; but science alone could sound the depths of the ocean, measure its currents, foretell its storms, or fix its relations to the system of Nature. In a democratic ocean science could see something ultimate. Man could go no further. The atom might move, but the general equilibrium could not change.[1]

The importance of this splendid paragraph does not derive from Herbert Spencer's use of a similar metaphor. Adams was using the image to suggest that democracy was the final form of social development (socialism had not yet begun to prey on his mind), without suggesting that this movement necessarily meant progress.

These analogies say much, however, about Adams's concept of man and society. Adams had his deterministic moments, when he saw men as mere animals caught in a world they could not control. To him the progression of American history, Michael Kraus asserts, "all seemed very remote, as Adams viewed the scene with the detachment of a scientist watching insects."[2] It is significant that in his copy of Henry Maudsley's Body and Will, Adams marked the statement that "most men eventually are little more

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[1] History of the United States, IV, 289; IX, 225.

[2] The Writing of American History, p. 182.

than machines, whose sayings and doings from day to day may be predicted with as much certainty as the cries and doings of a parrot."[1] Adams also marked T. H. Huxley's famous judgment that "We are conscious automata, endowed with free will in the only intelligible sense of the term--inasmuch as in many respects we are able to do as we like--but none the less part of a great series of causes and effects which, in unbroken continuity, composes that which is, and has been, and shall be--the sum of existence."[2] In the History Adams occasionally compared men to animals, such as the pioneers who in 1880 were "cutting down the forests with the energy of so many beavers, and with no more express moral purpose than the beavers they drove away."[3] But we should notice that Maudsley limits his comment to most men, who are "little"--but somewhat--more than machines; that Huxley allows free will in a practical sense; and that Adams held his characters in the History morally responsible for their actions.

Critics have probably made too much of Adams's analogies from the natural world, but his concept of man's relation to nature is important if not always clear. He agreed with Buckle and Sumner that man needed to control and master nature. Much of America's difficulty in 1800 derived from

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[1] P. 160.

[2] "On the Hypothesis That Animals Are Automata, and Its History," in Science and Culture, and Other Essays (1884) (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.), p. 247.

[3] History of the United States, I, 177.

nature being "rather man's master than his servant, and the five million Americans struggling with the untamed continent seemed hardly more competent to their task than the beavers and buffalo which had for countless generations made bridges and roads of their own." But the romantic American was "in ambition already ruling the world and guiding Nature with a kinder and wiser hand than had ever yet been felt in human history." The ambition was noble, if never fully realized. "Practical politics," in the best sense, was "a human attempt to modify the severity of Nature's processes." To overcome nature, of course, men had to obey her laws; Adams and Sumner insisted equally that to violate the laws of nature was the sure road to destruction. The question was, what were these laws and how did they apply? Adams did not completely agree with George Cabot, a precursor of the social Darwinists, who felt (as Adams wrote) that "Democracy must end in a crisis, experience and reason pronounced it impracticable and absurd [because it did not allow the fittest to rule], Nature would in due time vindicate her own laws."[1] What the History proved, however, was that the law of the struggle for existence applied to every society; each nation must fight to survive. Jefferson and the Republicans tried to evade this law; since "Peace was his passion," Jefferson tried everything to escape war. When his ultimate effort, the embargo, failed, "America began slowly to struggle, under the consciousness of pain, toward a conviction

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[1] Ibid., I, 5, 172; VIII, 20; II, 166.

that she must bear the common burdens of humanity, and fight with the weapons of other races in the same bloody arena; that she could not much longer delude herself with hopes of evading laws of Nature and instincts of life."[1]

George Hochfield takes this failure of Republican policy to typify the failure, for Adams, of idealism generally. But according to Hochfield, Adams did not see the Republican idealists as mere innocent victims of "circumstances," as he had in Gallatin. Rather, Adams accepted reality and saw idealism as useless and even harmful, if it persists in illusions, if it breaks natural laws. Hochfield asserts that "The History lays to rest, once and for all, the ghost of American idealism which had been haunting Adams for years," and "leaves him with a knowledge of the hardness and solidity of life."[2] If Hochfield is right, it seems likely that Adams attached a positive moral value to nature's law of struggle, that he had drifted, in other words, into the camp (one camp, anyway) of the social Darwinists.

Struggle Among Nations

Whereas Democracy is about struggle among individuals, the History concerns struggle among nations. The actions of the characters in Democracy have no particular relevance to the fortunes of America, but the figures in the History take their significance from their effect on the

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[1] Ibid., IV, 289.

[2] Henry Adams, p. 84.

country. The most important character of all is the nation herself, and the plot concerns her striving to succeed in a world afflicted by the belligerence of England and France. Adams had not changed his mind about the corrupting effect of the battle for power on individuals. When the Republicans became involved in a power struggle with foreign statesmen and other American politicians, their fate was similar (in kind if not degree) to that of Senator Ratcliffe. "They became enmeshed in the game of power," J. C. Levenson observes, "until their political behavior sank to the moral level of 'Europe.'"[1] But the moral nature of political power and struggle is transformed when the survival of the nation, as opposed to that of the politician, is at stake. When America confronted hostile England and France, morality and honor demanded that the nation display its power in war. Adams made the point by recalling Jefferson's advice to a grandson, that he should "get by them [fiery zealots], therefore, as you would by an angry bull; it is not for a man of sense to dispute the road with such an animal." In private life this was good advice and "did honor," Adams conceded, "to the gentleness of Jefferson's nature." But Adams insisted that

> a course of conduct excellent in social life could not be made to suit the arena of politics. . . . [The English bull] was not only angry, but mad with pain and blind with rage; his throat and flanks were torn and raw where the Corsican wolf had set his teeth; a pack of mastiffs and curs were baiting him and yelling at his heels, and his blood-shot eyes no longer knew friend

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[1] Mind and Art of Henry Adams, p. 182.

> from foe, as he rushed with a roar of stupid rage upon the President. To get by him was impossible. To fly was the only resource if the President would not stand his ground and stop the animal by skill or force.
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> Few rulers ever succeeded in running from danger with dignity.[1]

The metaphor has its parallels in Democracy, but the moral question is utterly different. War was bad for the men who fought it, and also for the scientific historian (it obscured the operations of historical laws), but a nation could not always avoid it. Adams believed the mad bull would never stop chasing the man who fled.

Adams had great respect for the English. Stupid, brutal, and selfish they certainly were, but they needed such qualities for success. "Seldom long at peace, they had won whatever was theirs by creating a national character in which personal courage was as marked a quality as selfishness; for in their situation no other than a somewhat brutal energy could have secured success." For nations as well as individuals and species it was a Darwinian world, and "In the struggle for existence the English people, favored by situation, had grown into a new human type,--which might be brutal, but was not weak." Ashamed of his own nation's timidity, Adams chronicled the growing impatience and contempt with which the English observed the Americans' attempts to avoid war. The issue was whether Americans could escape the human condition, escape, that is, the struggle for existence. "England required America to prove by acts what virtue existed in her conduct or character

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[1] History of the United States, IV, 139.

which should exempt her from the common lot of humanity, or should entitle her to escape the tests of manhood,--the trials, miseries, and martyrdoms through which the character of mankind had thus far in human history taken, for good or bad, its vigorous development."[1]

The Americans thought that their isolation, their removal from the constant quarreling of European states gave them the opportunity, if not the right, to shun war, and they intended to defend themselves by other methods.

> Believing that in the long run interest, not violence, would rule the world, . . . they were tempted to look upon war and preparations for war as the worst of blunders; for they were sure that every dollar capitalized in industry was a means of overthrowing their enemies more effective than a thousand dollars spent on frigates or standing armies. The success of the American system was, from this point of view, a question of economy. If they could relieve themselves from debts, taxes, armies, and government interference with industry, they must succeed in outstripping Europe in economy of production.[2]

Here was, in effect, a theory of economic social Darwinism with which Adams was basically in sympathy. He also saw nobility and progressiveness in such regard for peace. At times he wondered rhetorically whether America would be condemned "to repeat the story of violence and brutality which the world already knew by heart, until repetition for thousands of years had wearied and sickened mankind." Could America avoid repeating the brutal past? If, as Adams wrote, "the unfailing mark of a primitive society was to regard war as the most natural pursuit of man,"

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[1] Ibid., III, 395; IV, 74.

[2] Ibid., I, 162. On the influence of isolation and security on Americans' attitude toward war, see ibid., IX, 226.

then America represented social evolution. "The chief sign that Americans had other qualities than the races from which they sprang, was shown by their dislike for war as a profession, and their obstinate attempts to invent other methods for obtaining their ends."[1] These qualities seemed to signify real progress.

The difficulty was that "in the actual state of mankind, safety and civilization could still be secured only through the power of self-defense." Americans feared war because they feared the dictatorial power of a standing army. This fear never was justified in America, and in the early 1800's peace proved more ruinous than war. In addition to the economic harm that the embargo caused the country, the Americans, in refusing to test themselves in war, came to doubt their own integrity and courage. In a final irony, the blind pursuit of peace frustrated the Americans' self-respect so much that their instincts for conquest and brutal struggle were intensified. It was an ominous paradox to any believer in human progress: "The public had been taught, and had actually learned, to doubt its own physical courage, and the reaction of delight in satisfying itself that it still possessed the commonest and most brutal of human qualities was the natural result of a system that ignored the possibility of war."[2] The moral was that competition in the form of war among nations was an inevitable condition of life, a "law of Nature," and that the desire

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[1] Ibid., I, 156, IV, 136.

[2] Ibid., IV, 210-11, VI, 376.

for struggle and conquest was a law of human nature. Progress through continuous peace was, then, a Utopian illusion of the Americans. Though peace, abstractly considered, was morally preferable to war, in some situations war was less harmful to a nation than peace, even if its sovereignty was not threatened.

