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Henry Adams: An Education in Autobiography

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Henry Adams: An Education in Autobiography

Warte nur! balde / Ruhest du auch!¹

Under the Shadow: *The (de)construction of a First Sentence*

I am staring at two images. Both are representations of Henry Adams. The first is a copper-tinted daguerreotype taken in 1858 when both American photography and Adams were barely twenty years old (*Figure 1*). The second image is a line drawing by David Levine that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* over a century later (*Figure 2*).



Figure 1



Figure 2

What happened to Henry Adams – scion of a political dynasty, literary stylist, and once considered the country’s pre-eminent historian? How, over the course of a lifetime, did the pleasant depiction of an earnest, intelligent young man morph into a narrow-eyed caricature of old-aged cynicism? Pictorial likenesses from the intervening years offer no clue, they are plate-glass portraits in the fashion of the Gilded Age: stilted, posed, signifying – if not nothing – then

¹ Goethe's "Wanderer's Nightsong" (1780): "Only wait! before long / You too will rest." Quoted by the "young" Henry Adams in *The Education of Henry Adams, An Autobiography*.

very little. Yet, if *there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face*², perhaps it can be found in the (de)construction of the famous first sentence of Henry Adam's autobiography:

UNDER the shadow of Boston State House, turning its back on the house of John Hancock, the little passage called Hancock Avenue runs, or ran, from Beacon Street, skirting the State House grounds, to Mount Vernon Street, on the summit of Beacon Hill; and there, in the third house below Mount Vernon Place, February 16, 1838, a child was born, and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Church after the tenets of Boston Unitarianism, as Henry Brooks Adams.³

First words, like these taken from *The Education of Henry Adams*, are frequently revealing. Even when they seek to mis-direct or manipulate, first words can provide unintended insights into the mental and moral framework of its author.

This essay will begin by breaking down Adams's starting sentence word by word, piece by piece – pondering its meanings and permutations in the context of subsequent chapters of this iconic memoir. The essay will then consider whether Adams's *Education* should still be regarded as a classic of American autobiography or seen merely as an irrelevant and out-of-date artifact. In a nation radically transformed since Adams's time, does the book still deserve its high flung reputation? In other words, which of the images cited above is most relevant to *The Education*: an image of optimistic youth or one of smoldering cynicism?

² *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 4

³ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*, (1999 Modern Library pbk. Ed), Modern Library, 1999, 3.

To get a sense of how out of sync the book is with contemporary times, imagine Henry Brooks Adams opposite a clerk in a Boston, Massachusetts motor vehicle identification office – circa 2018, the centenary of his death:

Clerk: May I have your date and place of birth, please?

Adams: Under the shadow of Boston State House, turning its back on the house of John Hancock, the little passage . . .

Clerk: Sir, I only need your date and place of birth.

If we read *The Education* correctly, such an exchange could only confirm the worst forebodings Adams had for the fate of his legacy and the future of *his* American republic.

But in the country of fine writing – in the neighborhood of *belle lettres* – a close examination of this first sentence provides a revealing example of meticulous literary construction; nothing is random, each word is delicately placed like a brick with an eye for precision and design. Notice for example how Adams balances the sentence – with its measured length – on the fulcrum of a semi-colon, seven commas carefully weighed on either side. Indeed, the ideal of balance along with social propriety was important to Henry Adams in life as well as in sentences. The home he lived in when *The Education* was published – and presumably where he crafted its opening sentence – was designed for him by his Harvard classmate and erstwhile Paris companion, the famed architect H. H. Richardson, whose firm in the nineteenth century littered the American landscape with such gothic monstrosities as the New York state capitol in Albany. Nonetheless, the mansion (*Figure 3*) Richardson constructed under Adams’s watchful supervision is a small essay in



Figure 3

Richardson, whose firm in the nineteenth century littered the American landscape with such gothic monstrosities as the New York state capitol in Albany. Nonetheless, the mansion (*Figure 3*) Richardson constructed under Adams’s watchful supervision is a small essay in

balanced aesthetics; a square-shaped structure justified on both sides as if it were a printed paragraph, punctuated by sets of windows evenly distributed. The only concession being made to asymmetry, as the floors condescend to street level is a servant's entrance – lower left-hand corner.⁴

As for length, Adams's first sentence could be considered Proustian but significantly it lacks, or rather avoids, the fluidity of something out of *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Adams's lines are angular and antique rather than curvaceous and modern, in the manner of a Roman temple rather than that of a Parisian courtesan, lacking as it does the vitality of a once living thing. Such a contrast is ironic in that both works are remembrances of a sort. But Adams's musings and pontifications are recessive and measured in a way that Marcel Proust's serpentine sentences never are.

Notice as well how Adams employs a diction that sounds a note of pathos and withdrawal even in a commemoration of birth: “*under* the shadow,” “*turning* its back,” the active voice changing tense and speed conspicuously in mid-route from “runs” to “*ran*.” Also note the passive-aggressive quality in this understated withdrawal, an egotistical posture that will be sustained throughout the narrative. When Adams reverses the *w*'s of traditional rhetoric (who, what, where and when), *he* nevertheless, after being *christened later*, takes pride of place as the goal and terminus of the entire construct: *Henry Brooks Adams*. Period.

That Adams should introduce himself in the third person and maintain this solipsism throughout contradicts the feigned tribute he pays to Rousseau in the book's preface. There, Adams cites him as having “erected a monument of warning against the Ego.”⁵ But the conceit

⁴ The mansion was built by Richardson along side an adjoining mansion for Adams's close friend, John Hay. Both mansions were razed in 1927 and the site is now the location of the Hay-Adams Hotel.

