Henry Adams's *Democracy*: Intelligence, Sentiment, and Politics in the American 1880s

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Abstract

This article considers Henry Adams's 1880 novel *Democracy* in the context of his lobbying for civil-service reform, to show how the novel mobilizes proto-eugenic discourses of measurable "intelligence" and biological "merit" in its depiction of the characteristics Adams demanded of political actors in the new post-bellum era of American capitalist imperialism. Drawing on recent critical work on bio-power and sentimental culture by Kyla Schuller and the history of the emotions by Sianne Ngai, I show how Adams's novel predicts the system of Progressive Era biopolitics in its picture of idealized, modern, "meritocratic" forms of governance, and in so doing forecloses post-war processes of democratization in the service of efficient, "intelligently"-directed, and panoptic capitalist-state power.

Intelligence is a primary ingredient in the Wealth of Nations. Where this does not stand at the head of the inventory, the items in a nation's valuation will be few, and the sum at the foot of the column insignificant.

*Horace Mann, The Tenth Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education, 1847*

Henry Adams’s *Democracy: An American Novel* (originally published anonymously in 1880) concludes with an intriguing claim by the protagonist, Madeleine Lightfoot-Lee, which she has inserted as a postscript at the bottom of a letter by her sister to her Southern friend John Carrington. Madeleine writes that in response to her decision to reject the advances of the loathsome Silas Ratcliffe and leave America for the refinement of Europe, “[t]he bitterest part of all this horrid story is that nine out of ten of our countrymen would say I had made a mistake” (Adams, *Novels* 184). The sentiment Adams’s heroine expresses is designed to elicit the audience’s sympathy for her plight, which corresponds with the norms of the sentimental novel as Glenn Hendler, Elizabeth Barnes, and others have described it in highlighting how virtuous, moral, White womanhood might suffer unjustly at the hands of an unrefined, cruel, masculine world. Yet, the evocation of ten percent as the statistical measure of an enlightened class is more than just Adams’s self-lacerating comment on the generally poor taste and judgment of modern Ameri-
The assessment resonates significantly within a novel that, when read alongside Adams’s own vociferous appeals for reform from the 1860s onwards, makes a strong case for the need for the United States to restrain the Jacksonian “spoils system” for government appointments and move to a modern system of examination and professionalization in the Civil Service, an institution of “meritocracy” as a condition of political governance. In his 1869 essay “Civil Service Reform” in the North American Review, Adams describes reform of civil service appointment procedures as essential if America was to occupy the highest position in global systems of governance and trade. Two years after Adams published Democracy, the Senate passed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act, expanding the U.S. Civil Service Commission and instituting a system of competitive examinations, based on British and Chinese models, for around ten percent of civil service positions. Under the Directorship of the first Commissioner of the U.S. Civil Service Commission, Dorman Bridgman Eaton (who had been an active force for reform in New York City), the agency was tasked with administering and monitoring this new system of competitive examinations for appointments to the civil service. The new organization was controversial and deemed by many from the beginning to be another form of partisanship and elitism. This forced the U.S. Civil Service Commission into the position of regularly checking the neutrality of its appointees and expanded the available surveillance powers of the Federal Government.

Madeleine’s nine out of ten also resonates with the logic of “The Talented Tenth” (to borrow for a wider American society the term W. E. B. Du Bois used in relation to an African American form of racial uplift), a vision of democracy that foregrounded elite ability as a necessary condition for successful governance. This notion received further social confirmation after 1916, when the Stanford-Binet intelligence testing system devised by Lewis M. Terman controversially characterized human intelligence as a normal distribution, with around one-third of people scoring in the median range and approximately ten to twelve percent, with marks above 110, scoring in the highest three categories, labeled as “Superior Intelligence,” “Very Superior Intelligence,” and “Genius, or Near Genius.” It may seem counterintuitive to equate the cultural traditions of sentimentalism Madeleine expresses in her tragic line (with its vision of an idealized sensibility crushed under the heel of cruel, unthinking partisanship) with the hereditary brutality of Terman’s eugenic IQ science. However, in this article I use the work of Kyla Schuller on the “biopolitics of feeling” and Sianne Ngai on the history of the emotions to demonstrate how understanding Henry Adams’s novel requires us to reckon with the fact that for Adams, writing in the late nineteenth century, sentimental affectivity and proto-eugenic thinking on “intelligence” shared a common conceptual space and determined the role an individual could and should play in republican governance.

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1 See Adams, “Civil Service Reform.” Adams was one of a number of reformers who lobbied to establish a Civil Service based on merit and not on partisan selection. Following the passage of the Pendleton Reform Act in 1883, the U.S. government expanded the powers of the U.S. Civil Service Commission, which had come into existence in 1871 during the administration of Ulysses S. Grant.

2 For more on the fascinating parallels between Du Bois’s and Adams’s theories of aesthetics and the social, see Field.
As a young man, Adams had read and absorbed the classics of nineteenth-century liberalism. According to Leslie Butler, the works of John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville in particular, “appealed to the young New Englander in their defense of intellectual authority and their belief in the need for educated intelligence in a representative government” (86). They, like Adams, tended to venerate the intellect and worry about the degenerative effects democracy could precipitate on culture and ideas. Moreover, Adams’s work as a journalist in his “reform moment” from 1865-1890 was fixated on aspects of the liberal tradition that seemed to justify the importance of maintaining a natural, social elite. The question was what, precisely, were the attributes of this elite in the post-Civil-War United States, and how could these attributes be described scientifically and thus utilized for politics? For Adams, the elite were characterized by sensitivities that distinguished them from their fellows. The sense of historical attunement and discomfort with the political status quo felt only by a select group has been described by Jonathan Flatley in terms of the “modernist’s” skill for “affective mapping”; to perceive “subjective emotional life as the precipitate formed by the intersection of a set of social processes and institutions” (105). This ability is described in Adams’s Democracy (and, later, in The Education) as an “intelligence” manifested externally as a restlessness with the insufficiencies of the workaday world that might be productively channeled towards civic duty and action. Importantly, Adams was also committed to a sentimental and familial form of political thought that characterized the ideal preservers of U.S. political unity in terms of their capacities for what Brian Duff has described in gendered terms as a maternal, unconditional “love.” Duff has noted that across his work, from the early journalism through his 1870s lectures and writings on the “Primitive Rights of Women” to the novels, the long essay Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres, and, eventually, The Education, Adams cleaved to a certain form of the sentimental tradition and believed the procreative family was the best source of a unity that is resilient enough to allow for and accommodate diversity and multiplicity. According to Adams, masculine attempts to forge unity out of multiplicity and chaos, particularly heroic feats of theology and political theory, could not accommodate diversity within their rigid structures of reason […]. Adams believed that a reverence for a procreative sphere, centered on woman and child, provides the best grounding for the political capacity to create a unity that can accommodate diversity and forgive failure. (288)

