



“Shall We Go to Rome?”—The Last Days of Henry Adams

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In Half an Hour, in a Summer Sea

ON 12 April 1912 Henry Adams was in New York, preparing to sail on the return voyage of the *Titanic*. While waiting, he dashed off a blithe note to his oldest friend, Charles Gaskell, in England—“I sail on the 20th and shall be in Paris thereafter.”¹

Three days later, on 15 April, the *Titanic* sank. That same week, the Republican Party similarly “sank”—scuttled over Theodore Roosevelt’s challenge to William Taft’s candidacy for the presidency. A divided Republican Party, which had occupied the White House for over a decade, watched Woodrow Wilson sail to a Democratic victory. Adams described himself as a doubly shipwrecked mariner. “In half an hour, just in a summer sea, were wrecked the *Titanic*; President Taft; the Republican Party, Boyce Penrose, and I. We all foundered and disappeared. Old and sinful as I am, I turn green and sick when I think of it. I do not know whether Taft or the *Titanic* is likely to be the furthest reaching disaster. The foundering of the *Titanic* is serious, and strikes at our confidence in our mechanical success; but the foundering of the Republican party destroys

¹Henry Adams (HA) to Charles Milnes Gaskell, 12 April 1912, *The Letters of Henry Adams, 1838–1918*, ed. J. C. Levenson, Ernest Samuels, Charles Vandersee, and Viola Hopkins Winner, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press for the Massachusetts Historical Society, 1982–88), 6:533.

confidence in our political system. We've nothing to fall back upon."²

Such analogies were typical of Adams's play of mind. In *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), he had compared Woman to Russia, two conservative forces that dominated the national and international stages at the beginning of the twentieth century. What would happen, he wondered, if either were to have its energies ripped from their centripetal gravitation toward the cradle or the church?³ Which revolution—sexual or Bolshevik—would have a more decisive impact on world history? Would humane and spiritual forces, symbolized by the Virgin, tame sheer physical, technological force, symbolized by the Dynamo? In 1912 Adams continued to ponder such matters.

In its aftermath that April, Adams speculated if the double shipwreck might not create a wider audience for his privately printed *Education*, with its satire of American progressive optimism, and the solution he had proffered in the companion text, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1904). The *Titanic* catastrophe seemed almost too neatly to demonstrate the truth of his warning against modern man's belief that he could master and manipulate nature to create the kingdom of heaven on earth: "Every day nature violently revolted, causing so-called accidents with enormous destruction of property and life, while plainly laughing at man, who helplessly groaned and shrieked and shuddered, but never for a single instant could stop."⁴ Would the double demise of the *Titanic* and the Republican Party stir thinking people to question the shibboleths of the age?

In every letter he wrote in the five days following the double shipwreck, Adams hammered away at this new idea of a prophecy fulfilled. "Only in history as a fairy tale, does one

²HA to Elizabeth Cameron, 16 April 1912, *Letters*, 6:534–35. Senator Boies Penrose was a leader of the Pennsylvania Republican Party whose downfall many believed was signaled by his state's progressive enthusiasm for Roosevelt.

³See Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, A Centennial Version, ed. Edward Chalfant and Conrad Edick Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2007; distrib. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), chaps. 30, "Vis Inertiae (1903)," and 32, "Vis Nova (1903–1904)."

⁴HA, *The Education*, chap. 34, "A Law of Acceleration (1904)," p. 389.

like to see civilizations founder, and to hear the cries of the drowning. My sole compensation is denied me. I can't even tell them:—"I told you so! The sum and triumph of civilization, guaranteed to be safe and perfect, our greatest achievement, sinks at a touch, and drowns us, while nature jeers at us for our folly. I said it all, seven years ago in my *Education*, and nature has beaten me by fifteen years on my mathematics."⁵ Adams's sense of having "said it all" in *The Education* grew more pressing as the days went by. The pace of repetition quickened in his letters: "I am trying to hold my tongue. . . . Once I wrote a book that you never heard of,—called *Education*. . . . I made some closing remarks which have been ringing in my ears since last Sunday. . . . I . . . hide, for fear of talking."⁶ The appalled "I told you so" of the septuagenarian prophet rose to a crescendo: "In a work which you never heard of, called the *Education of Henry Adams*, I figured on the values of society, and brought out my date of stoppage,—did I not,—at 1917, with a possible error of time to 1927. I feel today as though I were shaving it close. The confusion and consternation here are startling. . . . Through the chaos I seemed to be watching the *Titanic* foundering in a shoreless ocean. By my blessed *Virgin*, it is awful! This *Titanic* blow shatters one's nerves. We can't grapple it. Taft, *Titanic*! *Titanic*—Taft! and Boyce Penrose! and I! Where does this thing end!"⁷

On 24 April, ten days after the double shipwreck, the overwrought seventy-four-year-old Adams suffered a stroke. For a month he lay paralyzed, blind, and delirious. The Adams family doctors thought that he would die or lose all mental capacity.⁸ On 3 June his older brother, Charles Francis Adams Jr., wrote Elizabeth Cameron in London to inform Adams's English

⁵HA to Cameron, 21 April 1912, *Letters*, 6:538.

⁶HA to Anne Palmer Fell, 18 April 1912, and HA to Mary Cadwalader Jones, 20 April 1912, *Letters*, 6:536, 537.

⁷HA to Cameron, 16 April 1912, *Letters*, 6:535. Here Adams echoes Tennyson's *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After*, "Chaos, Cosmos! Cosmos, Chaos! Who can tell how all will end!" It was a poem he had in mind at the inception of his *Education* (see HA to Sir Robert Cunliffe, 17 January 1887, *Letters*, 3:52–53).

⁸L. G. Walker Jr., "Henry Adams's 1912 Stroke: A Misunderstood Illness," *New England Quarterly* 71.2 (June 1998): 282–90.

friends of Adams's hopeless condition: "He seems quite indifferent to visitors. . . . I think it not improbable he may recover so far as that he can be wheeled through an open window on to a balcony, or even perhaps, carried on to the grass and sit in the shade under a tree. That, however, he will recover so far as to be capable of consecutive thought or continued articulate utterance and judgment I hardly think probable. Dr. Worcester, in whose experience and judgment I have the utmost confidence, holds out little hope of either."⁹ Despite this grave prognosis, however, a remarkable change began to manifest itself in the following week. Adams's friend William Sturgis Bigelow cabled Cameron in London. "Extraordinary improvement since Sunday. Recovery possible," and a week later, "Sees friends. Walks in Room. Drives with Nannie [Senator Henry Cabot Lodge's wife]."¹⁰ The next day, Charles reported that his brother had left his bed for the first time, had gone out for several short car rides, and that his mental condition was improving. Approximately a week later, Adams, with the help of a new personal secretary, Aileen Tone, renewed his correspondence.

