

OLAF HANSEN

# Aesthetic Individualism and Practical Intellect

*American Allegory in Emerson, Thoreau,  
Adams, and James*



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**AESTHETIC INDIVIDUALISM AND  
PRACTICAL INTELLECT**



*Aesthetic Individualism and  
Practical Intellect*

AMERICAN ALLEGORY IN  
EMERSON, THOREAU, ADAMS,  
AND JAMES



OLAF HANSEN

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*For*  
DANIEL AARON  
*and*  
MARTIN CHRISTADLER  
TEACHERS AND FRIENDS



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## PREFACE

Between so many possible beginnings, middles, and endings, we always identify aspects of a moral culture which we would like to call our past, our tradition. We have to make a choice and must face what William James, in a brief essay published in 1906, called "a certain ultimate hardihood, a certain willingness to live without assurances or guarantees." The existence of a moral culture, in other words, always depends upon the conscious act of making sense, knowing well enough, as William James put it, that we all "live on some inclined plane of credulity." To claim the right to the inheritance of a moral culture means to admit a specific history of both selfhood and knowledge. In fact, the title which William James gave to his essay, "The Absolute and the Strenuous Life," can be read today like a summary of all the possible fates selfhood and knowledge could have chosen as paths towards their own history out of the nineteenth century into modernity.

Broadly speaking, in this book my only concern is to unfold one particular strand within the complex history of both selfhood and knowledge in the American nineteenth century. The history in question refers to the kind of selfhood and knowledge which have tried to resist what Max Weber called the inevitable course of the disenchanted world towards a closed, bureaucratized system of rationality. Men like Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James knew that in order to make sense they had to accept the limits of preliminary selfhood and knowledge. It was a kind of acceptance, however, which had its rewards. To the degree that since the beginning of the nineteenth century the amount of possible choices offering themselves to the self increased so rapidly that the fear of social anomie became a widespread obsession, the preliminary self defied its integration into the order of social structures. Also, the kind of self-choice which preferred to confront "the

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whole body and drift of all the truths in sight," to refer once more to William James, was not only unable to "let loose quietistic raptures," it also invented a specific language and genre to express the seriousness of making sense as part of a general aesthetic endeavor. The aesthetic endeavor was a way of creating a morally practical unity of life knowing that the creative will would always remain a quest. So, from the very beginning, the conception of the self we are talking about and the kind of knowledge it helped to preserve and to produce were both oriented towards transcendence and towards practicality. Aesthetic individualism and practical intellect, in the American nineteenth century, had become the essential elements of a philosophical style which promised a kind of morality which would be generalized without destroying particularity and individualism.

Out of this genuine American philosophical style, a mode of thought which basically tried to negate the difference between life and art, the form of allegorical expression arose as the most suitable one for the purpose of making sense by preferring the fragment to the system. The language of allegory was subversive, it did not avoid hermeticism or paradox, it frequently was meant to be understood by only a few and always made heavy demands on those who cared to listen. Undoubtedly the American allegory of the nineteenth century revealed definite gnostic aspects as well. The American allegory was the perfect expression for a mode of thought which had to be philosophical within a tradition which quickly moved from secularization to professionalization. In short, the American allegory, simply because as an intellectual and artistic style it allowed the expression of conflicts and contradictions, kept a sense of tradition alive, when it was most threatened, by the old dilemma of having to choose between absolute subjectivity on the one hand and absolute objectivity on the other. Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James refused to make a choice. In a letter to his friend Charles Milner Gaskell, in 1891, Henry Adams presented his own position in a way which could easily serve as a categorical imperative for society in general: "The moral seems to be that every man should write his own life, to prevent some other fellow from taking it. The moral is always worse than the vicious alternative, and after all, the sacrifice would not ensure safety." A working tradition will have to live without the idea of its own biography. The American allegory drawing upon the past as much as it pointed towards the future, simply by insisting on the sensibility of keeping questions open and alive, has managed to make that part of our own tradition accessible to us which we are most likely to forget: in order to live our lives

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within a moral culture we have to remake it again and again. There is no other choice if we want to make sense.