Adams’s use of the female-centered sentimental novel in Democracy thus brings together two discourses—a biologically determined vision of intelligence and a sentimental orientation towards affectivity—to offer readers a model for the ideal U.S. civil servant at a moment when this was hotly debated in the public sphere. Adams’s choice of the form of the sentimental novel to address these concerns situates Democracy within a nexus of interlocking late-nineteenth-century racial, gendered,
and dis/ableist discourses that developed a specifically politicized role for White womanhood in the operation of U.S. state power. As Kyla Schuller has shown, assumptions concerning female “impressibility” in the late nineteenth century were not always negatively coded, since they could be marshalled in the creation of a specific form of power. Schuller notes that

nineteenth-century biopower consolidated in a sentimental mode that regulated the circulation of feeling throughout the population and delineated differential relational capacities of matter, and therefore the potential for evolutionary progress [...]. Racial and sexual difference were not assigned the role of immutable, static qualities of the individual body in the nineteenth century, as has been frequently claimed. (5)

This version of “biopower” was shaped by the popularity of neo-Lamarckism in late-nineteenth-century American popular social science, which argued (contra Darwin) that “the mechanism of species change [and so the unfolding of progressive temporality] was not the ‘promiscuous’ variation of natural selection but the ‘self-control’ of ‘intelligent selection,’ in which an organism chooses its repeated impressions and its body develops according to these habitual movements” (Schuller 36). Certain organisms, and this was frequently also read in terms of individuals, were differently endowed with the power of intelligence required to further the species. The plasticity of individuals (even what we might call “socially-constructed” behaviors) was not understood as a commonsensical foil to the discourse of naturalism and essentialism, as we might understand it now in light of post-structural theory. In its context, Adams’s focus on feeling and affectivity in the novel reveals at once his elitist conception of “intelligence” as an essential, biological “trait” that is distinctly gendered and racialized (and, crucially, distributed unevenly in the population), and his sense that human behaviors are conditioned by environment and training. Taking account of Schuller’s observations, it is no surprise that Adams turns to the discourse of sentimentalism in its generic form of the female-centered bildungsroman as the tool with which to make his claims, because the sentimental novel functioned by simultaneously dramatizing the political power of affectivity and policing the forms of emotionality required in the post-bellum period in a manner that resembled the model of species change favored by popular Lamarckian science. Not only does Adams’s sentimentalism demand attention to the emotions as a necessary resource for the ideal governor, civil servant, or manager in the novel, but the novel also fulfills the disciplinary function of the culture of sentiment by positing a certain set of emotions as the necessary conditions for meaningful individual, and by corollary, national, development and disavowing others. Specifically, as I will show, Adams’s novel cautions against envy and embraces the potential of a sort of paranoia.

Adams’s attention to the limits of educability in the late nineteenth century (as explored in The Education of Henry Adams) is famous. Re-
markably, however, this recurrent trope has been taken largely as a metaphorical gesture and never been adequately considered in relation to the development of IQ measurement during his lifetime—the very system of thought that provided the century’s most “scientific” claims concerning the biological limits of human intellectual development. If Adams’s search for an affective elite capable of governance stems from a tendency within mainstream Victorian liberalism, then the largescale adoption of IQ testing and the science of mental measurement in the 1910s could be understood as the result of an urge to codify and reify this sensibility. Following the model of Francis Galton in the United Kingdom (who cited the Adams family among his “geniuses” in the 1869 book Hereditary Genius), the Americans James McKeen Cattell, Henry Goddard, and Charles Davenport brought eugenics to the United States. However, the post-bellum republic was ready ground for the growth of mental testing, having already absorbed an evolutionarily-inflected late-nineteenth-century sentimental uplift ideology. Eventually, mental tests would be put to a variety of uses by the twentieth-century eugenics movement—an ugly alliance of conservatives and liberals in the first half of the twentieth century. Prior to the full-scale adoption of hard eugenics discourses in mainstream society what circulated in U.S. culture was an amorphous idea about the relationship between power and mental capacity that was captured culturally in the sentimental concept of “impressibility.”

Henry Adams emphasized adaptability in his meritocratically selected civil servants and was committed to restructuring the traditional divides of partisanship by locating forms of practice that Democrats and Republicans could utilize alike in the service of a renewed vision of state authority. For Adams, as for many of the writers and thinkers that came to be associated with the Northeastern “Mugwump” agenda of bipartisan reform in the 1880s, “intelligence” was the new frontier in the battle against a party that had begun with the Boston Transcendentalists in the 1830s. The resistance to partisanship that took hold of the Bostonian mind in the antebellum era was given new impetus by the rise of the ideal of “merit” in the post-Civil War world. The pursuit of idealized “merit” in government employees, along with the rise of standardized testing in schools and other institutions of learning and proto-eugenic thinking concerning the measurable limits of human mental powers, seemed to unite longstanding American idealizations of individualism, resistance to vested or embedded interests, and non-conformist faith in spiritual election with the era’s special commitment to empirical reason. Thinking that “merit” was synonymous with the emerging notion of “general intelligence,” reformers looked to England and France (especially to Galton and Alfred Binet) for their models of how to measure this ineffable, but seemingly essential, quality of humanity. In so doing, Americans formed previously unimaginable political coalitions. In many respects, “intelligence” represented both the object and limit of
The complicity of British and American pragmatism with the eugenics movement is a subject of heated debate. Admir Skodo has recently written about this as “Das F. C. S. Schiller Problem,” asking how the so-called father of antifoundationalism in Anglo-American philosophy could square this anti-essentialism in his own mind with a “staunch commitment to eugenics” (662), or how Oliver Wendell Holmes could “advocate [...] forced sterilization of those with hereditary ‘insanity or imbecility’” (662). The answer lies, most probably, in understanding that hereditarian essentialism and plasticity were not commonly understood in the era as wholly incommensurate with one another; individuals shaped their destinies to an extent, but only within biological limits occasioned by heredity.