On 30 August, in his first letter to his old friend Gaskell since the stroke, Adams wrote: "I've a mind to go back to Rome and renew our youth. To die in Rome is not so swell a thing as it used to be but it is a decent thing to do, still. . . . If I get abroad again, I hope to see you. Why not at Rome as of yore?"¹¹ Going to Rome to renew one's youth was something of a euphemism for conversion, an echo of the traditional entrance prayer with which the Tridentine liturgy of the Mass began: "*Introibo ad*

⁹Charles Francis Adams Jr. to Elizabeth Cameron, 3 June 1912, Microfilm Edition of the Henry Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, reel 26.

¹⁰Undated telegram, William Sturgis Bigelow to Elizabeth Cameron, Microfilm Edition of the Henry Adams Papers, reel 26: "Paris Boston Mass 14 10 Anglo = Extraordinary Improvement Since Sunday Recovery Possible = BeaconBig+" and "Paris 13 To Mrs. J. D. Cameron Stepleton House Blandford England Beaconsby boston cables head apparently about well muscles improving fast sees friends walks in room drives with Nannie coming 15 Lincoln Sunday Haries." See also Edward Chalfant, *Improvement of the World: A Biography of Henry Adams; His Last Life, 1891-1918* (New Haven, Conn.: Archon Books, 2001), chaps. 22 and 23, "Recoveries" and "Paris," which give a full account of Adams's post-stroke activities. Chalfant references these telegrams as well, p. 427.

¹¹HA to Gaskell, 30 August 1912, *Letters*, 6:553, 554.

altare Dei / Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam" (I shall go up to the altar of God / To God, who renews my youth). Rome evidently struck Adams as youthful compared to the sickly, dying civilization of America: "I went to Boston the other day, and stood in Beacon Street, and wept over its shrunken ruins. One or two squares of houses are all that remain; the world about is mere adipose tissue hanging on the old skeleton. I thought of Rome and the Capitol. Honestly it was not unlike, but Boston was the more ruin of the two."¹²

Upon finding himself a Lazarus, newly raised from the dead, Adams's first thought was to go to Rome, but he could not bear going alone. He would go with his nieces and nieces-in-wish, Elsie Adams and Loolie Hooper, Elizabeth Cameron and Martha Lindsay, or with his nephews-in-wish, Charles Gaskell, Ronald Lindsay, and Cecil Spring Rice. "My main hope is that you should be in Rome, and I shall want constant news about your movements, but whether I can myself get to Rome is another matter."¹³ "Mrs. Cameron . . . went back to do the pelican for Martha. Please send her to Rome to nurse me."¹⁴

The crisis passed, life went on. Cameron went to Cairo and Gaskell showed no interest, so there was no further talk of a trip to Rome. Adams resumed his annual trips to Paris in 1913 and 1914, turning his attention to his new project of recovering medieval music from the French archives—creating a "college of the twelfth century," a *scuola cantorum* of nieces, led by his Roman Catholic nurse-companion Aileen Tone and her long-time friend Justine Ward—and issuing the first public edition of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, with an introduction by Ralph Adams Cram.¹⁵

¹²HA to Bernhard Berenson, 4 September 1912, *Letters*, 6:557–58.

¹³HA to Cameron, 13 September 1912, *Letters*, 6:559.

¹⁴HA to Ronald Lindsay, 28 September 1912, *Letters*, 6:562.

¹⁵Siegmund Levarie, "Henry Adams, Avant-gardist in Early Music," *American Music* 15.4 (Winter 1997): 429–45. For further information about the influence of Adams's efforts to revive medieval music, see Francis Brancaleone, "Justine Ward and the Fostering of an American Solesmes Chant Tradition," *Sacred Music* 136 (Fall 2009): 6–26, and Pierre Combe, *Justine Ward and Solesmes* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987).

But, in the summer of 1914, as Europe spiraled into the war he had long predicted, Adams again wrote to Gaskell. “I will send you St Augustin,—that is, Bertrand’s Life of him. It will illuminate our path. I’ve said so long that the world has gone to the devil, that I now enjoy seeing the process. In those days people—some people—thought they could escape into the next world, but now they know they are going to be drowned so they dance and play ball. No one cares. I do not exaggerate. No one anywhere, socialist, capitalist, or religionist, takes it seriously or expects a future. The life is that of the 4th century, without St Augustin.”¹⁶ After being evacuated from Paris at summer’s end, he wrote again in the same vein, this time to Elizabeth Cameron: “I am Saint Augustin! Read him! You will see me all through. His world fell to pieces before the Germans. He tried to build another, and had a gay old time of it. Nervous collapse, I reckon, got us both. *My chief trouble is that no one seems to feel it as I do—and as Augustin did. As you know, I have bored you with it these ten years, and still am alone.* So, I take it, was Augustin of Hippo. He wrote the City of God! You can read it in the light of today at Cairo. It is the same moral collapse of a civilization.”¹⁷

By Christmas 1914, Adams faced a moment of decision when he arrived home in Washington, D.C. Aileen Tone introduced him to Father Cyril Sigmourney Fay (whom in 1920 F. Scott Fitzgerald would immortalize in *This Side of Paradise*), a well-known convert priest who was wont to apply his talents to the New England elite.¹⁸ The progress of Adams’s friendship with Father Fay and his dance with Catholicism in his final three

¹⁶HA to Gaskell, 1 June 1914, *Letters*, 6:650; also, “We all talk of the future as we do of heaven—or hades—as a place quite open to discussion and *hors concours*. Poor Mabel and her church are just like early Christians. They see the collapse coming, and don’t know where to run” (HA to Ward Thoron, 25 May 1914, *Letters*, 6:649).

¹⁷HA to Cameron, 15 November 1914, *Letters*, 6:666. Cameron was in Cairo with Martha Lindsay and her husband Ronald, British consul in Cairo. Emphasis added: the lament was characteristic (see nn. 24 and 26).

¹⁸As H. D. Piper notes, “Fay’s . . . friends, to whom he introduced . . . Fitzgerald, included Mrs. Winthrop Chanler . . . who appears briefly in *This Side of Paradise* as Mrs. Lawrence” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966], pp. 47, 127).

years of life can be traced in a series of letters Adams wrote from Christmas 1914 until just before his death in March 1918.