Adams's realization that early America could not escape war does not mean that he admired war. But we may wonder whether he shared his brother Brooks's enthusiasm for war and his faith in the survival of the fittest nation. Henry went this far: "If war made men brutal, at least it made them strong; it called out the qualities best fitted to survive in the struggle for existence. . . . War, with all its horrors, could purify as well as debase; it dealt with high motives and vast interests; taught courage, discipline, and stern sense of duty." Adams, however, was praising war specifically in comparison to the embargo, which stimulated only ignoble qualities and which failed even to make men or society strong. He did not indulge in mindless praise of the qualities by which men survive, as his narration of the Indian wars shows. The white man's treatment of the Indians, he wrote, "offered an illustration of the law accepted by all historians in theory, but adopted by none in practice; which former ages called 'fate,' and metaphysicians called 'necessity,' but which modern science has refined into the 'survival of the fittest.' No acid ever worked more mechanically on a vegetable fibre than

the white man acted on the Indian." Bad faith, as the narrative shows, was the white man's acid. Adams's distaste for the Americans' treatment of the Indians shows that whatever fondness he had for war derived from romantic notions of honor and skill and not from any exaggerated respect for the law of struggle and survival or from a belief that war caused progress. War merely accelerated movement in whatever direction a nation was already headed in: "It was a potent force to sweep nations on their destined way to development or decline."[1]

"In peace competition had become difficult," Adams wrote, "until the British shipowner cried for war." Adams himself never justified war by its effects on economics, though he paid more attention to its economic than its moral effects. Economics was extraordinarily subject to the struggle for existence, however, and Adams seemed to approve the economic hardship caused by the embargo precisely because it aided those with the strongest instinct for struggling. That meant, of course, the people of New England. "In New England, where the struggle of existence was keenest, the embargo struck like a thunderbolt, and society for a moment thought itself at an end." But with aid of energy, thrift, and a healthy disrespect for a bad law, the region survived. "New industries sprang up rapidly on a soil and in a climate where the struggle for life

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[1] Ibid., IV, 277, VI, 69, 436. We might note here that Adams showed no signs, in his treatment of the Indians, the Negro rebels of Haiti, or the American Negroes, of the racism that social Darwinism encouraged in many people.

was more severe than elsewhere in the Union."[1] In a time of hardship and trouble, a tradition of struggle was a great asset.

There is a Sumnerian grandeur in the early chapter on "American Ideals," in which Adams emphasized that the young nation, though physically primitive, offered unlimited opportunity for the industrious. This situation fitted Sumner's ideal of progress: increasing opportunity which enables more individuals to succeed and survive. But the concluding section of the History suggests that Adams felt opportunity in America had become too widespread by 1817, so that struggle had unfortunately lost its intensity. True, "The American continent was happier in its conditions and easier in its resources than the regions of Europe and Asia, where Nature revelled in diversity and conflict."[2] But the effects of happiness and ease were not entirely pleasant to contemplate. Religious thought took its tone from the easing of the struggle for existence and developed a mindless, optimistic theology that subordinated God to man and "rejected necessary conclusions of theology because they were inconsistent with human self-esteem." Political theory made no advances, and an unintelligent euphoria of the American people, who believed "that all was for the best, as far as the United States were concerned, in the affairs of mankind," boded ill (Adams implied) for the future. "On

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[1] Ibid., IV, 75, 278.

[2] Ibid., I, 159-60; IX, 241.

every side society showed that ease was for a time to take the place of severity." Finally, Adams suggested that the absence of severe struggle might make the American character "sluggish." "The inertia of several hundred million people, all formed in a similar social mould, was as likely to stifle energy as to stimulate evolution."[1] This judgment sounds like a conscious rejection of Spencerian optimism.[2]

The American of 1800 was well equipped to survive in a rugged land. "Stripped for the hardest work, every muscle firm and elastic, every ounce of brain ready for use, and not a trace of superfluous flesh on his nervous and supple body, the American stood in the world a new order of man." A new order of man, that is, because he was ready for work. Adams's Darwinian (or Lamarckian) conclusion was: "The instinct of activity, once created, seemed heritable and permanent in the race." Adams valued such energy, which partly explained the superiority of Americans over Europeans. Yet industriousness easily led to greed, and a hesitant irony lurks beneath his praise of the materialism of a people who

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[1] Ibid., IX, 240, 241. My italics.

[2] Adams never asserted the Spencerian notion that struggle would eventually be replaced by cooperation in society, but it is worth noting that he marked Maudsley's expression of the possibility "that the struggle for existence /may be/ checked and controlled by the growth and spread of the sentiment of universal brotherhood, and so the struggle become not one of individual against individual, nor of race against race, but one of the whole human race, compact in solidity of feeling and aim, against the obstacles that hinder its progress towards higher and higher ideals." Body and Will, p. 148.

could forgive their government "everything except an empty Treasury." It was no compliment to the Americans that "until they were satisfied that knowledge was money, they would not insist upon high education; until they saw with their own eyes stones turned into gold, they would not learn the meaning of science."[1] This irony does not suggest that Adams had rejected capitalism or the "Protestant ethic," but that he felt Americans were too exclusively interested in practical and material progress. The early years of the century only increased this emphasis, and after the War of 1812, economics began to take control of politics. "Economical interests dwarfed the old political distinctions and gave a new character to parties." Sumner warned against such an ominous trend, and Adams's own attitude is suggested by his observation that when after the war a great economic boom flooded the Southern states, "the stimulus thus given to the slave system was violent."[2] Economic prosperity might prove very dangerous to the United States and its political system. Though Ernest Samuels asserts that Adams at this time "essayed Jeffersonian democracy not in the radiance of the Rights of Man but in the steadier light of the Wealth of Nations," Adams hardly seemed pleased that in 1815 "the Rights of Man occupied public thoughts less, and the price of cotton more, in the later than in the earlier time."[3] The puritan capitalist in Adams approved

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[1] History of the United States, I, 159, 160, 57-59; IV, 148-49; I, 74.

[2] Ibid., IX, 93-94.

[3] Middle Years, p. 57. History of the United States, IX, 104.

of economic struggle and progress, but the puritan moralist in him regretted the effects of this kind of progress on American intellectual, political, and moral development.

Progress

To analyze such effects was the job of the "scientific historian." Adams's History was not really scientific; whenever he mentioned historical laws he immediately dropped the subject. In his work science, as Harvey Wish observes, "produced no history whatever."[1] But William Jordy accurately notes that the History is dominated by "above all, an evolutionist sense, not so much of progress (though this element is present) as of progression." Adams's historical thought, moreover, drew on the ideas and techniques of various theorists of social development. Adams followed Buckle, the English historian of England, and Guizot, the French historian of France, in choosing his native land to illustrate the furthest advance of Western civilization. The general influence of evolutionary theorists on Adams is clear. The most important influence, that of Comte, has been fully discussed by Jordy. It probably was Comte who taught Adams to look for laws, and certainly Comte who taught him to look for phases, in history.[2]

The supposed advantage of America, for the historian, was that in her isolation she could grow mostly

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[1] The American Historian, p. 162.

[2] Jordy, Adams: Scientific Historian, pp. 56, 97, 92-98, 113-20.

undisturbed by the constant struggles that convulsed European nations, and so in her growth the laws of historical development could be found operating without interference. As George Hochfield notes, however, "if laws of history require such conditions in order to be discovered, how applicable are they likely to be to societies that are not undisturbed, isolated, and pacific?"[1] In any case, Adams uncovered few laws of general history but many of the forces behind America's peculiar development. One of the strongest forces was the American genius for science and technology, which made possible American development of the steam engine (the supporters of steam power, Adams asserted, "dragged society forward"), as well as American superiority over English warships. It was partly because of technological skill that "probably no people ever grew more rapidly and became more mature in so short a time." And because America offered vast opportunity for the use of energy and technology, the American in 1800 "was more intelligent than the average European, and was becoming every year still more active-minded as the new movement of society caught him up and swept him through a life of more varied experiences."[2] Thus Adams committed himself, at least so far as early America was concerned, to the proposition of Nathan Gore in Democracy that "the masses are now raised to higher intelligence than formerly."[3] Adams

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[1] Henry Adams, p. 70.

[2] History of the United States, I, 69-70; IX, 194; I, 181.

[3] Democracy, p. 77.

believed that the strongest force behind social development resided in the masses. He "saw all the people as at once the embodiment and culmination of all natural power," William Jordy states. "He saw them as he later viewed the Virgin, as a kind of mystical prime mover in history. As such, the people almost mechanistically determined national destiny."[1]

This last point suggests that Adams maintained the social evolutionist's concept of social movement occurring apart from the actions of government and politicians. He did not hold this belief rigidly, and though he described famous public men as being "borne away by the stream" of forces beyond their control,[2] he did not deny them all influence over their country's movement. Their influence, however, was generally negative, as the embargo and the American conduct of the War of 1812 showed. Adams apparently believed with Spencer that men could distort or slow down a society's progress if they failed to understand and submit to the forces behind its movement. But eventually the "national movement" prevailed and society evolved "despite," as William Jordy notes, "the fumbling policies of the Republican administration."[3] There is no evidence that government aided social progress, and Adams continued to

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[1] Adams: Scientific Historian, p. 87. See also ibid., p. 98, and Samuels, Middle Years, p. 374.

[2] History of the United States, IV, 302.

[3] Adams: Scientific Historian, p. 15. On society's opposition to Republican policies, see History of the United States, VI, 450, IX, 153.

hold Senator Ratcliffe's doctrine in Democracy that society cannot be improved by the purification of government. For the most part the government merely reflected the mood and philosophy of the people.[1] As in the novel, then, democracy in the History was to Adams not so much a system of government as a way of life of the American people: "the true democracy of life."

