

Sagas of the Spirit: On the Retrospections of George Santayana and Henry Adams

Nature, for Emerson, was a part of spirit; “the world is a temple whose walls are covered with emblems, pictures and commandments of the Deity.”¹ Human beings are poets, to whose active and free perception “the ideal is the real” (ECW 3, 42). If the world or part of it seems opaque, it is because the human faculty is not active. In parallel with Peirce’s demonstration that man, as thinker, is himself of the nature of a sign (Peirce 5.238 and -313), Emerson announces that “we are symbols and we inhabit symbols” (ECW 3, 20). For him, the lived environment is ever a *semeiosis*.

But for Santayana spirit is, on the contrary, an outcome of nature. Nature does not cease to be emblematic of spirit in Santayana, but it is so in a radically different way from Emerson’s. This is because, for Santayana, nature is most clearly seen *by* spirit under the aspect of eternity; and in this aspect it is awesomely inhuman in cosmic scale and teeming — if not chaotically — complex in its molecular texture. Nature so viewed is the non-human matrix of the human, and therefore *not* the home of the human psyche or self. In this reversal of Emerson’s idealism, spirit is transcendental only in having gone beyond the human in an unsustainable stance of Godlike perceptivity.²

The present essay will show, curiously enough, that “spirit,” in just this sense, was at the basis of the mode of discourse adopted by Henry Adams in *The Education of Henry Adams*³ and his late essays on “cosmohistory.” More curiously yet, this essay will show that the application of Santayana’s categorial system to Adams’s works succeeds in clarifying the tone of his “impersonal” retrospections as well as the drift of the gloomy anticipations in his “cosmohistory,” so to call it. I refrain from qualifying Adams’s recollections as “personal,” because, as we shall see, the *Education* is the narrative account of a *representative* sensibility, not the biography of a particular individual.

The object domain of spirit, in Santayana’s system, is that of which it is aware; it is the realm of essence. But psyche, the mother of spirit, must compound instinct with ideation and so humanize animal nature that, in our sublunary world, natural societies can eventually become high civilizations. Though nature seems to bend to culture in the civilizing process, it was the eruption of new natural forces — neither fully tamed nor fully understood — into the operations and awareness of his culture that aroused Henry Adams’s concern about the quality of life in nineteenth and twentieth century America.

This was because Adams’s “dynamic theory of history” takes for granted that it is the forces of nature that capture man, not the other way around, as we see in Chapter 33 of

¹ See page 17, Volume 3, of Emerson’s *Complete Works*, which we cite as ECW 3.

² This is also the conclusion of an essay “Spirituality in Santayana,” namely, that the latter’s conception of “spirit” — because it takes the point of view of eternity and because of the inhuman impartiality of its insights — should not be mistaken to be the basis of a way of life. *Transactions of the C.S.Peirce Society*, XXV.4 (1989). This reading of Santayana’s idea of spirit is based on, and coincides with, the interpretations of John Lachs and Douglas MacDonald in the Santayana issue of *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* Vol.10, No.2 (1972).

³ To be cited hereafter as *Education*.

Education. So the story Adams tells in his book is as much that of the "failure" of society to understand and control the natural forces it was now tapping or unleashing, as that of the "failure" of a representative "education" to be adequate to the vast social changes which the beneficiaries of such an "education" were living through.

In distinction from Adams's story, Santayana's is that of the tension between his devotion to impersonal truth, or spirit, and his psychological need to reconstruct and express a perennial philosophy in which Everyman could be intellectually at home. More comfortable with nature at large, and speculatively less afraid of it than Adams, Santayana was both less integrated into society than Adams and more sympathetic to it. Thus, where Santayana allows himself to have "salt, pepper and pity for mankind," Adams confesses that he could have only "vinegar, pepper and vitriol" for the *fin de siècle* French.⁴ Santayana, unlike Henry Adams, gives the impression of wanting to understand or show compassion for all whom he encountered. In the event, however and for example, Adams's honest dislike of the self-regarding bad faith of the English ruling-class, goes down better than Santayana's *unreciprocated* Anglophilia.

The tensions generative of the *Education* were, first, Adams's disgust with financial and political dishonesty and, secondly, a continuing need — in spite of his confessed, congenital skepticism — for what Santayana called "the emotion of belief."⁵ In so far as this need to believe seems also to have been a need for some kind of ultimate clarity or intellectual grasp, Adams's difficulty was compounded by the confused state-of-the-question in the fundamental physics of his day, as well as by the positivist ideology of science which Adams persistently, and perhaps ironically, took to be the voice of science itself.