A Vile Croaker but Gooder after Christmas

Adams described the priest who visited him regularly for three years as the “delightful Father Fay who has an Irish love for the 12th century.”¹⁹ Adams realized that Father Fay, genial and “not too Jesuit,” was rather an unrepresentative Catholic priest, with his literary interests and his Anglo-Catholic penchant for liturgical renewal.²⁰ Like Adams, he seemed a fish out of water. “He is alone. No one now cares for the 12th or any other century or can think at all; but only fidgets and knits.”²¹ In his weekly letters, Adams mentioned Father Fay frequently. To Elizabeth Cameron, he wrote, “This week I have seen no one except Father Fay who came to dinner and to sing songs,” and to Ward Thoron, “We now have here at the Catholic University, a Father Fay . . . who comes and helps sing our songs. An audience of one—as usual.”²²

As Adams came to know Father Fay, he grew increasingly critical of himself and other fin-de-siècle pessimists like his brother Brooks, George Bernard Shaw, Cecil Chesterton, and George Santayana. They had complained so persistently for so long—talking tiresomely of war, ships, and guns; growling at government; cussing at Germans, Jews, and all mankind—until they had become nothing more than professional critics. They found voice in the crescendo of civilizational pessimism at the end of *The Education*. This “common early-twentieth-century pattern of dismay,” which had led many to the Catholic Church, would find its most famous expression after the war in Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*.²³ They had become so flatly

¹⁹HA to Cameron, 13 December 1914, *Letters*, 6:670.

²⁰HA to Thoron, 21 December 1914, *Letters*, 6:673.

²¹HA to Cameron, 13 December 1914, *Letters*, 6:670.

²²HA to Cameron, 20 December 1914, and HA to Thoron, 21 December 1914, 6:671, 673.

²³Adam Schwartz, *The Third Spring: G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene, Christopher Dawson, and David Jones* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), p. 8.

anti-German and not pro-anything, that they had overlooked the one thing necessary. "God forgive me!" wrote Adams, the fact is "my troubles go far beyond the Rhine or the Vistula."²⁴

To Gaskell, Adams wrote repeatedly that a change of direction was necessary. The only way to evade the Germans was to resist the German cultural influence that had seeped into Anglo-American intellectual life. Adams saw the danger of following German romantic optimism into its denouement in German existential pessimism.²⁵ "I am St Augustine at Hippo writing the *Civitas* in a corrected sense, before the Germans come. . . . I had said, ten years ago, all I had to say. I had croaked persistently for a long, long time, until satisfied that human will is a delusion, and that life is a mere phantasm; and then I took to St. Augustin, as you know. The Germans got him, too, but not before he had done his *Confessions*."²⁶ Adams, likewise, was coming to believe that he could ultimately resist German pessimism about human freedom and the immortality of the human soul only by "do[ing] his *Confessions*" before the Germans got him.

To Elizabeth Cameron, Adams wrote in the same vein. It was possible to talk too much, to write too much, to diagnose the ills of the day too much. Too much social criticism could become merely one more form of what he had once described in *The Education* as "turning away one's eyes as one approaches a chasm."²⁷ The war could serve as one more distraction from the deeper matter of his own soul's salvation. "People now ask gloomily for my *Education*, to read the last chapter. God forgive me—and it! We all want gaiety, and I have been a vile croaker.

²⁴HA to Cameron, 5 January 1915, *Letters*, 6:678.

²⁵"Throughout all the thought of Germany, France and England,—for there is no thought in America,—runs a growing stream of pessimism which comes in a continuous current from Malthus and Karl Marx and Schopenhauer in our youth, and which we were taught to reject then, but which is openly preached now on all sides. Next week I will send you a little volume I have written about it, not for the improvement of humanity, but only to prod up my historical flock. They are feeble-minded, and should be all shut up in your asylums; but I know no way of telling them so, except to act as one of them" (HA to Gaskell, 17 February 1910, *Letters*, 6:316).

²⁶HA to Thoron, 21 December 1914, and HA to Gaskell, 26 December 1914, *Letters*, 6:673, 676.

²⁷HA, *The Education*, chap. 2, "Boston (1848–1854)," p. 27.

Never mind! I will be gooder after Christmas. . . . As an honest Saint, I have to remember that at Hippo I had much to think about. Even a thousand years later, as Saint Thomas, I talked too much. Let's wait! Everyone here cusses the Germans, who are personally loathed as Jews. I, too, go with my crowd, and cuss the Germans—and all mankind, if you insist."²⁸

Meanwhile Father Fay, with his Irish good fun and his Irish baritone, was starting to get inside Adams's head. Adams managed to laugh at himself for the world-weariness and war anxieties that kept him "awake 'o' nights." Reveling in his new "Saint Augustincarnation," he reassured himself that his own turn to religion was not mere therapeutic escapism; he was not like the rest, turning away their eyes from the realities of the world, searching for gaieties and lamenting their champagne. He, unlike they, had seen all the world's sorrow already: "*What do you tyke me for?*"—the pretense of an accent betraying the influence of his new Irish priest friend.²⁹

Christmas 1914 passed, and Ash Wednesday 1915 came round. Adams was still pondering. He seemed unable to make a move on his own. His brother Charles died in 1915, but they had never been kindred spirits anyway. As he wrote forlornly, "My family . . . never saw the Chartres or heard of the Sainte Vierge."³⁰ His niece-in-wish Mrs. Winthrop Chanler, a convert from an old New England family whom he had met in Rome and whom he affectionately called "Sainte Thomasine" for her gentle efforts to draw him towards the Church, recalled that "his family never took his Catholic philosophy for more than a literary pose."³¹ His nieces and nieces-in-wish married and reverted to the New England transcendentalism he mockingly

²⁸HA to Cameron, 8 December 1914, and 5 January 1915, *Letters*, 6:669, 678.

²⁹HA to Thoron, 21 December 1914, and HA to Cameron, 25 December 1914, *Letters*, 6:673, 675.

³⁰HA to Cameron, 8 December 1915, *Letters*, 6:706.

³¹Margaret Chanler, *Roman Spring* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1934), p. 296: "His family never took his Catholic philosophy for more than a literary pose—it was so remote from the things they were used to, so contrary to the Adams tradition; but to me it seemed a sincere intellectual adventure, a voyage of discovery into other-worldly regions, where Henry Adams, the Harvard Professor Emeritus, author of a standard work on American history, fell in love with the twelfth century and used all his genius to get as near to it as possible."

dubbed “Hooperism,” after their family name. His old friend Charles Gaskell, who had launched him on his quest into the Middle Ages with a wedding gift of the romantic medievalist Viollet le Duc, seemed to have fallen behind in the pursuit of the spirit of medieval philosophy.³² His entire cohort of family and friends remained impervious to his *Education* and to his *Chartres*, which he referred to familiarly as “my Thomas Aquinas.”³³ “It is a holy spectacle to see all these Hooper nieces, including Loulie and Ward, the center of groups of offspring, not sensibly different from what their parents were, forty years ago, and promising a liberal supply of lunatics and others in a not distant future. I feel as though I were the Archangel Michael marching them all out just as I did their parents with no sensible difference in their forms of Hooperism and with no apparent prospect that there will ever be a change in Cabots and Curtises or Hoopers till the world’s end. As for Adamses, I shudder to think what new and more hideous terrors are coming on the other side of Boston Bay. Neither war nor peace will ever affect this source of humanity. Obviously, nothing ever *can*