Many individuals and institutions have given invaluable help in the process of writing this book. The American Council of Learned Societies first provided a generous fellowship that allowed me to start this project, which was finally finished during a year at the magnificent National Humanities center, North Carolina. The generosity and help which I have experienced at the Center cannot be praised enough. I want to express my profound gratitude to both the staff and to my wonderful cofellows. From among the many colleagues and friends who have helped me through their criticism and reassurance I can name only a few:

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Frankfurt am Main

December 1987



**AESTHETIC INDIVIDUALISM AND  
PRACTICAL INTELLECT**



## INTRODUCTION

Vision precedes language. The cultural process of transforming time into history reflects this order of precedence. In fact, it is the tension between vision and language which provides the elementary energy which it takes to create meaning. The true *epoché*, therefore, often produces forms of expression, which by means of intricate and highly configurative rhetoric try to recapture, as Francis Bacon put it, the "volume of creation."

Within the context of the American Renaissance, it was Emerson's theory of vision and language which more than anything else served to radicalize the idea of the epochal moment as one of reflection and redefinition. It is true, of course, that for the historian whose task it is to demonstrate continuities, it is the event which marks the period it helped to create. But even at its most accessible level of historiographical narrative, the representation of events frequently turns into the kind of discourse which points to itself as a reminder of its origin.

It is not surprising, then, that Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the reliable though not philosophically inclined chronicler of New England events, has given us one of the most perceptive accounts of the epochal qualities of the year 1836. Drawing upon the whole arsenal of visual metaphors which informed the era of transcendentalism as a culturally specific period in the American intellectual history Higginson puts the year into a double perspective, thus emphasizing the mythical function of the historically decisive *epoché*.

What is called the Transcendental movement amounted essentially to this: that about the year 1836 a number of young people in America made the discovery that, in whatever quarter of the globe they happened to be, it was possible for them to take a look at the stars for themselves. This discovery no doubt led to extrav-



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agances and follies; the experimentalists at first went stumbling about, like the astrologer in the fable with their eyes on the heavens; and at Brook Farm they, like him, fell into a ditch. No matter!<sup>1</sup>

"Looking at the stars for themselves" is the quintessential expression of asserted selfhood; it represents the evidence of man's ability and will to make sense in clear view of what he will never reach. The tragic potential of such self-consciousness would always be a reminder of what young H. D. Thoreau identified as man's fate. "How alone must our life be lived! We dwell on the seashore, and none between us and the sea . . . The weakest child is exposed to the fates henceforth as barely as its parents. Parents and relations but entertain the youth; they cannot stand between him and his destiny. This is the one bare side of every man. There is no fence; it is clear before him to the bounds of space."<sup>2</sup>

The clear view of the unattainable lends identity to our existence in this world *because* we cannot integrate the cosmos. So then, whatever shape each individual's existence will have, its identity is derivative of a purity of vision which can only be defined in terms of its unworldliness. Hence the worldly, practical consequences of our quest for identity.

Higginson is drawn in by his first line about taking "a look at the stars for themselves" and must reveal its pagan substance by quoting a fable, which itself has served in the course of time as a commentary on the worldly fate of vision.<sup>3</sup> Whether we think of Plato's version of the fable, or of its original content within the Aesopian context or remember Bacon's comments on the astronomer's fall: the transcendental movement, in Higginson's words is firmly placed as a beginning which clearly has its own tradition. The fact that Higginson picked this particular anecdote to illustrate what he thought to be characteristic of the transcendentalist movement attests to more than the mere durability of the fable itself. It is the way in which the sense of the fable is produced which allows Higginson to shed some light on how the transcendentalist movement was perceived. By linking the subjective

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (New York, 1968), p. 133. All quotations from Higginson are from the 1968 reprint. The book was first published in 1884.

<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau* (New York, 1962) 1: 239. All quotations from Thoreau's *Journal* are taken from the Dover edition, a reprint of the fourteen-volume Houghton Mifflin edition of 1906.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Blumenberg, "Der Sturz des Protophilosophen," *Poetik und Hermeneutik* 7 (1977): 11-64.

