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978-0-521-44573-3 - New Essays on The Education of Henry Adams

Edited by John Carlos Rowe

Excerpt

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## I

## Introduction

JOHN CARLOS ROWE

Think now

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors

And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,

Guides us by vanities.

– T. S. Eliot, “Gerontion” (1919)

## I.

THROUGHOUT his adult life, Henry Adams was always writing a book, so it is quite probable that his private publication of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* in 1905 is one way to date the beginnings of his next book-length project, *The Education of Henry Adams*, privately published in 1907.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the precise “origins” of Adams’s *Education* are far more difficult to determine, as they usually are for works of comparable influence and complexity. In his biography of Adams, Ernest Samuels “dates” Adams’s first plans for *The Education* in a variety of ways, including “the anniversary of Henry’s wedding day in June 1904,” with its reminder of his wife, Marian’s, suicide in 1885, and Adams’s reading of his friend Henry James’s *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* (published in 1903), with its evocation of their New England generation and its fatal innocence of what history would bring.<sup>2</sup> As he wrote James on November 18, 1903: “So you have written not Story’s life, but your own and mine, – pure autobiography, – the more keen for what is beneath, implied, intelligible only to me, and half a dozen other people still living. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Adams’s mood of reminiscence, sometimes maudlin or excessively self-critical in the years 1903–1905, mixed with yet other,

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practical concerns Adams felt about putting the historical record in order regarding the significant lives of his powerful friends and relatives. From 1900 on, Adams's close friend and Washington neighbor, John Hay, had been in ill health made worse by the demands of his office as Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of State. A year and a half before John Hay died in July of 1905, Adams wrote his friend from Paris in a jovial yet prophetic vein: "Please read Harry James's *Life of Story!* Also Morley's *Gladstone!* And reflect – wretched man! – that now you have knowingly forced yourself to be biographised! You cannot escape the biographer" (*Letters*, V, 526). Yet, it may well have been to "escape" becoming Hay's biographer that Adams wrote *The Education*, anticipating Hay's death and trying to find an alternative to what he described in that letter as the biographer's tendency to stick "pins" into historical figures, propped in their "cages," in the vain effort for them to "keep the lively attitude of nature" (*Letters*, V, 526).

In the aftermath of Hay's death, Adams would use *The Education* explicitly as his excuse for refusing the task of "biographising" his friend that Hay's widow and Adams's friends insisted he take on. As it turned out, Adams avoided the dreaded task only by agreeing to serve as "a kind of sub-editor" to Mrs. Hay's "artless" project of publishing *Letters of John Hay and Extracts from Diary*, which Ernest Samuels judges "one of the oddest memorials ever printed" (*Major Phase*, 397).<sup>4</sup> Typically ironic as Adams's claim was to have written *The Education* " 'wholly due to piety on account of my father and John Hay (the rest being thrown in for mass),' " it nonetheless has a measure of truth in terms of what scholars have judged the pragmatic reasons for writing an "autobiography" so elusive and ironic (*Major Phase*, 397). Adams's *Education* reveals as it protects, explains as it mystifies, "confesses" as it represses some of the most significant personal and historical records of American modernity.

In the summer of 1905, following Hay's death during the final negotiations of the Portsmouth Treaty (settling the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905), Adams was writing at what Samuels speculates "must have been furious speed" (*Major Phase*, 329). When he returned to Washington for the winter that year,

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Adams must have had a substantial part of the manuscript completed, because he made “preliminary arrangements for printing it with Furst and Company, the same firm which had done the *Chartres*” (330). Even so, Adams passed another summer in Paris before returning to Washington in November 1906 with the “main part of the *Education*, if not all of it, . . . in proof” (332). This was the very time when Adams was most pressed by Mrs. John Hay to help with her memorial work to her husband, and Adams found and used the excuse of work on the proofs of *The Education*.

Perhaps with the negative example of Mrs. Hay’s editing of her husband’s letters and diaries in mind, Adams planned to send what he called “proof sheets” of *The Education* “to friends who were mentioned in the text, asking them to let him know if they objected to anything said of them” and requesting that they do so by returning the text “with offending passages stricken out as might be called for” (*Letters*, VI, 39). This was a ruse of sorts, because Furst and Company had printed one hundred beautiful copies unlikely to be “marked” by friends in the manner requested; indeed, only three copies are known to have been returned to Adams. Had he really wanted to elicit candid comments and encourage such collaborative “proofing” from his friends, he might have circulated copies of the printer’s proofs he was reading in December 1906. Instead, the elegantly printed “proofs” came complete with a “Preface” dated “February 16, 1907,” Adams’s sixty-ninth birthday. Samuels explains that Adams could not have written this Preface on his birthday, so that this too was a symbolic touch likely to convince first readers that the text was indeed quite finished (*Major Phase*, 332).