³²HA to Gaskell, 15 August 1915, *Letters*, 6:702: “Of the war I hear only too much, but I was bred in war, and wish only to escape it. I live still only in the 12th century. These mountains echo to the Chatelain of Coucy. The Crusades are my life, and Coeur de Lion my joy. They are more melodious than 24-inch guns. I wish you could share my pursuit of them.” Earlier Adams had written to Henry James that his brother Charles “cares nothing for my 12th century songs, and is even cold to my 30,000-year-old babies and other citizens, which is fatal to brotherly affection” (29 May 1913, *Letters*, 6:603). “As you know, I loved Charles, and in early life our paths lay together, but he was a man of action, with a strong love of power, while I, for that reason was almost compelled to become a man of contemplation, a critic and a writer” (HA to Henry Cabot Lodge, 18 November 1915, *Letters*, 6:705). “You know what the Gods did, and it was a curious division of destiny. Charles being the elder had first choice of paths, and naturally chose the more promising one which led along the sunny side of life. He chose deliberately to back optimism. He forced himself to bet on the favorite horse. I think I was really more of an optimist than he, but naturally was obliged to back the losing horse. I became a pessimist, not because I believed in either optimism or pessimism but because I wanted room to move. He came out, at the end, as you know, and as you have so well related. I rather think the moral of it all for us both was the P.S. Vanitas Vanitatum” (HA to Henry Watkins Anderson, 17 July 1916, *Letters*, 6:735).

³³See Patrick Deneen, “*Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*: From Unity to Multiplicity,” in *Political Companion to Henry Adams*, ed. Natalie Fuehrer Taylor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), pp. 171–89, for an interpretation that recaptures Aquinas’s “unique position in the book as a whole” (p. 185).

affect it. Boston is immortal.”³⁴ As America’s last Puritan and first pilgrim to Chartres, devotee of the Saint Vierge, and student of Thomas Aquinas, Adams felt like “a tsetse-fly trying to bite a crocodile.”³⁵

Adams’s letters to Elizabeth Cameron, in particular, show him longing for a companion on his journey. He lists among his “remedies for insomnia” aspirin, songs to the Virgin, stoicism, contrition, tears and howls, and discussing the Trinity. Cameron seemed not to offer him any guidance or encouragement. He had hoped she would make the “trip to Rome” with him, but despite all their years of correspondence, he seemed still alone on his spiritual quest into the twelfth century. By the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8 December 1915, just after the fateful anniversary of his wife’s suicide on 6 December, a day he always dreaded, he cried out from the heart. Elizabeth Cameron had failed as “loving pelican.”³⁶ She gave him no courage for the act of faith, she had shown herself

³⁴HA to Cameron, 5 September 1917, *Letters*, 6:767. Also, “my nieces of the Hooper persuasion” (HA to Cameron, 31 December 1912, *Letters*, 6:577).

³⁵HA to Richard Watson Gilder, 2 February 1909, *Letters*, 6:216.

³⁶“Loving Pelican” or *Pie Pelicane* is a phrase from Thomas Aquinas’s hymn for the Feast of Corpus Christi, the *Adoro Te Devote*, and introduces a separate hymn often used for benediction. It refers to Christ, or to the Church as his Mystical Body/Bride, feeding the faithful with His/Her own flesh, as the mother pelican of ancient legend was thought to do. For Adams, the “Fête-Dieu” and the image of the Virgin Mother Church mercifully feeding her children was symbolic of the communal unity that had been lost after the collapse of medieval Christendom (see *Education*, chap. 32, “Vis Nova (1903–1904),” pp. 368–70). Adams often referred to the women in his life who voluntarily assumed the role of mother to those around them as “pelicans” in this sense, surviving relics of the “loving pelican.”

Adams, in what he called his “Augustincarnation” in the years after his stroke, was searching for a Monica, a mother-figure, a loving pelican, who could personally draw him into the Church so that his conversion would not be the lonely journey of the deracinated intellectual. In this desire he seems much like G. K. Chesterton who, though intellectually convinced by 1908 that the Roman Catholic Church was the one true church, waited until 1922 to enter it in hopes that his wife—whom he considered far more naturally religious—would lead the way. Father O’Connor, who eventually received both into the Church, said that Chesterton was far happier when he could “let Frances take him to church, find his place in the prayer-book and examine his conscience for him” (Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996], pp. 214–20, 268–76, 334).

Mabel Hooper La Farge, Adams’s niece, would have loved to play “loving pelican” for Adams during his conversion. Indeed, she sent him a watercolor of the “Pelican in her Piety” after he recovered from his stroke (HA to Mabel Hooper La Farge, Christmas 1913, *Letters*, 6:628–29). But Adams had played “loving pelican” for his

insensitive to his plans to go to Rome: "I fear that you would never trust the Saint Vierge as I do, because you come from Cleveland, O., and I notice that no one who comes from Cleveland, O., can ever imagine themselves to come from other, less favored, spots. They are Congregationalists, like our dear Mrs Hay, who is my ideal of all that is superior, and who shuddered at Buddha."³⁷ Adams's lament over Cameron's inability to follow his intellectual lead and light him on his spiritual way echoed that of his isolation from his brother Charles, from the Adams family more generally, from Boston, and from all those "of the Hooper persuasion."

He couldn't even get the Catholics, not even the Catholic theology professors, to read and understand his chapter on Thomas Aquinas in *Chartres*. Modern Catholics were Bergsonians, Pragmatists, Kantians, Modernists, Americanists. As Tocqueville had said decades earlier, Americans were Cartesians all!³⁸ What Adams took to be "orthodoxy" seemed to have fallen into a historic chasm somewhere between St. Thomas and himself. The "Civitas Dei," the Church, Christendom, had

motherless Hooper nieces for too long to have the roles reversed, and he looked to Elizabeth Cameron for this social and spiritual help. "Mrs Cameron . . . gets your usual bitter mamma's pleasure out of playing the pelican, and denudes herself of one feather after another until she must inevitably freeze to death on the nest. Since mothers have done so since the first mother invented the torture, it is doubtless all a part of the profession, but I see no pleasure in it for the uncle Pelican, who has not even the honor of a mention by the poet. Lorsque Mons. le Pelican comes home from his afternoon stroll, he finds tea a little weak" (HA to Anna Cabot Mills Lodge, 26 September 1909, *Letters*, 6:280). "You are the only person who sees people and the world. You alone have the instinct, and take the trouble, and do the work. No one else has the spirit of society. They all shrink into their shells except you. Madame de Pompadour! Why aren't there more of you? Why should you be the only surviving relic of the social faculty?" (HA to Cameron, 22 August 1899, *Letters*, 5:18). "I admit that the American woman is a failure; that she has held nothing together, neither State nor Church, nor Society nor Family. . . . It worries me to see our women run away from the job. . . . You all run away just when you are making speed. Sometimes, I admit, it is the man's fault. It was Don Cameron who ran away, not Mrs Cameron. Still, Mrs Cameron would like to run, like most other women. . . . You go off and desert us! One more lost!" (HA to Margaret Chanler, 11 August 1905, *Letters*, 5:701-2).