⁵ Adams, *The Education*, XXXVIII.

of autobiography in the third person is in fact a flagrant act of egotism. It is clothing the self – which he describes as only a “manikin” – in a costume of layered defense. What results is a series of artfully contrived tableaux, arranged in chapters, in which Adams charts his transformation against the backdrop of American history. Not long after the book’s publication, historian Carl Becker saw through this literary posturing:

On his own premises, there is something too much of the ego here. *The Education of Henry Adams*, conceived as a study in the philosophy of history, turns out in fact to be an *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, one of the most self-centred and self-revealing books in the language.⁶

Moreover, the self-comparison to Rousseau signifies the high literary and world-historical ambitions Adams intends for his personal narrative. Adams associates himself with one of the founding philosophers of modern education, but only to then suggest that Rousseau’s *Confessions* may no longer be a relevant guide for young men⁷ of the twentieth century. The reader can assume, then, that the text of the enlightenment educator – the author of *Emile* – will now be supplanted by a newer volume on education written by none other than Henry Adams himself.

In subsequent chapters, St Augustine, Charles Darwin, and even Karl Marx will be subjected to similar passive-aggressive revisionist tactics as Adams attempts not only to assay the meaning of his own life, but also to minimize the legacy of others and propound a strange “dynamic theory” of history itself – a theory that will explain the motion and force of the entire

⁶ The American Historical Review. United Kingdom: American Historical Association, 1918, 424.

⁷ Adams is gender specific in that his “story of education” is “meant to help *young men*” — presumed those who were white, protestant and well-off (i.e. wasps) -- Adams, *The Education*, 314.

universe. But then what to expect of a writer who in the first sentence of autobiography speaks of his nativity in biblical reverberations: “for unto us a *child is born* / Unto us a Son is given; / And the government will be upon his shoulders.”⁸

No doubt these lines taken from *Isaiah* concerning governance and patrimony had a personal and prophetic resonance for the grandson and great-grandson of a president; even, or perhaps especially for a son descending from a long line of deists who adhered to the *tenets of Boston Unitarianism* – ancestors and patriarchs who were members of the *First Church* headed by one of *his uncles* no less. In any case, when applying the “w’s” of traditional rhetoric to Adams, we left out the last and perhaps most important “x” factor: the *why* of his character and life story.

Adams seems to have thought of himself as republican royalty; and the first sentence of this autobiography gives the impression that he would not have considered the phrase entirely oxymoronic. Adams places himself within the penumbra, *under the shadow*, of the American revolution. And, as if his own family name were not enough, he evokes *Mount Vernon*, a not-so-subtle allusion to the man he considers the “pole star” of the revolution, George Washington. He then cites by association literally the most stylized signature in the annals of American independence, *John Hancock*. Significantly, both Washington and Hancock were immensely wealthy (and slave owners) unlike their fiercely republican compatriot, John Adams, a man of comparatively modest means who could only sneer at a country, like France of the *Ancien Régime*, which valued a “profusion of unmeaning wealth and magnificence”⁹ over republican virtues of thrift and simplicity.

⁸ Old Testament, King James Version, *Isaiah*, 9:4.

⁹ McCullough, David. *John Adams*. United Kingdom: Simon & Schuster, 2001, 204.

But profusion of wealth and magnificence (the avoidance of thrift and simplicity) was no small thing to the second president's descendant, Henry Adams – the *Brooks* in his name, was derived matrilineally from Peter Chardon Brooks, said to be the wealthiest man in New England at the time of his death. In this regard, *Beacon Hill* rises at the center of the paragraph. Beacon Hill was and remains the symbolic apex of new England aristocracy and Adams wants us to know that on *February 16, 1838* he was delivered into the world at the *summit* of that city on a hill – the scion of three notable generations – born in the *third house below*, i.e., the fourth child in the fourth generation.

Thus, in asking the “why” of a privileged life, we begin to see, through the prism of this first sentence – *this little passage* of (de)constructed text – a fateful fixation with wealth, status, and power that parallels the aristocratic tendencies that grew into the Gilded Age. But from the pen of Henry Adams the fixation is so superbly wrought and so well set, that we hardly notice the text is thick inlaid with the language of elitism, snobbery, and well-crafted narcissism.¹⁰ Such is the legerdemain of fine letters; the subliminal deflections of style accomplished with an elegant sleight of hand. But should not we as modern readers show some democratic disdain? Why should Adams be given the benefit of the doubt when we set about evaluating his written legacy? Narcissus may have been among the first in the literature of self-reflection, but should such a character trait go unquestioned in our twenty-first century interpretations of *The Education*?

Finally, as we move past this first sentence, we find that *skirting the state house grounds* remains the only italicized piece left here unexamined. Is this phrase, finally, a statement of

¹⁰ Bruce Simpson in *The Political Education of Henry Adams* quotes a diplomatic source as referring to Adams as “pompous and assuming.” The associate complained that Adams as a young man was “very conceited, and talks like a goose . . . He will ere long get a hard slap in the face from fortune . . .” Adams’s brother, Charles Adams, was more direct: “My brother has grown to be a damned, solemn, pompous little ass.”

humility? A sub-textual demurrer by Adams to having Isaiah's yoke of government being placed too heavily upon his rather narrow shoulders¹¹: "My name is a trifle too heavy for me," he once wrote in apparent exasperation.¹²

Humility? Perhaps. But then, the rectangular mansion Adams had built for himself stood not on his ancestral grounds in Quincy, Massachusetts nor in the literary precincts of transcendental Boston, but sat snugly in Lafayette square, Washington DC – opposite the White House. Proximity to power and wealth, hob-knobbing with social and powerful elites would throughout his life remain an abiding fixation for Henry Adams.

