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## The Whiners

*Or, Henry Adams and Malcolm Cowley Complain About Life and Americans*

The first thing to cross one's mind when considering great American intellectual minds is not the squeakiest wheel getting the grease. The United States, the world's most <sup>I don't quite get this</sup> diverse nation, benefits from the coexistence of a myriad of cultures and the rich histories of intellectual thought immigrants brought with them. Why is it that some of America's most promising and thoughtful intellectual minds chose to spend much of their time in Europe complaining about the plight of the American mind? It is from the minds of Henry Adams and Malcolm Cowley that this essay will attempt to answer that question.

Henry Adams, born in 1838, was the son of Charles Adams, a late <sup>18th?</sup> 19th century ambassador to England. A blue-blooded Bostonian, he could boast of two presidents <sup>Henry</sup> <sup>in his</sup> <sup>as</sup> family, grandfather John Quincy Adams and great-grandfather John Adams. Henry Adams was Harvard ~~ed~~ educated and spent a good portion of his twenties working, studying, and touring Europe. He grew to despise men of low intellect and base emotion, <sup>a sign of</sup> ~~belaboring~~ his upper-class education and background.

something's missing here

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first World War. Cowley, born in Pittsburgh, had no family history of politics and government service to fall back on. He held a dim view of men of low intellect as well, and his writings did little to hide this bias.

Both Adams and Cowley felt strongly that their respective educations were woefully inadequate in preparing them for the real world, the world of wars, poverty, hunger, and a multitude of other injustices. Adams saw his various new adventures, whether it be working as a private secretary in the US Embassy in London or visiting Paris, Rome, and Berlin, as potential <sup>opportunities</sup> sources to continue and improve his education.

Cowley, a voluntary expatriate, dropped into the bohemian culture of 1920s Paris. Both men wrote of their displeasure with both intellectuals and education, yet neither did much to correct the situations they found themselves in.

Adams' main problem was his snobbish nature. Growing up as a socially ~~privileged~~ male, he was privy to the various advantages of upper-class 1880s and 1890s American society. Due to the increasingly anti-intellectual climate of <sup>united states</sup> US politics, Adams was unable to break into the Washington arena, and he felt himself to be an outsider who should have been a premier statesman.<sup>1</sup> Harvard, though he found it inadequate, did give him the opportunity to acquire a drinking habit and an extreme dislike of Southerners.

But doesn't his self-doubt go even deeper - doesn't he doubt whether he should be a leader?

← The failings Adams found in Southerners he was later to apply to Americans in general. At Harvard, he found his friend "Roony" Lee, son of soon-to-be Confederate

<sup>1</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973 (original publication, Massachusetts Historical Society, 1918), 51.

hero Robert E. Lee, to be simple. Based on his interactions with Lee and a small band of Southerners attending Harvard, Adams decided Southerners were "stupendously ignorant." He considered them in possession of temperament but no mind, social instinct to survive on but no intellectual skill with which to improve themselves.<sup>2</sup>

After he had spent many years existing as an English gentleman, he pegged Americans as so anti- or non-intellectual as to be ignorant of their own level of ignorance. Along with their penchant for drink, which he shared, he considered Americans to be pathetic and helpless. He believed the American mind "was not a thought at all; it was a convention, superficial, narrow, and ignorant; a mere cutting instrument, practical, economical, sharp, and direct." With his opinion of President Grant as lower class and not even worthy of existence, it is small wonder he was unable to find an administration worthy of his service.<sup>3</sup>

Though Adams considered his time at Harvard completely wasted, he did come away with some valuable intellectual insights. He discovered that Harvard, by not preparing its students for life, was failing to prepare its students to lead the nation into the 20th century, perpetuating an inferior social type, and overall having a distinctly negative effect on its students. He also stumbled upon his own weaknesses during his time there and when he followed his father to England in 1861. Charles Adams marginalized his son Henry by taking him along, which served to reinforce his

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 57-8, 100.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 180-1, 266-7, 297-8.

ineffectuality in his own mind. Henry also realized that since he preferred the ways of colonial America, old Germany, and aristocratic England, honesty and truth were an obstacle to his intellectual development.<sup>4</sup>

Cowley, on the other hand, found living in the United States <sup>to be</sup> ~~as~~ the primary obstacle to his intellectual development. Instead of attacking American intellectuals, however, Cowley attacked artists. He keyed on what he believed to be their major failing, practicing art for art's sake. He believed artists had a social responsibility to interpret reality and portray it for the public, even though they may not entirely understand the representation presented to them.<sup>5</sup> need a verb

For his absence from the American public, he is terribly critical of it. According to ?  
Cowley, Americans sharing his background had the illusion of a classless society undefined by the distinct regional differences that could lead to a wide variety of intellectual thought. He felt his generation was ignorant of its own past due to several aspects unique to them. They were called the "Lost Generation" – equivalent to the modern-day Generation X – because they weren't tied to tradition or educated in a fashion that prepared them adequately for the world they were being sent out into.<sup>6</sup>

← Like Adams, Cowley believed his generation had no worthy intellectual precedents to embrace. Both men lived in a time of devastating war, for Adams the Civil War, for

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 59, 60, 65, 83, 231-2.

<sup>5</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994 (original publication WW Norton Co., 1934), xxvii, 325.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5, 8-9.

Cowley the first World War. Both generations were forced to abandon the values and hopes of their parent's generations and cast loose into a time when they had to attempt to form their own value system. The two key events that crystallized this concept for Cowley were the 1927 executions of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti and the Stock Market Crash in 1929.<sup>7</sup> Not being party to the widespread nativism that gripped parts of the United States after World War I, the executions ~~especially must have dashed whatever~~ *Cowley must have read* hopes Cowley may have had for an upswing in American intellectualism. *otherwise doesn't make sense*

Cowley's attack on artists and more specifically <sup>or</sup> what he called the religion of art, was an analogy for what he thought of American intellectuals. Extremes were dangerous to Cowley. Just as Adams considered eccentricity to be a weakness of character, for Cowley, if an artist or intellectual held the public in contempt, then he was giving in to extremism and eccentricity and therefore doing more damage than good. This extremism is how Cowley derides Dadaist art, which he called inexplicable, <sup>al</sup> though he considered the Dada artists among the most talented in Europe. The Dada artists, unbound by any sense of anything, took their liberty to extremes, which, instead of improving their work and benefiting society, detracted from their art and was of no use to society at large.<sup>8</sup> *This is a rather American view of art, isn't it?*

Unlike Adams, who had no use for his low-brow, politically-minded contemporaries, Cowley defines his generation's intellectuals. He picks them out as independent thinkers

<sup>7</sup> Adams, xii, xxix; Cowley, xvi, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Adams, 193; Cowley 147, 151-2.

who value ideas above their own interests and prejudices.<sup>9</sup> This is Cowley's saving grace; though he complains about much, he is able to put his finger on a concrete definition of both himself and his equals in the 1920s. Adams does little but bemoan his poor education. Cowley at least accepts part of the blame for his own inadequate education; he feels he was victim of the system he helped perpetuate. Adams, on the other hand, merely played the victim for the majority of his life, wondering why the intellectual climate was so inhospitable to him despite his background. Cowley realized that his generation was one of transition – an observation lost on Adams – and that he had little reason to be overly critical of himself and his contemporaries.<sup>10</sup> Both Henry Adams and

Malcolm Cowley were American intellectuals, though it is likely neither of them realized

*how much they exemplified its dilemmas  
it during their own lifetimes.*

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good effort and good  
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so cryptic as page one was.*

<sup>9</sup> Cowley, 219.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 226.