The usual story of *The Education*’s private circulation is that Adams was under almost constant pressure to publish a work declared by President Theodore Roosevelt (who received the “first” formally distributed copy) a “masterpiece,” but that Adams insisted on keeping the work exclusively in private circulation until his death. Nine years after he privately printed and distributed it, Adams wrote Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, President of the Massachusetts Historical Society, “requesting that the book be published on behalf of the Society.” Accompanying that letter

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was “a sealed packet containing a corrected copy of the 1907 private printing and an ‘Editor’s Preface,’ which Adams himself composed but to which he affixed in a shaking hand the initials ‘H. C. L.,’ with the puzzled but indulgent acquiescence of Lodge.”<sup>5</sup>

The first public edition was published in 1918 by Houghton Mifflin and Co., with “Lodge’s” “Editor’s Preface” and Adams’s original “Preface,” dated February 16, 1907. Insistent that *The Education* be published without the subtitle “An Autobiography,” Adams was foiled by posthumous editors, since the 1918 edition carries that subtitle. Ernest and Jayne Samuels would restore the intended title in their scholarly edition of 1973, reminding modern readers that Adams planned to subtitle the work, “a Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity,” to emphasize its connection with the companion text, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*: “a Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity,” both of which subtitles are mentioned in the “Editor’s Preface” to the 1918 edition (*EHA*, xxvii).

Adams had ended his *Chartres* with the long chapter on “St. Thomas Aquinas,” which was the part over which Adams had “worried” the most. St. Thomas both explained and thus hastened the transformation of Catholic religious authority in the Latin Middle Ages; what was a cultural “unity” for Adams under the authority of the Virgin Mary (the Cult of Mariolatry) was already multiplied in the rationalism of the Scholastics from Albertus Magnus to St. Thomas. In short, St. Thomas was a figure worthy of “biography” not for the sake of his “personality,” but by virtue of the historical transformation his work and life happened to identify and clarify. It has often been thought that Henry Adams is the modern equivalent of St. Thomas, and there is, of course, much to support this view. Adams would have been pleased, indeed, to have been taken for a latter-day St. Thomas, figuring out the “secrets” of modern Science and History with the same enthusiasm and intelligence as St. Thomas had theorized God’s ways in the intricacies of scriptural hermeneutics.

The parallelism is both too neat and too exclusive, however, to tell the entire story of *The Education* as proper “companion text” to *Chartres*. St. Thomas is unthinkable without the Virgin, and I think that “Henry Adams,” at least as this name figures in

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*The Education*, is unthinkable without John Hay. The medieval Virgin points to the unknowable Godhead of the Catholic Church; the modern Secretary of State points to the equally unfathomable Authority of the nation-state. St. Thomas ushers in modern “multiplicity” in his efforts to rationalize what the Virgin symbolically represents; Henry Adams carries that multiplicity a step further by attempting to “explain” and render “intelligible” the political authority that John Hay came to embody.

In the end, Adams did, then, write the “biography” of Hay that he tried so desperately to avoid, even as he did avoid “biographising” his friend, the statesman. He also wrote his “autobiography,” despite his best efforts to keep such indulgence from the “title page” of a book he hoped would represent more than the mere vanity served by the many memoirs published by his powerful contemporaries.

## II.

Henry Adams’s *Education* has exasperated generations of readers and still maintained its classic status, even though we know today that the “classic” must undergo several transformations by different generations of readers to warrant the title. Books that exasperate and perplex readers often survive because there is some elusive pleasure in the hardship they provoke. Joyce’s *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, Eliot’s *Waste Land* have vexed several generations of readers still tantalized by the promise of understanding their secret meanings, whether these be located in the inner workings of the literary mechanism or in some metaphysical message tapped, as it were, between their lines. Even in the Moderns’ immediate predecessor and friend to Adams, Henry James, the impatience of the reader is often tolerable in hopes of the unraveling either of a plot or its modern equivalent, a character’s intricate psyche, in the course of a story still readable amid the distractions of the difficult, modern style.

