

Publication

The Desire for Unity and Its Failure: Reading Henry Adams through Michel Serres

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This article charts passages between Michel Serres's *Genesis* and Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*. Both works can be read as an extended reflection on the relationship between unity and multiplicity. Both works also share a range of metaphors to sketch out the idea of the multiple: chaos, noise, crowds, the sea. The two writers' handling of these metaphors is, however, diametrically opposed. While the patrician Adams abhors chaos, the noise of the crowd and conceives of war as "the surf of a wild ocean" (110), Serres values these metaphors because they allow him to imagine an escape from rationalist reason, which is to him "a vehicle of death" (73). These differences point to a more fundamental distinction between Serres's and Adams's thoughts. As a historian and a life-long student in search of an education, Adams desires unity because "running order through chaos, direction through space, discipline through freedom, unity through multiplicity, has always been and must always be, the task of education" (17) and because, to his nineteenth-century mind, "history had no use for multiplicity; it needed unity" (359). Serres, on the other hand, rejects the move from multiplicity to unity as an inherently violent act: "It is to forget the press of the throng in fury, to repress the multitude and the population, that the furious hero and the orderly army are made ready, constructed, represented" (54). Adams does betray an awareness of this problematic when he writes in the wake of the Civil War that "Law should be Evolution from lower to higher, aggregation of the atom in the mass, concentration of multiplicity in unity, compulsion of anarchy in order; and he would force himself to follow wherever it led, though he should sacrifice five thousand millions more in money, and a million more lives" (224). The ultimate failure of Adams's project in the light of a twentieth-century "multiverse" (433), in which "[m]odern science guaranteed no unity" (407), and his realization that "Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man" (427), therefore comes as a redemptive gesture that foreshadows Michel Serres's conviction that "[t]he multiple as such [...] is not an epistemological monster, but on the contrary the ordinary lot of situations" (5).

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