Now, the private correspondence which relates to Adams's cosmohistorical speculations makes it no mere surmise that his need for the emotion of belief was gradually displaced, in the scientific reading to which he gave such apocalyptic interpretations, by a need "to feel the impression of bitterness," as Bushnell Hart put it to him.⁶ The pessimism which found expression in Adams's physicalist and catastrophist interpretations of planetary history can be seen to be an outcome not only of the spirit of his age and his reading of Schopenhauer but, more deeply, of his personal experience as well. The latter included, on the one hand, the agonized death of his sister (1870), an acute perception of a decline in his father's intellect, the suicide of his wife in 1885, and an ever-increasing sense of the individual's irrelevance to the historico-political process. It also included, on the other hand, his social observer's conviction that Power or Energy could no longer be given a humanly acceptable or controllable form. But the essays about cosmohistory⁷ and the correspondence which confirm H. Schneider's view of Adams as "desperate," as a "desperate naturalist,"

⁴ See *Henry Adams and his Friends*, Letters edited by H.D. Cater, and Philip B. Rice *Kenyon Review* VI (1944); elsewhere in his correspondence Adams registers his disappointment with Spanish people by saying that to him they all looked like faded Jews.

⁵ See *Some Turns of Thought in Modern Philosophy* 1933, "Revolutions in Science," Vol. VII Triton ed.; p.196, and *The Education of Henry Adams*.

⁶ Hart to Adams, May 2, 1910; *Letters of Henry Adams*, 1892-1918.

⁷ "The Tendency of History," "A Letter to American Teachers of History," "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," all in *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* edited by Brooks Adams.

also forbid us from calling him a “naturalist.”⁸

For, from these documents Adams can be said — with qualifications — to emerge, rather, as a *desperate positivist*. For here he combines, like Comte himself, the crudest reductionism with the boldest postulations about the phases left to mankind in its chaotic journey to extinction through the degradation of energy and the heat-death of the sun. Qualification is necessary because of the several shades of irony that color the prose of the essays about history as an energy process.

For, not only does Adams take accumulable and expendible sociohistorical energy to be *very exactly* measurable, but the tone in which his extrapolations and predictions are couched, is suspect. It is somehow both alarmist and urbane. And insofar as it is selfconscious, it is a tone which seems to know that it is overemphasizing its scientism, at the same time that it insists on itself as a *literary* or historiographic *experiment*. The reader feels, in short, that Adams can't be unconscious of the fact that he is taking liberties with a “scientific method” he claims to be strictly following, and that he is getting a grim satisfaction from pushing physical theories to extremes which, if believed, must involve the destruction of civilization.

The outcome of this is that Adams's eschatology, if taken literally, is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the positivist ideology of science. “Look at what physical science says we are,” Adams's cosmohistorical construct is saying, “impotent and doomed.” The *silent* but vital *implication* left standing, however, by Adams's discursive construction is that if this is science, then we must take it with the future miseries it promises; but, since only the educated few understand this, the elect élite must live its informed life to the hilt — or as best it can — drawing ironic consolation from the joke upon those, in politics and industry, who think that *they* are in control of the very forces which will soon destroy all of us.

— Is what Mabel Lafarge wrote relevant here, that “he never liked to show that he saw farther or was any wiser than the person he was with, and usually took the attitude of being instructed”?⁹ In contrast to his *docility* in conversation before the technological achievements of science and its positivist interpretation, Adams's writing about them allows itself to be *perceptibly* ironic. It, nevertheless, remains difficult to gauge the degree to which the irony qualifies his assertions.

A Santayananian way of cutting through the Gordian knot of the degree to which Adams is, at any time, being ironic, would be to say that while his *History of the United States* and *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* have their place in the Realm of Truth, the location of his subsequent speculations in cosmohistory is properly the Realm of Essence. That they are a *jeu d'esprit*, the product of Adams's *spirit*, in Santayana's sense, rather than of his *psyche* (in Santayana's sense) not only explains away the bitterness they seem to mask and accounts for their perception of the essential alienness of the universe in its aspect as a congeries of energy processes. It also begins to explain the degree to which *Education* is not an autobiography, and gives us the reason why it is not at all confessional in the Augustinian or Rousseauvian mode.

⁸ In Schneider's *A History of American Philosophy*, sec.34 “Desperate Naturalism.” Under this heading Schneider discusses Wm.Graham Sumner, Henry Adams, Edward Arlington Robinson, and G.Santayana. As far as Santayana is concerned, we will see that, though of course a “naturalist,” he was, in contrast to Adams and in Schneider's own terms, far from being “desperate.”