In a recent essay, Stephen Carter notes how the failure of the Grant Administration to be a force of positive reform looms large in the disenchanted imaginary of Adams’s work from the 1880s. Carter writes that “Adams represents the persistent absence in the post-Civil War moment of a politics of intelligent, oriented social direction, one which understands the creation of an alternative temporality, capable of moving beyond the impasses and limitations of the prevailing state of affairs” (194; emphasis added).

The philosopher John Dewey would sum up the era’s conception of “intelligence” by defining it in his 1917 essay “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” as an active force utilized by beings with heightened sensory abilities that allows them to receive and interpret signs in the present and thus to predict the impact of events in the future. Dewey states that a being which can use given and finished facts as signs of things to come; which can take given things as evidences of absent things can, in that degree, forecast the future; it can form reasonable expectations. It is capable of achieving ideas; it is possessed of intelligence. For use of the given or finished to anticipate the consequences of processes going on is precisely what is meant by “ideas,” by “intelligence.” (21)

Future-oriented, self-directed, independent, and sensitive to its environment, the “intelligent” subject was an efficient tool for Progressive Era governance, ensuring sensible policy and permitting the state to guard against unnecessary risk.

Madeleine’s Mind

Adams’s Democracy revolves around a discussion about the relationship between forms of “intelligence” required by modern republics, which itself relies upon a cultural attitude towards the fundamental inequality of human capacities for sympathy and rational action. The
plot of Democracy concerns the attempted seduction of Madeleine by Ratcliffe and is enacted against a backdrop of debates about civil service patronage and office-seeking in Washington, transforming a battle over perceived sexual rights into an argument about the privilege enacted by influential political figures in appointing and controlling their “agents.” As Ratcliffe himself asserts in the face of Madeleine’s unimpeachable desire to maintain her independence (sexual and political), “I have a right to the help of all pure minds. You have no right to refuse it” (89). Yet the novel also dramatizes a different trajectory, one in which Madeleine’s personal, intellectual, and sensory “awakening” from a condition of deadened “ennui,” her experience of a progressively enlightening rationality, and her final “overstimulation” and retreat to Egypt represents a self-directed and self-policied evolution from the primitivity of unimpressible dead flesh to full and abundant life.

Whilst it may seem that the novel plays out as a tragedy—Madeleine never succeeds in achieving the knowledge she desires and becomes “overstimulated”—her emotional journey is also evidence of the superiority of her impressibility. As Schuller has noted of the period, “[s]ensitivity connotes both the capacity for growth and the possession of a nervous ‘susceptibility,’ a characteristic allegedly overdeveloped among wealthier women […] [i]mpressibility posed both the potential for progress and an unwelcome vulnerability to denigrating influence, while sentimentality frequently verged on hysteria” (37). In protecting her independence from party politics, synonymous here with a protection of her own body from violence, and in her developing capacities for future-oriented growth and development, Madeleine displays an “intelligence” that makes her in Adams’s eyes a candidate for the role of the ideal modern civil servant.

The ten percent of Ratcliffe’s naysayers Madeleine describes at the end of the novel are significantly connected to the concept of an emerging intellectual elite within the United States who were prized, yet also often denounced, for their supposed independence from party politics: their capacity to resist seduction or “graft.” More than this, Adams’s novel explores how representations of “intelligence” interacted with affective states of patriotism, party loyalty, and nervousness (“neurasthenia” in the terms of Adams’s contemporary George Beard) in the post-Civil War United States. Madeleine’s final line in the novel, “I want to go to Egypt […] democracy has shaken my nerves to pieces. Oh, what rest it would be to live in the Great Pyramid and look out for ever at the polar star!” (182), evokes precisely such a conflation of “cleverness” with “nervousness” and “unpatriotic” affect, a dangerous overextension of the possibilities of the impressible subject. As Tom Lutz argues in American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History, the sense of mental sensitivity that existed within the matrix of affective states ascribed to “intelligence” was a source of concern, as the very attunements of certain subjects towards the world that might be useful to the state also placed them at risk of nervous exhaustion or the “madness” of unpatriotic action. Additionally,
neurasthenia was a distinctly racialized and gendered discourse and was something of a double-edged sword. It was marked as both the apogee of White racial subjection, a condition attributable to occupying a position of privilege that made one somehow “overcivilized,” and was associated with femininity as a state of especial impressibility and nervous stimulation. However, it also gave rise to a cosmopolitanism of intellect that was to be harnessed by agents of the state as the United States moved towards being a global, imperial power.