³⁷HA to Cameron, 8 December 1915, *Letters*, 6:706-7.

³⁸Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Debra Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), bk. 2, chap. 1, "The Philosophic Method of the Americans," p. 403. Henry Adams famously described Tocqueville's *Democracy* as "the Gospel of my own private religion."

disappeared, swallowed up by “this vast plain of self-content,” America, Boston, the interior basin of a continent devoted to oblivion, to Nirvana at any cost.³⁹

Adams had a hard time discerning whether—between stoicism on the one hand and the Jamesian will to believe on the other, between “Empedocles on Etna” and Pascal’s hazard—there was a confession of faith he could make as a rational assent, a confession of sins that brought grace in its wake. Father Fay was genial and not too Jesuit, but sometimes it struck Adams that “his rotten old church is really too childish for a hell like this year.”⁴⁰ Adams fumed that maybe his convert niece Mabel’s silly Church was just one more form of “Hooperism,” like the Christian Science that was becoming such a wartime vogue among New Yorkers or Billy Sunday’s Temperance Revivals that were taking the nation’s capital by storm.⁴¹

The Near Peril of Turning Christian

On 15 February 1915, in an unusually explicit communication with his former student and fellow medievalist, Henry Osborn Taylor, Adams described his intellectual struggles with faith. Adams scholars, assigning it great importance from the beginning, have read the letter as a retraction of the Thomism of *Chartres*’s concluding chapter, in other words, as Adams’s “retreat from Chartres” in the last years of his life.⁴² Given the

³⁹HA, *The Education*, chap. 21, “Twenty Years After (1892),” p. 258.

⁴⁰HA to Cameron, 22 January 1915, *Letters*, 6:681. Henry Adams in this letter laughingly comments on a marriage between a Catholic girl and a man who is a “Unitarian like me,” who needs a “dispensation . . . for a pagan, or ancient Roman senator.” He talks of Father Fay having “an idea that I want conversion. . . . He had best look out that I don’t convert him.”

⁴¹HA to Cameron, 10 March 1915, *Letters*, 6:689.

⁴²Vern Wagner, “The Lotus of Henry Adams,” *New England Quarterly* 27:1 (March 1954): 89; R. P. Blackmur’s oft-cited “Three Late Moments,” *Kenyon Review* 2:1 (Winter 1940): 7–29, first printed the Taylor letter. Blackmur’s emphasis on this letter (at a time when the full correspondence was not yet edited and available to scholars), along with his article “Henry and Brooks Adams: Parallels in Two Generations,” *Southern Review* 5:2 (Autumn 1939): 308–34, launched an interpretation that conflates “the Adams brothers” and too facilely assimilates Henry Adams to Brooks Adams’s skepticism and pessimism. See Charles A. Beard, intro. to the 1942 reprint of Brooks Adams, *Law of Civilization and Decay*

fact that the letter was not a statement begging for publication, however, but an intimate exchange with a former student and fellow medievalist, it should be read within the context of Adams's entire relationship with Taylor.

Henry Osborn Taylor (1856–1941) had studied under Adams at Harvard in the 1870s. Unlike most of Adams's other students, who went off to politics, Taylor followed an intellectual calling: he succeeded Adams as professor of medieval history at Harvard and president of the American Historical Association. In 1901 Taylor sent Adams his book *The Classical Heritage of the Middle Ages*, which under the title *The Emergence of Christian Culture in the West* became a standard history of the transition from antiquity to medieval monastic culture. Taylor went on to incorporate the study into his two-volume masterwork, *The Medieval Mind*, which, in 1911, he also dispatched to Adams. Thus, Taylor sent Adams his book on the “age of transition” just as Adams was working on his own account of the transition from Abelard's rationalism to Thomas's synthesis, the “Mystics” chapter of *Chartres*. While revising his own book for general publication, Adams gently mocked Taylor's “Cyclopedia” on the “development of thought and emotion in the Middle Ages.” In due course, Adams sent Taylor an early copy of *Chartres* and of *The Education*, and Taylor duly reviewed each.⁴³

From the beginning of their correspondence, it is clear that teacher and student differed over their interpretations of the

(New York: Knopf, 1943); Yvor Winters, “Henry Adams or the Creation of Confusion,” *Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), collected in *In Defense of Reason* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1947); Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953); Arthur F. Beringause, *Brooks Adams* (New York: Knopf, 1955); Timothy Paul Donovan, *Henry Adams and Brooks Adams: The Education of Two American Historians* (Tulsa: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961); Ernest Samuels, “Brothers in Prophecy,” *Henry Adams: The Major Phase* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964). One of the more recent citations of Adams's letter to Taylor in this interpretive lineage is John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 105–7.

⁴³Henry Osborn Taylor, review of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, *American Historical Review* 19.3 (April 1914): 593–94; review of *The Education of Henry Adams*, *Atlantic Monthly*, October 1918, pp. 484–91. The second review is, of course, of the posthumous publication, but Taylor's letters themselves constitute the personal review of the printed edition that Adams most hoped for from his friends.

medieval spirit.⁴⁴ For Taylor, the Middle Ages could indeed be “fitted into an orderly, middle-class, Bostonian, systematic scheme of evolution.”⁴⁵ Taylor believed he had succeeded precisely at the project across which Adams had written “Failure” in his *Education*: “He knew better than though he were a professional historian that the man who should solve the riddle of the middle ages and bring them into the line of evolution from past to present, would be a greater man than Lamarck or Linnaeus.”⁴⁶ Taylor was convinced, as was the Harvard school of history (which Adams had launched but from which he refused to receive an honorary degree), that “Latinity and Law” bridged the gap between antiquity and modernity; that a single “Western Civilization” based on a single ethical cult, a stoic “moral adjustment,” could be traced from the Greeks of the fourth century B.C. to the Bostonians of the 1850s. This was the “Harvard theory of history,” in which America was heir to Greek democracy. It formed the basis of James Robinson’s course “Rise of Rational Thought,” the model for Western Civilization courses across the nation.⁴⁷

Adams strenuously objected to this assimilation of the Middle Ages into the Whig narrative of “Western Civilization.” He did not accept the assumption that a form of neo-Platonic stoicism was the “thread” on which history was strung or, at the least, that the Middle Ages experienced no breach in it. “He saw no relation whatever between his students and the middle-ages unless it were the Church, and there the ground was particularly dangerous.”⁴⁸ The notion that the “Classical Mind,” the

⁴⁴Adams wrote eleven letters to Taylor. Sensing ironic criticism, Taylor balked at Adams’s response to his first book. Adams maintained his Socratic relation with Taylor to the end, calling him “Scholar and Master” (HA to Taylor, 15 February 1915, *Letters*, 6:684); “You are the professor; I am the student” (HA to Taylor, 4 May 1901, *Letters*, 5:247).

