The problems confronting society in the immediate post-war period—poor harvests and high levels of unemployment, for example—proved to be scarcely less easy to deal with than the prosecution of the war itself, an endeavor which had been carried on in the teeth of fierce opposition, not only from within Parliament but also from many quarters in society at large. Revolutionary fervor, a pernicious inheritance from egalitarian France, was rife among certain sections of the populace, and the possibility of insurrection never was far removed from Liverpool's mind. His heavy-handed response toward such unrest as did occur, culminating in the Six Acts of 1819, has come in for some severe criticism (deservedly so in the case of Peterloo, though the government was only indirectly responsible for that unhappy affair). Yet it is not difficult to appreciate the nature of his fears. During his travels on the continent as a young man, he had been, after all, a witness to the storming of the Bastille and the excesses which followed it.

Gash points out, quite rightly, that Liverpool's government was the last of the eighteenth-century administrations in its structure and duration and the first of the nineteenth in its problems and accomplishments. Clearly Liverpool viewed society in a provincial eighteenth-century context, a society largely rural where adherence to religious principles still prevailed. He simply failed to apprehend the nature of the new social forces at work in a Britain becoming increasingly industrialized. It has been said of Liverpool that the great secret of his policy was that he had none. Always a cautious man he was distrustful of principles. Professor Keith Feiling has written somewhere that one of Liverpool's defects was a dread of ideas; and insofar as any recognizable policy can be discerned it is merely one of expediency.

Gash is a distinguished historian; he taught history at The University of St. Andrews in Scotland for twenty-five years and has written extensively in the field of early nineteenth-century British history. His two-volume biography of Sir Robert Peel, published in 1961, was received very favorably.

Lord Liverpool is a work of careful scholarship. Within its pages Gash has sought to portray Liverpool in a more generous light than has hitherto fallen to his share. Unglamorous, staid, and reserved he certainly was, but Liverpool was also an honorable man who more than once sacrificed personal ambition for the sake of party unity, a practice rare in the England of the regency. Posterity has not been kind to him; yet given the constraints under which he had to labor—the bitter animosity between Castlereagh and Canning, or the vexing business of dealing with the petulant George IV, particularly over the sordid affair of the King's divorce from Caroline of Brunswick, a disreputable woman—his achievement was not inconsiderable.

Gash readily admits that a complete life of Liverpool remains to be written now that a vast quantity of archival material is available to the scholar, but until such time his study is to be valued for the commendable service of rescuing its subject from obscurity.

—Reviewed by Andrew Shaughnessy

Henry Adams
(1838-1918)


That Henry Adams was a major figure in nineteenth-century American literature and intellectual history is evident from his massive history of the administrations of Madison and Jefferson, his novels Esther and Democracy, his Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, and his "autobiography" The Education of Henry Adams. These
works disclose an exceptional degree of historical understanding and an acute and penetrating imagination. As an artist, of course, Adams failed to attain the first order, but as a literary intelligence engaged in the analysis of American social and political institutions, he towered over most of his contemporaries and brought to his task that distinct perspective that only an Adams—descended from a line of presidents and diplomats—could have possessed. It is therefore a critical event of some importance to have this new study of his mind and art. R. P. Blackmur's credentials as a literary critic are likewise manifest in a series of impressive books—The Double Agent (1935), Language as Gesture (1952), The Lion and the Honeycomb (1955), and other works. He spent nearly an adult lifetime in writing Henry Adams, which friends eagerly awaited. But at his death in 1965 only a partial text of some 700 pages of manuscript, representing his lifelong meditation on the meaning of Adams, was found amongst his papers. Boxed, incomplete, and in fragments, these papers have now been arranged for publication by the editor. The result is a substantial study, however incomplete. What does it contain?