¹¹ Apparently self-conscious about his small stature physically, and perhaps politically as well, Adams thinks that scarlet fever might have stunted his growth: "He fell behind his brothers two or three inches in height, and proportionally in bone and weight." Adams, *The Education*, 6.

¹² Simpson, *The Political Education of Henry Adams*, 4. Simpson adds on the same page, "His father's accomplishments in themselves presented a career difficult to equal; to follow two presidents as well seemed almost too much to bear."

Beyond the First Sentence: A “Howling Jew” and “Niggers without Newspapers”

No student of autobiography or American letters can easily dismiss *The Education*. Upon its publication over a century ago, it received the Pulitzer Prize for literature and eighty years later in 1998 was voted by the *Modern Library* as number one on its list of the hundred best works of non-fiction. Even the title itself has become a trope in publishing circles. When assigning a title to a memoir or bildungsroman¹³ – especially one with literary pretensions – editors are fond of prefixing the title with *The Education of* . . . this or that person or occupation.¹⁴ And, over the years, the book has not gone without praise.

As one of many in the critical space, essayist Alfred Kazin, for instance, cited Adams in *The Education* as “the master of his literary trade” who in seeking to “create impressions . . . often arranges a whole period [of history] to a motif as if it were a piece of music.”¹⁵ Such literary virtuosity and command of the historical sweep are evident when Adams follows up his first sentence with this:

Had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest, under the name of Israel Cohen, he would scarcely have been more distinctly branded, and not much more heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century. . .¹⁶

¹³ The word *Bildungsroman* literally translates as a novel of education: German, from *Bildung* ‘education’ + *Roman* ‘a novel’.

¹⁴ A biography published in 2020 concerning the second president is entitled *The Education of John Adams*.

¹⁵ Alfred Kazin. *An American Procession* (1st Harvard University Press pbk. ed, Harvard University Press, 1996), 303.

¹⁶ Adams, *The Education*, 3.

The pairing of this second sentence with the first illustrates one of Adams's favorite stylistic devices: contrasting persons and places symmetrically. Note how the images of the two sentences are juxtaposed as if written on the opposing panels of a diptych; in this particular case, the *counterfeit presentment of two brothers*¹⁷: Henry Brooks Adams and Israel Cohen. Note too how Judeo-Christian references are contrasted in several "Jew against Gentile" comparisons: Jerusalem-Boston, circumcised-christened, synagogue-church, etc.

The words are carefully chosen and if a close reader questions whether this second sentence lies *under a shadow* of its own, with a glowing tinge of anti-Semitism beneath, they need look no further than Adams's views on the Dreyfus affair (that "howling Jew"¹⁸) or the words of Secretary of State, John Hay: "[when Adams] saw Vesuvius reddening the midnight air he searched the horizon to find a Jew stoking the fire."¹⁹ That Hay, private secretary and biographer of Lincoln, could joke about Adams in such convivial terms regarding such dubious notions and yet remain his most intimate friend is perhaps emblematic of what "society" was during the American Gilded Age and its fashionable embrace of Anti-Semitism.

Note, too, the casual sarcasm implicit in the statement that he along with Jews will be "heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century." Considering the Jew-baiting tendencies of Adams and his kind, we certainly know why Jews will be socially handicapped in years to come. But does Adams dare to claim his Brahmin background and family connections are tantamount to the same treatment? In any case, it is a modern paradox that we are encouraged by some critics to recognize Adams's exceptional talent, as writer and intellectual, but then to see him as "only a man of his time" when it comes to his equally exceptional racism and

¹⁷ Hamlet, Act III, Scene 4.

¹⁸ Daniel Okrent. *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America* (United States, Scribner, 2019), 34.

¹⁹ Henry Adams. *Henry Adams, selected letters* (Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 281.

snobbery even judged by the prejudiced standards of the time – giving him, yet again, the benefit of the doubt.

As might be expected, Adams’s bigotry also extended to persons of color. Visiting the South for the first time – on a “pilgrimage” to George Washington’s slave plantation – Adams described the Virginia scenery: “the broad Potomac and the *coons in the trees*,” the rich flora and the lively fauna: “a haphazard variety of pigs, cows, and *negro babies* . . . [where] the brooding indolence of a warm climate and a negro population hung in the atmosphere heavier than the catalpas.”²⁰

The treacle of condescension Adams applied to “negros” and “coons” (who are described picturesquely here as if part of the flora and fauna) is no less noxious, in our time, than the sulfuric acid of hostility he leveled at Jews. During the reconstruction era, Adams, despite his inbred Yankee opposition to slavery had scant sympathy for emancipated blacks:

Adams was horrified at the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Fourteenth Amendment in 1866, he charged that the Republican-controlled Congress was “violating the rights of minorities” [but the “minorities” Adams is referring to are southern whites not freed African Americans] . . .²¹

Adams grew increasingly querulous with age and bitterly averse to the claims of modernism.²² He wrote that in his travels he preferred darker races to whites; and, ironically, for a former Washington correspondent, he decried the “fatuous” journalists who in his opinion

²⁰ Adams, *The Education*, 48 (italics added).