In the late-nineteenth-century United States, the assumption that sensitivity was a sign of a special endowment of intelligence was common. Indeed, there is a specifically American version of empirical mental testing rooted in sentimental discourses concerning the variable limits of human capacities for “feeling.” James McKeen Cattell’s 1890 experiments at the Psychological Laboratory of the University of Pennsylvania were among the very first attempts to empirically measure human mental ability. In his essay “Mental Tests and Measurements,” Cattell equated mental ability with sensory attunement and reflex speed, developing tests to measure this sensitivity as brain capacity itself. The development of what would come to be called “neuroscience” (that is, a biophysical, neurological understanding of the processes of the mind) was the product of an experimental psychology that expressed a distinctly sentimental tendency towards measurement of the whole sensorium as an indicator of the susceptibility of an individual to environment. Indeed, the tests Cattell developed at the University of Philadelphia were multisensory (aural, visual, and haptic responses, as well as sensitivity to color, were all tested) with an aggregated score on a variety of tests serving as a measure of an individual’s “mental ability,” which would have resonated according to popular understandings of “impressibility.” Such work oscillated around normative conceptions of gender, yet scientists were troubled to find that women (commonly seen as more sensitive in a negative sense according to the cultural norms of the time) were often proven to be receptive in a way that put them on par with men, so raising the possibility of exceptional “feminine” intellect that threatened normative models of masculine supremacy. Galton, the “father” of eugenics and one of the primary popularizers of psychometric testing, noted in the 1893 edition of his landmark eugenics text *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* that

> the trials I have as yet made on the sensitivity of different persons confirms the reasonable expectation that it would on the whole be highest among the intellectually ablest. At first, owing to my confusing the quality of which I am speaking with that of nervous irritability, I fancied that women of delicate nerves who are distressed by noise, sunshine etc. would have acute powers of discrimination. (20)

Galton, typically ready to place male intellect on a far higher plane than the female, eventually came to distinguish between the two types of sensitivity—although he offered no suggestion regarding how one was supposed to make the crucial distinction between “irritability” and “sensitiv-
ity.” “Nervous irritability” in women was considered to be of little value in shaping the eventual “intelligence” of the subject; sensitivity in males, by contrast, continued to be a mark of special mental ability. Adams, less outwardly dismissive of female perceptive powers, gifts Madeleine with a form of aesthetic judgment that appears to stem from her sensitivity and, at least initially, transcends the conventionally measurable.

Adams takes pains to show that although Madeleine was “not brighter than her neighbors, the world persisted in classing [her] among clever women” (Novels 4) and she starts the novel by denouncing economics, psychology, and philosophy, “Herbert Spencer” (3), “Taine […] Darwin and Stuart Mill” (7), the quantities of “petroleum and pigs” America produces, and the “statistics of vice” (3) as all just another Victorian-American vogue obscuring “the great mystery of democracy and government” (7). Adams places in his lead character a kind of romantic kernel that is Carlylean in its distaste for the “dismal science” of economics. However, her disavowal of nineteenth-century empiricism, “the price of stocks [and] the men who dealt in them” (3), is clearly related to her sensitivity; she is not merely bored, so much as “tortured by ennui” and so drawn to metaphysics. Yet, this too only contributes to her depression; “in her despair she had resorted to desperate measures,” writes Adams wittily, “[s]he had read philosophy in the original German, and the more she read, the more she was disheartened that so much culture should lead to nothing—nothing” (Novels 3). Frustrated alike with the social sciences, humanities, and philanthropy, Madeleine seeks some pseudo-mystical truth at the heart of politics to rejuvenate her, a quest that comes to reveal her special “intelligence” or “cleverness,” synonymous in the novel with a gradual awakening to sensory experience patterned along self-directed evolutionary lines.

Madeleine is “not brighter than her neighbors” (her memory is poor for “the list of Presidents in their order” and the like that was the stock knowledge required for a curriculum of rote learning), and rather than seek out “the Speaker, and the Chief Justice” for the simple, factual knowledge they might confer she rationalizes her need in Emersonian terms, “instinctively wonder[ing] whether they [the Speaker and Chief Justice presumably] might not solve her problem; whether they were the shade of trees which she saw in her dreams” (Novels 7). Even if she does not exceed her New York friends in personal achievements, she seems to outstrip them in her possession of some semi-mystical condition of excellence, a distinguishing, affective trait that is related to her tendency to peevish “restlessness.” Adams writes:

Here, then, was the explanation of her restlessness, discontent, ambition,—call it what you will. It was the feeling of a passenger on an ocean steamer whose mind will not give him rest until he has been in the engine-room and talked with the engineer. She wanted to see with her own eyes the action of primary forces; to touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society; to measure with her own mind the capacity of the motive power. (7)
Madeleine’s desire to “touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society” is an urge to evaluate criteria far greater than conventional “taste,” at least in the sense of making invidious judgments that uphold stringent, but usually opaque, cultural norms and hierarchies that Pierre Bourdieu gives to that term. Indeed, there is something outré or louche about the nature of her desire. It evokes a modern, sexualized, industrialized, and, crucially, international landscape that is far from decorous to the tastes of conventional “culture.” In essence, Adams’s presentation of Madeleine’s sensorium corresponds with Schuller’s observation about the relationship between the category of “woman” and the eugenic imperatives of late-nineteenth-century culture: “Femininity’s longstanding associations with susceptibility and penetrability became an advantage in this context, in which sensitivity, elasticity, and openness of the body was linked to its capacity for progress” (Schuller 181).

The “Motive Power” of American Empire

In conjuring the image of the ocean steamer (a figure that will return later in the novel when Silas Ratcliffe’s corrupt financial dealings with the “Inter-Oceanic Mail Steamship Company” are revealed), Adams sutures Madeleine’s nervous power and “intelligence” to a modernity rooted in the international patterns of commerce and exchange that he favored, an “American” system of imperial governance based on highly mobile free trade rather than crude nationalism or the colonial settlement that had characterized British superpower. As Bové has noted, Adams’s long friendship with John Hay affected his thought on the “American system” and empire generally, and he came to believe that “the United States would soon exceed the [British] empire in its economic and military potential, but, more importantly, he understood that the British system, based on empire and controlled markets, could not rival the American System in its ability to innovate, accumulate, dominate, and modernize (7). What worried Adams was settler colonialism of the British kind. Imperialism generally was not a worry for him, as long as the United States was attempting to promote the “progressive” ideals of free trade and democratization. The issue for Adams, as Bové and Stephen Carter have both shown, was ensuring that this process was governed with “intelligence,” a network of meritocratically selected managers of imperial relations who could steer the unruly ship of state between the Scylla of stultifying political partisanship and the Charybdis of anarchic capitalist expansion. Madeleine’s restlessness is of a piece with the understanding of “genius” that Adams offered in The Education, where he noted that “susceptibility to the highest forces is the highest genius; selection between them is the highest science; their mass is the highest educator” (475). Patrick Mullen has considered this quotation as an example of Adams’s intuition that the future lay not with loyalty to political party (such as his father, Charles Adams, had shown) but
in the figure of “the American manager,” who “has learned, at least to some degree, to select and guide turbulent forces to his own ends” (53). This sympathy with managers behind the scenes can be seen in the first chapter of Democracy, when the narrator remarks that