⁹ H.Adams *Letters to a Niece*, p.26.

To be the latter it would have had (i) to be a product of Adams's psyche, and it would have had (ii) to deal with such psychological and impossible matters as the meaning of his beloved wife's suicide. Though more vitalist than rationalist, Adams's otherwise "eighteenth-century" disposition would naturally be more comfortable working in the realm of essence and the mode of spirit. That the *Education* is, in Santayana's terms, the product of spirit rather than psyche explains the presence, besides, of all the speculative discourses woven into it, as well as the basic fact that it is not about an individual, but about a *representative* phenomenon Adams chose — with mild sarcasm — to call "education," and about the undergoing by a whole generation of some great social changes. A twentieth-century term for Adams's "education" might be "future-shock."

Santayana tells us that, when he was taken to visit Henry Adams, and identified as a teacher of philosophy at Harvard, "Mr. Adams said, somewhat in [a] gentle but sad tone 'I once tried to teach history there, but it can't be done. It isn't really possible to teach anything'."¹⁰ Though he found it "discouraging" at the time in his *psyche*, Santayana did not *in spirit* demur — probably for the reason that it is *essentially* true, from the point of view of spirit; namely, and as any college teacher will confirm, there is such a thing as learning which goes on in his or her students. But there really isn't such a thing as teaching. All we do, as Plato's Socrates already showed, is put the student into the way of learning what we want him or her to learn; we create the proximate conditions under which the student can grasp what he or she is being asked to grasp.¹¹ We note what Santayana's memoirs didn't pause to note, that while their author responded, in this encounter, both as a psyche and as spirit, Henry Adams met him *entirely in the mode of spirit*. The question arises, are Santayana's writings in the mode of spirit a mask for the respects in which, like Adams, he was to a degree alienated?

Warm as Santayana's personality was, he does appear ever the stranger, ever only the perfect guest to a variety of well-observed hosts in *Persons and Places*. For all its wit, it is only Santayana's integrity and firmness, it seems to me, that saves the autobiography from an underlying drift towards generalizing his estrangement into an aspect of the human condition. But it is clear that the expressive activity of constructing his autobiography must have abreacted, and compensated for, any displeasure in his aloneness.¹² It is quite believable, on the other hand, that Santayana's sense of his own distinctness gave no entry to such displeasure.

In any case, since "history" at Harvard meant, to Adams, chiefly medieval history,¹³ and his view of it was synoptic in the sense of locating it as a phase in the history of the West as a whole, we can safely assume that the connotations of the term were, in the first instance, not too different for these two thinkers. As we know from *Persons and Places*, Santayana thought of his own *Life of Reason* as a philosophy of history, and in synoptic

¹⁰ *Persons and Places*, p.224.

¹¹ See my *Plato's Dialogues One by One*; Ch. 3, "History & Rhetoric in the *Meno*."

¹² Santayana's own remarks about this notwithstanding (in *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*), there is no reason why the insights of "spirit," besides being impartially true, should not also be consolatory. There, Santayana does not admit that they are.

¹³ Adams also taught colonial history, U.S and English history at Harvard.

terms.¹⁴ It is also safe to assume that, at the date of their meeting, Adams included “philosophy of history” as he had been practicing it among the connotations of the term, namely, as an interpretation of the course of human history as a whole and as an attempt to get some insight into the directions it might take. But where and why Adams and Santayana differed in their conception of history can best be seen in the contrast between the latter’s historiographic chapter in *Reason in Science* and Adams’s later writings about history, “The Tendency of History,” (an essay discarded by Adams himself, but incautiously published by his brother Brooks), “The Rule of Phase Applied to History,” and *A Letter to American Teachers of History*.¹⁵

Santayana’s wittingly *non-nomothetic-deductive* stance toward the science and art of history, in combination with his view of his own work as “a natural history” of Western mankind, stands in sharp and happy difference with the unwitting scientism, or nomothetic-deductivism, of the masterly author of a monumental history of the United States which is in no way nomothetically-deductively structured. I call Adams’s positivism unwitting precisely because, though aggressively “asserted” as historiography, it is a negation of Adams’s own practice of historical writing. And I put asserted in cautionary quotes because the assertion of scientism is so soundingly and bleakly iterated that the iteration seems to be interrogating itself. By scientism I mean just the reductionist attempt of positivism to explain the world, and provide foundations for the other arts and sciences, in terms of a single preferred science, in this case physics, or energetics, as it was called in the nineteenth century.¹⁶