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traces of transcendentalism to its political background, his densely packed statement opens a clear vista on the transcendentalist movement and its self-conception; on its peculiar blend of Enlightenment and romanticism, of subjectivity and of the function of the objective reality it kept probing.

Even if Higginson does not exploit his material to its full extent, he manages to outline its potential. Ingeniously he gives credit to the transcendentalist's originality, by discarding the importance of the failure of Brook Farm.

There were plenty of people to make a stand in behalf of conventionalism in those very days; the thing most needed was a few fresh thinkers, a few apostles of the ideal; and they soon made their appearance in good earnest. The first impulse, no doubt, was in the line of philosophic and theological speculation; but the primary aim announced on the very first page of the "Dial" was "to make new demands on literature." It is in this aspect that the movement must especially be treated here.<sup>4</sup>

One would expect, after such self-exhortation, that Higginson should move on to a description of literary theories or at least to some preferences of artistic taste as advanced in the *Dial*. But there is no easy escape from the metaphysical content of his beginning. In a circular movement he returns to his primary image and then adds to its meaning. As a result, he also enhances the meaning of the fable mentioned earlier.

The moment they made the discovery that they could see the universe with their own eyes, they ceased to be provincial. . . . After all, narrowness or enlargement are in the mind. Mr. Henry James, turning on Thoreau the reverse end of a remarkable good telescope, pronounces him "parochial" because he made the woods and waters of Concord, Massachusetts, his chief theme. The epithet is consciously felicitous. To be parochial is to turn away from the great and look at the little; the daily newspapers of Paris afford the best illustration of this fault.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of Henry James reversing the telescope demonstrates the ambivalence of progress. The original version of Emerson or Thoreau could not have been reversed. Instead they desperately tried to maintain the validity of a personal, technically unmediated interaction with

<sup>4</sup> Higginson, *Ossoli*, p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

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the world around them. Thus they not only accepted without program or ideology the limitations of the mind's place in nature, they also faced the dilemma of having lost faith in the substance of idealism without being able to replace it with some kind of acceptable realism. The awareness of man's uncertain position in a world of seemingly unlimited varieties of reality which Emerson and Thoreau shared with both Henry Adams and William James can hardly be overestimated.

At the same time, however, it was the very fact of these men's acceptance of a limitation as to what kind of truth one could possibly expect from personal vision as a basis of experience which allowed the introduction, and as a logical result, the reversal of the telescope as a reality-constructing tool of the intellect by their opponents.

Even if the time sequences between the fable of Thales of Miletus and the reminder of the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* in Higginson's placing of the transcendentalists will eventually confirm our suspicion that the American Renaissance owed more of its characteristics to the legacy of the Enlightenment than to romanticism, we have to admit that by mere force of protest, Higginson admits an interesting defeat. The machinery of refined vision, the telescope or microscope, is indeed an indicator of a hope of improvement. The defeat in question begins with Thoreau, on whom, according to Higginson, the telescope is reversed. Emerson after all, would hardly have liked to admit that an optical device could fundamentally change the meaningful and sensible relation between the eye and the horizon. If, then, Higginson tries to aid Thoreau, it is in the spirit of Emerson. But the spirit has become abstract, for Emerson would have denied the primary importance of the telescope as a means of improved vision. He saw himself much more naturally in the role of the observer than Thoreau would.<sup>6</sup> His mild and yet clear remarks on the faculties of the naturalist in his journal and in his lectures demonstrate this aptly. Higginson's final defense goes to Thoreau—and, in the end, to Margaret Fuller Ossoli, when he writes: "It is not parochial, but the contrary, when Dr. Gould spends his life in watching the stars from his lonely observatory in Paraguay; or when Lafargue erects his isolated studio among the Paradise Rocks near Newport; or when Thoreau studies birds and bees, Iliads and Vedas, in his little cottage by Lake Walden. To look out of the little world into the great, that is enlargement; all else is parochialism."<sup>7</sup>

As the passage from Higginson's book on Margaret Fuller Ossoli

<sup>6</sup> Thoreau repeatedly referred to the activities of observing and recording as naming.