⁴⁵HA, *The Education*, chap. 6, “Rome (1859–1860),” p. 71.

⁴⁶HA, *The Education*, chap. 20, “Failure (1871),” p. 236. It is doubtful that Adams had written this chapter when he sent his letter to Taylor in 1901, so the exchange with Taylor seems caught up in Adams’s decision to write his book so that he might fling it in the faces of the Harvard school of history.

⁴⁷Gilbert Allardyce, “The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course,” *American Historical Review* 87.3 (1982): 695–725.

⁴⁸HA, *The Education*, chap. 20, “Failure (1871),” pp. 235–36.

“Medieval Mind,” and the “Modern Mind” were but ascending rungs on a ladder labeled “The Rise of Rational Thought” was, for Adams, a clear falsification of history. “You want to see connection,” Adams told Taylor in 1901. “All I now care for is the break.”⁴⁹ At the time Adams was working on “The Mystics” and reading aloud to John La Farge his “Miracles of the Virgin,” as he called *Chartres’s* early chapters on art and architecture. He had not yet spent three summers reading Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa*, or rewriting *Chartres* in light of it. But already the *Chartres* project had required a rupture with the Harvard history school and its Germanism.⁵⁰ “Never did a man go blindly on a career more virtuously than I did, when I threw myself so obediently into the arms of the Anglo-Saxons in history, and the Germans in art. The reaction, it is true, has been more violent. Between Bishop Stubbs and John La Farge the chasm has required lively gymnastics. . . . To clamber across the gap has needed many years of La Farge’s closest instruction to me, on the use of eyes, not to say feet.”⁵¹ “Germany was never so powerful, and the Assistant Professor of History had nothing else as his stock in trade,” Adams wrote mockingly of his early scholarship. “He imposed Germany on his scholars with a heavy hand.”⁵²

Adams betrayed a measure of embarrassment that he had had to be taught “the use of eyes” to see such monuments of medieval culture as the Cathedral of Chartres and the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, but to his erstwhile student his comment was

⁴⁹HA to Henry Osborn Taylor, 4 May 1901, 5:247.

⁵⁰See Robin Fleming, “Henry Adams and the Anglo-Saxons,” in *The Preservation and Transmission of Anglo-Saxon Culture*, vol. 40 of *Studies in Medieval Culture*, ed. Paul Szarmach and Joel T. Rosenthal (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), pp. 1–23. Fleming acknowledges that Adams is present at the birth but also responsible for the “strange death of Anglo-Saxon history” (p. 14). See also Paul Freedman and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, “Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies,” *American Historical Review* 103:3 (June 1998): 677–704. Freedman and Spiegel clarify that “Unlike Baxter Adams, Henry Adams’s espousal of the theory was tepid at best and not of long duration” (p. 679, n. 6).

⁵¹HA to Taylor, 4 May 1901, *Letters*, 5:247–48. William Stubbs, professor of history at Oxford, was famous for his *Constitutional History of England*, which opened with the Teutonic invasions.

⁵²HA, *The Education*, chap. 20, “Failure (1871),” p. 238.

meant to convey a subtle hint about the bias that had entered the professional study of history at its inception. "Adams never tired of quoting the supreme phrase of his idol Gibbon, before the Gothic Cathedrals:—'I darted a contemptuous look on the stately monuments of superstition.' Even in the footnotes of his history, Gibbon had never inserted a bit of humor more human than this, and one would have paid largely for a photograph of the fat little historian, on the background of Notre Dame of Amiens, trying to persuade his readers—perhaps himself,—that he was darting a contemptuous look on the stately monument, for which he felt in fact the respect which every man of his vast study and active mind always feels before objects worthy of it; but besides the humor, one felt also the relation. Gibbon ignored the Virgin, because in 1789, religious monuments were out of fashion."⁵³ Adams sensed that even a scholar of the medieval mind like Taylor, who devoted a good deal of attention to Aquinas, could retain Gibbon's neoclassical bias, flattening out the story in an attempt to present a seamless narrative of progressive continuity. Adams, on the contrary, had argued in *Chartres* that Christianity represented something genuinely new—a *sui generis* work of art that had to be understood on its own terms. It is only against the backdrop of this difference between Henry Adams and his former student that the 1915 letter can be properly understood.

For Adams, the matter was not merely historical but religious and moral: Was there nothing new under the sun? Was ancient Stoicism the only great moral vision of life mankind had ever produced? Did Christianity add nothing to the picture? Or does history offer something to study beyond philosophy? Referring to the days immediately following his wife's suicide, Adams revealed what was at stake in the debate. "Once, at the most trying crisis of my life, and of his,—our old teacher in wisdom, Gurney, said to me that of all moral supports in trial only one was nearly sufficient. That was the Stoic. I cannot say that I have found it so, except in theory, but I am talking theory. . . . [A]ll that goes before is futile except as failure;

⁵³HA, *The Education*, chap. 25, "The Dynamo and the Virgin (1900)," p. 303.

all that follows after is escape—flying the ring,—by assuming an unprovable other world. Logically, the religious solution is inadmissible,—pure hypothesis. It discards reason. I do not object to it on that account; as a working energy I prefer instinct to reason.”⁵⁴ In short, Adams squarely faced the question of whether all religious belief is merely irrational escapism. Thus, he exemplified the integrity of a scholar who never forgets that he is also human—who is able to “resume his humanity” and see beyond disciplinary boundaries.

In the history of moral philosophy, as Adams summarized Taylor’s argument, Christianity, with its assurances of individual immortality, was just a blip on the screen. “As you put it, the Augustinian adjustment seems to be only the Stoic, with a supernatural or hypothetical supplement nailed to it by violence. The religionists preached it, and called it Faith. Therefore to me the effect is of ending there. The moral adjustment, as a story, ended with Marcus Aurelius. There you lead us with kind, sympathetic hands.”⁵⁵ But in doing so, Taylor skirted the “vast forests of scholastic science.”⁵⁶ Was medieval philosophy, the enormous human endeavor that drew upon Aristotle’s hylomorphism in attempting to explain the relationship of the immortal soul to the mortal body, not even worth exploring? “There, over the door to the religious labyrinth, you, like Lord Kelvin, write the word Failure. Faith, not Reason, goes beyond.”⁵⁷ This struck Adams as a bit of modern hubris, especially considering that the moderns were abysmally ignorant of the arguments put forth by the medievals.