It would seem, then, that just as we can criticize Santayana’s conception of spirit, *taken literally*, for being only partially applicable to either spiritual life in the ordinary sense or to Santayana’s own productive life, so also can we criticize Adams’s historiographic speculations as irrelevant to his previous practice of history writing. That he did not let them disturb the equanimity of his social life, apart from his private discussions of the subject with his brother Brooks, tells us something about the hypothetical and rhetorical way in which he held to his eschatological extrapolations. As claims about the end of the world, Adams surely could not have taken them more literally than he took anybody else’s, whether biblical scholar, store-front evangelist or scientific cosmologist.

It would seem, all the same, that we should not say that Santayana’s life was *more* consistent with his beliefs than Adams’s. This is because, with reference to Adams, we must ask whether we can call that a belief which is advanced with irony, playfulness, or any degree of interrogativeness. With reference to Santayana, we should ask whether it is not a category-mistake to call the *ontological* doctrine of spirit a belief, if, by definition, it is not the kind of thing that can be acted upon by a human being. The doctrine can lay claim to assent as a constitutive part of a coherent metaphysics, but not as a foundation for the spiritual life. For, in the context of spiritual life as the pursuit and exercise of psychological

¹⁴ *Persons and Places*, p. 393f.: “philosophy of history ... for me meant no providential plan of creation or redemption, but merely retrospective politics; a study of what had formed the chief interests of mankind in various epochs.”

¹⁵ The correspondence relating to Adams’s application of “energetics” to history is, of course, also apposite. For a summary of Santayana’s formal statement of his historiography, see my *History as a Human Science*.

¹⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 11th. Edition (N.Y. 1910-11).

health, it is an irrelevant and theoreticist notion.

We are told by his editors that Santayana enjoyed turning, in 1940, from the completion of *Realms of Being* to the MSS that were to become *Persons and Places*; and that he laughingly called these his "rambling, endless, philosophical and satirical stream of recollections" (PP xxxii). And in his Epilogue he characterizes his reminiscences as "private and poetical," meaning, one must suppose, "personal and expressive." But, like Adams, he nonetheless seems to have a quarrel with "his host the world." For, he had "discovered how much the human world ... had become the enemy of spirit and ... of its own light and peace" (PP 540). In this usage Santayana both identifies with spirit, and seems to mean by it both the imaginatively contemplative life and the mechanism by which "the passing virtues and sorrows of nature" are turned into "glimpses of eternal truth" (PP 547).

Critical and competent celebration of life in readable memoirs, however, takes time out from the actual participation in it, in a worldly sense. So Santayana, who enjoyed writing for its own sake in any case, can be said to have also enjoyed the frugal and retiring life which, again in any case, he says he preferred, although he had "sometimes sipped the rim of the plutocratic cup" (PP 541). But Santayana's doubt remains very real to his reader, as to "whether that *body* with its feelings and actions was not [his] true *self*, rather than this invisible *spirit* which they oppressed" (PP 538). For, Santayana, the lover of matter, when he appears to take the side of spirit can be seen by his reader to be identifying with what was only a product of his expressive powers, namely, his literary utterance and with only the impersonal (theoreticist and assertive) part of it that he could call "eternally true," rather than with all of it in its multimodal — poetic and expressive as well as theoretical — or inclusive diversity.

So his quarrel with the world was really a projection upon it of the tension between his preference for the solitude of intellectual construction and contemplation, and his ability *both* to understand detachedly *and* participatively enjoy his social world. He explicitly differs from Adams's posture toward the world when he says (PP 540) that his own was not the result of its "mechanical inventions or natural sciences or loss of Christian [unity] ... as lovers of antiquity or the middle ages (!) seem to think."

We touched above on the sense in which Adams's *Education* is *not* an autobiography. And we see that by treating the figure of "himself" as a mannequin, and in such a way as to get onto the reader's side, Adams achieves the point of view of spirit more than mere impersonality.¹⁷ In fact, it is because the *Education* is written in the mode of spirit (in Santayana's sense) that its expressiveness is neither that *of* his psyche nor *about* it, but is rather the expression of an ironic insight extending over the whole range of the spirit's retrospection. Where, however, spirit is *not constitutive* of the impersonality, the result can be grating, as in his angry but unspirited use of the stereotype of the Jew as "gold-bug" or manipulative financier.¹⁸ Santayana, for his part, appears as resorting to the mode of spirit

¹⁷ This figure of the mannequin serves to tell, or remind, the reader that the "data" in *The Education* are not statements about Henry Adams but about his ironic creation, an "amiable, never adequate, yet never daunted, forever re-educated dumbbell-genius who is the humbled hero of the tale," as E. Chalfant has called Adams's convenient confection (in private correspondence).

