

"HENRY ADAMS AND AMERICAN REALISM: THE LITERARY  
EXPRESSION OF SOCIAL IDEAS"

BY

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Henry Adams and American realism:  
The literary expression of social ideas.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to establish the context and meaning of Henry Adams' Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.<sup>2</sup> It will show that Chartres, on the surface an atypical piece of American writing - a study of the European Middle Ages - is central to the main literary endeavour in the period following the Civil War, and to the American intellectual effort as a whole.

So far as context and meaning can be distinguished, the first three chapters are devoted to context and the fourth to meaning. With this distribution of weight it is important to define at the outset what, between the covers of Chartres and the edge of the universe, is meant by "context" in this case. First there is that of Adams' other major books - The History of the United States,<sup>3</sup> The Education of Henry Adams,<sup>4</sup> and the novel Democracy<sup>5</sup> - from which will be drawn the elements of an insight that finds full articulation in Chartres. Second there is the post-bellum literary environment - the late writing of Melville and Whitman, and the major writing of Henry James and the naturalists, some of which will be brought into relation around Chartres.

These contexts are interpenetrating. What pulls them together and relates them to Chartres is their common realism. In one sense this is obvious: the writing of James and his contemporaries is conventionally known as realist literature, and Henry Adams can be shown to have participated in this tradition of expression. However, the term will not be employed in its usual sense of "un-romantic" or "tough-minded", but in its philosophical sense, by which the existence of ideas ante res is postulated. This different view of literary realism is the core of the

thesis, and it is offered in the spirit of experiment,

There is room for such an experiment. While Henry James and William Dean Howells were developing the realist novel, a school of neo-realism was taking shape in philosophical circles at Harvard University. Charles S. Peirce, Ralph Barton Perry and many others contributed essays to The New Realism, published in 1912, but comprised of essays written throughout the period between 1870 and 1912 - the era of literary realism. It is an odd fact that these two explicit realisms, emerging out of the same time and place, have never been systematically compared.

This kind of comparison raises methodological considerations. The focus here is cross-disciplinary; Adams' effort will be viewed simultaneously from the vantage points of literary criticism and the history of ideas. The perils waiting on this approach are obvious. However, studies of Henry Adams have traditionally suffered from a hesitation to enter the region that lies between the two disciplines. Adams himself, historical poet and mythopoetic historian, was resident in that zone of complicated lights and shades; and it is the responsibility of his interpreter to observe from the relevant quarters rather than to select as significant those facets visible from the safety of one position or the other.

The chapters of the thesis move between analyses of the inception of American realism and of its literary culmination in Chartres. Realism and nominalism are the concerns of the first chapter; a working definition of realism is established, with which Adams is gradually brought into conjunction. The second consists in a discussion of Adams' unique development of realist thinking, as evidenced in his History, Democracy, and

The Education, The third consists in an attempt to map out the situation that faced American literary writing generally after the Civil War, and to locate Adams' particular position therein. The fourth is a discussion of Adams' main response to this situation, his Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.

One thing must be made clear before proceeding: whereas The Education was the last major undertaking of Henry Adams' life, it has been found useful here to write on the assumption that the slightly earlier Chartres is a response to concerns expressed therein. To do so is not to twist the documents unduly, because the actual order of composition is not an accurate reflection of the order of experience. Rather, the order of composition reflects the generally-felt need to portray "chaos" (the advertised plan of The Education) from some standpoint not itself chaotic - as The Magic Mountain and The Waste Land each measure contemporary disorder from the standpoint of Dante. Adams created his own solid base from which to measure and express disorder: Chartres. Both books awaited the repose of old age, but only Chartres is its reflection; The Education is largely the experience of the younger Adams.<sup>7</sup>

## NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Lewis Mumford [Virginia Quarterly Review, 38, (Spring, 1962), 196] drops the "s" of the possessive in his reference to Adams, and I conform to this practice, which is followed by a majority of critics.
2. Garden City, New York; Doubleday and Co., 1959. Hereafter called Chartres.
3. The History of the United States During the Administrations of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, 9 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1889-91). Hereafter called the History.
4. New York; Modern Library Editions, 1946. Hereafter called The Education.
5. New York; Airmont Publishing Co., 1968.
6. The information given in this paragraph can be found under the headings "Realism", "New Realism", and "Peirce, Charles S." in The Dictionary of Philosophy, ed. Dagobert Runes (Totowa, New Jersey; Littlefield, Adams, and Co., 1966).
7. The limitations of a strictly chronological interpretation of this phase of American cultural history is noted by Bernard Poli in the introduction to his Le Roman Américain 1865 - 1917: Mythes de la Frontière et de la Ville: "L'histoire littéraire, en insistant sur des classements chronologiques faussement objectifs, m'a paru présenter une interprétation des faits qui n'est pas toujours la plus probante.  
 "Il est évident aussi [par exemple] que l'entrée des provinciaux dans les cités de l'Est doit être considérée comme logiquement antérieure à l'exil des citadins vers l'Europe, même si, chronologiquement, ces mouvements sont parfois simultanés, et si The American précède Sister Carrie ou A Hazard of New Fortunes. L'histoire littéraire, pour rester valable dans l'explication qu'elle propose, doit tenir compte de faits historiques qui ne cadrent pas forcément avec sa propre chronologie". (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1972), p. 6.

## THE CRITICAL CONCEPT REALISM

Concepts deriving from the notion reality carry a heavy burden of accumulated meaning. It is therefore surprising that the term realism is allowed currency in literary discussion without being subjected, from time to time, to semantic query. Of the many theoreticians brought together in George Becker's Documents of Modern Literary Realism,<sup>1</sup> apart from those who labour to disclose that realists portray reality, most employ the concept with the apparent aim of reducing it to the status of pure name. This is ironic since nominalism, the ancient art of reducing concepts to names, is the traditional antithesis of realism. The loose arranging of Balzac, Flaubert, and George Eliot, Twain, Howells, and Henry James around realism displays an absence of critical anxiety such as might go along with fixing the dates of their works on a chronology. If we are to have in our possession a sign without a referent, then surely something weaker could do the same job without raising up, only to ignore, the rich full world of contention at whose centre realism sits.

Outlining the standard meanings of literary terms, M.H. Abrams suggested that by realism one understands "an accurate presentation of life as it is",<sup>2</sup> noting that this is valid but inadequate. What would be adequate he does not venture to say. Instead he goes on to de-energize the conventional understanding by observing that the unusual and the fantastic are banished from realist writing as tendentiously as the commonplace had been from romantic - involving a comparable falling short in either case of the comprehensiveness generally associated with "reality".



Alfred Kazin extends this point;

The typical product of realism represents invention and choice, as does every artistic method. No artistic work can ever be simply a copy of actuality, for the writer is dominated by an idea of what reality is before he ever chooses his examples of it; and a book represents an effort at organization that life, as life, never possesses.<sup>3</sup>

Once it has been observed that literary groups, like others, adhere to notions of significance which they like to call criteria of reality, this sort of analysis has yielded its full harvest. Realism, applied to literature, is a misnomer.

Many critics have suspected this to be the case. In his book on literary realism Damian Grant extensively documented the "chronic instability" and "unmanageable elasticity" of the concept. In recent times there has been an adverse reaction: Writers have indicated their mistrust of its behaviour by sending it out under escort (i.e. with epithets, viz. "socialist realism" or "infra-realism") or by letting it loose only when safely handcuffed by inverted commas.

Literary concepts, however, cannot be expected to endow critical efforts with scientific precision, any more than literature can be expected to distribute itself neatly into elements and relations. The most that should be expected from literary concepts is that they provide tentative hypotheses which are able to carry a reader to within sight of the debating field before they disintegrate. Realism functions to this extent, as evidenced by the body of useful criticism created within its frame.