<sup>7</sup> Higginson, *Ossoli*, p. 134.

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shows, it was not that simple; even a very brief account of what made the year 1836 so special had to work with a variety of layers of meaning. The influence of the available contemporary knowledge does not suffice in order to explain the specific quality of a disruptive beginning within an ongoing tradition. As Higginson correctly observes: "The sources of intellectual influence then most powerful in England, France, and Germany, were accessible and potent in America also . . . thanks to this general fact, that the best literature is transportable and carries the same weight everywhere, these American innovators, living in Boston and Cambridge and Concord, had for literary purposes a cosmopolitan training. This advantage would, however, have been of little worth to them unless combined with the consciousness that they were living in a new world and were part of a self-governing nation."<sup>8</sup>

Once more, Higginson, by way of quoting from the young Robert Bartlett's "Master of Arts oration" held in 1839, demonstrates how the national consciousness which he mentioned earlier on would have to invent a particular language of self-reference.

Let us come and live, and know in living a high philosophy and faith, so shall we find now, here, the elements, and in our own good souls the fire. Of every stories bay and cliff and plain, we will make something infinitely nobler than Salamis or Marathon. This pale Massachusetts sky, this sandy soil and raw wind, all shall nurture us, . . . Rich skies, fair fields shall come to us, suffused with the immortal hues of spirit, of beauteous act and thought. Unlike all the word before us, our own age and land shall be classic to ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

In its final turn of temporal structure, the move is made, from an appeal to the future to the rhetoric of allegory. The desire to "be classic to ourselves" will never be fulfilled, and it is the very statement of such a wish, which implies the realization of its impossibility. We can go one step further than this. The appeal to the future establishes the future as an authoritative and authentic fact of history's progression, whereas the temporal impossibility of being classical to oneself acknowledges the fact of infinite nonidentity. The language of the American allegory has legitimized the transition from the insight into the fundamental impossibility of becoming classical to oneself—that is, an authority over one's own existence in time—to the formalized ex-

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134, 136.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

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pression of the insistence that the pursuit of the unattainable literally *makes sense*.

The claims of intellectual history must be modest: for the sake of its authenticity it has to work by exclusion. Any argument, then, made within the limits of the mind at work creates an enormous, sometimes an overwhelming, background. The obvious question is: how can one not talk about the social, political, and economical dimensions of whatever we think history is all about? If we want to avoid the fray of meta-disciplinary discourse concerned with defining the method and scope of intellectual history, the answer to the question raised will have to be given in the form of a simple proposition. We assume that an advanced, complex, and self-conscious mode of thought exists which addresses itself to comprehensive problems of humankind. Max Weber, who has tried to outline the characteristics of the intellectual in his *Economy and Society*, has coined the phrase of the intellectual's "soteriological" disposition. What he meant was, quite simply, that an unbiased analysis of society will have to account for the existence of a kind of individual who becomes preoccupied with metaphysical problems and questions concerning the idea of a sensible world as a whole, without being forced to do so by external pressures. These people do not look for a way out of a desperate situation—they desperately try to understand the larger design. If there is any specific disposition which we can call their very own, it is the desire to understand the sense and the order of a world which they find elusive, puzzling, enigmatic, and often quite chaotic. It is these people's way of dealing with the world which is under scrutiny here—under scrutiny in its particular form as it has been produced in the second half of the nineteenth century in America.

All we have said so far helps to distinguish the "man of letters" from the intellectual in the modern sense of the word. It is, in fact, one of the disturbing findings with which we have to come to terms, that the modern intellectual, emerging as a social type in America after the turn of the century reacted very strongly to outside social, political, or ideological pressures, whereas it is the man of letters who is driven by the "soteriological" desire which Max Weber talks about. His wish to order the world in such modes of thought which recognizes, identifies, and interprets problems which go beyond particular or special-interest groups is by its very nature the primary subject matter of intellectual history. The rest follows.