¹⁸ We may note that, if a stereotype is a kind of degenerate essence then it is a faulty product of the operation of spirit; and we could say that the failure of insight comes from a penetration of psyche into the activity of spirit. Hence my use of "unspirited," as a qualifier.

in order to handle, or rise above, what he otherwise could not bring under full expressive control. For, Santayana's retrospection does not, like Adams's, exempt itself from having to report or make sense of all of his interesting involvements.

In connection with Adams's silence about the tragic loss of his wife, we hypothesize that the reason for it was a compound of the unstatable conclusion it brought him to, that if his beloved wife had not had love enough to stay alive for him in spite of the loss of her father, then *he* would never find anyone who could love as much as love demanded, nor could *she* have known how much he loved her. Whether he *had* loved her, in their happy time, as much as he now thought he did, was beside the point; for he would now prove his great love for her by believing or silently implying that she could not be replaced.

Chapter 21 of the *Education* resumes its observations in such a way as to remind its reader that it is not a personal memoir. The twenty years it has skipped are the hiatus in which Adams symbolically buries the personal dimension of his past. Looking back in 1892, as a member of the generation born in the 'thirties, he finds he has "nothing in common with the world as it promised to be" (*Education* 317). Washington had been his home since 1877 when he moved there "partly to write history" (as the old George Bancroft had done), but "chiefly ... as a stable-companion to statesmen whether they liked it or not." By then "[Hay's] 'Life' of Lincoln had been ... published hand in hand with the 'History' of Jefferson and Madison, so that between them they had written nearly all the American history there was to write."

Though mildly alienated, Adams could still say that he had "all that anyone had; all that the world had to offer; all that [he] wanted in life" (meaning by "all" here, "as much as"). By the end of the century, at the beginning of the Indian summer of his life, Adams's spirits were quickened by the feeling that he was perhaps the only person who carried the whole history of his country "since the Stamp Act, quite alive in his mind" (*Education* 362). Involved as his family had always been in it, he had a clear perception of his country's international situation at the onset of the Spanish War, and of his friend Hay's problems and advantages now that the latter was Secretary of State.

But it was while thinking about history in this context that Adams came to believe that "the reason of his failure in teaching it" was his inability "to discern the working of law in history ... for chaos cannot be taught." On top of this, "he thought he had a personal property by inheritance in [a] proof of sequence and intelligence in the affairs of man" (ED 363).

Here we find stated the mistake at the basis of the intellectual problem that occupied so much of the last part of Adams's life. Adams has disjunctively assumed that there is no alternative, in history, between 'scientific' lawfulness and chaos; and that the only form that can be given to an account of the sequence of human affairs is the form of what we now call nomothetic-deductive history. Ignoring his own past practice, Adams seems unaware that circumstantial narratives which *use* the sciences of geography, demography and economics will not have the form of a hypothetico-deductive natural-science presentation, but must *interpretively* apply and join together the conclusions of the former into a non-nomological, if not narrative, sequence which precludes the latter.

The form, on the other hand, which Adams gives in the *Education* to his response to the world is, like Santayana's, that of the intelligent traveller and disillusioned but not unsympathetic social observer. Adams's observations are nation-centered where Santayana's are more truly cosmopolitan. Adams gives decent expressive form to what might otherwise look like self-obsession, by taking the point of view of spirit about his generation.

Santayana also avoids self-obsession by lacing and leavening the story of his responses, wherever he can, with the point of view of spirit. Adams is self-conscious about the quality of his responsiveness to a world for which his generation had been unprepared — into which, as Heidegger might say he was *geworfen*: not as a castaway, however, but as a representative sensibility. The quality of Santayana's responsiveness, in turn, emerges as due to the struggle between his poetic and convivial sensibility, on the one hand, and his vocation for the critical and synoptic work of philosophy, on the other. It is a paradox of sorts that perhaps the biggest contrast between the two compositions is that, while Adams's addresses the human condition in the mode of spirit, Santayana's — because it is autobiographical without being confessional — addresses the human condition in the voice of a psyche which has both adapted to the strangeness of his host the world and turned that world into a fire-side kind of audience by dint, not of cosmic perspective or generational criticism, but of a warm story-telling kind of eloquence.

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