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Elegy in an Urban Churchyard

The cab ride itself was brushed with irony, a Russian driver losing his way through the seamy side streets of America's capital city, trying to take us to Washington's oldest graveyard. Even when we finally passed through the iron gates of Rock Creek Cemetery, tucked away in the northern corner of the District of Columbia, the goal of our trip still proved elusive. Not until we spied a clump of high shrubbery rising amid the monuments did we guess that we had found the object of our hunt on that wet, humid afternoon. We climbed from the cab, pressed around a wall of holly, and peered inside the enclosure. There, at the far end of the garden interior on a slab of red granite rested the celebrated sculpture we had come to see. It was an arresting moment as we stood there beholding the seated bronze figure, larger than life size, with a mysterious countenance that was neither male nor female, the head draped in a flowing shroud, an arm uplifted to the chin.

We were viewing the late 19th Century masterwork of Augustus St. Gaudens, the leading American sculptor of his day. Since being placed on the National Register of Historic Places, the site has officially been designated the "Adams Memorial." But in the beginning it was meant to bear no name, nor contain any markings to indicate that buried there was the celebrated historian Henry Adams and his wife.

When in 1885 Marion Hooper Adams, who was known as "Clover," took her own life at age 42 by swallowing a vial of potassium cyanide from her photographic laboratory at her new

home on Lafayette Square near the White House, her devastated husband sought to create a memorial to her memory. He commissioned St. Gaudens, an acquaintance, to craft an image that would symbolize “the acceptance, intellectually, of the inevitable.” He offered no guidance to the artist other than mentioning Michaelangelo’s frescoes of the prophets in the Sistine Chapel and the towering Buddha he saw in Kamakura on a tour of Japan.

When these gauzy notions found form in the bronze, one writer judged the figure “the most profound work of art yet produced in America . . . singularly baffling to the matter-of-fact mind” while transcending “the utmost irony of which Adams was ever capable.”

After Mark Twain suggested the figure embodied all human suffering, visitors began calling the sculpture “Grief.” But when a Washington socialite, visiting the site, asked St. Gaudens what he named the figure, he hesitated and then said, “I call it the Mystery of the Hereafter.” “Is it not Happiness?” she asked. “No. It is beyond pain and beyond joy.”

In a letter to a friend, Adams himself wrote that “the whole meaning and feeling of the figure is in its universality and anonymity. My name for it is ‘The Peace of God’.”

In his most famous book, the much admired but strangely third-person and often opaque “*The Education of Henry Adams*,” the author broke a 20-year silence surrounding Clover’s death. He wrote that he would go to Rock Creek “to see what the figure had to say to him that was new, but, in all that it had to say, he never thought of questioning what it meant.”

He was annoyed by “high pitched, sharp nosed women” who intruded on him as he worked on the shrubbery around the gravesite. He was likewise annoyed by “every magazine writer who wants to label (the figure) some American patent medicine – Grief, Despair, Pear’s Soup, or Macy’s Men’s Suits Made to Measure.”

Adams' acerbic tongue did not deter several of those close to him from expressing disapproval. A friend of a friend found the figure "an image of pagan helplessness" that denied Clover's very identity in death. Adams' own brother, Charles, wrote that the sculpture reminded him of "a mendicant, wrapped in a horse blanket."

On that long-ago day of our memorable taxi ride, my wife and I had not sought out the gravesite as if on a juried art tour. We were more interested in trying to solve to our satisfaction the puzzle of where this brilliant, enigmatic Adams fit in America's most distinguished political family tree and, perhaps even more crucially, in the tapestry of the nation itself.

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From the outset, Adams could not help but recognize his privileged background. "Probably no child held better cards," he mused – the direct descendant of two U.S. Presidents, his great-grandfather John and grandfather John Quincy; and his father Charles Francis, whose diplomatic skills proved pivotal in preventing British intervention in the Civil War.

Young Henry's talents propelled him into a career as journalist, historian, Harvard professor, and widely recognized world traveler. He was an urbane intellectual, full of bite and wit, constantly surveying his surroundings with an ironic eye. To one biographer, he was the wisest yet weakest of the Adams men who rose to prominence.

As an historian, he undertook to document America's days as a young republic in a nine-volume masterwork that is even today a foundational source of study about the Jefferson-Madison era. He found in the circumstances of the nation's founding an authentic trust in an optimistic future. As time wore on, though, he worried whether inevitable corruptions embedded in democracies would allow the union to endure over the long term. He saw in America's

growth both success and failure. Especially did he decry the materialistic appetites of a burgeoning economy dominated by rapacious bankers, railroad barons and custodians of engorged trusts – sources of the same sort that loom today, only bearing different labels.

Two little-read novels he wrote – with the author’s name not attached – offered vivid clues to his brooding concerns. The first, a satire titled *Democracy*, told the story of a bright-eyed widow who came to Washington “because I must know whether America is right or wrong,” only to learn – through the amorous pursuit of a corrupt senator -- that the corridors of political power festered with venality. The heroine of his other novel, *Esther*, was a non-believer who lost her suitor, a New York churchman, over her lack of faith – a not-so-subtle commentary on religion’s decline in the growing secularization of the age.

Without naming names, both stories suggest in their characters the contradictions Adams found in real life. There, side by side, were the clear advances from the science-inspired Dynamo, which fascinated him so much, and the social chaos he saw unfolding around him at the same time. Why did it need to be so, he asked, almost despairing.

He turned to an unlikely period of history for solace – the 12th and 13th centuries, the height of Christian civilization in the West, a time he saw bound together by unity, faith and simplicity. “We have got to become pilgrims again,” he wrote as he journeyed to the great cathedral of Chartres with its majestic rose window that “redeems everything, dominates everything,” and to the abbey church of Mont Saint Michel, rising out of huge granite rock thrusting from the sea. In Chartres he found “an emotion, the deepest man ever felt -- the struggle of his own littleness to grasp the infinite.”

He believed that only the splendid unity that joined the elements of medieval thought could have produced such magnificent, breathtaking structures. By contrast, he argued that “science has become too complex to affirm the existence of universal truth,” unlike the metaphysics of the 12th Century where “truth was a real thing.” Thus did the Virgin confront the Dynamo in perhaps the most searching essay Henry Adams ever wrote.

He was struck by the idea that it was faith alone that held the flying buttresses in such perfect tension, central to the architectural integrity of the medieval cathedral. But he added, in words that seem prophetic about his own inner turmoil, “If Faith fails, Heaven is lost.”

In 1915, with the end of his life’s journey three years ahead, he wrote, “The only record I care to leave is St. Gauden’s figure at Rock Creek.”

I have thought often of that figure since first viewing it and of learning Adams’ own admonition that it was there to ask questions, not give answers. Henry Adams raised questions that we continue to confront today about ourselves, our culture and our political life, about America’s future as a beacon of democratic hopes, and indeed about the very rightness of its founding in the first place. Sadly, hobbled by his ironic mien, he could offer no answers, only pose more doubts about the consequences of the Dynamo, more uncertainties, more contradictions. At the same time, though, he has forced us, who admire his literary legacy, to face squarely these same timeless challenges that beset each fresh generation of Americans.

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