And yet the concept is appropriate in a more specific way than that, as can be shown simply by considering what realism actually means

and then by comparing that meaning with the writing it is meant to denote. Grant suggests the invocation of philosophy as an adjunct to the exploration of realism: "If one wishes to achieve a genuine discrimination between the unruly meanings of realism as they jostle and overlap, then one must accept the necessity of going back to the philosophers".<sup>5</sup> This is true, because it is mainly in literary discussion and everyday vernacular that the "meanings" of realism jostle and overlap; in philosophy its function is definite and singular. It is not necessary, however, to pursue the concept deep into the fiery regions of philosophy proper - where questions of reality per se are confronted, where ontological status is parcelled out in infinite complexity, and so on. That is certainly the direction to be taken, but only so far as the comparatively temperate zone of the history of ideas. Realism is one of the larger Western ideas, and has left an avenue broad for following.

Either ideas are more real than things, or things are more real than ideas; the dominance-of-ideas position, whether denying or merely overriding the existence of things, constitutes what legions of scholars since Plato have understood to be realism. More specifically, it is abstract or general ideas that realism is concerned with, and the source of the issue is the ambiguous relation of these ideas to the world. For instance, it is the general idea "redness" real? If it is, did it exist ante res, that is, before any actual instances of red things had come into the world? Or does it exist merely as a name, as a linguistic abbreviation of the world based on (and hence coming after) numerous observations of individual red things? The nominalist, who sets himself in opposition to the realist, believes that general ideas are merely names - artificial devices of thought and communication unreal in themselves.

This opposition is characterized in a passage marked as noteworthy by the undergraduate Henry Adams in his copy of an 1852 Biographical History of Philosophy: "We are here led to the origin of the world-famous dispute of Realism and Nominalism.... The Realists maintain that every General Term (or abstract idea) such as Man, Virtue, etc., has a real and independent existence (apart from concrete instances). The Nominalists, on the contrary, maintain that all general terms are but the creations of human ingenuity ... merely used as marks of aggregate conceptions<sup>N, 6</sup>

From the beginnings of primitive religion to the intricacies of high Christian theology, realism was a collectively held unconscious assumption about the universe. Christian thinking from Augustine forward was realist in every respect, although room was afforded for shifting between realisms (Aquinas moved away from hard Platonic realism to the softer Aristotelian version). There were certain general ideas, such as God, and beneath that Trinity and Universal Church, and finally Man and Right, which this philosophy regarded as absolutely real. The idea Man itself was a reality, of which individual men partook; and yet Man itself did not draw its reality from the sum of individual men, but rather from other general ideas even higher above, ultimately from God.

The vision of the world implied by realism was thus one of interconnections. Nothing was irreducibly individual; all things belonged to one or another general class; and all classes were subsumed beneath the ultimate universal, God. The world was a universe, understanding the term literally. The social implication (or perhaps social base) of this is obvious: Man in general, the human community, was more real than any man in particular.

In the later Middle Ages the inherent problems of this philosophy, hidden at its heart at least since Plato and Aristotle debated the status of ideas, rushed into the foreground. A powerful school of nominalism rose up to dispute the ground with realism; Man is a mere name, created by men's experience of each other, a name that would not exist if no man or only one man existed. Virtue exists only inasmuch as there are instances of virtuous behaviour.

These supersubtle distinctions seem pedantic. However, while philosophical issues and disputes may indeed be eternal, pure, airborne, the forms they assume in human history usually have roots - ideological roots - in the ordinary world. This is bound to be the case where an issue has entered history as a large-scale obsession and confrontation; and, as John of Salisbury wrote from the University at Chartres in the twelfth century, the dispute between realism and nominalism was "a problem over which more time had been lost than the Caesars ever spent conquering the world and more money than ever filled the coffers of Croesus".<sup>7</sup> In fact, this dispute was a vehicle capable of handling ideas of obvious practical significance - ideas creating and created by radical changes in the character of Western life.

Postulating a world of multiplicity, a multiverse in which everything was to be seen as particular, nominalism nevertheless came down strongest for particularity as applied to the human sphere. "Redness" may not be an issue worth going to the gallows over, but the difference between Man and 'a man' is considerable. This difference becomes clear as one reads David Knowle's description of Ockham's nominalism, in which "generalities of every sort are denied in favour of a world of individual things, each of which was so irreducibly individual as to be unsusceptible

of any intelligible relationship or connection with any other individual<sup>8</sup>. And since this principle "was applied with remorseless logic to every field of thought"<sup>8</sup>, the outcome of its application to mediaeval notions of Man and Community is obvious. Community was not something real, but rather a name for aggregates of individuals who happened to be gathered together in some loose sense.

