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978-1-107-05667-1 - Failure and the American Writer: A Literary History

Gavin Jones

Excerpt

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Introduction

Henry Adams and the Catastrophic Century

Grandson of John Quincy Adams and great-grandson of John Adams, Harvard Professor of History, editor of the *North American Review*, president of the American Historical Association, bestselling novelist, Pulitzer Prize winner, author of the monumental *History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*: Henry Adams was a self-confessed failure. We know Adams today as the quintessential critic of modern culture and as a theorist of history: an anti-modernist thinker seeking a spiritual framework of meaning to combat the banality and nervousness of industrial society.¹ To read Adams's autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), is to view him as an all-round flop. According to the *Education's* preface, Adams's account of the multiplicity of modern life and his theory of history were inadequate; the published version of the text seemed incomplete, and marred by factual errors.² Adams had already printed the *Education* privately in 1906, distributing to friends around 100 copies with wide margins "so that each one may correct or strike out anything unpleasant or objectionable." But error was not so easily erased. Only two or three copies were returned, Harvard President Charles W. Eliot's without a word. "An overrated man and a much overrated book," Eliot reputedly commented in private, and Adams may well have agreed.³ He confessed that the *Education* was a difficult book, its difficulty marking the degree of his dissatisfaction. "The point on which the author failed to please himself, and could get no light from readers or friends," wrote Adams in his preface, "was the usual one of literary form."⁴

That one of the foremost intellectuals of his generation considered himself an outright failure should not be dismissed as mere intellectual posturing or false modesty. It describes a serious mindset, almost a way of being, that had developed fully by the turn of the twentieth century. We have become familiar with the emergence of a modernist sensibility that challenged purportedly Victorian conventions, certainties, and absolutes

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to reveal knowledge swimming in uncertainty, consciousness tangled up in error, and human psychology defined by blunder and inadequacy.⁵ The shift from the nineteenth century to the twentieth seems equivalent to a tolerance for “the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure,” as Virginia Woolf famously phrased it, positing a point of rupture “on or about December 1910.”⁶ Adams’s focus on a kind of failure that was “respectable enough to deserve self-respect”⁷ seems part of the virtual coincidence of intellect and self-conscious failure that marks a twentieth-century turn of thought. But to begin with *The Education of Henry Adams*, a book that sits in the rupture Woolf posited, returns us equally to questions from an earlier time. What Adams unfolds in his autobiography – an idea of the nineteenth century as a failed century, told through the story of his life – and how he opens this idea, *as a problem of literary form*, highlight a productive fracture or fault that runs through the bedrock of nineteenth-century American literature. Adams may perceive himself a “failure” – and, as we shall see, he enjoys good company in so doing – yet the term remains meaningless, a mere intellectual gesture, without an appreciation of the literary tremors and ruptures that define such an attitude. My book is an attempt to register those tremors and to uncover the backstory and the drama of failure’s rise.

The *Education* tells of Adams’s early life in Boston, his experience as secretary to his father, the American Ambassador to London during the Civil War, and his return to American society after the war when he became professor of medieval history at Harvard University in 1870, only to retire, disillusioned, seven years later. It is a book defined by contradictions and gaps, most notably its odd third-person narrative perspective that creates an ironic distance between “Adams” the author and “Henry” the subject.⁸ For Yvor Winters, this later work by Adams shows the “radical disintegration” of a once great mind, demonstrated by a fundamental split in the narrative subject. The *Education* has appeared equally problematic as a theory of history. Marked by inconsequential theorizing and overgeneralization, Adams seems to turn at times against his own literary ambitions.⁹ More recently, we have come to appreciate Adams as an oppositional thinker who sought to bring a new kind of intellect to a moribund American culture.¹⁰ But even such sympathetic views of the political Adams are troubled by the book’s jarring moves between minute historical details and the abstractions of theory. To many of his critics, Adams had written a book intentionally designed to fail.

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The *Education* formally enacts Adams's own experience of failure, which becomes most pronounced during his time as a professor at Harvard, described in a chapter titled, simply, "Failure." Recruited by President Charles W. Eliot as part of an academic reform of that university, Adams was hired to teach a subject he professed to know little about, medieval history:

The two full Professors of History – Torrey and Gurney, charming men both – could not cover the ground. Between Gurney's classical courses and Torrey's modern ones, lay a gap of a thousand years, which Adams was expected to fill. The students had already elected courses numbered 1, 2, and 3, without knowing what was to be taught or who was to teach. If their new professor had asked what idea was in their minds, they must have replied that nothing at all was in their minds, since their professor had nothing in his, and down to the moment he took his chair and looked his scholars in the face, he had given, as far as he could remember, an hour, more or less, to the Middle Ages. (300)

Adams's "Failure" chapter describes his place in a curriculum that exposes the limits of academic expertise – not least his own – though what concerns Adams most is not the content of that medieval history but the implication of sequencing within the structure of university knowledge.¹¹ History itself had failed as a discipline and as a process, having broken down so pitifully in its efforts to "solve the riddle of the Middle Ages and bring them into the line of evolution from past to present" (301). Rejecting an idea of history as teleological or evolutionary development, Adams seems close at times to those twentieth-century philosophers who questioned the continuum of history by privileging what Margreta de Grazia calls "'systematic dissociation' in the form of epistemic rupture, dispersal, reversal, and accident."¹² If the *Education* offers a philosophy of history then it is equivalent to a theory of failure that is institutionally determined and personally felt, while being dependent on an experiment in literary form to make it known. The professional discipline of history has failed to provide a sequence to make sense of the past, argues Adams, leaving a gap to be filled by literary works. "For all serious purpose," writes Adams, history is "less instructive than Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas" (301).