Yet, Adams gives the reader little such satisfaction in *The Education*, even as he forces us to endure in condensed form the tormenting bafflement before the modern age that he himself

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experiences throughout the sixty-seven years of admittedly failed education. *The Education* is not “difficult” to read in the same sense that the great modernist literary works are, even if it is justifiably celebrated for its stylistic originality. The “difficulty” of *The Education* is not so much the complexity of Adams’s style, philosophy, or even his own life (complex as that surely was, given his ancestry); it is first and foremost the difficulty of *history*, especially as we understand this history in terms of the great powers – England, France, Germany, Spain, and increasingly the United States – working out our dismal inheritance for the rest of the twentieth century. It is history that baffles and torments us in *The Education*, not Adams’s rhetorical flights or his philosophical speculations.

The great literary moderns I mentioned above all attempted to compete with history, often even claiming to *replace* history with some sort of literary or aesthetic genealogy. Adams never claims to compete with history in *The Education*, even though I think there are subtle ways in which he does participate in the redesign of history from an American vantage, as I argue in my contribution to this collection of essays. Yet, the reader’s impression is still carefully constructed by Adams to be that of the autobiographical figure, “Henry Adams,” as always subjected to historical forces both more powerful and complex than any he can muster as mere intellectual. The baffling multitude of historical characters, significant events, and political currents has generally been the first obstacle to the reader’s involvement in this narrative. Ernest and Jayne Samuels’s wonderfully annotated edition of *The Education* was not published until 1973; it still amazes me that readers helped turn a book of such difficult historical references into a classic in the several reading generations separating its private publication in 1907 and scholarly publication in 1973. Yet, in the sixty-six intervening years, the *Education* continued to exert significant influence on intellectuals, literati, and political leaders, as Brook Thomas points out in his contribution to this volume.

It is by now conventional to explain the success of *The Education* as a consequence of Henry Adams’s distinguished legacy – great-grandson of John Adams, grandson of John Quincy Ad-

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ams, son of Charles Francis Adams, Free Soil Party vice-presidential candidate in 1848 and Ambassador to Great Britain during the Civil War. Certainly, Adams's autobiography owes its historical complexity and its interest for readers in part to the access it gives us to the Adamases' family power, not only in American but also in emerging global politics from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. If it is the promise of the "inside story" of the first American "ruling" family – our "first royalty," as the Adamases were sometimes called – that attracts us to *The Education*, then it is one repeatedly broken by a narrator who insists upon the family's steady loss of power and confirms it by virtually erasing from the narrative any traces of real, flesh and blood "Adamases," including "Henry Adams" himself.

Ernest Samuels suggests in his biography that one of Adams's motivations for writing *The Education* grew out of discussions Henry had with his brothers, Charles Francis, Jr., and Brooks, concerning "the disposition of the family papers" (*Major Phase*, 316). Samuels reasonably concludes that such decisions put Henry into a "retrospective mood," especially since he was concerned at this time (1903–1904) with deciding the "relative success of the leaders of his generation" (Samuels, 316). Yet, the three brothers decided to restrict access to their father's papers for the next half century, and *The Education* seems more to contribute to that privacy of the family's interests and secrets than to the public judgment of the Adamases' *achievements* that Samuels argues might have been one of Adams's aims in writing *The Education*.

Adams opens his Preface by quoting Rousseau's *Confessions*, both to draw on a great autobiographical pretext and to distinguish his own work from such romantic expressivism. When it comes to revelations about the Adams family, Henry is just as circumspect as he is with regard to confessing any of his "least agreeable details." The other autobiographical classic invoked in Adams's Preface is Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, decidedly less "revealing" and more mythically "controlled" than Rousseau's *Confessions*, and it is the former that informs Adams's own attitude toward the representation of his ancestors in his own autobiography. The "inside story" of the Adamases is no more

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given in *The Education* than Franklin tells us the “truth” of his early days as a printer’s apprentice in Philadelphia. Rousseau confesses to libidinous passions, masturbation, petty theft, childishness; the Adamses confess to failing to bring a treaty around, loss of a national political contest, “failure” to be as meretricious as the new age demanded.

The inside story of the Adamses is by no means what *The Education* gives us, and it doesn’t even promise the sniff of scandal to lure us further into the labyrinth of modern history so relentlessly reconstructed by Adams, complete with dates and names. What compels us to read this book without the customary pleasures of story, identification, secret meanings (literary, personal, historical) must be our imaginary projection of the “Henry Adams” of *The Education* as the special “product” of this history between 1838 and 1905 that we can begin to call “the American,” especially insofar as just this history marks the beginning of the “American Epoch.” For the person of Henry Adams – short, thin, sardonic, ironic, Socratic, slyly supercilious – the normal reader would have to prefer Gore Vidal’s generous portrait of Henry Adams in *Empire*, the third novel in Vidal’s historical series. To be sure, previous generations of readers did not have *Empire* available, as they did not have more recent accounts of the problems with alcoholism and insanity in the Adams family, but these “inside” accounts are not at all what readers have wanted – and would have necessarily found elsewhere, had Adams not written it – in *The Education*. Readers have wanted the “American Self.”