[the stage was before her, the curtain was rising, the actors were ready to enter; she had only to go quietly on among the supernumeries and see how the play was acted and the stage effects were produced; how the great tragedians mouthed, and the stage-manager swore. (8)

This is not a story about the performers, who are really little more than puppets (manikins would be a more appropriately Adamsian metaphor), or even really about character or plot, but an assessment of the merits of the real players, the swearing “stage-managers” and scene-shifters of the American capitalist juggernaut.

With high “culture” for her an empty vessel that leads to “nothing—nothing,” Madeleine is drawn towards the world of abstract “primary forces” and pure experience. She wishes to understand for herself how the machinery works beneath the veneer of a dull, empirical Gilded Age world, saturated with data. Madeleine is trying to measure her “general intelligence” against an abstract, universal and immanent “Power.” She wishes to “measure with her own mind” (7) the systems that govern democracy and thus be independent in her moral judgments, free from the conditioning of culture, the expectations of tradition, or the social demands of her gender.

Adams’s move here can be seen in the shift of genre. In particular, Adams subverts the expectations of the bildungsroman by leaving the protagonist without the satisfaction of becoming “cultured”—usually a marriage, or a place within her community—just as “education” fails in his autobiography. Indeed, Madeleine starts the novel having already exhausted the potential of “culture” and also, because she is a widow, marriage (the traditional end for female protagonists), beginning her search instead for an education that goes beneath the surface of things. Madeleine’s vision of the world as an examination that cannot be measured by reading the surface performance alone (the rote learning of Presidents in their order etc.) responds to a moment in American cultural life in which individuals were finding their actions judged to increasingly exacting and abstract, even invisible, standards. This focus on the measuring of minds leads us to consider a dominant theme of the novel, and of Adams’s work in toto: education.

The post-Civil War period saw the reformist project in education and public schooling that had developed in New York and New England take hold at the federal level with the creation of the U.S. Office of Education and the appointment of a Commissioner of Education charged with producing national policy. As Allison Speicher has argued, the centralization of common schooling under the U.S. Office of Education after the Civil War led to the gradual replacement of longstand-
ing nineteenth-century public rituals of school exhibitions—a world in which one must learn the ropes to participate in a “culture,” where students were expected to recite rote-learned poetry, perform moral role-plays, and participate in spelling bees—with written examinations and more formal and abstract modes of assessment. With the restructuring of education in common schools and universities in the late nineteenth century, the structure of feeling in society shifted in relation to social emulation. The “monotorial system” that had developed in the early nineteenth century in Britain (and which had been in common usage in American schools for many years) was being gradually replaced with forms of “progressive education” that sought to respond to the intrinsic characteristics and potentials of the individual child. Frances Ferguson has shown how the monotorial system, a key node in utilitarian disciplinary regimes of power, was based on instituting a continual process of “ranking […] by turning the schoolroom into a classroom, and making it a whole that ranked each and every pupil in each and every moment” (899). The system worked by unbridling the desire for emulation and competition in students as each student sought to supplant the higher position attained by their peers.

What occurred under the reforms of Horace Mann, close friend and teacher of the Adams family, in Massachusetts was the erosion of the grounded, localized comparison of the monotorial system and the institution of a more universal and absent standard of value appropriate for the expanded spatial frame of the new national—and international—context. This eventually became the standard by which common schooling was to be judged nationally. As the historian of education Bob Pepperman Taylor has shown, Mann was utterly opposed to “all practices that would create intellectual and moral competition among and between students” (12), which he saw as promoting negative (and thus ungodly) envy of success, and was instead in favor of an assessment of individual, biological merit, which was characterized as a positive good. After his reforms, pupils in New England schools were no longer expected to compare themselves only to their immediate peers. Instead, they were increasingly asked to judge themselves according to an external standard of morality and intellect that did not exist in an embodied state in the classroom itself, but in an abstracted and expanded third space of the “nation” or “republic,” or even universally. What was put into operation was a fundamentally different structure of feeling that denounced the destabilizing trans-individual affect of envy so as to transform ability (or “potential” to achieve) into an ontological and “objective” fact, and not a social condition of relationality.

In Adams’s novel, even as Madeleine compares only moderately well against her friends in classroom tests, her peers make an aesthetic judgment as to her superior “cleverness,” arguing that she possesses traits that distinguish her from a wider population of Americans, male and female. The satisfaction of her desires can only come with the concretization of
this aesthetic judgment—a real “intelligence” test that does not pit her merely against her peers, but against the cosmos, or human capacity itself. In line with the double-edged sword of sentimental impressibility discourse, the high stakes of this assessment render her emotionally vulnerable at times, yet conversely her very susceptibility to the forces of the world is what defines her as “intelligent.” What Madeleine seeks out primarily is “Power,” which is to say, she is not envious of individuals (she does not remember the names of actual influential personages), but rather wishes to perceive first-hand the transformative and governing potentialities of abstract forces. Whereas the antebellum educational environment worked through the energies of personalized envy, which David Hume saw as a form of sensibility that related subject to subject in a kind of negative affinity, the larger, more networked post-bellum world was gradually harnessing the “motive power” of a sort of paranoiac openness: “impressibility” expressed as urgent hyperawareness. It is this affect that Adams came to see as related to both “intelligence” itself and the large-scale systems that underpin “modern” imperial capitalism.