Man thinking, to borrow a phrase from Ralph Waldo Emerson, is the center of intellectual history. We are dealing with active minds cre-

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ating a tradition, claiming the right to do so from an independent point of view and fully aware of the fact that others who do not participate in the making of both culture and tradition will have to live within the boundaries which such making necessitates. If we look at the four men who represent what is the allegorical tradition in American culture, Emerson, Thoreau, Henry Adams, and William James, we are struck immediately by the fact that they "represent" in a strange way. They are certainly not part of what Raymond Williams would have called the "dominant culture" of their time, and yet, if we look for the larger questions raised within the turmoil of the American nineteenth century, we turn to them and follow their discussion of the issues at stake. If we want to appreciate the full body of their intellectual substance, we will have to acknowledge that all four allowed themselves a certain aloofness from pressing social matters of the day. They were, all of them in significantly different ways, masters of distantiation. Occasionally this attitude of non-involvement has embarrassed historians of culture to such an extent that they have felt obliged to take it upon themselves to concentrate on social and economic as well as political matters, which they thought to have been unduly neglected. Such noble labor has produced fine, historically detailed accounts of the material emergence of American society.<sup>10</sup> But as a reaction to the suspicious detachment from vital social problems which Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James seem to display, it misses the point. Intellectual distance was their only way to *make sense*! The making of sense was their true business and it is, of course, this effort which constitutes the allegorical tradition.

The particular blend of practical intellect and aesthetic individualism which we find represented in their endeavor to create a reasonably controlled plurality of coherent links of meaning in a fundamentally indeterminate, chaotic universe is the main characteristic of the American tradition of allegory. It is a *mode of thought* which sees itself as practical action *in essence*. If we look at the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James in this light as expressions of the tension which such self-conception creates, we will have to admit that it is the fate of any theoretical conceptualization to be too late, when confronted with original thought. It would be a mistake, then, to impose upon the driving force of the allegorical tradition such theoretical constraints as we find in the theory of "symbolic action" or in a theory of alienation. The framework of such discourse would plainly destroy the

<sup>10</sup> See Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York, 1982). Trachtenberg also provides a useful and extensive bibliographical essay on related works.

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very substance of the allegorical tradition: its counterfactual promise that there is meaning in man's paradoxical struggle with nature. The knowledge that the struggle must be fought—and will be lost—is an essential part of the allegorical tradition, a fact which we find confirmed if we pay attention to the sudden disappearance of this awareness at the turn of the century. A final glimpse of what had been a tradition at work before its replacement can be caught in Randolph Bourne's fall from Deweyite optimism into bitter but helpless despair.<sup>11</sup>

To the generation of young intellectuals at the turn of the century the world seemed full of possibilities. The profound knowledge about the hard facts of limitation had disappeared as a visible part of the public, collective consciousness. Hardly anyone cared to point out the limitations of professionalization. If we fail to be amazed by the questions which the generation of 1910 did *not* ask, when we look at them from the perspective of the nineteenth century, we can hardly miss the tone of certainty and purpose in the prose of someone like Van Wyck Brooks in his essays on American culture and its discontents. What we find is an almost technologically organized blueprint of how things *must* be, were they to be well—what we miss is the skeptical quality of the allegorical sense of history. Gone is the noetic quality which puts the reader's ability to think an argument through to a severe but wholesome test, and gone is the quality which Angus Fletcher holds up as an essential element of allegory: its tendency toward "a human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language which tries to preserve the remoteness of a properly god-head."<sup>12</sup>

There is little sensitivity for all that is so typical of allegorical prose to be found in the cultural criticism of Van Wyck Brooks.<sup>13</sup>

Allegory as a mode of representation had been safely delegated to the realms of poetry and fiction. In fact, there was no use for the allegorical mode of thought that men of letters like Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James represented. With the establishment of philosophy, with the establishment that is of departments of philosophy and of sociology in the universities, the process of professionalization had reached a point which made the kind of discourse which had created

<sup>11</sup> Olaf Hansen, ed., *The Radical Will: Randolph Bourne, Selected Writings* (New York, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1964), p. 221.

<sup>13</sup> Van Wyck Brooks's early cultural criticism is extremely straightforward and causal in its analysis of what he perceived to be the roots of the alleged American cultural poverty.