The bulk of Henry Adams is an extremely close reading of Adams's works—especially The Education and Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres. One chapter—"King Richard's Prison Song"—is a work of excellent straightforward biography dealing with Adams's last years. Interspersed throughout the book are meditations on general experiences of life as well as on those aspects of Adams's sensibility that particularly fascinated Blackmur. Setting aside the biographical chapter, Henry Adams discloses Blackmur's powers as a New Critic—that is, as an analyst of the imagery, structure, texture, irony, and paradoxes of Adams's prose; and the book provides a full restatement of Adams's ideas—about his family, American politics, the Civil War, sex, science, and religion. Adams's familiar symbols—the Virgin and the Dynamo—receive perhaps their most fully elaborated explication here, and these are related to Adams's pessimistic sense of the decline of religion and the rise of scientific technology in the later nineteenth century. Henry Adams is a large, ambitious, and intelligent book. But it must be said that, ultimately, it is unsatisfactory. The reason for its failure must remain clouded in the unusual personality of Blackmur. But a few generalizations may be risked to account for the odd failure of the book. For one thing, it is clear to anyone familiar with Adams's texts that Blackmur was in some strange way held in the grip of Henry Adams's mind, caught up in some peculiar psychological identification with his subject. Blackmur was therefore incapable of explicating and understanding his subject with his customary acuteness. From time to time, for example, the book veers off from the subject into mini-essays on certain types of sensibilities and what they may mean to the reader. One such instance, ostensibly apropos of Adams, is this:

When we come on the lives or works of such men, they have the peculiar warrant of something we have experienced before, less perfectly but more deeply; they have the persuasiveness, the inevitable mistaken-ness, and the uncontrollableness of sharp memory. The tokens [their works, gestures, images, symbols] have values in the actual world which we had not known we felt, but the tokens have other values, too, which may belie the actual and the reasonable and the desirable—values which are precise without being recognizable—and these are the values created between the withdrawal [from action in the arena of life] and the return: we feel their pressure quickening the actual without knowing what they are. And then, whether we are these men themselves or are merely those who rehearse themselves in the works of others—then we cannot help mutilating, trapping, prisoning this direct central experience in the conventions of the mind, for the sake of our ordinary safety. Men are not so much marked by experience as by the precautions they take against it, and by the devices to which they resort to reduce to tolerable form the experience they could not help having. Like
Dostoevsky's Idiot, we are not worthy of our suffering and transform it into religion or philosophy or history or art; when it is not ourselves but our suffering that becomes worthy, however, it fails to reach our experience. Thus our deepest knowledge is that which we reject in order to live.

This passage yields some clue to Blackmur's preoccupation with Adams. The example of Adams triggered, it seems to me, some crisis in Blackmur's own sensibility, which required a working out in the form of this book-length study. The passage reflects Blackmur "rehearsing" himself in the work of Adams, putting Adams to the service of rendering tolerable some private experience of suffering through the agency of critical form—in effect "mutilating" Adams's texts in order to deal with an obscure despair over knowledge which the text does not fully disclose.

Denis Donoghue, in the Foreword, remarks that "It was clear that the relation between Adams' mind and Blackmur's was extraordinarily intimate, and that the big book on Adams would count as Blackmur's autobiography, or at least as the most salient parts of it." That is charitable; in fact, however, the intimacy of relation between the two sensibilities was finally disabling to Blackmur's critical gifts, for there is in this book a fatal lack of distance between the critic and his subject. Blackmur himself conceded that "For a job of [explicating] such delicate issues [as may be found in Adams's work], the critic's tools of analysis, specification, and comparison are rough and awkward," or that they "would be if Adams had not himself made the first approaches simple and inevitable...." But this is taking Adams on his own terms, ceding as inevitable the approach to Adams that Adams adroitly insists on himself. In this, Blackmur fatally compromised his independence and disinterested critical judgment.

The consequence of this identification with Adams is that the structure of Henry Adams is disorganized: Blackmur could not find a way to make it cohere. Further, the style is at times so close to that of Adams that we might almost suspect a parody if Blackmur were not so sincere in grappling with his subject. An instance of this pervasive stylistic identification is this passage, taken at random:

Of the two the Senate was more human—a defective organization of human foibles and forces—and Grant was more a plain force of nature. The Senate could be tinkered with and individual Senators criticized according to the rules of experience. Grant could be studied as a phenomenon and handled only by sympathetic means and repeated contact. The Senate was an endless irritation; Grant had to be swallowed whole.