Paranoid Progressivism

As a novel informed deeply by the affective intensity of sentimental discourse, Democracy frequently characterizes modern life in terms of the orientation of subjects to certain kinds of affects. Adams’s description of the nature of Madeleine’s “restlessness” and “discontent” importantly resembles a state of paranoia. The “passenger on an ocean steamer” presumably wishes to speak to the engineer not for reasons of mere interest alone. To get a feeling for the direction of travel, how the cogs turn, and how the machinery operates is also to protect oneself against potential threat. This threat, of course, becomes all too real in the final scenes of the novel, when Silas Ratcliffe, unmasked as “naturally dictatorial and violent” (Novels 180), bears down on Madeleine in a clearly sexualized way after she exposes his corruption and refuses his marriage proposal. This state of paranoia for both personal safety and the fate of democracy persists in the atmosphere of Adams’s novel as Madeleine’s personal “intelligence” becomes a capacity to read between the lines of events as they unfold, to map historical relationships, and develop her capacities to read the machinations of politicians. This aspect of “intelligence” is, of course, contained in the word itself, possessing as it does a triple meaning: suspicion and spying, “knowledge” or information itself, and, increasingly after the 1860s, a faculty or capacity possessed by an individual.

The dominant affect of Adams’s Democracy is paranoia, a feeling that Adams characterizes as appropriate for the larger spatial formation of the post-Civil War imperial state. At an aesthetic level, the novel’s tendency to unfold through near Socratic dialogues between key figures in restaurants, art galleries, Congress, and private residences casts the reader for the most part in the position of seeming to listen in, some-
thing like a stance of paranoiac surveillance. What is more, promotion of the novel worked by maintaining the anonymity of the author to cultivate audience suspicion and contemplation as to which Washington “insider” had written it and which characters were satires on actual politicians and lobbyists. In essence, paranoia was grafted to Adams’s novel thematically and cultivated through the author’s anonymity in the social world of his readers, a condition the author relished.

In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai argues that paranoia was historically characterized as a distinctly male trait and intimately connected with the experience of intellectual superiority. Ngai quotes Naomi Schor in pointing to how Freudians distinguished “between a masculine persecutory form of paranoia marked by ‘elaborate ideation, … excessive intellectuality, … occurrence in individuals with a high power of sublimation,’ and a jealous form that is ‘par excellence the paranoia of women”’ (301; ellipses in original). For traditional Freudians, paranoia was “feminine” when it was related solely to the individual and their urge to jockey for position *within* an established order that they remained passively complicit with. There is certainly something distinctive in the slip into the masculine Adams performs when describing the character of Madeleine’s mind as one that will “not give *him* rest” (7; emphasis added). Yet Madeleine certainly seems to transcend the separate spheres in her search for a clear understanding of systems of government and power on an expanded geographic scale. Ngai argues via Cyndy Hendershot that “[g]iven the ‘systemization and theorizing’ characteristic of the paranoiac, ‘many […] commentators…associate[d] paranoia with knowledge and knowledge-producing systems *per se*’” (Hendershot qtd. in Ngai, 301; emphasis and second ellipsis in original), something captured in a feminist systemization such as “patriarchy.” For Adams, the state of being paranoiac is correlated with intelligence (at least as Madeleine embodies it) and is therefore a highly significant affect for the exercise of judgment and reform of government. As Ngai says, “paranoia’s cognitive dimensions [can] be emphasized as an enabling condition for knowledge” (302). However, this is only once one is able to move beyond the purely personal “jealous” version of paranoia and into a state in which one is able to comprehend and expose systems—that is, to diagnose “power” at a “trans-individual level […] as an abstract and holistic entity” (301). This paranoia functions within the referential frame of nineteenth-century sentimentalism, a genre that demands of its characters a certain “openness” to the world while also policing of the moral limits of expressive emotionality, an ethos of attention and care. Paranoia as a mode of knowledge-making forces awareness of exterior forces and also an internalization of feeling in the body of the individual, such as Madeleine experiences in the political machinations of Washington. However, in the moral world of Adams’s novel, it is the male politicians who suffer most from the “jealous” form of paranoia, the more purely privatized version of the affect early psychologists associated with femininity.
This is a key aspect of Adams’s satire of gender. *Democracy* reverses the poles of conventional Gilded Age gender norms, asking readers trained to associate femininity with weakness and lack of character not to see this in the women of the novel but in many of the men, whose pettiness is at the heart of American government and the traditional patronage system that underpinned it. Typically, Adams raises the possibility of female power and influence only to cut it down with satirical inversion. In a sense, Madeleine is only redeemed from the stereotypes attributed to her gender by her intrinsic superiority. Few readers of *Democracy* would be able to doubt that Madeleine is presented as “objectively” superior in intellect and “merit” to Ratcliffe. Adams goes as far as to suggest that Madeleine is so superior that it is quite foolish and petty to envy her. She stands, as Cindy Weinstein has noted of the figure of the Virgin Mary in Adams’s later work, as the apotheosis of his ideals of womanhood, labor, and civic duty. She is unenviable, she must be admired and served, like the Virgin, through duty, vigilance, and a sense of unconditional love. In essence, Adams’s ideal woman is a New Woman in style, but a Victorian True Woman in deportment, her very “independence” from the masculine public sphere of politics paradoxically the source of her utility to that public world. Adams uses the “fact,” as he sees it, of certain individuals’ higher moral, cultural, and biological status as a means to discredit envy as improper, and by corollary to establish a certain iteration of “representative democracy” as a form of politics based on imitation. This is because as a form of imitative desire, envy is not seen by Adams as the appropriate affective stance for progressive reform: it is not a “right feeling” for the demands of the state. It is temporally static, asking one figure to replace another like for like, and not serving as a conduit for the demands of a future world. As Ferguson has noted, Hume’s description of envy emphasized how the emotion was produced as a result of one’s similarity to another: “the great disproportion betwixt ourself and another” rather than “our proximity” (891), and consequently was miniscule, petty, un-grand, and useless for expressing the diversity of modern political life. For Ferguson, envy functions to identify its protagonists—the envious and the envied—as members of the same species. Envy, that is, functions to classify its central figures as similar enough for a comparison to be meaningful, and as similar enough for an invidious comparison to seem objectionable […] envy exists as a species-making emotion. (891; emphasis in original)