Adams conceives of literature – more specifically, the historical romance – as an alternate form, existing outside of institutional context, and hence capable of accepting a complexity that preempts the evolutionary ideology embodied in the university curriculum. Adams's educational ideal would counter the inertia and waste of the system by forcing minds

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Figure I.1. Portrait of Clarence King, photographer unknown. This formal profile was probably taken during or shortly after King's time as director of the USGS (1879–81).

Credit: U.S. Geological Survey.

into “conflict, competition, contradiction” (303), creating an intellectual shock that educational organization seems most designed to avoid.¹³ Adams's story of his time at Harvard ends when he quits this machine-like university, with its packaged resistance to contradiction and risky thought. Standing in the middle of his career, he realizes that his “life, past or future, was a succession of violent breaks or waves, with no base at all” (312). Adams understands his failure to be a function of institutional placement and a condition of social existence. But with characteristic ambivalence, Adams's chapter “Failure” leaves us with an ideal of energy and genius that might balance such waste, an ideal embodied in Adams's friend, the geologist Clarence King: *The Great American Success* (Figure I.1).

King was the first director of the United States Geological Survey, but King's real success lay for Adams in his discovery of the shock of geological change: “The young men of the Fortieth Parallel had Californian

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instincts; they were brothers of Bret Harte. They felt no leanings toward the simple uniformities of Lyell and Darwin; they saw little proof of slight and imperceptible changes; to them, catastrophe was the law of change; they cared little for simplicity and much for complexity but it was the complexity of Nature, not of New York or even of the Mississippi Valley” (313). A figure of manly intelligence, King stands at the portal between Adams’s education and his life. The chapter “Failure” ends appropriately enough with a sudden shift from Harvard College to the mountains of the West, which represent all of the complexity and paradox flattened by the academic pursuit of history. Literally falling into King’s arms at the end of the chapter, Adams’s narrative suddenly breaks – for twenty unspoken years – at the point where he discovers a peculiarly American theory of failure in a geological context.

Clarence King was a catastrophist. He held to the theory that “certain geological and biological phenomena were caused by catastrophes, or sudden and violent disturbances of nature, rather than by continuous and uniform processes.”¹⁴ King outlined his theory in his essay “Catastrophism and Evolution” (1877). Attempting to reconcile divine intervention and evolutionary theory, King describes catastrophism as a condition of primal memory, “the survival of a terrible impression” based on an ancient witnessing of sudden, unusual energy. It needs therefore a special imaginative and emotional sensitivity to appreciate it. “You may divide the race into imaginative people who believe in all sorts of impending crises, – physical, social, political, – and others who anchor their very souls *in statu quo*.” This imagination of catastrophe – this capacity to register schisms – was dependent in a crucial sense on the *American* environment, with its geological demonstration of “enormous revolutions” that were especially evident in its western mountains and canyons.¹⁵

Catastrophism was perhaps the natural view in a nation forged in revolution and recently warped by the Civil War. At heart, catastrophism described a history governed by sudden and enormous changes of rate, moments of rapidly accelerated resistance that create destructive fissures in the surface of the earth. Predicting evolutionary theories of punctuated equilibrium, King believed that species change not by gradual processes of natural selection but by the plastic capacity to respond rapidly and creatively to catastrophic environmental transformation. Catastrophism was an idea driven by productive failure, by schisms both physical and temporal. King believed that catastrophes were proven scientifically by geological analysis, and could thus explain what biologists mistook to be merely

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“breaks in the palaeontological record, meaning by that the observed gaps of life or the absence of connecting links of fossils between older and newer sets of successive strata.” These apparent gaps were not the sign of missing evidence, but really a condition of American existence itself: to live in a territory where change was wrought by two time periods colliding. “Beneath our America,” wrote King, “lies buried another distinct continent, – an archæan America.”¹⁶