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the allegorical tradition obsolete. But what if this kind of obsolescence has to be seen as a symptom rather than as a solution? What if we need to know what allegory tells us: That the *provisional making* of sense will continue and must?

The following chapters, to a large extent, will address problems and fundamental issues which the function of the American allegory raises. Their problems are more or less clearly defined by the emergence of American allegory out of a Puritan tradition. I say "more or less," in order to avoid the erroneous assumption that there is one particular and specific point of origin from which we can safely depart. The opposite is the case: we not only lack any kind of primary matrix which could be outlined as a well-defined birthplace of tradition, but we have to take into account further considerations which press the issue that whatever we call the Puritan tradition is already a result rather than a beginning. Whenever we call something, by title or denotation, of "Puritan" origin, we must admit at once that we refer to a visible segment of a larger, partly invisible whole. Therefore, the Puritan tradition we talk about and which we see as an active force in the formation of the American allegory is a tradition which at the beginning of the nineteenth century had become part of a highly complex social process.

The main characteristic of this social development was an increasing modernization of the social system expressing itself above all in an acceleration of secularized social subsystems. The rapid emergence of extremely differentiated and functionally interdependent subsystems within a growing and cohesive society as a whole created both private and collective worlds of everyday life and of not so quotidian vision which had to compete and to coexist at the same time. Such issues cannot be simplified.

If the term culture in this context is often used with a certain capaciousness, it is done so with the idea in mind that those interdependent subsystems which we arrange under the rubric of culture, in order to be functionally interrelated at all, had to necessarily maintain a specific amount of autonomy. When allegory emerges as a mode of thought, it is in order to acknowledge this Janus-faced quality of what we call the cultural experience. In this sense, then, the seemingly private intellectual worlds created by Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and William James were in a genuine dialectical way part of the collective American cultural history as it unfolded throughout the nineteenth century.

The second major concern of our argument about the role of the American allegory in the transformation of the American cultural tra-



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dition is the particular nature of this tradition itself and the peculiar process of its formation. Once again the concession must be made that the use of the word *tradition*, here, applies to a rather large segment of accessible history. If the use of such terms as *culture* and *tradition* seems to be rather loose and encompassing, that use is limited to a manageable size by our working hypothesis that the allegorical mode of thought articulates only a small part of the cultural history under discussion. It expresses, and here lies the limitation, precisely those otherwise latent energies in the making of a cultural tradition which the overt culture has tried to repress, to ignore, or to replace. The overt culture, the visible and, last but not least, the practical side of it, prefers manifestations of absolute truths, broken down into neat bits and pieces yielding to an impatient mind. Thus the movement of cultural history is explained in terms of class struggle, of generational conflict, in the name of progress or manifest destiny and other, similar concepts. Naturally all these concepts serve a purpose and have a certain, though somewhat reductivist, explanatory value. But as William James has pointed out, quoting the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard: "We live forward but we understand backward." The mere fact, therefore, that we can always ask another sensible question about our past indicates that the transformation within the flow of tradition works according to a pattern of forgetting and remembrance which we must try to decipher, even though, or rather *because*, we are part of this pattern.

We are, in other words, always part of an invisible sector of tradition, a fact which we can only discuss in a terminology of nonidentity. The American man of letters in the nineteenth century was aware of this fact, often to the point of despair. If we look at the work of the men we have chosen to discuss, or if we take the example of historians like Prescott and his colleagues, we never cease to be amazed to what an extent extreme self-doubt and overwhelming productivity seemed to coexist. The answer to our amazement lies of course exactly in the quality of the self-doubt from which the man of letters seems to suffer, a kind of self-doubt which is radically different from what a later generation would describe in terms of an identity crisis. Henry Adams, in his own inimitable style of self-reference, has sketched for us the quality in question in *The Education*, and to the extent that his observation is made from hindsight we may safely assume that it can be generalized, applying to a whole generation of hearty self-doubters.