This passage duplicates not merely Adams's typical parallelism of syntax, his trick of balanced contrasts, his vocabulary, and his ironic tone, but also Adams's judgment of the political situation obtaining after the Civil War. In later years Blackmur tried to dissociate himself from the New Criticism, but here the defects of a mere "close reading," which fails to convey critical discriminations based on historical judgment, are most apparent. Close readings of The Education and other works, chapter by chapter, sometimes line by line—in a style that is often indistinguishable from the distinctive Adams voice—create not merely a sense of déjà vu but a kind of horror that some bizarre critical ventriloquism is being enacted before our eyes.

Blackmur's failure to get sufficient distance from Adams results in a failure of judgment on more than one occasion. Of Esther and Democracy, both manifestly inadequate novels, Blackmur's conclusion is that "To intrude the standards of the art of fiction would be to obviate the burden the books actually carry." Such a conclusion represents the abdication of critical responsibility. Elsewhere Blackmur takes at face value Adams's assertion of the inadequacy of the U.S. Constitution, and he sidesteps a serious interrogation of the wisdom of Adams's taking the position of a conservative Christian anarchist.

One of the most interesting failures of perception is Blackmur's missing the full implication of Adams's feelings about
stoicism and old age, in particular the decline of his friends John Hay and Clarence King. Blackmur writes:

Marcus Aurelius seemed to him sometimes a hero because of his stoicism, sometimes stoicism seemed moral suicide. At best it was an alternative to values not bearable, at worst it denied life by obliterating the sense of what had given life meaning. Here, thinking of the three friends in their last twilight playing stoic as it were for love of each other, Adams made the bitterest judgment of all: "The affectation of readiness for death is a stage role, and stoicism is a stupid resource, though the only one, Non dolet, Paete! One is ashamed of it even in the acting."

Blackmur quite properly glosses the allusion, in Pliny and others, to the story of Paetus, who was ordered to kill himself because of an act of cowardice. Paetus is shamed by his wife Arria, who, stabbing herself, holds out the knife to him with the consolation, "It does not hurt, my Paetus!" What Blackmur fails to develop here is that Arria stood in Adams's imagination for Marian, his wife, who had already committed suicide. The act of suicide, exemplary in stoic philosophy, was rejected by Adams, although the invitation to follow the example of Marian, whom he deeply loved, must have occurred to Adams many times. Doubtless he felt both shame in her means of dying as well as failure in not being able to rise to the example of her death. This much seems evident in Adams's consciously suppressing her death in The Education as well as in the twenty-year period of his life following it. But Blackmur could not entertain this implication of the Paetus reference, for it bore too painfully in some way upon his own identification with Adams.

Perhaps the most decisive evidence of Blackmur's lack of critical distance from Adams is his holding out to us an image of Adams indistinguishable from, the image that Adam himself tried to create:

Specifically, with Henry Adams, scruple of thinking and thence of action was the whole point of his education for public life. Men without scruples either victimized power or succumbed to it; and if you had the wrong scruples you succumbed, like Grant, without knowing it. Political education was meant to supply the right scruples at the start, to teach sensitiveness to new ones as they came up, and to ingrain a habit of feeling for them if not apparent.

For Blackmur, Adams "lacked the coarseness of will and ability to dissimulate to seize the larger opportunity, had it offered." Such a view of Adams does not square with what is documented about his ambition in the biographies of Ernest Samuels and Edward Chalfant. Was Adams scrupulous? Chalfant had argued that Adams—while serving as his father's private secretary in the legation in London during the Civil War—exploited his insider's access to classified information in order to write anonymous articles for The New York Times, hoping to advance his career, after the war, as a journalist and political analyst. Had he been unmasked, his father Charles Francis Adams would have been politically ruined. Blackmur might not have known all that Samuels and Chalfant have shown—although the materials of historical research were as accessible to Blackmur as to these scholars. But Blackmur ought to have questioned his own belief in Adams's "scrupulousness" merely from a reading of The Education itself, for there Adams is candid enough to remark that "No professional diplomats worried about falsehoods. Words were with them forms of expression which varied with individuals, but falsehood was more or less necessary to all."