²¹ Simpson, 26.

²² Adams’s aversion to modernism did not preclude one of his favorite past-times: motoring across the French countryside in a chauffer-driven “pretty Mercedes.” Adams, Henry. *Henry Adams, selected letters*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992, 445.

seem to “admire themselves too much to admit their own possible inferiority to *niggers without newspapers*.”²³

As for the rights of women, Adams has little to say that does not jar modern sensibilities:

The woman seldom knows her own thought; she is as curious to understand herself as the man to understand her, and responds far more quickly than the man to a sudden idea.²⁴

As for the emancipation of women into the workplace, Adams’s opinion is typical of his class and his time: he accused working women of abandoning “the cradle and the family” and as a result they “must become sexless like the bees.”²⁵

Adams's bigotry, like his intellect, was broad. When John “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald was elected mayor of Boston, Adams wrote: “Poor Boston has fairly run up against it in the form of its particular Irish maggot, rather lower than the Jew, but more or less the same in appetite for cheese.”²⁶ “Honey Fitz” was the grandfather of the future president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

With all this said, can the benefit of the doubt still be afforded a “classic” text that casts such a wide net of snobbery and contempt (from a self-confessed “New Englander . . . who had learned . . . to love the pleasure of hating”²⁷) just because some might find its ironic prose seductive, and its pervasive cynicism so well-tempered?

²³ Henry Adams and J. C. Levenson. *The Letters of Henry Adams* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 185.

²⁴ Adams, *The Education*, 446.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 446.

²⁶ Samuels, Ernest., Adams, Henry., Levenson, Jacob C., *The Letters of Henry Adams*. United Kingdom: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982, 301

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

Adams and Augustine: *Autobiography in the Form of Confession*

Adams's work is a strange landscape difficult to map in terms of genre. We enter it unsuspectingly through the region of memoir. Early chapters in *The Education* introduce us to Henry Adams's boyhood in Boston and Quincy, Massachusetts with "lessons" in observation: e.g., the *lesson of color*: "a yellow kitchen floor in strong sunlight"; a *lesson of pain*: scarlet fever; a *lesson of taste*: "a saucer with a baked apple" after a long illness (à la Proust and his madeleine). Here too we are privy to what may be the most vivid scene in the book when, as a young boy, Henry Adams is in "rebellion" against his mother at going to school. How does John Quincy Adams, the aging former president of the United States, deal with the situation?

Putting on his hat, he [the elder Adams] took the boy's hand without a word, and walked with him, [the boy] paralyzed by awe, up the road to the town. After the first moments of consternation at this interference in a domestic dispute, the boy reflected that an old gentleman close on eighty [should] never trouble himself to walk near a mile on a hot summer morning over a shadeless road to take a boy to school, and that it would be strange if a lad imbued with the passion of freedom could not find a corner to dodge around, somewhere before reaching the school door . . . but the old man did not stop, and the boy saw all his strategical points turned, one after another, until he found himself seated inside the school . . . Not till then did the President release his hand and depart.²⁸

²⁸ Adams, Henry, *The Education*, 273.

Subsequent chapters of the first half of *The Education* touch upon nineteenth century politics (presidents and prime ministers), literature (Swinburne and Henry James), sociology (Comte and Marx) and science including Darwinism and the epochs of Charles Lyell's geology.

In the end, however, the reader finds her/him self led down the garden path, as it were, into a prearranged clearing where the material of the previous chapters (people, places, inventions, etc.) come to serve only as scaffolding to construct a pseudo-scientific and confusing theory of human history as the product of "supersensual forces" moving through history. Under the guise of personal narrative, Adams has transformed himself into a philosopher of ideas and the mid-wife of what he seems to have considered a literary innovation that he supposes reaches the level of Rousseau's *Confessions* or a volume of scientific historicism with aspirations to rival the influence of Darwin's *The Descent of Man*. After recounting the many supposed failures of this life, this section of the book is intended as a sort of philosophical redemption. But in the end, it bespeaks failure yet again. But this time the failure is real and not faked (as we will later discuss) for literary purposes. Louis Auchincloss, one of Adams more sympathetic biographers, writes:

. . . in the opinion of many commentators Adams went hopelessly astray in applying the laws of physics to human events so that his theorizing amounts to little more than brilliant and imaginative fantasy.²⁹

Still, somehow, it's difficult to dismiss Adams's conceit altogether. Henry Adams was one of the pre-eminent public intellectuals of his day. He moved in lofty academic circles and knew brainy notables on both sides of the Atlantic. His intelligence was capacious and insightful. Prior to the discovery of DNA, he suspected causative gaps in Darwin's theory of natural

²⁹ Auchincloss, Louis. Henry Adams. United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1971, 38.

selection, and before Einstein was widely published, Adams seems to have glimpsed the first flickerings of relativity in physics and the ominous and destructive implications of a post-Newtonian world. Besides having mastered the major European languages (including the dead ones) he dabbled in Asian dialects and had himself steam-boated across the Pacific on more than one occasion embarking on cultural expeditions of his own devising. As a globe-trotter, he became a travel writer of the first water.³⁰ Reminiscing about south sea islands, he mused in characteristically passive-aggressive prose about one day returning:

. . . if it were only to sleep forever in the trade-winds under the southern stars, wandering over the dark purple ocean, with its purple sense of solitude and void. Not that he liked the sensation, but that it was the most unearthly he had felt . . . Life had been cut in halves, and the old half had passed away, education and all, leaving no stock to graft on.³¹

Adams's pursuit of a wide range of interests is evident throughout *The Education*. But neither history, diplomacy, philosophy, science, or travel-writing seem adequate to encompass the polymathic nature of this peculiar work. Ironically – as Adams was decidedly a non-believer – the genre that most aptly fits *The Education*, is one previously charted by Augustine and Rousseau – namely, the *confessional* mode.