Envy is not Madeleine’s motivation (she seeks for a power that functions on an abstract temporal plane), but rather that of petty men like Ratcliffe, whose desires are immediate and spatial: he seeks position for its own sake. What is more, envy is characterized by Adams as feminizing. True to the policing of emotions demanded by sentimentalism, Adams suggests that, while Madeleine might be an ideal civil servant, she is not to be envied at all. This is shown especially by the parody Adams offers of Ratcliffe, who is unable to disassociate his sexual desire for
Madeleine from his wish to emulate her. The running joke of the novel is that Ratcliffe consistently opposes Darwinian evolution in his speech, yet his wish to emulate Madeleine and his unregulated desires for her, his “harshness, almost a savageness, of manner” (180) when she rebuffs his advances, render him apelike when compared with her civilized sensibility, independence, and self-control.

Rather than harboring a deep, patriotic feeling for the values of the U.S. state, most of the male politicians in the novel, and those committed to resisting civil service reform and retaining the “spoils system” in particular, exhibit psychological profiles shaped by a personalized and (in the context of its time) “feminine” affect indistinguishable from envy. It is Madeleine, with her capacity to reveal the “primary forces,” who most exhibits an intelligence that is complex, trans-individual, and proper for the White liberal subject. “In her own mind,” writes Adams, “she frowned on the idea of seeking for men […] what she wished to see […] was the clash of interests […] guided, restrained, controlled, or unrestrained and uncontrollable […] what she wanted was POWER” (Novels 8). By contrast, Ratcliffe seeks after individuals loyal to him and the Party. Such a desire makes him petty and vindictive, prone to deploying his influence in cynical ways and to instituting ad hominem attacks on individuals, such as his use of the “Secret Service Bureau in the Treasury Department” to remove his political enemy, John Carrington, an erstwhile “senior captain” in the “rebel army” (12) and his rival for Madeleine’s affections. Whereas Madeleine uses information in a controlled and deliberate way for the benefit of national debate, Ratcliffe’s use is purely personal. In a discussion about the president’s orders concerning an upcoming debate, Madeleine remarks “I knew about that a week ago. […] Oh, you do not know how admirably I have organized my secret service bureau” (36). Ratcliffe has what Carrington calls “Yankee eyes”: “Cold eyes […] steel grey, rather small, not unpleasant in good humor, diabolic in a passion, but worst when a little suspicious; then they watch you as though you were a young rattlesnake, to be killed when convenient […] his eyes only seem to ask the possible uses you might be put to” (15). Carrington notes how Ratcliffe’s power lies in his ability to “dodge […] all the sharp issues” and a willingness to “flatter […] and conciliate […]” the president (15). Carrington’s description of Ratcliffe’s “eyes” as “rather small” implies that he lacks a breadth of vision beyond the urge to protect the Party, the nation, or the homestead from invasion by outside threat. Furthermore, whilst somewhat gruff in manner, he is also a flatterer unable to face up to the larger social concerns, “the sharp issues” that are of genuine matter in a democracy. In effect, Ratcliffe acts as something not dissimilar from the idealized nineteenth-century presidential wife, massaging the Commander-in-Chief’s ego, handling appointments to “the house,” attending Church services for reasons of convention and decorum, and ensuring that the public world of politics runs as smoothly as possible.
Chapter 7, in which Ratcliffe must appoint his Civil Service, is portrayed ironically by Adams as a parody of a domestic scene with more than a little of the character of a bourgeois nightmare of hiring household staff, with “[d]ozens of office-seekers […] besieging his house [with] applications […] lounging about his room, reading newspapers, or beguiling their time with tobacco in various forms” (74). Ratcliffe feels “a strong impulse to teach [the president] better sense and better manners. […] He hated the sight of his tobacco-chewing, newspaper-reading satellites, with their hats tipped at every angle except the right one, and their feet everywhere except on the floor” (76). The senator from Illinois is the archetypal angel in the house of White, bourgeois consciousness, reforming the president’s morals, attending to household duties, and disciplining the staff. Indeed, Ratcliffe even has something of an epiphany about the monotony of his life that is distinctly Bovaryesque in character. “Their conversation bored him,” Adams writes, “and their presence was a nuisance. He would not submit to this slavery no longer” (76). In his frustrations he begins to suffer a deep imitative desire for Madeleine Lee:

He would have given his Senatorship for a civilized house like Mrs. Lee’s, with a woman like Mrs. Lee at its head, and twenty-thousand a year for life. He smiled his only smile that evening when he thought how rapidly she would rout every man Jack of his political following out of her parlors, and how meekly they would submit to banishment into a back-office with an oil-cloth carpet and two cane chairs. He felt that Mrs. Lee was more necessary to him than the Presidency itself; he could not go on without her […]. (76)

This passage reveals the complexity of Adams’s approach to questions of gender, paranoia, and imitative desire in Democracy. While Madeleine feels exhausted by her cultured life in New York and is therefore drawn to the rejuvenating “energy” of the “machinery of society” (7), a trajectory that shapes her mind as “masculine,” Ratcliffe’s life of office work leaves him sexually frustrated and depleted to the point that all of his energy is thereafter devoted to securing Madeleine as his wife. This desire is significantly inflected though with a strong sense of envy for her capacities as a woman. His envy produces a psychological proximity to Madeleine that is emasculating for him. For Adams, Ratcliffe’s envy dramatizes a form of imitation that lies at the core of the problem of representative democracy. That is, in being forced to imitate the people—who are, for the conservative Adams, congenitally corrupt—government itself will be corrupted. Ratcliffe’s envy is of a piece with unreformed representative democracy, as Adams sees it: an evolutionary dead-end that does not look to the future but to its own immediate desires and needs. This is revealed in an exchange between Madeleine and Ratcliffe toward the beginning of the novel:

Mrs. Lee, with much earnestness of manner, still pressed her question: “Surely something can be done to check corruption? Are we ever to be at the mercy of thieves and ruffians? Is a respectable government impossible
in a democracy?” […] “My reply,” said Ratcliffe, “is that no representative
government can long be much better or much worse than the society it rep-
resents. Purify society and you purify the government. But try to purify the
government artificially and you only aggravate failure.” (37)

Adams condemns pure, unchecked “representative democracy” and its
Jacksonian “spoils system of appointments” as a hall of mirrors driven by
an emasculating, imitative desire that impedes the advance of American
Enlightenment ideals.