Adams believed that Jeffersonian democracy had accomplished an irreversible revolution. George Cabot had been wrong when he stated in 1804 that democracy was "the government of the worst," and inevitably would dissolve into anarchy and impotence for keeping the fittest (that is, the New England Federalists) from power. Adams took sides tentatively with the democrats: "The obstinacy of the race /of Federalists/ was never better shown than when, with the sunlight of the nineteenth century bursting upon them, these resolute sons of granite and ice turned their faces from the sight /of democracy/, and smiled in their sardonic way at the folly or wickedness of men who could pretend to believe the world improved because henceforth the ignorant and vicious were to rule the United States and govern the churches and schools of New England." Adams, who elsewhere called "the democratic movement . . . equally imbecile in peace and war," seemed to be mocking both sides; but despite his doubts about democracy he was sympathetic toward it. The History proves that Nathan

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[1] History of the United States, VI, 162-63; IX, 134-35.

Gore's praise of democracy did express part of Adams's opinion; though the chances for success were small, the success, if gained, would be monumental. If the Americans were right

> in thinking that the next necessity of human progress was to lift the average man upon an intellectual and social level with the most favored, they stood at least three generations nearer than Europe to their common goal. The destinies of the United States were certainly staked, without reserve or escape, on the soundness of this doubtful and even improbable principle, ignoring or overthrowing the institutions of church, aristocracy, family, army, and political intervention, which long experience had shown to be needed for the safety of society. Europe might be right in thinking that without such safeguards society must come to an end; but even Europeans must concede that there was a chance, if no greater than one in a thousand, that America might, at least for a time, succeed. If this stake of temporal and eternal welfare stood on the winning card; if man actually should become more virtuous and enlightened, by mere process of growth, without church or parental authority; if the average human being could accustom himself to reason with the logical processes of Descartes and Newton!--what then?

What then indeed; but to accomplish this feat a mental evolution on the order hoped for by George Strong in Esther seemed necessary. Adams wondered whether American society could "physically develop the convolutions of the human brain."[1] The future of democracy seemed to depend on it. But even granting such mental evolution, it remained to answer the question with which Adams's conjectural New Englander confronted Jefferson in 1800: "What will you do for moral progress?"

Jefferson's answer, as Adams supplied it, came from

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[1] Ibid., II, 76; I, 87; VII, 68; I, 158-59, 184.

a letter of 1815: "I fear from the experience of the last twenty-five years that morals do not of necessity advance hand in hand with the sciences." This issue was crucial to Adams, who was strictly deterministic only when he glanced broadly at the cosmos or the sweep of history, but a moralist whenever he examined human acts. His concern for progress in America is clear from his picture of the early American people: "The acres brought into cultivation, the cattle bred, the houses built, proved no doubt that human beings, like ants and bees, could indefinitely multiply their numbers, and could lay up stores of food; but these statistics offered no evidence that the human being, any more than the ant and bee, was conscious of a higher destiny." Apparently these insects had no moral sense at all. Yet Adams believed that democracy contained within itself, at least in theory, some inherent moral value, or he would not have commented that Jefferson, in maneuvering to acquire Florida (a power play typical of Europeans), lost "the moral leadership which belonged to the head of democracy."[1]

The statement is significant because Jefferson's failure, along with the depravity of the New Englanders during this time, must have crushed Adams's doctrine of the moral elite. In his youth Adams had believed that the elite could and should guide public opinion; in the novels he feared they had lost their influence; in the History

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[1] Ibid., I, 179; III, 212; IV, 339.

they appeared to have lost their moral superiority as well. The ants and bees were on their own. There is a bitter irony in Adams's description in the History's concluding volume of the optimistic theology of the new age, which credited human nature "with virtues hardly suspected before, and with hopes of perfection on earth altogether strange to theology." And in the last pages of the work Adams expressed a terribly harsh judgment of American morality, allowing that it suited a society whose qualities were shrewdness, unscrupulousness, and perhaps a lack of honesty. The overriding fact about American morality, Adams concluded, was that "like American intelligence, it discouraged excess."[1] It discouraged, that is, excessively moral men. The countless, faceless masses had this influence, which did not seem conducive to progress.

Where, then, was progress to be found? Not in political thought: American development from 1800 to 1815 marked a drastic narrowing of the range of the American political mind. "The ideas of 1787 were antiquated in 1815, and lingered only in districts remote from active movement. The subsidence of interest in political theories was a measure of the change, marking the general drift of society toward practical devices for popular use, within popular intelligence." The whole American system was in trouble, Adams hinted, because men had lost the distinction, vital to a free country (and basic to social evolutionism) between

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[1] Ibid., IX, 183, 237.

the government in power and the nation. "This identifying doctrine," Adams quoted the political philosopher John Taylor, "puts an end to the idea of a responsibility of the government to the nation. . . . It renders useless the freedom of speech and of the press; it converts the representative into the principal."[1] This is a fair description of the problem of government expressed in Democracy. Adams doubted that the faults Taylor found could be corrected. The nation would have to live with politicians who identified the nation's interests with their own. And even if the politicians proved trustworthy, the system itself, in its vastness and uniformity, might collapse.

> One uniform and harmonious system appealed to the imagination as a triumph of human progress, offering prospects of peace and ease, contentment and philanthropy, such as the world had not seen; but it invited dangers, formidable because unusual or altogether unknown. The corruption of such a system might prove to be proportionate with its dimensions, and uniformity might lead to evils as serious as were commonly ascribed to diversity.

When Adams concluded the History, he felt that Americans had achieved only material and scientific progress by 1815, and he saw that this progress would cause more trouble than fulfillment for Americans. So with his own age in mind he ended the work with a series of questions which suggested that though he had failed to determine reliably the course of the nation's development, he feared the worst. The Americans

> were intelligent, but what paths would their intelligence select? They were quick, but what solution of

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[1] Ibid., IX, 194, 196.

> insoluble problems would quickness hurry? They were scientific, and what control would their science exercise over their destiny? They were mild, but what corruptions would their relaxations bring? They were peaceful, but by what machinery were their corruptions to be purged? What interests were to vivify a society so vast and uniform? What ideals were to ennoble it? What object, besides physical content, must a democratic continent aspire to attain? For the treatment of such questions, history required another century of experience.[1]

Individuals

Adams's vision of the world included "the familiar figures of famous men,--Napoleon, Alexander, Canning, Godov, Jefferson, Madison, Talleyrand; emperors, generals, presidents, conspirators, patriots, tyrants, and martyrs by the thousand,-- . . . borne away by the stream, struggling, gesticulating, praying, murdering, robbing; each blind to everything but a selfish interest, and all helping more or less unconsciously to reach the new level which society was obliged to seek."[2] Adams was saying nothing here about the individual's free will, nor did he quite deny that public men can affect at least the rate of a nation's development. He showed throughout the History, moreover, an interest in individuals as personalities, largely apart from their importance in history, which complemented rather than contradicted his use of individuals to illustrate the national development. Though some critics feel, with Edward N. Saveth, that "Adams's effort to subordinate individuality to force

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[1] Ibid., IX, 219, 242.

[2] History of the United States, IV, 301-02.

was a continuing one,"[1] I think it truer that he tried continually to rescue individuality from force. Otherwise, the care with which he portrayed the major and minor figures in the History is inexplicable and wasteful.

Adams had a theory, to be sure, about using individuals to express the character of a nation. In a democracy, he thought, one person had less opportunity than in an aristocracy to use power for his own personal purposes. One was not likely to come to political or social power in a democracy unless he represented a dominant trait or impulse of the people. Therefore, individuals could be conveniently studied as types, representatives of the national character. This is a theory of historical study, and says nothing about the nature of individuality. Adams explained his theory in his last chapter.

> Whether the figures of history were treated as heroes or as types, they must be taken to represent the people. American types were especially worth study if they were to represent the greatest democratic evolution the world could know. Readers might judge for themselves what share the individual possessed in creating or shaping the nation; but whether it was small or great, the nation could be understood only by studying the individual. For that reason, in the story of Jefferson and Madison individuals retained their old interest as types of character, if not as sources of power.[2]

Comte had wanted to identify the individual with the species, to do away with individual differences, but this was not at all Adams's point. He followed rather Spencer's principle that one studied a society through its individuals.

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[1] "Introduction" to The Education of Henry Adams and Other Selected Writings, ed. by Edward N. Saveth, p. x.

[2] History of the United States, IX, 226.

No individual, however, could be a perfect type, and the danger of Adams's method was either in distorting the portrayals of individuals to make them fit a type, or in blurring a picture of a type by presenting complex portraits of individuals. Adams inclined toward the latter fault, being more often interested in individuals than in types. In a way he had a much easier task in Democracy and Esther, since the novels were not closely bound by the details of history. Esther was "an American type," and Adams could portray her as he wished, as an ideal type that represented to him the best of the American character.

According to Robert E. Spiller, the central theme of the History is "the incapacity of the individual to control his own destiny or shape the course of events outside of himself."[1] The statement can apply, however, only to the public life of politics, not to any man's private life. Even as a statement about public life, it is dubious once we get beyond Adams's general thesis about the irresistible progression of society; for Adams felt that Jefferson could have shaped not only his own destiny but external events also, by abandoning the embargo before it had crippled American commerce, or preparing for war during his first term of office. For Adams the moral world never faded from sight, and for him as for Oliver Wendell Holmes it was the world of free will, limited severely (more severely by Holmes

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[1] "Henry Adams," in Literary History of the United States, by Robert E. Spiller et al, p. 1087.

than by Adams) by the pressures of the natural world but always maintaining its autonomy. The individual can influence his destiny, and in the end we see that Jefferson and Madison underwent the same trial as Madeleine and Esther did: the test of whether one could be true to one's ideals against the world. There are two differences between the situation of Adams's heroines and his politicians, neither of which have anything to do with free will. One is that the women maintain their ideals and the Presidents do not. The other is that the moral dimensions of the two situations are dissimilar, because the women are responsible only to themselves and their friends, whereas the Presidents were public men responsible to the whole nation. Adams clearly respected Madeleine and Esther for defying the world in favor of their principles. But their principles are defensible; some of those of Jefferson and Madison proved misguided. The defense of a bad principle was not noble. Unhappily, Jefferson and Madison abandoned good principles as well as bad ones under the pressure of circumstances, and so on the whole Adams did not feel impelled to praise their moral integrity.