Henry Adams formulated the realism-nominalism dispute in an interesting way: "The schools knew that their society hung for life on the demonstration that God, the ultimate universal, was a reality, out of which all other universal truths or realities sprang"<sup>9</sup>. The interesting point here is that Adams sees society hanging in the balance, and this of course is accurate.

The middle class, which began to emerge during the late mediaeval period, experienced as fetters many of the general ideas that the Church had envisioned (and enforced) as real. The intellectual apologists of this class attacked the status of general ideas generally, but their special commitment was to the task of releasing the enterprising individual from the restrictions of the mediaeval community, and replacing the troublesome Virtue with the more pliable ethic of personal interest. The explicit nominalism of such otherwise diverse early modern thinkers as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke comes to mind. Mature liberal-individualism reveals its nominalist centre unequivocally through one of its main spokesmen, John Stuart Mill. Of the abstract human community, Man, Mill wrote: "Men are not, when brought together, converted into another kind of substance"<sup>10</sup>. He writes similarly of abstract Virtue: "I will forego any advantage which could be derived from the idea of abstract right"<sup>11</sup>. The liberal and the nominalist are indistinguishable here;<sup>12</sup>

"group" and "right" are illusory phantoms, the individual and his conscience alone are real,

Some time before the advent of Mill, this habit of mind had crystallized into the dream of a liberal America. Miraculously coeval with the rise of individualism was the discovery of the New World, a vast region where the individual would be allowed room to nourish and contemplate his particularity. An America of owner-farmers and few cities, as envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, would escape the constriction of the traditional European community. America's values would not be lowered down from above, through Church and Community; rather they would emanate from the individual, and of course from the fresh green land itself. The related ideas of the land, Nature, and the "natural individual" as generators of value found expression in the vocabulary of European romanticism.

In Walt Whitman's early poems, where the free-floating self unfolds in blissful union with a totally particularized and lovingly catalogued Nature, the aspiration of America's youth are given classic form. The very structure of the poems reflects a nominalist world-view; and yet it is possible to find more explicit nominalism than that. In the opening paragraph of Democratic Vistas, Whitman unites his vision of a particularised Nature with a description of American Society: "As the greatest lessons of Nature ... are perhaps the lessons of variety and freedom, the same present the greatest lessons also in New World politics...." He cites Mill's On Liberty wherein "full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions" (emphasis added) is the precondition for "restoration" and "vitality",<sup>13</sup>

And yet Whitman had probably never given nominalism, as a philosophical tradition, a serious thought. The same could not be said of the

more scholarly Emerson. His general interest, preceding Whitman's, in nature, America, and the individual is well known; and in his essay, "Nominalist and Realist", nature and nominalism are brought together and fused. He writes: "Nature will not be a Buddhist; she resents generalizing, and insults the philosopher with a million of fresh particulars ... She hates abstractionists",<sup>14</sup>

The modern world, however, was not long generating its own fifth columns of opposition. About the time that the problems associated with realism and nominalism seemed laid aside forever, to the extent that realism had become effectively synonymous with its old antithesis materialism, a school of neo-realism came forth. In America, Harvard University was the seat of this school, and Charles S. Peirce its main exponent. Peirce turned his attention to what he considered to be the next of many characteristic modern confusions, the late Middle Ages. In particular, he was opposed to Descartes for his creation of "the modern form of the nominalist error", and was positively influenced by the realism of the thirteenth century philosopher Duns Scotus, the author of the ethical principle that "the limited duration of all finite things logically demands the identification of one's interests with those of an unlimited community of persons and things",<sup>15</sup> Here was realism, a general ethical principle, and a non-particularist view of the world and man.