For Adams, the excitement of Taylor’s text was the clarity with which it laid out the choices: the medieval synthesis of faith and reason; the modern acceptance of chaos in theory but its embrace of a voluntaristic fideism in practice; and a Stoic agnosticism regarding all metaphysics. “The moral is somewhat pointed,—to me decidedly peaked,” Adams remarked. There were three great historic options presented to the human

⁵⁴HA to Taylor, 15 February 1915, *Letters*, 6:685.

⁵⁵HA to Taylor, 15 February 1915, *Letters*, 6:685.

⁵⁶HA, *The Education*, chap. 25, “The Dynamo and the Virgin (1900),” p. 305.

⁵⁷HA to Taylor, 15 February 1915, *Letters*, 6:685.

person: "If you are writing Failure over one door and Lord Kelvin over another, and the Germans over the third and last—that of energy without direction,—I think I had better quit. I said so ten years ago, but I put it down to my personal equation then."⁵⁸

Adams contended that Bostonians refused even to study Thomas Aquinas, that they would be Puritans or Classicists, Augustinian Christians or Stoics. But, he insisted, they were rigging the terms. Just as one could not return to 1850s Boston and its hopes of a purified Union, one could not return to fourth-century Christianity and its hopes of a purified Holy Roman Empire. All expectations for an earthly kingdom, an earthly *telos* of human life, had to be put aside and the issue of immortality directly addressed. "Are we, then, to go back to Faith? If so, is it to be early Christian or Stoic? The early Christian I take to have been abandoned long ago by the failure of Christ to reappear and judge the world. Whatever faith is to save us, it cannot be that."⁵⁹ "I aspire to be bound up with St. Augustine. Or rather, I would have aspired to it, if it were artistically possible to build another fourth-century church. It cannot be. The Leit-motif is flat."⁶⁰

Adams ended the letter to his protégé with a plea. Was there not one great book on the Stoics that might save him from entering the Cathedral of Chartres one last time and wandering within the labyrinth of scholastic science for the rest of his days? "Is it, then, the Stoic? . . . I should . . . very likely have labored damnably over the Buddhists and the Stoics. Marcus Aurelius would have been my type of highest human attainment. Even as it is, I would give a new cent to have a really good book on the Stoics. If there is one, lend it to me. I need badly to find one man in history to admire. I am in near peril of turning Christian, and rolling in the mud in an agony of human mortification. All these other fellows did it,—why not I?"⁶¹ Adams never did find

⁵⁸HA to Taylor, 15 February 1915, *Letters*, 6:685.

⁵⁹HA to Taylor, 15 February 1915, *Letters*, 6:685.

⁶⁰HA to Taylor, 22 November 1909, *Letters*, 6:287. Adams was commenting on Taylor's enthusiastic response to *The Education*.

⁶¹HA to Taylor, 15 February 1915, *Letters*, 6:685–86.

a book on the Stoics that satisfied him. In the end, he turned away from Stoicism—"it is deadly Roman and hard"—to his twelfth-century songs to the Virgin, which every evening saved him from despair.⁶²

Porcupinus Angelicus

In their project to convert Adams, Father Fay and the Chanlers did more harm than good by enlisting their intellectual heroes to visit him. Among them were Arthur Balfour, who had just published *Theism and Humanism*, a work that influenced C. S. Lewis; Henri Bergson, whose *Creative Evolution* was the rage among young converts like Jacques Maritain; Cecil Chesterton, who had converted in advance of his more famous brother; and Shane Leslie, editor of the *Dublin Review*.⁶³ But Adams the Thomist was too much of a troglodyte to be handed across the chasm of faith by this chain gang of assistants. Years before, he had written to Margaret Chanler that he preferred Thomas Aquinas to all his contemporaries who were attempting to combine Catholicism with varieties of modern philosophy. "St Thomas said all there was to say. On the whole I think I like to keep my milk and my flies separate. Bergson does not much

⁶²HA to Cameron, 6 February 1916, *Letters*, 6:721; see also HA to Taylor, 17 April 1916 (his last to Taylor, sent two years before he died), *Letters*, 6:729.

⁶³"Father Fay . . . brought to breakfast the other day a very dirty, fat and lower-middle-class English Chesterton who is lecturing here. When I see these modernists of the Bernard Shaw school, I feel very much as though I would like to shut my mouth now, and for ever" (HA to Cameron, 28 January 1915, *Letters*, 6:683). "More and more my fortifications of silence are disturbed and broken. . . . I am now almost in despair about holding my own tongue or keeping my temper, which have been my only occupation for years. Even philosophers are no use. The great Bergson came in the other day and for an hour with infinite ingenuity I fought him off and made him talk philosophy" (HA to Cameron, 1 March 1917, *Letters*, 6:747). "Even the immortal prophet Bergson whose philosophy I never *could* understand has honored us with his presence for a brief moment, while his attendant saint, Daisy Chanler, and Wintie and various other members of the family have done their best to enlighten our darkness" (HA to Cameron, 1 April 1917, *Letters*, 6:748). "Father Fay, who is one of Mrs. Wintie's spiritual advisors [visited]. . . . [T]hrough the alliance with Springy we got Arthur Balfour with one of his secretaries with Father Fay, to breakfast" (HA to Cameron, 7 May 1917, *Letters*, 6:750; on Balfour, see also 6:752, 757). "At other times the company and the conversation are more enlivening, as for example one evening when Father Fay made his appearance along with Shane Leslie" (HA to Cameron, 5 December 1917, *Letters*, 6:772).

amuse me. I like my Schopenhauer, and I like my Kelvin,—I like metaphysics and I like physics,—but I don't much care to reconcile them, though I enjoy making them fight.”⁶⁴

Adams looked forward to such a dustup in the summer of 1917, when he invited his wife's cousin, William Sturgis Bigelow, who had converted to Buddhism, to lunch with Father Fay. But Adams was disappointed in his expectation of a good Irish brawl.⁶⁵ Catholics seemed far too willing to accommodate converts, even those who refused to check their Buddhism or Kantianism at the door.

Adams was well acquainted with the fin-de-siècle habit of coming round to Rome as an escape from ennui. He had before him, at the end of his life, the story of his friend Charles Warren Stoddard. Stoddard, too, had been looking to break out of the stuffiness of Boston. He had, like Adams, traveled to the South Seas in search of unfamiliar alternatives, where he had discovered in Catholicism a form of exoticism that contented him. He had become friends with Father Damien, apostle to the leper colony on Molokai, and written a book about him. He sent Adams an autographed copy of his conversion memoir, *A Troubled Heart and How It Was Comforted*.⁶⁶ Stoddard was perhaps the first to bring a Catholic priest—Bishop John Joseph Keane of Richmond, first rector of the Catholic University of America, considered something of a liberal and a modernist—to visit Adams following his wife's death. After twice attempting to settle down to teaching literature, at the University of Notre Dame and then at the Catholic University of America, Stoddard

⁶⁴HA to Chanler, 9 September 1909, *Letters*, 6:272.