CHAPTER VII

THE LATER WORKS

Society and the Self

The suicide of his wife in 1885 split Adams's life, as he later said, in halves. The History belongs to the earlier half, though he wrote much of it after Mrs. Adams's death. The later sections agree in idea and tone with the earlier ones, except for a slight darkening of mood in the concluding chapters. The History marks the end of a phase in Adams's life as definite as any he found in history. "It belongs to me of 1870," he wrote to Elizabeth Cameron, "a strangely different being from the me of 1890. There are not nine pages in the nine volumes that now express anything of my interests or feelings; unless perhaps some of my disillusionments."[1] With the death of his wife, and then of his father in 1886 and his mother in 1889, his former world dissolved. Upon the completion of the History, the old life was gone, and the feeling grew upon him that he was isolated from society and his generation cut off from the future. "The future no longer belongs to us," he wrote to Gaskell. "I care not a silver dollar, even at its future value of

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, I, 468.

eighty cents, what kind of society the world is to have; but I feel sure it will be so different from ours that our generation will find it a bore."[1]

The financial panic of 1893, however, reawakened Adams's interest in the society around him. A new force was loose in the world, all the more fascinating because it threatened to destroy society. Society, "the old machine," "was bound to break down, and if it happened to break precisely over one's head, it gave the better chance for study." From this time dates his obsessive interest in a science of history which could infallibly predict society's future. The key to Adams's new trend of thought was the catch-all idea of force. "Satisfied that the sequence of men led to nothing, and that the sequence of time was artificial, and the sequence of thought was chaos, he turned at last to the sequence of force."[2] It would seem, then, that Adams had outgrown the interests and attitudes of social evolutionism; but he could hardly think about force except in terms of thought, time, society, and men. And however scientific and objective he tried at times to be, a powerful "force" behind his theories was that of his own subjective individualism.

In Body and Will, Henry Maudsley warned of a dangerous trend in social evolution, the demise of religious feeling and the growing influence of science: "It is not on knowledge, which separates, nor on power, which tyrannizes,

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[1]April 25, 1886, Adams Papers, Microfilm #599.

[2]Education, pp. 338, 382.

but on sympathy of feeling, which unites, that society is founded and built up." Adams commented in the margin: "What can all this matter to a man who knows that evolution is not a matter of free will?"[1] He denied here not the individual's free will but the power of men to influence evolution. The tone of the comment is futility, and perhaps despair. It suggests that Adams had abandoned hope for the future of society. If so, what could he hope for? Or perhaps the question was merely, what could he be interested in? One important answer to Adams was oneself. He thereafter pursued the problems of man largely by examining himself. If the study of his life led to knowledge of society, so much the better. In 1882 he had written condescendingly of John Randolph that "the passion for referring every comparison to one's self is a primitive quality by no means confined to women and children."[2] When a few years later he encountered a similar statement in Body and Will, he drew a line by it; and he must have realized by this time that what Maudsley said applied to himself and defined the character of his own genius and interests. The line Adams drew signifies, I believe, his self-knowledge and, hopefully, his acceptance of the dominant trait of his old age, his "intense and narrow self-regarding egoism: not necessarily a deliberate, conscious selfishness, but an acute self-feeling; a constant and inveterate reference of all impressions to self, which is easily touched to the quick, being

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[1] Pp. 210-11.

[2] John Randolph, pp. 14-15.

what is called very sensitive, as well it may be when all its sensibilities are collected into one sensitive point and that point self."[1] This "self-feeling" pervaded all his later writing, influencing even his use of science and evolutionary thought.

The Uses of Science

"I can grasp the fate of the world," wrote Karl Jaspers, only if I can grasp science. . . . Only through science and face-to-face with science can I acquire an intensified consciousness of the historical situation, can I truly live in the spiritual situation of my time."[2] Henry Adams felt precisely this way, and pursued the science of his day with tremendous energy. He grew bored with science, however, when it did not yield striking ideas, since he was interested not in experimentation but in laws, graphs, and formulas with which to order the phenomena of history and society. This was not a new interest for Adams in the 1890's, but it was not an obsession before then. The metaphors from physics and biology in the History were largely ornamental, and he made no attempt to subject the details of American history to scientific laws. Only around 1893 did he become painfully eager to "apply Darwin's method to the facts of human history," "extending the field of study until it shall

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[1] P. 285.

[2] "On My Philosophy," tr. by Felix Kaufmann, in Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre, pp. 144-45.

include all races, all countries, and all times."[1] The irony was that in these later years Adams seemed to lose interest in the details which the laws were to embrace. Especially in his essays "The Rule of Phase Applied to History" (1909) and A Letter to American Teachers of History (1910), he treated historical events arbitrarily or else ignored them altogether in developing his laws. As he once candidly admitted, his "wonder ran off into figures,"[2] and when mathematical and geometric figures began to dance cosmically in his head, facts appeared trivial, and often he produced magnificent generalities with very obscure applications. He wrote in "The Rule of Phase," for example, that "The future of Thought, and therefore of History, lies in the hands of physicists, and . . . the future historian must seek his education in the world of mathematics and physics. Nothing can be expected from further study on the old lines."[3] What such history could be like was not clear.

Perhaps by 1909, at the age of 71, he had lost sight of the problem caused by his tendency to run off into figures, but in the The Education of Henry Adams, for all its glittering generalities, he faced it squarely, aware that the world was not likely to conform to his or any laws. After considering how to measure the inertia of mind and race, he

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[1] "The Tendency of History," in The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma, ed. by Brooks Adams, pp. 127, 126.

[2] Education, p. 319.

[3] "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," in The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma, p. 283.

concluded that "simplicity is the most deceitful mistress that ever betrayed man." Studying masses of statistics supplied by the Government Statistics Bureau, he "fell into a superstitious terror of complexity as the sink of facts." Meditating on the past efforts of historians to find historical syntheses in theological or scientific concepts, he decided that "For human purposes a point must always be soon reached where larger synthesis is suicide." Again and again the ancient, mysterious, non-evolving ganoid fish Pteraspis breaks into the narrative, reminding the reader that nature and history defy all efforts to comprehend their depths. "Complexity precedes evolution. The Pteraspis grins horribly from the closed entrance."[1] In giving these frequent reminders, Adams was more candid than in the History, where he casually mentioned the possibility of subduing history to general laws only to drop the subject. And his formulations of laws in the Education were more effective than in "The Rule of Phase" and the Letter, since in the latter works he pretended his laws were objective truth, whereas in the Education he conceded that his theories of history were one man's efforts to satisfy himself by imposing order on the universe. Synthesis, suicide or not, had a personal value; it calmed the mind.

The difficulty of using science to comprehend social and historical change frustrated Adams and intensified a recurrent distrust of science that he had first expressed in his "Class Day Oration" of 1858. "My belief," he wrote to

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[1] Education, pp. 441, 351, 402, 302.

his brother Brooks in 1902, "is that science is to wreck us, and that we are like monkeys monkeying with a loaded shell." His attitude in 1903 toward the second law of thermodynamics (the quantity of useful energy in a closed system steadily decreases) was: "Who cares? Already it is like all the rest of our old structure. It explains nothing."[1] Seven years later, it is true, he used this law in the Letter to prove the degradation of human society. But by that time he was attacking all rational thought, on which science depended, as a weakened form of instinct.[2] He used science to try to show the feebleness of science.

This dislike and vague fear of science coexisted with a belief that he could somehow use science to study society and even predict its future, if only he had the right data and the right formulas. In Lucien Poincaré's La Physique Moderne Son Évolution (1906) Adams wrote this intriguing note: "Study this formula as applied to human society! $S \times Vol.^2 = p.$"[3] But nothing came of it. He consistently failed to prove relations between science and society. The most obvious failure occurred in the Letter, in which he tried (how seriously, no one knows) to use the second law of thermodynamics to prove the deterioration of society. As William James pointed out to him, mere quantity of energy says nothing about the

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 392, 408-09.

[2]See A Letter to American Teachers of History, in The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma, pp. 203, 205-06.

[3](At the Mass. Hist. Soc.), p. 107.

quality of the work which the energy can do.[1] What Adams's use of science does definitely accomplish in the Letter is to emphasize his thesis that social decay is already upon us and moving fast!

The Darwinian world-view always appealed to Adams. In "The Tendency of History" he gave Darwin (along with Buckle) credit for interesting him in finding the laws of history. Darwinian evolution with its slow, orderly changes governed by law attracted him always. So did Louis Agassiz's catastrophism, of course, and in the Education he thought catastrophism accounted for biological and social change far more accurately than did Darwinian uniformitarianism. Adams used these ideas to describe not only social change but the course of individual lives. Uniform change was best; Clarence King's life, for example, proceeded evenly: "Standing in the middle of his career, . . . he could look back and look forward in a straight line. Adams's life, past or future, was a succession of violent breaks or waves, with no base at all."[2] Another old dispute of the 1860's between Darwin and Agassiz lived on, surprisingly, in Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres (1904), in which Abelard and William of Champeaux debated the relation between universals and individuals in an attempt to determine how

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[1]Samuels, Major Phase, p. 499.

[2]Education, p. 312. Adams saw his life as a series of phases broken by catastrophes such as the secession of the South, his return to America and President Grant, the deaths of his sister and his wife, the financial panic of 1893, and the sinking of the Titanic (on which he had booked return passage).

unity could produce diversity. Like Agassiz, William started with universals; he was a Platonic realist and believed that essential reality was not in individuals but in the patterns on which they were based. Like Darwin, Abelard began with individuals; he was a nominalist and thought that one could comprehend universals only in observing and generalizing from individuals. Adams seemed to favor Abelard, just as he approved of Darwin's method of basing laws on observation, but in his later years he tended toward Agassiz's method of finding the law first and then fitting experience to it as best he could.[1]

In the Education Adams made effective use of evolutionary metaphors, of which the most important is the Pteraspis. The image of the river running into the ocean, commonly associated with Spencer, is not important in the Education but proved useful in "The Rule of Phase," as a metaphor of various kinds of entropy, such as thought trickling in streams "until at last it reaches equilibrium in the ocean of ultimate solution." The river-ocean metaphor in the History can be interpreted as an expression of social progress, but in Adams's later works it is always an image of stagnation. Occasionally he discussed catastrophic changes as mutations,[2] since he liked the abruptness inherent in the idea of mutation. James K. Folsom argues that Adams treated the great

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[1] Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, pp. 294-305.