As it happened, he never got to the point of playing the game at all; he lost himself in the study of it, watching the errors of the

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players; . . . The habit of doubt; of distrusting his own judgement and of totally rejecting the judgement of the world; the tendency to regard every question as open; the hesitation to act except as a choice of evils; the shirking of responsibility; the love of line, form, quality, the horror of ennui; the passion for companionship and the antipathy to society—all these are well-known qualities of New England character in no way peculiar to individuals.<sup>14</sup>

The last, of course, is not true, even if Henry Adams in order to justify *his* generalization, evokes the familiar topos of the climate as the great generalizing force to which, after all, all men are exposed.

New England was harshness of contrast and extremes of sensibility—a cold that froze the blood, and a heat that boiled it—so that the pleasure of hating—oneself if no better victim offered—was not its rarest amusement; but the charm was a true and natural child of the soil, not a cultivated weed of the ancients. The violence of the contrast was real and made the strongest motive of education. The double exterior nature gave life its relative values. Winter and summer, cold and heat, town and country, force and freedom, marked two modes of life and thought, balanced like lobes of the brain.<sup>15</sup>

Suffice it to say here that not everybody is equally susceptible to the weather and that the next generation of city intellectuals would inhabit a totally different climate of their own making. What Henry Adams really tells us in the brief passage just quoted is that such qualities of self-doubt as he playfully ascribes to everybody are in fact a rare gift in need of defense. Self-hatred, to utilize his own phrase, is hardly everyone's pleasure—and again, in the language of theory, we might say that seeing the world in terms of nonidentity was the gift of those men of letters, who adopted the allegorical mode of thought as their way of expressing a fear about the future. The self, then, which so productively doubted acted out the fear of self-loss. Self-doubt, to put it differently, was in many ways an act of anticipation and resistance.

Anticipations of the kind which we find represented in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and William James only become a visible part of tradition, if they are “successful,” the measure of success being the degree to which the object of their anxiety would become itself

<sup>14</sup> Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston, 1973), p. 4. All subsequent quotations from *The Education* come from the Riverside edition, edited by Ernest Samuels.

<sup>15</sup> Adams, *Education*, p. 7.

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part of reality. If it is true, then, that the allegorical mode of thought as adopted by Emerson and those who would become the carriers of the transcendentalist's legacy, represented among other motives a choice, we must raise and answer the question whether this choice, by the standards of success mentioned above, was a reasonable one.

Our answer, by way of introduction, must necessarily be brief. It may, at first glance, seem like an odd choice on our part to place someone like William James, and with him, of course, large parts of pragmatism into an allegorical tradition which began with Emerson's version of transcendentalism. But the author of *The Pluralistic Universe* defended exactly the same qualities of self-doubt which Henry Adams had described in such a different fashion. Together with Emerson and Thoreau the insistence of their defense is on the legitimacy of pretheoretical experience—which is not the same as random subjectivity! Their fear was that the right to self-doubt would become obsolete in a social context which did not allow for doubt, and consequently not for choice either. The sociological blueprint as envisioned by Lester Ward's idea of "social telesis" would indeed leave little room for qualified doubting. After the turn of the century, with the rise of a new class of intellectuals, the arrival of which, ironically enough, James himself would proudly proclaim in the pages of the *New Republic*, the question asked demanded an answer. The freedom which the idea of self-doubt had helped to establish a few decades earlier was irrevocably gone. Even if Dewey's optimism and the spirit of the New proved the point of pessimists of the nineteenth century only in so far as they confirmed the innermost anxieties which Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and William James expressed in their allegorical defense of the self, we can hardly avoid listening to the voices of such minor figures as Isaac Rosenfeld. Rosenfeld, a few decades later, once again confronted with a different reality, would in a manner of despair not unfamiliar to the student of the nineteenth century confirm that age's worst fears as expressed in the allegorical tradition: self-doubt as a condition of freedom had become obsolete, like the self which had vanished in the true heart of darkness of western civilization. In a brief essay, printed in the *Partisan Review* in 1949, he outlines "a few propositions" emphasizing at the same time that "the argument can be expanded in all directions."

Evoking Nietzsche's idea about joy which wants "deep profound eternity" as his beginning he goes on to describe what he calls the main reality, because it is the model reality.

The concentration camp is the model educational system and the model form of communality. These are abstract propositions, but