⁶⁵“We have a highly popular priest who comes from the Fays of Southboro and says he is coming to see us tomorrow for a week. You can judge what my society is. But Sturgis Bigelow threatens to come at the same time and Bessy Lodge brandishes an American banner from Nahant, also attracting the church” (HA to Cameron, 4 July 1917, *Letters*, 6:760). In a 1915 Christmas note, Adams had acknowledged a copy of William Sturgis Bigelow's 1908 *Buddhism and Immortality*: “I . . . being imbecile . . . You will, therefore, forgive me if I make no remarks on your volume, except of admiration. I will, as usual, take refuge in the Lotus. There we will meet. We shall not be alone. May the Peace of the season attend you—if you can find any” (HA to Bigelow, 26 December 1915, *Letters*, 6:711).

⁶⁶The book is in the Henry Adams Library, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

resumed his bohemian lifestyle of traveling and writing journalism. Henry Adam seems to have occasionally rescued him from debt and cared for him as one of his many orphaned nieces and nephews.⁶⁷ A wandering mystic, Stoddard never really thought of Rome as his intellectual “home.”

Adams, however, was a Puritan, even when it came to Catholicism. He preferred a good fight to an easy compromise. “As far as possible I do nothing but talk about the Council of Trent with Father Fay, and the Day of Judgment with Aileen.”⁶⁸ It may very well be that Adams resisted conversion to Catholicism because his Catholic friends were insufficiently Thomist for his taste. They were “too Jesuit”; they had compromised with Kant.

If I were really of the Church, the only thing I would insist on would be that all the Germans should get out of it. Honestly I think you don’t mind. The Church should have been so deeply grateful to Luther and Calvin and Knox and the rest, for ridding her of Germans and Swiss and Scotch and Dutch and all the most disagreeable people on earth! They all insist on our swallowing what they call Truth, which is always themselves *au lard*.

Do you ever read Kant? In the whole history of human thought, nothing so German ever was known. Kant was short of a God, and deliberately made one out of himself in his official character of German professor. His categorical imperative is the Dean of Königsberg. If any German,—not Jew,—had ever been endowed with a sense of humor, Kant would have been the noblest jest of Deity. He is the drollest of serious solemnities. I don’t get over him at all. Old as human conceit is, and weary as I am of it, Kant’s simple-minded German-professorial conceit knocks me silly, not on account of Kant but on account of the German Kantists, who still keep it up, as solemnly as in the fifteenth century when the Professor reigned unchecked.⁶⁹

This highly facetious rant captures not only Adams’s own humor but his hostility to modern thought, particularly the tendency to turn God himself into a figment of the human mind,

⁶⁷HA to Charles Warren Stoddard, 9 May 1904, *Letters*, 5:584.

⁶⁸HA to Thoron, 13 November 1917, *Letters*, 6:771.

⁶⁹HA to Chanler, 2 June 1905, *Letters*, 5:666.

to assent to God as a requirement of social or psychological utility.

"I asked him once," remembered Margaret Chanler, "how it was he did not become a Catholic, seeing he assented so warmly to what we believed. 'Do you think, my child, that Rhadamanthus would be less severe?' He said this half solemnly with a defiant twinkle in his eye."⁷⁰ Unlike the Chanlers, who enthused about Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, Adams took his stand on the "necessity of creation." The doctrine of creation was the "Q.E.D.," the *quod erat demonstrandum*; you could not bypass the question without being driven to the "unreality of all phenomena."⁷¹ "What I like most in the schoolmen is their rule of cutting infinite sequences short," he wrote. "They insist on stopping at the prime motor at once."⁷²

Henry Adams's prickly attachment to Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of creation earned him the appellation *angelicus porcupinus*. In 1904, as Adams was completing his study of the Angelic Doctor, American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens created a bronze medallion of Adams's head, above which he placed the wings of an angel and below, porcupine quills. The title stuck. In their remembrances of him, Adams's friends would resort to it as a shorthand description of his fiercely original mind and temperament.⁷³

⁷⁰Chanler, *Roman Spring*, p. 299.

⁷¹HA to Lawrence Mason, 1 April 1915, *Letters*, 6:692.

⁷²HA to Chanler, 9 September 1909, *Letters*, 6:272.

⁷³John Hay to Augustus Saint-Gaudens, 12 April 1905, in *The Life of John Hay*, ed. William Roscoe Thayer, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 2:60–61, 401; Chanler, *Roman Spring*, p. 296: "He resolved to write about Mont St. Michel and Chartres for his pleasure and that of his friends. . . . [A] college president wanted a copy and, knowing me to be a friend of Mr. Adams, wrote a beseeching letter after sending several verbal requests, but Porcupinus Angelicus put on his prickliest quills and blankly refused: 'No, the book was not written for college presidents.'" There is perhaps a reference in the appellation to Jonathan Swift's *Battle of the Books*: "Now, it must be here understood, that *Ink* is the great missive Weapon in all Battles of the *Learned*, which, convey'd through a sort of Engine call'd a *Quill*, infinite Numbers of these are darted at the Enemy, by the Valiant on each side, with equal Skill and Violence, as if it were an Engagement of Porcupines" (Jonathan Swift, "Battle of the Books," *The Writings of Jonathan Swift* [New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973], p. 378).

A month before Adams's death, on 27 March 1918, Father Fay, who had been "very much about the house" of late, suddenly departed for Rome. Adams's last comment about the genial priest is to say that Cardinal Gibbons "sent him off to Rome on an Italian freight steamer a month ago, about some matter of church politics of which I am supposed to know nothing."⁷⁴ By his final month, Adams's social circle had contracted to a small band of Catholic friends: Leslie Shane, his niece Mabel La Farge, and his personal assistant Aileen Tone. He repeatedly dismissed his own efforts to arrive at "the great ideal of Stoicism" as hopeless. In the last line of his last letter to Elizabeth Cameron, his most important correspondent following the death of his wife, he wrote, "I suppose that really the entire world is now hanging on to itself for the next month, waiting to drop into some *new* bit of darkness that it can't escape, but meanwhile we try to be cheerful and whistle our twelfth-century melodies."⁷⁵

⁷⁴HA to Cameron, 1 February 1918, *Letters*, 6:781.

⁷⁵HA to Cameron, 1 March 1918, *Letters*, 6:790.

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