



THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS: A STUDY IN TWENTIETH- CENTURY MULTIPLICITY

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Abstract

We can look at Adams' life in four stages: boy, journalist and secretary, teacher of history, and twentieth-century man. Henry Adams straight away begins with his birth. It has been pointed out that no preceding sixty-year period in history had included as much change in the United States between 1840 and 1900. That is why Adams treats his boyhood as "eighteenth-century" and according to him 1838 was "colonial" and "troglydytic" and what could become of such a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the twentieth? But then he realized that, "To his life as a whole he was a consenting, contracting party and partner from the moment he was born to the moment he died", and "Only with that understanding – as a consciously assenting member in full partnership with the society of his age- had his education an interest to himself or to others" (*Autobiography and Imagination* 10). **Keywords:** eighteenth-century, colonial, troglydytic, seventeenth-century, twentieth-century.

Nothing in Education is as astonishing as the amount of ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts.

-Henry Adamsuction

Discussion: In the beginning of *The Education*, Adams tells us that,

From Cradle to grave...{the} 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 (Robert F. Sayre, *The Examined Self* 104).

Thus *The Education* is "the story of the taming of his chaos and the attempt to liberate his energies" (*The Examined Self* 93). Recollecting his childhood and the various influences on him during his childhood, Adams mentions the scarlet fever that affected him seriously. In fact, according to him the disease had a permanent influence on his personality, both physical and mental. It is this attitude of Adams' that has made critics consider *The Education* "the story of an eighty-year search for the meaning of life in a modern world of machines, a story which professed to be a mere record of failure ending with a prophecy of universal dissolution. The tone was almost bantering, the

mood dark" (Literary History of the United States 1080).

In Chapter II, "Boston (1848-1854)", we find Adams participating in the city's political and intellectual life. They tried to imitate in America England's middle class government, which they considered "the ideal of human progress"(33). Adams accepted their beliefs. The Chapter ends with an idyllic image of summers back at Quincy. The next chapter is entitled "Washington (1850-1854)", this chapter is mainly devoted to the author's recounting of an experience which might have overthrown the New England dogma. When his father took him to new York and then to the Capital, he was not impressed until they reached Maryland, where, for the first time in his life , he was in a slave state. Yet, there was something which appealed to Adams. This chapter presents another contradiction. During their return journey to Mount Vernon, both father and son realized that the roads were very bad . By pondering on this dilemma, he might have reached early wisdom. The chapter begins with a story of snowball fights on the Boston Common and ends with a story of Charles Summer's fight for a seat in the Senate, in which the boy readily accepted the Free Soil party's bargain with the pro-slavery Democrats. According to Adams, the sign of the practical man is the faculty for ignoring contradictions. At the end of the chapter we find Adams realizing that "The education he had received bore little relation to the education he needed. Speaking an American of 1900, he had as yet no education at all. He knew not even where or how to begin" (53).

The next stage in the education of Henry Adams was Harvard College. Adams was very glad to join in because it reflects the remarks of a man. He dismisses the college's social prestige. He came to the conclusion that socially or intellectually, the college was for him negative and in some ways mischievous. When he was elected Class Day Orator, Adams considered it a political rather than a literary victory.

Henry Adam's *The Education* is a story of failure. William Merrill Decker observes,

Although he lived some thirteen years beyond its composition, *The Education* would remain Adam's last major effort to reestablish his voice as a persuasive moral presence in his country's public discourse, and the effort stands despite the text's famous self-deprecation. In as much as it has been and continues to be read critically, the Education must be judged to have succeeded. And it has done so not only in spite of but because of its apology, its insistence that we attend to the likelihood and nature of its (and our) failure. The failure of which the book and its author stand self-convicted proceeds from the protagonist Henry Adam's failure: his inability, as student, reformer, author, to make headway against the irrational course of history (The Literary Vocation of Henry Adams 42-43).

Adam's, in fact, set out to write a public autobiography. However his only public experience was his effort to find and grasp a significant public place in post-civil war America. Education is personal as it involves an individual who is a learner. Adams, though he disliked egotism, was compelled to write a thoroughly self-centered book. In fact, it was a confession of his failure:

Not only had he failed to meet the standards of public eminence set by his ancestors, but he had not achieved his own intellectual ends either. To be sure he set himself astronomical goals. With these in mind, he was able to concentrate all his immense puritan energies on his own worthlessness. The result is a matchless contribution to the literature of pure sadness. For there was, in his world, no redemption, no posterity, and no God to forgive or condemn him. There was nothing but regret (Judith N. Shklar 60).

As a child he considers his situation very ordinary. We notice this in the very first paragraph of *The Education*:

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).

In the passage quoted above we find that place is prior to time and time takes precedence over individual identity. Though Adams was born into a very politically famous family, he was an exile from politics because he was a born spectator. We can say his character was his real fate. Nurtured in the eighteenth century, he faced the nineteenth. Throughout his book he asserts that his education had been a failure. In 1844 he was too young to understand the significance of the industrial age. In 1850, when his father took him to Washington, he had his first glimpse of political corruption. The compromises over slavery distributed him. He was terribly upset when he realized that slavery was inseparable from American history. His education gave no answers to his questions about the sorry state of affairs.