Insofar as the “Henry Adams” that combines both historical fact and imaginative projection appeals to several generations of readers, “he” satisfies such readers by offering them a character for that abstraction, the American Self. Even without the help of historical commentary, without literary plot, or the titillations of “inside knowledge,” the reader still finds “Adams” acting out various expectations of what from 1918 to 1973 belong identifiably with that mythology and ideology. The four essays in this collection all address at various points just what was once meant by this American Self and how Adams’s *Education* belongs to its



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cultural tradition. I shall try here, then, only to sketch a few of its most recognizable features before turning to the interesting problem facing today's reader, who may well be fully conscious that such an American Self no longer governs so singularly our experiences of the many cultures and literatures shaping the multicultural United States.

Shortly after Ernest and Jayne Samuels's scholarly edition of *The Education* was published in 1973, Sacvan Bercovitch published two important books, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978).<sup>6</sup> As most readers recognize, they are complementary works that theorize and then interpret the ways Puritan immigrants and their heirs transformed the religious jeremiad from "an immemorial mode of lament over the corrupt ways of the world" into the fundamental genre in cultural symbology that interrelated political and moral, social and religious concerns.<sup>7</sup> At the heart of the American Jeremiad is the concatenation of cultural criticism and utopianism in the sheer exhortative voice of the great Puritan Divines from the Mathers to Jonathan Edwards. It was this powerful voice, full as it must have been of the contradictory pulls of conscience and higher consciousness, present corruption and future redemption, that informs the American Individualism so convincingly constructed by those secular Divines, the American Transcendentalists, especially Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman.

The voice of the jeremiad depends crucially upon its power and authority, originally derived quite self-evidently from the Church and later by the Transcendentalists more problematically drawn, sometimes even teased from Nature, History, or the "visionary company" of artists. Yet, there is another sense in which the jeremiad depends crucially upon the *vulnerability* of its speaker – the "frailty" that the Puritan Divine could claim as part of his mortality and his dependence on God's grace. For the romantic heirs of this tradition, it was a certain "negative capability," a refusal to "know" the true and the good, even as the latter shaped indispensably the rage against social corruptions at the center of the jeremiad. A crucial, central bewilderment, like that of the child or the noble innocent faced with evil (Melville's Billy

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Budd, for example), is necessary for the speaker and then author of this American Jeremiad to achieve a certain mythic identity as a "Self."

This "American Self" is a decided revision of the traditionally "self-reliant American" we also identify with many of the authors I have mentioned from Cotton Mather to Henry Adams in the so-called "Puritan Origins of American Culture" that dominated American Studies from Perry Miller to Sacvan Bercovitch. "Self-reliance" is qualified in this account with a certain "self-doubt" and even "self-criticism" urging what Bercovitch considers the necessary cultural "revolution" that will carry democracy into its next epoch. If Bercovitch is right that this "American Jeremiad" is at the heart of cultural and thus literary expression in America, then he has also explained quite effectively why Adams's *Education*, despite its demonstrable "unliterary" qualities, remains a crucial text in American literature and culture.

At the end of *The American Jeremiad*, Bercovitch includes Adams's *Education* among American literary works traditionally associated with the mid-nineteenth-century American cultural unity to which F. O. Matthiessen gave a name in his 1941 study, *American Renaissance*. Bercovitch dubs *The Education* an "anti-jeremiad," respecting Adams's apocalyptic modern tone and mood, but Bercovitch certainly considers *The Education* a kind of capstone to the cultural tradition he has interpreted so well in these two important books: "The distinctive quality of the *Education* is that it reverses all the effects of the jeremiad while retaining intact the jeremiad's figural-symbolic outlook. Adams is not a Victorian sage calling halt to a rampant industrial capitalism. He is a prophet reading the fate of humanity, and the universe at large, in the tragic course of American history." Even so, Bercovitch argues, the old utopianism survives even in this anti-jeremiad: "It is true that he never allows the reader to lose sight of the old faith, and that his condemnation of the dynamo, accordingly, gains much of its substance from the counterforce of the national symbol. America is represented, for example, in the figure of his grandfather, the remote, majestic incarnation of 'moral principle' . . ." (195).<sup>8</sup> At the end of *The Education*, Secretary of State John Hay, Adams's lifelong friend, will take the