[2] For example, he referred in "The Rule of Phase" to the evolutionary leap of man's mind from "instinct" to "thought" as a mutation, pp. 296-97.

changes in history, such as the growth of the Virgin's power and the discovery of radium, as metaphorical mutations.[1] More frequent, however, than the metaphor of mutation was that of the organism. Adams's continued interest in the concept is shown by a marginal comment he wrote beside Hans Driesch's definition of the biological organism as "more than a sum or an aggregate of its parts." Adams replied:

> Does not this definition of organism apply more precisely to--
> The Church (Roman)
> The Army (to wit, German)
> A State (e.g., England)
> A Federation (United States)
> A Corporation (U. S. Steel)
> A Bee-hive
> The role of Entelechy in an army is sufficiently self-evident. It is not the sum of its units. It is its co-ordination to an end.[2]

Particularly in the Letter Adams insisted that society is an organism, but not with the Spencerian purpose of stressing its orderly slow growth. Rather, he emphasized precisely the point which Spencer evaded: that organisms die. The idea of the death of society is at the center of the Letter, and Adams underlined the point neatly by insisting society is an organism.[3]

The concept of the organism was never so important in Adams's writing, however, as that of natural selection.

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[1] "Mutation as Metaphor in The Education of Henry Adams," Journal of English Literary History (1963), pp. 162-74. Folsom goes so far as to make Adams a follower of De Vries, which is probably too far.

[2] The Science and Philosophy of the Organism (1907) (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.), pp. 338-39.

[3] Letter to Teachers, p. 196.

It hardly mattered that in the 1890's and after it seemed dead as a scientific theory.[1] Perhaps believing that the law was invalid justified for Adams his misuse of it in the Education. In order to refute the concept of progress, he distorted that of natural selection in two ways. One was to identify progress and natural selection, and then reject progress by attempting to disprove natural selection on scientific grounds. The other was to discuss natural selection as a valid law of social relations to show that a world governed by the survival of the fittest (the most powerful) cannot progress morally. Here is the theme of Democracy expanded to embrace unequivocally all of society. As in the novel, the best characters--mainly Adams and his friends--reject the use of brute power in human relations; and, as in the novel, natural selection thrives in the world of politics. Various of Adam's acquaintances, most notably Henry Cabot Lodge, were lured into politics and promptly corrupted. But Adams did not emphasize politics so much as he had in Democracy; the range of the Education is much broader. In the early chapters Adams described how in his youth he had considered men without reference to the natural world, governed by or violating an abstract morality. Then, after reading Comte, Darwin, and others in the 1860's, he had decided that since humanity was a part of the natural world, human conduct could not be explained or predicted unless men

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[1] "Every generalization that we settled forty years ago," Adams wrote to Gaskell, "is abandoned. The one most completely thrown over is our gentle Darwin's Survival which has no longer a leg to stand on." Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 407.

were considered as part of nature. To establish (partly ironically) man's place in nature is perhaps the main purpose of the chapter "Darwinism." Thereafter Adams could use natural selection to explain how a primitive brute force like Grant could overcome, in the political world of power, more sophisticated and moral forces. For Grant "action was the highest stimulant--the instinct of fight. Such men were forces of nature, energies of the prime, like the Pteraspis, but they made short work of scholars." Grant "should have been extinct for ages,"[1] but there he was: the President!

After the chapter "Darwinism" Adams could also use the terms "fit" and "unfit" to express through irony the difference between power and morality. In America the opportunities to control power were great, but those whose principles restrained them from blindly pursuing it lost out. "Boston meant business. The Bostonians were building railways. Adams would have liked to help in building railways, but had no education. He was not fit."[2] He could not, that is, forget his standards for the benefit of railways. Others could, and Adams repeated the warning of the History that America's materialistic success was weakening her moral fibre. Material and moral fitness seemed incompatible. For the History's defense of another kind of fitness, brutal aggressiveness as a national trait, Adams had no use in the Education. Whether he had changed his mind about the need for a nation to be

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[1]Education, pp. 265-66.

[2]Ibid., p. 241.

willing to fight is not clear, but in any case some of his evaluations changed drastically. He no longer accused America, for example, of national cowardice. And whereas in the History we learned that "in the struggle for existence the English people, favored by situation, had grown into a new human type,--which might be brutal, but was not weak," the English type as described in the Education "might be brutal or might be only stupid--but strong, in either case, it was not."[1]

Such differences in Adams's use of evolutionary theory had little to do with his understanding of science. The same scientific idea could be applied to various subjects for various purposes. For the most part we find the same scientific concepts in Adams's later writing as in the earlier works. His rejection of Darwinism did not stop him from using Darwinian ideas. The rejection indicates, however, some significant changes in his thinking. Adams abandoned Darwinism in his old age because he associated it with the idea of progress, which he rejected, because his historical theories demanded such rapid change that Darwinism gave them no support, and probably because he was responding to the general fin-de-siècle reaction against all science as well as to the scientific challenge posed by the mechanistic physicists. There are two more possible reasons. Darwinism contains a strong element of utilitarianism: if a species could not use its abilities to adjust to its environment, it died out.

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[1] History of the United States, IV, 74. Education, p. 182.

In the primitivist state of mind which grew on him after his Asian and South Seas travels of the 1890's, Adams decided that societies in their earlier, purer state were not obsessed by vulgar utilitarian motives. But New Englanders, for example, "have kept only the qualities which were most useful, with a dull instinct recalling dead associations. So we get Boston." What modern society needs is to "get its intellectual processes back to the state of mind in which society naturally expressed itself in the Iliad, or the Chanson, or the temple, or the church, and sang, or built, or fought, or loved as a habit, without reference to practical use." Secondly, Adams rejected Darwinism because as his subjectivism grew he called in question the whole objective, observational epistemology of Darwinian science. The passion for relating all observation to oneself suggests that perception cannot be purely objective. There are only two schools of philosophy, Adams wrote in 1905: "One turns the world onto me; the other turns me onto the world: and the result is the same. The so-called me is a very, very small and foolish puppy dog, but it is all that exists."[1] Thus Adams reclaimed the individual self which Darwinism virtually ignored, and slighted the objective Darwinian world.

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 80, 544, 451.

Progress and Social Darwinism

Adams's rejection of Darwinism reflects the changes in his concept of social progress. "Never had the sun of progress shone so fair" as when he was a young man in 1870. "Evolution from lower to higher raged like an epidemic. Darwin was the greatest of prophets in the most evolutionary of worlds." The fact of progress seemed evident, and few wondered what exactly progress meant. After pursuing the matter in Democracy and the History, Adams had no very clear idea, and his definition in the Education of progress as "the development and economy of forces" begged the whole question, as he conceded.[1] America and all Western society drifted aimlessly, not knowing (as he wrote in Chartres) "where it means to go, or whether it means to go anywhere--what its object is, or whether it has an object."[2] No one knew what progress was or whether it was attainable. Perhaps Hans Driesch was right, in this Adamsian passage which Adams marked: "All real progress is non-historical--and its champions almost always have become martyrs: this fact seems not to recommend history as a means of education, except for persons of a very strong character."

For a nation to progress it needed ideals to work toward, but Adams remarked with a sneer that the American mind

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[1] Education, pp. 284, 474.

[2] Chartres, p. 344.

[3] Science and Philosophy of the Organism, p. 320.

"shunned, distrusted, disliked, the dangerous attraction of ideals."[1] In the Education he still thought America had ample energy, and doubted only society's ability to control and direct its energy. After the Education the belief hardened in his mind that society was stagnating: "Society swallows passively whatever is thrown at it, but never even splashes when hit." In the History Adams had warned that the conventionality of the American mind and the vast uniformity of its society would thwart the nation's development. The Education is bitter on the subject of American conventionality, and the Letter is a pseudo=scientific elaboration of the History's warning about American uniformity. America's strength was in her material resources and interests, and "a materialist society like ours," he wrote in 1897, "has no life except in materialist success."[2] Brutality and murder survived in America as elsewhere, and Adams declined to justify it, as he had in the History, as an unpleasant national virtue in a world ruled by natural selection.[3] America still maintained the advantage over Europe mentioned in the History, that she was headed in only one direction, Europe in many; but no longer did America enjoy a three-generation lead. "Whenever Europe or Asia should be polarized or oriented towards the same point, America might easily lose her lead." The world moved faster in 1868 than in 1817. Given such troubled reflections, it is

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[1] Education, p. 328.

[2] Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 572, 115.

[3] See Education, e.g., p. 352.

surprising that Adams could be as hopeful as he sometimes was. The Education, for example, ends on an almost optimistic note; the American "social mind," he felt, "would have to jump" to meet the challenges of the new century, but they might be met.[1] As his brother Brooks complained, "In theory you believe, as I do, that men are automata, that we cannot do otherwise than we do--that there is no advance and in practice you are always worrying for an American Eutopia."[2]

In his earlier works Adams altered his concept of nature to fit whatever aspect of American life he was discussing. In Democracy he emphasized the amoral brutality of the natural world in order to characterize Washington politics, while in Esther he conceived of nature as a mysterious force opposed to American society and sympathetic to the individual, though irrelevant to moral decisions. In the early essays and the History nature was so strong a force in human affairs that even the young American government had to obey her laws in order to succeed. Similar ideas can be found in one or another of the later works. The vitalism of the Letter is a direct development from Esther, though one can hardly be pleased with the development, since Adams's vitalism seemed intended merely to discredit science and rationalism, without providing any philosophy for the individual. More positive was Adams's concept in Chartres of the Virgin as a force of nature, and his presentation of St. Francis as society's

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[1] Ibid., pp. 237, 498.