³⁰A definition of the phrase *first water* includes: “the highest grade, degree, or quality”; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/>.

³¹ Adams, *The Education*, 195.

Autobiography and Conversion: Obituary or Suicide Note?

Adams seems to have expected comparison to Augustine and Rousseau, illustrious figures in the history of both philosophy and memoir. And, jealous always for the laurels of originality, attempts in his passive-aggressive manner, to minimize any presumed influence of these earlier rivals in the annals of self-revelation. As noted earlier, Adams may have been self-conscious about his height, but he apparently had no wish to be seen as standing on the shoulders of giants intellectually. For instance, the oath that Rousseau makes to tell the “naked” truth about his life prompts Adams to revert to his puritan roots and observe dryly: “the Eternal Father himself may not feel unmixed pleasure at our thrusting under his eyes chiefly the least agreeable details of his creation.”³² And when discussing the problem of literary form, he concedes that Augustine was a “great artist” but then he writes, “half in jest, that his [Adams] great ambition was to complete St. Augustine's ‘Confessions.’”³³

To classify himself in league with Augustine, as he did with Rousseau, is yet another example of Adams’s rank intellectual hubris. But the comparison maybe apt in ways that Adams probably did not intend. Patrick Riley, in his seminal work on the genre of autobiography, writes that the experience of conversion is the “central drama” in the writing of the form. Conversion in this context means the total “interruption of subjectivity”³⁴ whereby the person undergoing such a conversion is wholly destroyed and a new “authorial” voice is born. Thus, conversion as described here is a kind of literary death, a born-again experience in words. Riley uses this

³² Adams, *The Education*, XXXVII.

Perhaps with this quote in mind, British statesmen, Lord Morley, quipped, “If Adams had ever looked at himself naked in a glass, he would have rated other men a little more gently.”
Samuels, Ernest. *Henry Adams: The Middle Years*. United Kingdom: Harvard University Press, 1958, 400.

³³ Adams, *The Education*, XXXIV.

³⁴ Riley, Patrick. *Character and Conversion in Autobiography: Augustine, Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, and Sartre*. United Kingdom: University of Virginia Press, 2004, 17.

theory of conversion to explain the arc of Augustine's transformation from sinner to saint as it was laid out in his famous *Confessions*.

As if following an intellectual blueprint, *The Education* attempts to mimic the logic and structure of Augustine's literary example. In the first half of the book, Adams, like Augustine, represents his life as a series of "failures" – he failed as a Harvard student; he failed at diplomacy; he failed as a journalist, reformer, and Harvard professor and historian. But as we learn from Adams's biographers these so-called failures were, in many cases, public accomplishments and were deemed successes. For instance, Adams himself lets us know that one of his "failures" at Harvard included being elected Class Orator, the most coveted honor awarded by the student body.³⁵

After a while, the reader gets the sense that Adams doesn't really think he failed at anything in the world but, rather, that things of the world, failed him. Harvard, he tells us, failed to educate him properly for the coming century; for example, not providing him exposure to Karl Marx or Augustus Comte. However, in this instance, Ernest Samuels, his main biographer, informs us that his Harvard education was rigorous and fairly comprehensive by the standards of the day. In any case, Marx had yet to be widely published; and furthermore, Samuels indicates that it was indeed likely that Adams had been exposed to the sociology of Comte.

Similarly, when writing of his years in London, Adams displays prolonged bitterness when he finds that Englishmen in diplomatic circles are not always on the square. But as Auchincloss notes, "it is incredible that Henry, who came from three generations of diplomats, would be surprised that a statesman should say one thing, intend another, and desire a third."³⁶

³⁵ Adams, *The Education*, 67.

³⁶ Auchincloss, 32.

Prosopopoeia: “I have been dead for fifteen years.”

Supposed failures aside, verisimilitude is not the aim of *The Education*. Its intention is to describe in a semi-fictional literary style a vision of life and a philosophy for young men to admire if not emulate. To this end, the conceit of failure is in fact, as it was for Augustine, a literary strategy. Just as the Bishop of Hippo recounts his grappling with the failures of late antiquity, Adams uses the first half of *The Education* to inventory his confrontation with the failures of the nineteenth century: ranging from robber-baron capitalism in the persons of Jim Fiske and Jay Gould, to what he considers the corruption of the American political class in the offices of Presidents Jackson and Grant. Related to this, he questions with some petulance why neither he nor his brothers (and others of this class), although members of the political “elect” seemed hardly ever in this period of American history to gain election or appointment to any high office – executive, judicial, or ambassadorial.