**The Sentimental Civil Servant: Why Does Madeleine Fail?**

If Madeleine’s mind potentially represents the ideal form of post-
bellum civil service “intelligence,” how do we reckon with her tragic
failure to harness and direct the forces of American democracy to moral
and progressive ends? The answer lies in Adams’s engagement with sen-
timentalism, which, even as it elevates the use-value of “female” per-
ceptive powers for the state, functions also to enforce gendered norms
around feeling and behavior that proscribe female access to full, inde-
pendent life. As noted earlier, Adams’s understanding of politics fre-
quently turned on emphasizing the “maternal” and nurturing powers
of female figures for politics, the cult of the Virgin in twelfth-century
Catholicism being his most potent example. According to Duff, this
figure functioned as the apotheosis of the political because of its capacity
to allow for diversity within unity, and, crucially, to perform a forgive-
ness that Adams associated with an expressly maternal form of love. For
Adams, virtues associated with the Victorian cult of domesticity did not
operate in a minute sphere that was discrete from the masculine world
of politics, but were part of the intelligent moral sense that could help
direct the large-scale social forces of the modern state. In the novel, this
capacity is ultimately not displayed by Madeleine, whose own loss of
child and husband before the start of the book may be read as something
like a fatal flaw prefiguring her as a “failed” maternal figure (a mother
who is not a mother). Instead, it is found in the dyad of her sister Sybil’s
religiously-inflected morality and the Southerner John Carrington’s re-
publican virtue and ethos of care.

The novel ends with Sybil’s words in the letter to Carrington that
suggest forgiveness and an unyielding commitment to the ideals of un-
conditional love: “If I were in your place I would try again after she
comes home” (184). The novel pulls something of a bait-and-switch with
Sybil, at first presenting her mind as singularly unexceptional and her
values as shallow and vapid. When she is introduced, the narrator de-
scribes Sybil as a

simple and devout worshipper at the ritualistic altar; she bent humbly before
the Paulist fathers. When she went to a ball she always had the best partner
in the room, and took it as a matter of course; but then, she always prayed for
one; somehow it strengthened her faith. Her sister took care never to laugh
Yet what guidance are we given as readers that we must be cynical in seeing Sybil’s religiosity as a sham or sign of weakness next to the analytic mind of Madeleine? Adams makes it quite clear in this passage that religion does not fail her, as she always “had the best partner in the room” when she wanted him. That is, her devotions are also a means of selecting the “best”—an aesthetic sense that is akin to Madeleine’s own much-vaunted discriminatory powers. Additionally, at the end she follows the most moral course in handing the letter from Carrington concerning Ratcliffe’s deception to Madeleine at the crucial moment. Ratcliffe, too, underestimates her abilities to hold true to a love of people and the state in a way that suggests that in underestimating Sybil ourselves, we are closer in type to Ratcliffe than to Madeleine’s sociable sister:

He had made up his mind that Sybil was a silly, frivolous girl, who counted for nothing in her sister’s actions. He had fallen into the usual masculine blunder of mixing up smartness of intellect with strength of character. Sybil, without being a metaphysician, willed anything which she willed at all with more energy than her sister did, who was worn out with the effort of life. (172)

Ratcliffe is surprised to learn that Carrington, through his “civil service” agent Sybil, “managed to be present and absent, to get a good office in Mexico and to baulk his schemes in Washington” (172). In being caught off-guard, Ratcliffe wholly misses that U.S. power on the cusp of the “American Century” no longer resided with the private, petty desires and envies of Washington insiders or the machinations of parties, but within an expanded spatial frame of American empire that encompassed Mexico, Europe, and places beyond, and that (in Adams’s vision at least) called for a particular kind of meritocratic governor: moral, devoted, panoptic, and intelligent.

Ultimately, Madeleine is shown to be worn out with life and unable to marshal her intrinsic biopolitical merits into service for the state because she has forgotten the nineteenth-century sentimental admonition to govern the self and society with loving care. Moreover, she is denuded of energy—that relentless capacity for responsiveness and future-oriented action that proto-eugenic science described in terms of “impressibility.” Sybil’s energy, by contrast, seems limitless, even as she polices herself by cleaving doggedly to the moral sensibilities of “True Womanhood.” At the end of Democracy, we are left with the image of American governance as the free-marketeer Adams wished to see it in its next phase: a loving, imperial mother, adaptable, intelligent, and ever watchful of her childlike subjects, operating through agents in the expanded spatial frame of empire.

In deploying the language of innate “intelligence” and suggesting in his novel that the future of American imperial systems of government
turned on the question of the measurable value of minds, Henry Adams was participating in the creation of a biopolitical regime of power in the twentieth century. This would, of course, come to its fullest fruition after World War I, when the rise of IQ testing allowed “intelligence" to be solidified and reified as a force that enabled, or disabled, an individual’s full participation in the political order. In *Democracy*, Adams took a sentimental focus on feelings in a conservative direction that sought to hobble the process of expansive democratization and channel energy into the search for a meritocratic elite. Adams’s sense of mental ability and merit as measurable and absolute was assuredly “modern,” including as it did a sense of the necessity that systems of governance be reformed to challenge the hold of the old two-party system, and even incorporated an (albeit circumscribed) vision of New Womanhood. Yet his “reformism” presupposed that minds were not equal and that only certain individuals had the right to full participation in the political order, dramatizing a sentimental proto-eugenics that reached back into the antebellum past and looked forward to the aesthetics and politics of a conservative modernism as the United States was on the verge of overtaking Britain as the world’s preeminent superpower.

**Works Cited**