[2] Samuels, Major Phase, p. 633.

ultimate expression of naturalistic pantheism.[1] The vision of nature in the Education is, however, of a far different order; here nature appeared as a chaotic force, blind and non-moral (despite Adams's personifications), working against man at every point. "Order was an accidental relation obnoxious to nature," and this chaos helped explain, he thought, "the persistently fiendish treatment of man by man; the perpetual effort of society to establish law, and the perpetual revolt of society against the law it had established."[2] That society reflected the qualities of chaotic nature, however, did not absolve man of moral responsibility; if man's natural tendency was to "follow nature" in chaos, the job of morality was to halt this tendency.

Social Darwinism distinguished between the desirable struggle of individuals against nature and man's destructive efforts to alter nature's processes in society. Adams seemed to make this distinction: his dynamic law of history required that "two masses--nature and man--must go on reacting against each other, without stop"; but he also wrote that "I never think it good sense to try to reverse the processes of nature."[3] When Lucien Poincaré predicted that physics "accomplira, pour la société tout entière, une oeuvre plus précieuse encore, en contribuant tous les jours, par les améliorations qu'elle suggère, à rendre la vie plus facile

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[1]Chartres, pp. 343-44.

[2]Education, p. 458.

[3]Ibid., p. 478. Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 53.

et plus douce et en procurant à l'homme des armes contre les forces hostile de la nature," Adams replied in the margin: "Feeble conclusion! Physics are force, and force is the object of nature."[1] One hardly knows how to take such an objection to man's using science against nature. The History, however, gives the clue. In it Adams had suspected that man's use of science and technology might eventually hinder social development, as though in fighting nature too hard man might injure both nature and himself. This idea grew on Adams after the History, and he expressed it clearly in his "Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres":

> Seize, then, the Atom! rack his joints!
> Tear out of him his secret spring!
> Grind him to nothing!--though he points
> To us, and his life-blood anoints
> Me--the dead Atom-King![2]

The speaker in the poem is Western man, and the end of his pursuit of nature's power is the destruction both of nature and of nature's master, man, the Atom-King. Modern man cannot battle nature without destroying both nature and man. Adams's criticism of Poincaré, then, is not a peevish complaint against the idea of improving humanity but rather an assertion that science simply cannot help man by doing battle against nature. What then should man do? The obvious answer is to work with nature; this is what Adams advocated, and he cited Francis Bacon as authority. The difficulty was that

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[1] La Physique Moderne, p. 308.

[2] In Letters to a Niece and Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres, With a Niece's Memories (1920), ed. by Mabel La Farge, p. 130.

nature moved too fast for man to follow. "No one is likely to suggest a theory that man's convenience had been consulted by Nature at any time. . . . In every age man has bitterly and justly complained that Nature hurried and hustled him."[1] In the modern world, nature was moving faster than ever.

The older Adams's characteristic attitude toward nature is an awed appreciation, tinged with distrust, of mystery and power, and a sense that between man and nature is an unbridgeable gap. Science will never comprehend nature's secrets, and neither nature nor science can help solve one's moral dilemmas. This is essentially the position Adams took in Esther against George Strong's evolutionism. How can the discovery of Truth make the individual or the race immortal? Truth, it turned out, apparently existed only in the mind. In the past the mind's "own unity had created a universe the essence of which was abstract Truth; the Absolute; God! To Thomas Aquinas, the universe was still a person; to Spinoza, a substance; to Kant, Truth was the essence of the 'I'; an innate conviction; a categorical imperative; to Poincaré, it was a convenience; and to Karl Pearson, a medium of exchange." The historian, Adams concluded, "must not try to know what is truth, if he values his honesty; for, if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts."[2] To search for truth, he maintained in Chartres, is precisely the wrong effort: "True ignorance approaches the infinite more nearly

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[1] Education, pp. 484, 493.

[2] Ibid., pp. 456-57.

than any amount of knowledge can do." In thus denying that knowledge is the best read to infinity, Adams rejected the validity of such evolutionism as George Strong's. To refute once more its usefulness, he cited St. Thomas Aquinas. In Chartres Adams discussed the theological counterpart to evolutionism: "In God's providence, man was as nothing. With a proper sense of duty, every solar system should be content to suffer, if thereby the efficiency of the Milky Way were improved." As in evolutionism and social Darwinism, the assumption here is that whatever is, is right, that the sufferings of the part are of no consequence, if the whole progresses; and the individual should gladly accept his own problems in the secure knowledge that in the universe all works for good. "Such theology," Adams wrote, "shocked Saint Thomas, who never wholly abandoned man in order to exalt God."[1]

Adams retained many social Darwinist attitudes, however, partly because they supported his own social class. He was no fanatic like his brother Brooks, whom Ernest Samuels regards as a distant forerunner of the fascists; but Samuels asserts that Henry's "opinions smacked too much of an anti-democratic social Darwinism that no politician dared publicly profess," and notes that his later letters reveal no "signs of a sympathetic interest in the ordinary individuals who made up the mass of mankind."[2] In Chartres Adams described the rights of man as an illusory convention like courteous love, the

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[1]Chartres, pp. 111, 371.

[2]Major Phase, pp. 456, 409, 252.

balance of trade, and the Athanasian Creed.[1] On the subject of social work he often waxed derisive. Philanthropy was a diversion for bored women. One of the grievous flaws of socialism was that it "cut off the few avenues of escape which capitalism had opened to the woman,"--it deprived her of the ability to do good works by doing them itself.[2] (Meanwhile, capitalistic America was destroying the family: the Madeleines and Esthers of the new century faced a dim future in either kind of society.) When Alfred Russel Wallace in Man's Place in the Universe (1903) pleaded for a campaign against dirty air and water and "filth, disease, and misery" generally, Adams wrote cutely in the margin: "How about drink and food and regular exercise? How about thick shoes and having their hair cut? How about a regular income and seats at the Opera? If man is the centre of the Universe, all such talk is singularly British."[3] It certainly was not singularly American. Adams's attitude reflected the common prejudice of his class toward a society that was ceasing to pay it homage. Added to this resentment was the conservatism of the man of means for whom the growing power of the masses was nothing but a threat. Adams justified his attitude by the same rationalization that comforted Madeleine Lee. "I thoroughly believe,"

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[1] Chartres, p. 226.

[2] Education, p. 446.

[3] (At the Mass. Hist. Soc.), pp. 260-61. On Adams's ideas on social reform see also Samuels, Major Phase, pp. 252, 359, 412-13; and Jordy, Adams: Scientific Historian, pp. 213-14, 270.

he wrote in 1891, "that I never yet did a charity without doing harm, and sometimes far more harm than good."[1]

The financial panic of 1893, which indicated a serious breakdown in the American economic system, influenced Adams to reject laissez-faire, but he gained no new confidence in governmental power. Though he recorded in the Education his sympathy with Roosevelt's battle against the trusts, he doubted that Roosevelt could do much.[2] And into his writing, especially his letters, often came the tired, exasperated tone of a man so disturbed by society that he wanted to abandon it entirely. "I think it likely the world will break its damned neck within five and twenty years," he wrote in 1901, "and a good riddance. . . . I incline now to anti-imperialism, and very strongly to anti-militarism. I incline to let the machine smash, and see what pieces are worth saving afterwards."[3] We should not hold Adams rigidly to such outbursts. Undoubtedly at the time he did think of himself as anti-imperialist, yet he based his high estimate of John Hay as diplomat on Hay's imperialistic "true empire-building," which Adams saw as the consummation of his own ancestors' political efforts.[4] He had his anti-militarist moods, but he supported the French army against Dreyfus because —

> I have had but one rule, which is to back the Army and Navy against everything everywhere on every occasion.

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[1]Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends, p. 258.

[2]Education, pp. 500-501.

[3]Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends, p. 504.

[4]Education, p. 363.

> That is why I am an anti-Dreyfusard. . . . When the army makes a mistake and shoots the wrong man, I am sorry, and would do all I can to redress the injustice, but the Army and the Navy have saved and made me and mine so many times that I'm not going back on it, whatever it does.[1]

This was militarism of a sort, though we have seen in the History how romantic Adams's admiration of war was. The same quality is evident in the opening chapters of Chartres.

"L'homme d'état étudiant l'action et la réaction des différentes nations les unes sur les autres," Balfour Stewart wrote cheerily in 1899, "accomplit une oeuvre analogue à celle de l'astronome." "The deuce he does!" Henry Adams replied irritably in the margin, showing once more his opinion of politics.[2] Since the 1870's and 1880's, when he thought the American Constitution successful because it did not violate natural laws, and Jefferson a failure because he did, new forces in the world had caused Adams to re-examine the role of politics and government in society. The failure of the Constitution now appeared certain; the founding fathers' "machine was never meant to do the work of a twenty-million horse-power society in the twentieth century, where much work needed to be quickly and efficiently done." Outstanding politicians might make the machine work, but politicians reflect the society that elects them, and American society, far from producing good politicians, did not even take its own mediocrity seriously. So "rich and poor joined in throwing contempt on their

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 240.

[2]La Conservation de l'Énergie (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.), p. 2.

own representatives. Society laughed a vacant and meaningless derision over its own failure."[1] Worst of all, Adams thought, uncontrollable forces were taking control of modern politics, and of these forces the greatest was economics. To Spencer, who had no use for politics, such a situation indicated progress. To Adams, economics was a wild force that threatened society. If politics and government were impotent, economic competition seemed destructive. This was the point at which the "young radical" of the 1860's, searching for a theory of progress, had at last arrived. He could detect no real progress in modern society. The situation grew more alarming as Adams perceived more flaws in the capitalistic system in the years after 1893, and forced himself to reexamine the nature of capitalistic society.