More intriguingly perhaps, the chapters on failure serve to distract from the most traumatic episodes in Adams’s life: the death of a favored sister, Louisa Catherine, and the suicide of this wife. Marian Clover Adams, an amateur photographer, swallowed potassium cyanide and drop dead on her dark room floor where she was discovered by Adams. Similar to the way that Adams draws attention to his ego by writing in the third person, he draws attention to his dead wife by never mentioning her once in *The Education*. Still, she emerges in the book as a haunting presence, an instance (once removed) of what Riley calls “prosopopoeia” where the autobiographical writer can be read as if speaking “from beyond the grave.”³⁷ The reader senses her spectral presence when Adams recalls his sister’s death in Italy:

³⁷Riley, *Character and Conversion*, 157. Riley is following Paul de Man who wrote that the “dominant figure of the epitaphic or autobiographical discourse is . . . the prosopopeia, the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave” – see *Autobiography as De-facement*. *MLN* 94, no. 5 (1979): 919-30. Accessed April 25, 2021. doi:10.2307/2906560.

Death took features altogether new to him, in these rich and sensuous surroundings. Nature enjoyed it, played with it, the horror added to her charm, she liked the torture, and smothered her victim with caresses. Never had one seen her so winning. The hot Italian summer brooded outside, over the market-place and the picturesque peasants, and, in the singular color of the Tuscan atmosphere, the hills and vineyards of the Apennines seemed bursting with mid-summer blood.³⁸

Marian Adams's suicide affected Adams profoundly. Samuels writes that the house H. H. Richardson built for Adams "became a kind of symbolic tomb."³⁹ He became self-consciously a walking corpse. When asked to address the meeting of an historical society, he replied, "Do you know . . . I have been dead for fifteen years?"⁴⁰

One may be tempted to describe *The Education* as an instance of an unhappy man writing his own obituary, but in the context of Marian Adams's death and the idea of prosopopoeia (i.e., speaking from beyond the grave), G. Thomas Couser is more on point in writing about *The Education* as an instance of what Hamlet refers to as "self-slaughter":

Certainly, Adams committed his own *literary suicide* with great verve and supreme skill. With the simple gesture of adopting the third person point of view, Adams was able to treat himself as a biographer might – *as though his life had ended*. By characterizing himself as a failure, he could

³⁸ Adams, *The Education*, 243.

³⁹ Samuels, *Henry Adams*, 204.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 204

forestall criticism of his egotism while implicitly indicting a social system which excluded such a talented man from power (*italics added*).⁴¹

In *The Education*, this “literary suicide” took place in Paris. In what reads like a nervous breakdown set to prose, Adams wants us to believe that he experienced a volt of intellectual

shock at the Great Exhibition of 1900 that was held in the city of lights. While walking among the “Gallery of Machines” (*Figure 4*) he was struck with the epiphany that these gargantuan engines were replacing the power of the crucifix which had ruled European society since the Emperor Constantine. Sensing the vibration of the turbines converting coal into electricity, Adams had something of a conversion



Figure 4

himself when he walked, like Paul on the Road to Damascus, down the “great hall of dynamos”:

[To his engineer-guide], the dynamo itself was but an ingenious channel for conveying somewhere the heat latent in a few tons of poor coal hidden in a dirty engine-house carefully kept out of sight; but to Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross. The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revolution, than this huge wheel, revolving within arm's length at some vertiginous speed, and barely murmuring—scarcely humming an audible warning to

⁴¹ Couser, G. Thomas. “The Shape of Death in American Autobiography.” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1978, pp. 53–66. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3850134. Accessed 11 May 2020. Couser, G. Thomas. 62.

stand a hair's-breadth further for respect of power—while it would not wake the baby lying close against its frame. Before the end, one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force. Among the thousand symbols of ultimate energy the dynamo was not so human as some, but it was the most expressive.⁴²

Following this intellectual moment of spiritual shock, Adams's writing becomes increasingly cynical and dyspeptic – as he transforms himself into a sort of American Nietzsche. Indeed, he begins to embody a poignant maxim attributed to that grand master of nihilism who himself went mad: “When skepticism mates with longing, mysticism is born.”⁴³

With the evangelistic certainty of the newly converted, Adams uses the climatic chapters of *The Education* to speak in a quivering voice of vatic doom about scientific fatalism and the perplexing forces that propel the turning of the cosmos – and trying pathetically to relate these forces to the inconsolable mystery of death – of his wife (subliminally) and his intimate friends explicitly.

Homosocial Henry Adams: A Scene from Brokeback Mountain?

John Hay, Teddy Roosevelt's Secretary of State, and Clarence King, gentleman-geologist and adventurer,⁴⁴ formed with Adams a trio that could be described as “homosocial” to use Eve Sedgwick's insightful term for what today might be called a three-way bromance. This homosocial aspect is oddly not much discussed in critical readings of *The Education* but nevertheless comprises a large part of its meaning and eventual pathos. Samuels informs us that

⁴² Adams, *The Education*, 234.

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr. “Editor's Introduction.” in Martin Buber. *Ecstatic Confessions: The Heart of Mysticism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. 1996), xiv.

⁴⁴ King also led a double life as a black pullman porter pretending to be white. He did this to persuade a former slave to marry him. *"The 'Strange' Tale of Clarence King". American Lives. PBS.* August 18, 2010. Retrieved May 7, 2021.

in letter-writing at least, Hay and Adams outdid each other in affectionate pet names: “Dear Heart,” “Dear Oasis,” and “My Own and Ownliest.”⁴⁵ The three would take hiking vacations that sound like *Brokeback Mountain* excursions. The intimacy gives added poignancy to the following quote from *The Education* concerning the death of Clarence King (italics added):

The sunshine of life had not been so dazzling of late but that a share of it flickered out for Adams and Hay when King disappeared from their lives . . . He was morbidly curious to see some light at the end of the passage, as though thirty years were a shadow, and he were *again to fall into King's arms at the door of the last and only log cabin left in life.*⁴⁶

Towards the end of *The Education*, John Hay too is dead:

The three friends had begun life together; and the last of the three had no motive—no attraction—to carry it on after the others had gone. *Education had ended for all three . . .*⁴⁷

It seems clear then that when reading *The Education* along with the biographies and the ample correspondence left behind, that Adams’s descent into bitterness and despair has three primary causes: the death of his wife and intimate companions; his inability to reach the political and diplomatic heights of his legendary antecedents; and, most significantly, his obsession with race, power, and wealth. Perhaps this explains the sixty-year transformation of the youthful face in the early daguerreotype to the cynical caricature drawn by David Levine in the nineteen-

⁴⁵ Ernest Samuels. *Henry Adams: The Middle Years* (United Kingdom, Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 176-177.