Along with this went a new way of seeing and talking about practical human affairs. The nineteenth-century habit of viewing human history in terms of the waves moving outward from the activity of great individuals - such as Carlyle's "heroes" - gradually gave way to an attempt to view particular events within the context of general "forces",<sup>16</sup> These forces were seen to be ultimately human, of course, but with the advent of

unknown and partly-known variables like technology and population explosion, they could not be said to be individual in any ordinary sense. The idea of "synergism" that was being advanced by biologists, that in some cases the combined energy of separate agencies will be greater than their sum individually, was seen to be applicable to the human sphere. "Man in general," known now as "social force" rather than "community", was on the scene once again, and the various chroniclers of human life were not slow to pick up his vibration.

Around the turn of the century, for instance, Émile Durkheim criticized the analyses of some scholars for their facile individualistic assumptions. He believed that "society is not a mere sum of individuals, [but] rather the system formed by their association represents a specific reality that has its own characteristics".<sup>17</sup> This kind of conceptualization seemed especially à propos to the analysis of modern warfare, wherein the role of the individual (as conceived by liberalism) could be seen to be patently insignificant. In 1917, Henry Cabot Lodge wrote that "Woodrow Wilson does not mean to go to war, but I think he will be carried away by events".<sup>18</sup> In other words, Wilson is not on his own course, nor is he merely responding to anyone who is; events are carrying individuals along. In the same vein, Herbert Butterfield wrote in 1944 of war in particular and modern life in general: "There is something in the nature of historical events that twists the course of history in a direction that no man ever intended".<sup>19</sup> That "something" was given a more decisive name in an essay by T.S. Eliot: vast impersonal forces.<sup>20</sup>

With the mention of Eliot, one is reminded that it is one thing to analyse theoretically on the basis of a new look at the world, and another to incorporate that new look into a full-length, many-faceted



vision of life - such as a novel or a long poem. Literature, especially in America, had for some time portrayed the "irreducible particularity of the individual"; and in the last half of the nineteenth century novelists became interested in portraying the irreducible dimension of "connectedness" as well - perhaps even without declining the romantic legacy of personal intensity. Henry James, for instance, had an idea of what made for intensity: "The greatest intensity may so be arrived at evidently, when the sacrifice of community, of the 'related' sides of situations, has not been too rash".<sup>21</sup> Again: "Experience, as I see it, is our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures".<sup>22</sup> Eliot, strongly influenced by James, felt that "the real hero [of a James novel] is always a social entity of which men and women are constituents".<sup>23</sup> This suggests an important aspect of Eliot's literary indebtedness to James, his borrowing of James's metaphors and technical devices as aids to the delineation of social entities, and finally "vast impersonal forces", in his own writing.

A few critical inroads have been pushed into this subject. In a review of William Dean Howells for The Academy in 1890, William Sharp moved toward this generalization: "Perhaps realism in literary art may be approximately defined as the science of exact presentment of many complexities, abstract and concrete, in one truthful, because absolutely reasonable and apparently inevitable, synthesis".<sup>24</sup> It is interesting that Sharp is discussing Howells and literary realism, and using categories cited above in connection with philosophical realism. This conflation suggests that the presence of abstract entities, such as "society", in realist writing could be identified without a prior acquaintance with philosophical realism. After all, it is common and reasonable to expect

that a piece of realist writing will deal with society, with the various things that connect people rather than separate them. One would not expect to take up a novel given as "realist" and be plunged into a moody and unremitting first-person reverie. In other words, by recourse to the history of ideas we have not replaced one idea of realism with another, but rather broadened the conventional denotation. To define it as "the presentment of abstract as well as concrete complexities" is not to reject the earlier "portrayal of life as it is", but rather to render it more specific. "Life as it is" includes the social dimension.

Realism thus broadened and specified is capable of doing work. Hereafter it will serve as the master-concept in an interpretation of some of Henry Adams' writing and ideas. Adams merges smoothly with this trend toward realist thinking and description. On a superficial level, he enters the discussion inasmuch as he was intellectually related to each of Lodge, James, and Eliot - to Henry James through friendship and the mutual reading of one another's books, to Henry Cabot Lodge through friendship and as colleagues at Harvard, and to T.S. Eliot inasmuch as Eliot was significantly influenced by Adams' thinking.<sup>25</sup> The specific character of Adams' realism is the subject of the next chapter.