Adams went to Harvard College in 1854 and to Berlin in 1858. Ironically, he learned the most when least a student, when, for instance, he sat in a bear garden in Berlin and listened to the music of Beethoven, and realized how deprived he had been of sensual experience. Unlike some of his classmates, he did not have to think about making a name for himself. His social position was so good it could not be improved. But it made him afraid of risks. He was an intellectual – aloof and critical – and what he needed was certain knowledge. But his quest for it proved interminable. As he looked back upon learned men, statesmen, and active politicians, he realized that he knew more than what they knew. But he also realized that all his wisdom made him futile and passive.

Adams visited Italy in 1859. He refers to the decision to write the decline and fall of the Roman Empire that Edward Gibbon took while sitting on the steps of a Roman Church. But no such inspiration came to Adams. When he returned to America, he

noticed events threatening the decline and fall of the United States : Lincoln had become the President and the South was about to secede from the union. Adams got an opportunity to visit England when his father, Charles Francis Adams, was appointed minister to England by Abraham Lincoln. Adams accompanied his father to London as his private secretary. Chapters eight to fifteen are devoted to a description of the diplomatic efforts of the father and the social and intellectual adventures of the son. Critics observe that except chapter fifteen, all other chapters are the least satisfactory chapters of *The Education*.

What Adams saw in England was the hospitality of the Government and the ruling classes to the North and sympathy for the South. Dealing with the British government was extremely difficult, but Charles Adams and Henry Adams thought that they came to understand the motives and policies of its individual members. Only later did Adams realize that both he and his father had been wrong about almost everyone. Even the diplomacy of the Civil War turned out, in retrospect, to have been paradoxical, a series of misunderstandings. When he returned to America after seven years in England, he noticed that he had no place in his own country. The resulting uneasiness was made worse by the realization that his failure was due not only to the social and political transformation of America, but to his own temperament : “America had no use for Adams because he was eighteenth-century, and yet it worshiped Grant because he was archaic and should have live in a cave and worn skins”(266).

When, in 1870, his brother-in-law telegraphically informed him, from Italy, that his sister was dying of tetanus, Adams’ frustration turned to anguish. When he went to Italy, he had two entirely different experiences, the softness of an Italian summer outside and horror inside his sister Louisa’s room. The lesson Louisa’s death taught Adams was that “Chaos was the law of Nature; Order was the dream of Man” (451). The rest of the book describes his quest for that dream.

The final chapter that describes his youth, Chapter XX, has the simple title “Failure.” It describes his leaving Washington to become a

professor of medieval history at Harvard, which he considered the only honorable service in America. Paradoxically, Adams came to the conclusion that his life at Harvard was also failure. It was a failure partly because he did not believe in academic education, and partly because he came to see his experiences at Harvard as foreshadowing all the sadness he was to feel as an old man. During his stay at Harvard, Adams published a number of books on *American history including History of the United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*. As Allen Guttman observes, "The history was an ironic meditation on national failure."

The Education also describes the rise of his friends, John Hay and Theodore Roosevelt. But Adams considered political decisions inconsequential when compared to the changes in technology and science. He began to study mathematics and physics in his quest for order. Convinced by the physicist Karl Pearson's view that "Order and reason, beauty and benevolence, are characteristics and conceptions which we find solely associated with the mind of man" (450), Adams set about with renewed determination to emulate the physicist, to impose an order on the apparently chaotic facts of history. He tried to show how European society had moved from the unity of the Middle Ages to the disintegration and diversity of the present. "For in the end Henry Adams had to return to Europe, spiritually at least. That, after all, is degradation led him back to the age of the cathedrals." But though he tried his best, he could not believe in Christianity and could not understand theology. His twin symbols, the Virgin and the Dynamo, tell us more about his psyche than about medieval Europe. Finally Adams "realized that the sciences did not even offer a road to cosmic order and unity. He found some satisfaction in the thought that at least confusion reigned everywhere, not only in the minds of American historians" (*The Education of Henry Adams* 66).

Every page of *The Education* is filled with irony. It begins with the purpose of showing young men what sort of education might be useful to them. However, it is at once clear that no example, certainly not Adams', can be of any value. His final discovery was that not only his education but all

education was pointless, whether it was his own obsolete eighteenth-century one or an up-to-date version. No one could be shown how to cope with an inscrutable, ever-changing world. The very idea of education that prepared young people for success was a delusion" (*The Education of Henry Adams* 60).

To conclude, Adams realized that "Man... was a helpless plaything of some dark inscrutable forces which he could neither understand nor master. This was a bitter truth, but truth always fortifies and sustains. In this sad truth our American Odysseus finally found a peace and reconciliation which can never be attained by unearned optimism" (*The Odyssey of Henry Adams* 55).

Reference

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