⁴⁶ Adams, *The Education*, 331 (italics added).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 419.

eighties when collections of Adams's letters, dripping with bile and bigotry, were starting to be published.

Conclusion: *The Rest is Silence*

A clue to a nation's character might well be found in the statues that stand in its municipal parks or the books that lie on its library shelves. In the wake of Charlottesville, we have begun to pull-down equestrian statues of Stonewall Jackson and the like – knocking them off their proverbial high horses. Is this also the moment when Henry Adams's autobiography should go into the dustbin of history? The question returns us to the benefit of the doubt.

At the time of his graduation from Harvard, when the daguerreotype was taken, Adams could look over his shoulder and with youthful intelligence peer into the country's origins as if looking into his own backyard; and, in many ways, he was. In time, he published a multi-volume work concerning the nation's beginnings that esteemed historian Henry Steele Commager called "the finest piece of historical writing, in our literature."⁴⁸ Janus-like, Adams could turn the other direction and see events darkening on the nation's horizon including the Civil War. With his dynastic name and natural talents, he was uniquely situated to observe, record, and even influence the course of national events. In fact, father and son worked hard at preventing England from interfering in the war between the states when Henry's father, Charles Francis Adams, was appointed by Lincoln to the court of St James. The civil rights movement today would likely be at least fifty years in retrograde had they not succeeded in this crucial diplomatic mission. Certainly, if the conflict had been stalemated (as for a time seemed possible), the south could have remained a slave confederation for decades to come. We forget how close the period is to us: there are still a few elderly citizens walking the streets of Washington and Boston today whose grandparents may have been born as property on southern plantations. For that alone, one might be tempted to show Adams some latitude if not sympathy.

⁴⁸ The Marcus W. Jernegan Essays in American Historiography. United States: Russell & Russell, 1958, 195.

As a work of political and social commentary, *The Education* is not without interest. The jeremiads Adams aims at the destructive forces of capitalism and the dehumanizing power of the industrial state are compelling even if one senses they are being delivered from a remote balcony of privilege, racism, and snobbery. Born into a political climate imbued with eighteenth century republican virtues, Adams was among the first to question the benefits of modernity in a country that was increasingly lurching towards gun-boat imperialism via Central America and the Philippines.

As literature *The Education* can be equally compelling – so much so that a proudly professed “New York Jew”⁴⁹ and renowned literary critic, Alfred Kazin, could look past its odious anti-Semitism to write that “*The Education of Henry Adams* has long been for me one of the great chronicles of society in our literature.” If the appraisal seems overblown it is not uncommon among other critics who have commented on the book, Louis Auchincloss and Gore Vidal among them. But the rarefied reputation among such critics may in some ways reveal more about them than Adams.

Alexis De Tocqueville, the trenchant observer of our nation in the nineteenth century wrote the “surface of American society is covered with a layer of democratic paint, but from time to time one can see the old aristocratic colors breaking through.”⁵⁰ Perhaps De Tocqueville’s observation explains in part why certain literary types find refuge in praising Henry Adams; it is a reverence that represents an escape from democratic values and an embrace of a literature that is reclusive, overly refined, excessively ironic, and presumed beyond the interest of the lower classes — seen as too dull to appreciate *aristocratic colors*. It is an elite disposition they share with Adams who, when reading a review of a dead poet penned by his

⁴⁹ *New York Jew* is the title of Kazin’s autobiography.

⁵⁰ *Revue Tocqueville*. United States: Tocqueville Society, 1994, 165.

friend, Edith Wharton, remarked: “. . . Wharton's notice is very nicely done, with fine appreciation and feeling; but all the notices from today to doomsday will never make an American public care for poetry—or anything else unless perhaps chewing-gum.”⁵¹

Adams can at least lay claim to a place in the canon of self-reflection. In “The Shape of Death in American Autobiography” cited above⁵², Couser provides an insightful survey of the important personal narratives in the nation’s literary tradition.⁵³ The common thread in these profiles (ranging from Jonathan Edwards to Malcolm X) is the effort to find meaning in life while standing on the edge of mortality. As suggested above, it is an attempt to set down one’s own obituary while some light still flickers in the brain, an attempt that is as old as Moses who wrote of his own death in the final chapter of Deuteronomy while overlooking the promised land from the heights of Mount Nebo.

Couser notes that Benjamin Franklin, characteristically didactic and witty, mockingly assumes the role of God and considered his autobiography to be a “second edition to correct some Faults of the First”; and he faced his death with a scientific curiosity. Franklin, like Adams, uses a sartorial metaphor to describe re-fitting his “failures” to tailor a better cut for the larger message of his life story. But Adams unlike Franklin seems to have faced mortality in a wardrobe of cosmic dread rather than light-fitting inquisitiveness.