Capitalism and Socialism

Adams's social-Darwinian advice to a niece in 1898--"What we accept with gratitude from a brother pauper, we take with a grudge from a Rothschild. Among paupers, all is common; but the rich stand apart, and cannot be unselfish"[2]--might have seemed to an unsympathetic reader (a pauper, for example) to be a subconscious argument for socialism. Possibly it was. After the panic of 1893 socialism preyed on his mind. He turned to Karl Marx, and a letter to Gaskell

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[1] Education, pp. 375, 272.

[2] Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends, p. 436.

in 1894 shows how deeply Marx impressed him. "We know too little yet to make a science of history. Another fifty years will do it, I've no doubt. I can wait. It will do no one any good. Did you ever read Karl Marx? I think I never struck a book which taught me so much, and with which I disagreed so radically in conclusion. Anyway, these studies of morbid society are not so amusing as Petronius and Plutarch."[1] Adams was saying either that Marx was a premature scientific historian or that socialism would make a science of history useless. He already suspected, in any case, that socialism was the next step in social evolution. The conclusion of Marx that he disputed was probably not that socialism was inevitable but that it was progress.

"He had studied Karl Marx and his doctrines of history with profound attention,"[2] Adams said of himself, but what he actually learned from Marx is not quite clear. His markings and comments (not the most reliable of guides) in Capital suggest that he paid close attention mainly to Marx's attempts to define value in the early pages, attention which culminated in the comment: "This beats me. Nothing more German was ever written than this complication of Value, Values, and forms of value."[3] Perhaps we need only insist that he

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 49. Italics mine.

[2]Education, p. 379.

[3]Capital, tr. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (at the Mass. Hist. Soc.), p. 34. (Samuels misquotes Adams's comment, reading "corruption" for "complication." Major Phase, p. 140.)

tried harder than most Americans to be fair to socialism. But a reflective letter of 1898 shows us what had happened to the self-proclaimed radical of the 1860's who "inclined toward every 'ism' in the faint hope of detecting within it some key to the everlasting enigma of progress":

> As far as I can see, the present Hungary is the child of State-Socialism in a most intelligent and practical form. In principle there is no apparent limit to its application. The railways, etc., are all, or nearly all designed, built, run and owned by and for the State. The forests, the mines, the banks, the very street-cars, and, for all I know, the babies and the pug-dogs, are, or might be, in principle, made, bred and educated solely by and for the governing commissions or committees. What is more curious, the result seems to be reasonably consistent with a degree of individual energy and character. As one form of future society, it deserves a little attention, especially in connection with Russia; and, as it represents to me the possible future with which I sincerely wish I may have nothing to do, I recommend it to your notice. To me it seems to demonstrate what 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.
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> . . . 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 there a statesman is obliged to follow it, unless he leads. Progress is Economy! Socialism is merely a new application of Economy, which must go on until Competition puts an end to further Economics, or the whole world becomes one Socialistic Society and rots out. One need not love Socialism in order to point out the logical necessity for Society to march that way; and the wisdom of doing it intelligently if it is to do it at all.[1]

So the survival of the fittest leads to socialism. An exquisite joke on the social Darwinists![2]

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 177-78.

[2]Adams thought, however, that socialism based on cooperation was impotent. "The amiable doctrines of Kropotkin were sentimental ideas of Russian mental inertia." With such socialists "the mind that followed nature had no relation." This mind presumably believed in survival through struggle. Education, p. 407.

At last Adams had decided what "fitness" really meant. It meant "economy," or "cheapness." "All civilization," he pronounced, "is the survival of the most economical (cheapest). Darwin called it fittest, and in one sense fittest is the fittest word." And cheapness was socialism: "Marx's theory of history, as 'the survival of the cheapest, until it becomes too cheap to survive.'"[1] No wonder Adams decided socialism was "hopelessly bourgeois, and lowest middle-class,"[2] catering to the masses with "old-age pensions,--universal education, --trades-unionism,--and the rest." Gradually his conviction that socialism conspired against superior individuals like himself approached paranoia; in 1910 he complained: "I can't go out of my cheap garret here in Paris, for an hour, without being throttled by some infernal socialist, levelling, humanitarian regulation which is intended to kill me and to keep some syphilitic abortion alive."[3]

Given such feelings regarding socialism, we might expect Adams to be a rabid defender of American capitalism. But so alienated had he become from capitalism that in comparing the two he was reduced to quoting Dr. Johnson: "Sir, there is no settling the point of precedency between a louse and a flea."[4] Adams felt that extreme capitalism and socialism led

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 163, 248.

[2]Education, p. 405.

[3]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 537, 542.

[4]Ibid., II, 191. For other comparisons between socialism and capitalism see Ibid., II, 164, and Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends, pp. 438, 484.

equally to centralization and governmental control over individuals. Was there any other way? Yes; it was the way of economic decentralization, of the silver standard, of the Adams family, of Gallatin and Jefferson, of "eighteenth-century principles, strict construction, limited powers, George Washington, John Adams, and the rest." America accepted the gold standard in 1893, however, and in doing so chose the necessary centralization of pure capitalism. All Adams could say was,

> Of all forms of society or government, this was the one he liked least, but his likes or dislikes were as antiquated as the rebel doctrine of States rights. A capitalistic system had been adopted, and if it were to be run at all, it must be run by capital and by capitalistic methods: . . . the protective tariff; the corporations and trusts; the trades-unions and socialistic paternalism which necessarily made their complement.[1]

Thus socialism and capitalism proved to be, Adams thought, nearly the same thing. Both favored the masses, tyrannized over the individual, and declined to judge men on their merits. How comforting, in comparison, was the social-Darwinist society that exalted those in favored positions by assuming that their success was based on their worth.

Around 1909, when Adams had long felt that society was universally tending toward socialism, he found in the second law of dynamics a splendid metaphor. "I'm sorry Lord Kelvin is dead," he wrote in 1909. "I would travel a few thousand million miles to discuss with him the thermo-dynamics of socialistic society. His law is awful in its rigidity and intensity of result." Socialism was the "levelling-down" of

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[1]Education, pp. 335, 344-45.

society, as entropy was of energy. So in what he described as "a bitter satire against . . . socialism,"[1] Adams asserted that the law of entropy governs society, that all energy, human and non-human, is running down. There will be no earthly paradise, no Spencerian perfection, no Marxist utopia. "Stable equilibrium is death."[2] How perverse! as critics have been known to say of Adams. But there are two ways to take the Letter as satire. One is that he really meant that society is running down, and parodied the nature of socialism by his scientific metaphor. The other, ingeniously worked out by Harry S. Kariel, is that Adams parodied the determinist reasoning of the socialists, in order to alert his readers to the dangers of socialism or any system which tries to dominate the individual. Kariel argues that Adams, like the Marxists, rejected the moral beliefs of his time, invented an arbitrary social theory, and then tried (Adams ironically, by writing the book) to impose it on the world. Adams's purpose was to show the danger of such arbitrary theories if they are taken too seriously.[3] It is a beautiful thesis, weakened only by the fact that Adams never demonstrated elsewhere such an understanding of socialism. If Kariel is right, if Adams was warning against socialism, he must have believed that men could maintain their freedom by remaining vigilant. The

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[1]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 518, 536.

[2]Letter to Teachers, p. 244.

[3]"The Limits of Social Science: Henry Adams's Quest For Order," American Political Science Review (1956), pp. 1074-96.

future of society, then, was not inevitably fixed; men had a choice. Thus Adams rejected determinism once and for all, and abandoned the old Comtean assumption that law rules over all. At the very least, he affirmed the freedom of individuals to control their lives in--or outside of--society.

The Great Escape

The central problem for the individual, Adams thought, was whether to resist or adjust to the social and natural forces around him. We need not rely on Kariel's thesis to assert that Adams avoided the easy solution: despite the deterministic tone in his concept of social change, he did not let determinism affect his ideas of individual conduct. One of the rules was to assume free will. "Whether life was an honest game of chance, or whether the cards were marked and forced, he could not refuse to play his excellent hand. . . . To his life as a whole he was a consenting, contracting party and partner from the moment he was born to the moment he died."[1] How, then, should one respond to the forces of society? The answer depended largely on the particular society. The ideal (mediaeval) society maintained unity between "Church and State, God and Man, Peace and War, Life and Death, Good and Bad; it solved the whole problem of the universe. The priest and the soldier were both at home here, . . . the politician was not outside of it; the sinner was welcome; the poet was made happy in his own spirit."[2] Such harmony in

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[1] Education, p. 4.

[2] Chartres, p. 44.

society was Adams's ideal, and probably he had often the same thought as George Cabot Lodge, whom he quotes in his biography of Lodge: "I felt as if it was almost cowardly of me not to turn in and leave all the things I love and the world doesn't, behind, and to adjust myself to my age, and try to take its ideals and live strongly and wholly in its spirit. It seems so useless being an eternal malcontent." But modern society proved not worth uniting with. As Adams grew older, his moral revulsion at society, coupled with indignation at what he thought his failure to gain power and status in society, steadily grew more intense, and the resister, the rebel in him asserted itself more. Resistance and rebellion were chaotic and catastrophic forces, and Adams had always been fascinated by them. His historical writings showed his interest in such rebels as Toussaint Louverture and Aaron Burr. George Cabot Lodge had to rebel against society in order to find his artistic voice. In late nineteenth-century New England, "poetry was a suppressed instinct: and except where, as in Longfellow, it kept the old character of ornament, it became a reaction against society. . . . Less and less it appeared, as in earlier ages, the natural favorite expression of society itself."[1] Adams thought that in the end society crushed the poet in Lodge beneath its inert weight. Madeleine and Esther rebelled against society, as Abelard did against Church and State, and the Virgin did--on behalf of mankind--against fate, divine law, and human law.[2]

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[1] *The Life of George Cabot Lodge* (1911), pp. 34, 9.