## NOTES

CHAPTER I

1. Princeton, 1963.
2. A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York, 1971), p. 140.
3. "The Realist Novel", Paths of American Thought, eds. White and Schlesinger (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1963), p. 250.
4. Realism (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 2.
5. Ibid., p. 3.
6. Cited in Max I. Baym, The French Education of Henry Adams (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), p. 185.
7. "John of Salisbury and the Controversy Over Universals", in Mediaeval Philosophy, ed. Herman Shapiro (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 177.
8. "The Harvest of Nominalism", in The Evolution of Mediaeval Thought (New York: Vintage-Knopf, 1962), p. 328.
9. Chartres, p. 326.
10. Mill, A System of Logic (1843), vii, 1.
11. Cited in R.P. Wolff, The Poverty of Liberalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 5.
12. There is room for contention here. It should be noted that this was not literally true of liberal theory in every aspect of its formulation. For instance, liberal theorists tried to establish general principles of individualism and its morality throughout the eighteenth century - vide the theory of "universal natural rights". And later on, the social Darwinists believed that absolute competitive individualism would turn their society into a quasi-biological "organism".  
 But these are paradoxes within liberal thinking rather than a refutation of the characterization of liberal-individualism as nominalist. In the same vein, the particularist relies on a general theory of particularism, and the pluralist on a singular theory of pluralism. And of course the attack on "community" was carried out by individualists who were united in their aims and formed intellectual communities of their own.  
 In these and similar cases, the paradox derives from a distinction between means and end; it is nevertheless the desired end in each case that should be regarded as characteristic.

13. The Complete Prose and Selected Poetry of Walt Whitman, ed. James Miller (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1959), p. 455.
14. Essays (New York: A.L. Burt and Co., 1920).
15. Runes, op. cit., p. 277.
16. This change is discussed by E.H. Carr in What is History? (London, 1970).
17. Cited by Alasdair MacIntyre in the March, 1974 New York Review of Books.
18. Cited in Carr, op. cit., p. 51
19. The Englishman and His History (London, 1944), p. 103.
20. Cited in Carr, p. 44.
21. Cited in Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 27.
22. Ibid., p. 21.
23. Cited in Berthoff Ferment of Realism (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 83.
24. Cited in Grant, Realism, p. 61.
25. Some of the details of Eliot's debt to Henry Adams are provided by Yvor Winters in his In Defense of Reason (New York: Swallow Press, 1947), p. 497 et passim. Winters writes: "Adams, whose influence on Eliot's entire poetic theory is probably greater than has been guessed, worked out [in The Education and Chartres and in certain essays] the entire theory of modern society and its relation to the society of the Middle Ages, upon which Eliot's critical theory rests".

Specific passages in Eliot's poems have been borrowed from Adams' prose; and of course Eliot wrote an essay on Adams for The Athenaeum in 1919.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION IN DEMOCRACY AND THE EDUCATION:  
REGULATED AND UNREGULATED SOCIAL ENERGY.

In her biographical study of Henry Adams, Elizabeth Stevenson cleared a path toward his realism:

Unlike the great individualists of his time [Adams] could not conceive of man alone, but always thought in terms of man living among his fellow men, and somehow regulating or failing to regulate the energies of society. His greatest unhappiness came from a disappointment of this conception; his most fruitful insights, from seeing this idea in various aspects.<sup>1</sup>

Three interesting distinctions are offered: the individualists of the nineteenth century, against Adams who thought of men living within social contexts and emitting social energies; the paired possibilities, within Adams' conception, of regulated or unregulated social energies; and the psychological response, happiness or unhappiness, consonant with these possibilities. It will be useful to document and connect these generalizations, with a view to validating the claim that Adams' "most fruitful insights" came from seeing the various aspects of social energy.

The distinction between individualist and realist has its earliest and most visible manifestation in Adams' historical analysis - in fact, in his decision to write history at all. Prior to Henry, men of the Adams family had been seen as embodiments of heroic individualism: making history, literally creating a new history in the new world. And now an Adams had set himself to the passive recording of history. The difference is total; history and individual have exchanged places. History is no longer moved by the individual, but rather reflected by him. "Reflected" is no loose image in this case, because in the History as well as in the