Jonathan Edwards, following Augustine, used his *Personal Narrative* as part of a struggle to eradicate the ego and “awaken” within himself a newly graced soul (“conversion was like

⁵¹ Adams, Henry., Levenson, Jacob C., Samuels, Ernest. Letters, 301.

⁵² Couser, G. Thomas. “The Shape of Death in American Autobiography.” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1978, pp. 53–66. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3850134. Accessed 11 May 2020. Couser, G. Thomas.

⁵³ Adams himself thought that “American Literature offers scarcely one working model” for the type of “education” he was attempting. Although he gives Benjamin Franklin a passing reference, he ignores the other classics of American autobiography such as Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, U. S. Grant and certainly not Frederick Douglass.

conception”⁵⁴), just as Adams used the artifice of writing about failure to re-create himself after losing his wife.

Lastly, and closer to home where Adams is concerned, New England transcendentalists, e.g., Thoreau, used literary memoir to warn “against death by suffocation in civilization”⁵⁵ and to accept death as part of the cycle of nature. In Adams, we can feel the influence of transcendentalism in the contemplative pulse of his essay-like writing especially when he turns to nature (*the singular color of the Tuscan atmosphere, the hills and vineyards of the Apennines . . .*).

It would be churlish then to allow *The Education* no literary value — even as we acknowledge its moral failings. Read slowly, meditatively, its chromatically textured sentences, images, and superior diction can, in passages, cast a peculiar elegiacal spell, exhibiting prose that reads like poetry. The following sentence fragments were taken from the first chapter:

The New England light is glare . . .
. . . his idea of pleasure in light was the blaze of a New England sun . . .
The intense blue of the sea . . .
. . . the cumuli in a June afternoon sky . . .
. . . the strong reds and greens and purples of colored prints and children's
picture-books . . .
these were ideals.⁵⁶

and this from the final chapter . . .

The clouds that gather round the setting sun do not always take a sober coloring from eyes that have kept watch on mortality; or, at least, the

⁵⁴ Couser, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Couser, p. 59.

⁵⁶ Adams, Henry, *The Education*, 8.

sobriety is sometimes scarcely sad. One walks with one's friends squarely up to the portal of life, and bids good-bye with a smile.⁵⁷

In addition, the narrative contains quotes that are sardonic and philosophical, like those on the titular topic of education and its effects (*italics added*):

- [A] schoolmaster . . . *a man employed to tell lies to little boys.*⁵⁸
- A murderer takes [a] life, but his deed stops there. *A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.*⁵⁹
- In essence incoherent and immoral, *history had either to be taught as such—or falsified.*⁶⁰
- From cradle to grave this problem of running order through chaos, direction through space, discipline through freedom, unity through multiplicity, has always been, and must always be, the task of education, as it is the moral of religion, philosophy, science, art, politics, and economy; but a boy's will is his life, and he dies when it is broken, as the colt dies in harness, taking a new nature in becoming tame.⁶¹

The aura of contemplation often found in *The Education* has an analogue in a strange statue of a human form in Rock Creek Park, Washington D.C. As Teddy Roosevelt pointed out, annoyed, one can hardly tell whether it's a man or woman. In any case, the statue, commissioned by Henry Adams and sculptured by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, sits above the grave of Adams and his wife; and, because of its haunting quality, the bronze has become something of a tourist site for visitors to the nation's capitol. Carl Becker, cited earlier, provides a fine contemporary description that reads as if written by Adams himself in the autobiography's third person style:

⁵⁷ Ibid., 503.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 304.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 304

⁶¹ Ibid., 12

Henry Adams lies buried in Rock Creek Cemetery, in Washington. The casual visitor might perhaps notice, on a slight elevation, a group of shrubs and small trees making a circular enclosure. If he should step up into this concealed spot, he would see on the opposite side a polished marble seat; and placing himself there he would find himself facing a seated figure, done in bronze, loosely wrapped in a mantle which, covering the body and the head, throws into strong relief a face of singular fascination. Whether man or woman, it would puzzle the



Figure 5

observer to say. The eyes are half closed, in reverie rather than in sleep. The figure seems not to convey the sense either of life or death, of joy or sorrow, of hope or despair. It has lived, but life is done; it has experienced all things, but is now oblivious of all; it has questioned, but questions no more. The casual visitor will perhaps approach the figure, looking for a symbol, a name, a date – some revelation. There is none. ⁶²

As a work of art, the statue's meaning is difficult to comprehend. Its ethereal quality is perhaps what Adams aimed for in his autobiography. Maybe he hoped, like the sculpture, to cast a shadow of doubt over the mind of the reader. In this sense, the benefit of the doubt, questioned

⁶² Becker, p. 434.

above, rebounds back onto the reader of this strange autobiography, as perhaps the instigation – the shadowy suggestion of doubt is the essence of all true education. About the Saint-Gaudens’ work, Adams himself wrote, “The interest of the figure was not in its meaning, but in the response of the observer.⁶³”

As Becker points out, the grave-site sculpture has no inscription, no “symbol”, no “revelation”, but if one could be so crass as to suggest an epigraph, one could do no better than Goethe’s poetic lines about death (cited at the beginning of this essay) or the dying words of Hamlet which Adams quotes in the last paragraph of his autobiography:

*. . . the rest is silence.*⁶⁴

⁶³ Adams, Henry, *The Education*, 208.

⁶⁴ *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene 2