[2] *Chartres*, pp. 291, 276-77, 263-64.

For Adams, willingness to oppose and resist was a genuine test of fitness. The student needed to resist the inertia of society and his teachers in order to learn.[1] The physical sciences were rebelling against society in rejecting the concept of progress that Darwinism had encouraged. The "Degradationist" such as Lord Kelvin was the "outlaw and enemy" of society, and "could have no friends, because he proclaimed the steady and fated enfeeblment and extinction of all nature's energies."[2] The historian who went against the prejudices and vested interests of society ensured himself society's enmity. The greatest rebel of all, if he should ever appear, would be that messianic figure first mentioned in "The Tendency of History," the new Darwin who would turn history into a science. Inevitably he would bring history into conflict with church, state, property, or labor, and outrage society. The theme of resistance runs throughout Adams's works, beginning with the Class Day Oration. In his own eyes, according to the Education, his first, abortive rebellion came in 1867 as he lay with a flock of sheep on Wenlock Edge, and decided 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 Darwinist for fun." Society punished this attitude "ferociously and justly, in self defence."[3] So young Adams fled from his strange thought,

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[1] Education, p. 314.

[2] Letter to Teachers, p. 157.

[3] Education, pp. 231-32.

which revived with a vengeance about twenty years later in the capricious subjectivism of the Adams who was Kelvinist, degradationist, social Darwinist, egoist, largely for fun--the fun of resistance. "The world is going so fast, now," he wrote in 1900, "that dogmatism or marked individuality has become economically unprofitable and socially obstructive."[1] The eccentric individuality of Adams's later years was a deliberate attempt to be "socially obstructive," to reject society as completely as he could while still getting what he wanted from it. That he wanted a good deal from it helps explain why his rebellion took such a devious intellectual path.

Just as we can discuss Adams's urge to chaos and destruction so long as we keep also in mind his desire for unity and progress, we can talk about the fun Adams had in rebelling against society if we sense also the intense seriousness of his social thought. Very sober emotions lurked behind the wit of his later writing. The reader can make no greater mistake than to underestimate the depth of Adam's emotional attachment to his ideals and the pain with which he felt them dissolve. A lifetime of moral outrage was condensed into his comment in 1903 to his brother Charles that "Reform proved a total loss, and abstract morality went into bankruptcy with the Church. All our ideals turned out to be relative."[2] When a man decides that ideals are relative, he may conclude that only one source of standards is available to him:

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[1]Cater, Henry Adams and His Friends, p. 487.

[2]Ford, Letters of Henry Adams, II, 417.

himself. In Adams such subjectivism existed along with the life-long habits which he could never lose: a Calvinist sense of abstract morality, and a Darwinian concept of universal laws governing all phenomena. We see in the Education what such a hybrid led to. When Adams re-entered the world in 1892, as he told it, he suffered a series of mental shocks which made him question his values and his assumptions about society and the universe. The final shock was the assassination of M. de Plehve in 1904, and it drove him to the Adamsian equivalent of a monastery: to an attempt to explain the world rationally and make sense of the universe. To a Dynamic Theory of History. The point here--and the idea of a monastery is appropriate--is that Adams could no longer stand the vision of chaos, supersensual forces, and meaninglessness which his studies and travels had revealed to him. He felt that he had to find Unity, for his own sake. Objective truth was almost irrelevant.

> As long as he could whisper, he would go on as he had begun, bluntly refusing to meet his creator with the admission that the creation had taught him nothing except that the square of the hypothenuse of a right-angled triangle might for convenience be taken as equal to something else. Every man with self-respect enough to become effective, if only as a machine, has had to account to himself for himself somehow, and to invent a formula of his own for his universe, if the standard formulas failed. . . . One sought no absolute truth. One sought only a thread on which to wind the thread of history without breaking it.[1]

So Adams worked out his dynamic theory. It was very rational and orderly, and satisfied neither himself nor any reader; but this did not matter, for the ultimate vision was

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[1]Education, p. 472.

the vision of chaos. Theories and hopeful wishes, such as the plea at the end of the Education for "a world that sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shudder"[1] were all attempts to console oneself, and Adams knew them as such. This knowledge is evident in the Education. It is evident in Chartres, in the architectural metaphor of the magnificent Church that St. Thomas Aquinas built: "Never let us forget that Faith alone supports it, and that, if Faith fails, Heaven is lost. The equilibrium is visibly delicate beyond the line of safety; danger lurks in every stone."[2] It is evident also in the "Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres," in which the plight of Western man is similar to that of Esther Dudley, except that he can find comfort where she could not--in the Virgin, the force not so much of religion as of maternity, life. As in Esther, Adams rejected faith in science and progress as useful philosophies.

> Waiting I feel the energy of faith
> Not in the future science, but in you!
>
> The man who solves the Infinite, and needs
> The force of solar systems for his play,
> Will not need me, nor greatly care what deeds
> Made me illustrious in the dawn of day.
> . . . . . .
> But when, like me, he too has trod the track
> Which leads him up to power above control,
> He too will have no choice but wander back
> And sink in helpless hopefulness of soul,
>
> Before your majesty of grace and love,
> The purity, the beauty and the faith.

Finally we find out what kind of comfort the Virgin can give:

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[1] Ibid., p. 505.

[2] Chartres, p. 383.

> Help me to bear! not my own baby load,
> But yours; who bore the failure of the light,
> The strength, the knowledge and the thought of God,--
> The futile folly of the Infinite![1]

The final vision is of man lost and alone in a godless, foolish universe, clinging to the concept of Life as his only comfort. The Virgin could help man stand the barren universe, but it was still barren, and he was still alone in it.

It is part of a vision which, following the hints of recent critics, we can call "existentialist."[2] The idea is suggestive, if we do not insist heavily on it. Sidney Finkelstein describes existentialism as the product of a specific historical situation, an elitist, anti-democratic reaction against nineteenth-century capitalism and its values--faith in progress, science, and the "reason" of the Enlightenment. Existential anxiety, Finkelstein writes, is "an awareness of an alienation socially created, rising on the heels of capitalism, with its dominating competitiveness of war of all against all, "intensifying after each successive crisis."

> The existential nightmare of material progress as spiritual desolation is the outcry of the individual whose potentialities were liberated by the bourgeois democratic revolutions but who finds in the competitive life of the bourgeois world, dominated by avarice, fear, and money as the symbol of security, no field for the operation of these potentialities. The world about him is the mirror of his frustrated individualism. His own drives when they appear in others, appall him by their inhumanity. The collective struggles that had liberated these powers are forgotten. Society appears as the

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[1]Pp. 131-34.

[2]See, e.g., Jordy's "Introduction" to Adams: Scientific Historian, p. xii, and Harry M. Campbell, "Academic Criticism on Henry Adams: Confusion About Chaos," Midcontinent American Studies Journal (1966), pp. 12-13.

> eternal enemy of the individual, and if he cannot disengage himself from it in real life, he does so in his mind.[1]

Adams's disengagement from society was devious and ingenious. The chaos and lawlessness of the universe allowed him to create in his own mind an order into which he could fit society, but in which he was not himself fixed. In the end we see his search for social and historical laws as an attempt to impose on a society which he rejected limitations which he, the free individual, escaped. Henry Steele Commager's summation proves inaccurate for the Adams of the 1900's: "He recognized, quite impersonally, that if the historian expected to find a formula that would explain the American character, if he expected to find a formula that would reduct history to a science, if he expected to find a formula that would satisfy the conditions of a stellar universe, he must find a formula that would explain Henry Adams."[2] Adams was really after a formula to explain everything but himself. The man whose optimistic social evolutionism had been destroyed when he realized that neither nature nor society conformed to morality--and therefore could not progress in any worthwhile sense--despaired, in the 1880's, of reconciling the moral individual with society and nature. The despair hardened in Adams's mind to a chronic pessimism, and with the failure of

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[1] Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature, pp. 161, 109.

[2] "Henry Adams," in The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography, p. 192.

his personal life and his literary hopes, it became a mental habit necessary for maintaining his self-respect. The older Adams had to reject the world in order to accept himself. Thus he came to rejoice at the individual's isolation from society and nature. It was as though he refuted what Camus calls the nineteenth-century discovery and found again the solitary man. The former social evolutionist found an uneasy philosophical and moral resting place in a romanticized mediaeval past and the unromanticized individual. Once more a parallel to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard is instructive. Pointing out that these two were brought up on a classical education and Christian tradition, Karl Jaspers writes that although they rejected the perversions of these traditions they accepted them in what they thought their pure form. And so, "They bound themselves to a basis which fulfilled their own beliefs: Kierkegaard to a Christianity of the New Testament, and Nietzsche to a pre-Socratic Hellenism." But, Jaspers concludes,

> Nowhere is there any final stop for them, neither in finitude, nor in an explicitly grasped basis, nor in a determinately grasped Transcendence, nor in a historical tradition. It is as though their very being, experiencing the abandonment of the age to the end, shattered and, in the shattering itself, manifested a truth which otherwise would never have come to expression. If they won an unheard-of victory over their own selves, they also were condemned to a worldless loneliness; they were as though pushed out.[1]

We reject such neatness, of course; Henry Adams enjoyed himself too much, his victory over himself was imperfect,

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[1]"Reason and Existenz," in Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre, p. 173.

his loneliness was too worldly. He was so much the teacher and moralist that he kept even in old age an idea of what Samuels calls "the moral elite who must begin the reform of society by learning first to despise it."[1] His "existential, puritanical, . . . profoundly anti-humanistic" qualities, as Harry S. Kariel states, never completely dominated him. "He never ceased taking part in the perennial human debate and thus never completed his alienation from society, hanging on as its diffident participant while ever departing from it."[2] Ever departing from society--but ever looking back with a faint air of superiority but an intent curiosity, condescending to society but fascinated by it and caring for it, knowing that though he knew more about it than others, he needed to know more.

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[1] Major Phase, p. 209.

[2] "Limits of Social Science," p. 1086.

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