Falsehood, or, more charitably, fictive manipulation, is at the very heart of The Education, which cannot be taken—as Blackmur evidently takes it—as straightforward autobiography. Missing in Blackmur's book is any attention whatsoever to the notion of "Henry Adams" as an invention, a created persona, a "manikin" who is draped in a Carlylean clothes-philosophy of ironic failure—all for didactic effect. Blackmur's editor, Veronica A. Makowsky, tries to justify Blackmur's bizarre entanglement with Adams's sensi-
bility by noting Blackmur’s defense of the “provisional imagination,” according to which a critic “must imaginatively adopt a writer’s belief, such as Yeats’s magic or Eliot’s Anglicanism, in order truly to appreciate his work.” She observes that “Blackmur believed that he could approach an understanding of Adams as an artist by a ‘rehearsal’ or creative imitation of the structural ‘values’ of Adams’ great works.” But in this book Blackmur’s appropriation of Adams’s belief is not provisional; there is little creative imitation; he not merely rehearses, he duplicates. Blackmur in some sense, then, became Henry Adams, and the more deeply Adams displaced Blackmur’s sensibility, the more nearly impossible it became for him to finish the book.

The key to this identification is the motif of failure in Adams, whatever the evidences of success in Adams’s outward life. Some implication of that experience of failure took possession of Blackmur and haunted him throughout the lifelong project of writing this book. Whether the sense of failure had something to do with Blackmur’s complicated career at Princeton it is difficult to say. Blackmur lacked any formal education and did not even graduate from high school. He thus had a troubled relationship with the English Department and eventually attained his professorship by way of the Creative Writing Department. In any case, this sense of failure in Adams appears to account for Blackmur’s preoccupation with King Richard’s Prison Song, which gets a chapter to itself.

The story of the prison song of Richard Coeur de Lion first showed up in the diary of John Quincy Adams in 1830, where, musing on his despair after being defeated in his re-election bid for the presidency, John Quincy identified himself with the defeated king in André Grétry’s opera Richard Coeur de Lion (1784). There the minstrel sings to the former King in prison: “O, Richard, O, mon Roi! / L’univers t’abandonne.” Henry Adams became obsessed with this passage in his grandfather’s diary, went to a performance of the opera in 1891 as “an act of piety to the memory of my revered grandfather,” and mobilized his friends to find for him the medieval original of the song, which he later reprinted in the Chartres volume.

Just as John Quincy, turned out of the presidency, found in King Richard’s prison song an objective correlative for his own failure and rejection, so Henry found in the song the expression of his own defeat and despair. Further, the way that Blackmur preoccupies himself with this song suggests that he too appropriated it, in some obscure way, as the expression of a personal sense of inadequacy and rejection. King Richard and Richard Palmer Blackmur were thus on some level one with Henry Adams in their sense of despair and abandonment.

I confess to not knowing enough about Blackmur the man to anchor these observations in the facts of his biography, but they seem warranted by the striking features of this peculiar study that he could never finish. With respect to Adams, it is clear that he dealt with his unhappiness by cultivating the stoic’s indifference to both pleasure and pain. Toward the end of his life he repeated the wisdom of his old teacher Gurney, who said to him that “of all moral supports in trial only one was nearly sufficient. That was the Stoic.” And he remarked that “Marcus Aurelius would have been my type of highest human attainment.” Blackmur’s struggle with this book suggests that this moral support was largely denied him.

— Reviewed by James W. Tuttleton

Pierre Duhem
(1861-1916)


IN THIS BOOK, Father Stanley L. Jaki tells