Like King, Adams can detect no evolution, only change. The sole evolution is one of power, he writes in the *Education*, which asserts selection of type by violence alone (230–31). But catastrophe, the intensification of failure, becomes less of a theory and more of a lived reality for Adams. His intellectual development is dominated by “freaks of force,” by the twisting and torturing of sheer violence, just as his emotional life – revealed by his sister’s sudden death following a minor accident in Italy – is equivalent to catastrophic collapse.¹⁷ Adams’s experience of personal tragedy thrusts him into sudden communication with that primeval, sublime sense of shock that King described at the root of human imagination. If the popular mind of the age was like “an economic thinking-machine which could work only on a fixed line” (180), then Adams’s mental anarchy places him in a different realm of discontinuity, flux, and lawlessness. The *Education* is punctuated by the kind of “dangerous moments” that Karl Heinz Bohrer identifies more generally in modern prose: moments that deny the continuity of narrative time, and reflect the late-nineteenth-century fascination with speed and suddenness.¹⁸ Adams’s work expresses the aesthetics of shock that Rita Felski identifies as one of the fundamental uses of literature, to rupture our familiar frames of reference and to jar our consciousness. Most pronounced in the provocations of the avant-garde and in moments of traumatic experience, Felski describes shock as particularly unstable and uncertain because its inherent link to disgust and anxiety means the constant risk of failure, of audience indifference if not outright refusal.¹⁹ For Adams, though, failure is not the problem of shock but its very point – a point naturally wedded to the literary profession. As Adams puts it in a letter to Barrett Wendell, comparing his literary efforts to those of St. Augustine and Rousseau, “I feel certain that their faults, as literary artists, are worse than mine. We have all three undertaken to do what cannot be successfully done – mix narrative and didactic purpose and style. The harm of the effort is not in winning the game but in playing it. We all enjoy the failure.”²⁰ Failure, for Adams, lies in literature’s formal faultiness, its qualities of catastrophe. At Harvard, Adams had discovered the institutional shape of failure to be the inherent incapacity of liberal education to sequence the past into a coherent narrative of development. In

literature he discovers the form to highlight this conception of failure: less a problem than a fundamental condition of historical experience.

The episodes of the *Education* that most correspond to conventional memoir – for example, Adams’s lengthy account of his time in Britain during the Civil War as the personal secretary of his father, the American ambassador – are thus defined by rupture both in content and in style. For Adams, political experience is tantamount to shock: “the profoundest lessons are not the lessons of reason; they are sudden strains that permanently warp the mind,” leaving “a chasm in life that never closed” (108). This intellectual warping finds form not in representation but in a refusal to elucidate the very details of such formative moments of diplomatic rupture: the break with Charles Sumner during the *Trent* affair, the political shock of England recognizing the belligerency of the Confederacy, the assassination of Lincoln.²¹ Shock in the *Education* is often the shock of unrecognition, as interest is directed toward objects and stories that explicitly fail to clarify or expand knowledge. Adams’s text moves through moments of astonishment and irrelevance that constitute what Brook Thomas describes as the peculiar failure of the *Education* as historical writing and method. Adams fails to translate the past into the present by giving it meaning, hence resisting the transformation of content into form.²²

Much of the *Education* resonates with established ideas of the modern self split into parts, suspended over a void, astonished and bewildered by a whirring world in which the center cannot hold. The various gaps and absent meanings of the book seem like moments of traumatic knowledge that endlessly displace the content of the shocking event. In other words, we can find in the *Education* a familiar understanding of modernity as catastrophic experience.²³ But the real interest of the *Education* lies not in its modernist ethos but in its effort to grapple with failure as a *specific kind* of historical experience, in which shocking changes of acceleration force two times to collide, sweeping “into the ash-heap these cinders of a misdirected education” (345). What Clarence King observed in the tectonic plates of the West, Adams found in the social movement of his era. Failure, for Adams, is primarily a mode of temporal transition, a slipping across a chasm, a sudden leap into the machine age. What aligns Adams’s work with the literature of the nineteenth century is his effort to give form as well as theory to failure – in Adams’s case, his attempt to express the point at which a fault breaks apart.

The constant, small jumps in the *Education* get dramatically magnified when, like a sudden shift of tectonic plates, Adams jolts us across twenty unspoken years – the years of his marriage to Marion Hooper, her

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suicide, and its aftermath – in a rent in time that is registered textually and felt only traumatically in subsequent chapters. Immediately following his chapter “Failure,” failure takes shape literally and formally in a twenty-year gap that places the *Education* in a literary conversation. Here, Adams clearly evokes one of American literature’s most notable failures: Washington Irving’s Rip Van Winkle, a character who was very much alive at the end of the nineteenth century in Joseph Jefferson’s popular stage and film versions of Irving’s story (Figure 1.2). If Rip presides over the birth of the American imagination, as Leslie Fiedler once argued,²⁴ then that imagination is born in a tale about a village ne’er-do-well who represents the attractive inverse of the success ethic. Irving’s tale is a mock-historical piece from the pen of Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irving’s fictional historian known for his *History of New York* (1809), a book that plays fast and loose with accuracy. Rip’s character is equally defined by a “great error” in its composition: “an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labour.”²⁵ Rip, a failure as farmer and father, famously flees his village, falls asleep after some mountain-top debauchery, and returns to find to his amazement a new American government in place of colonial British rule. By blurring history and fairy tale, Irving creates a mild political satire that targets the failure of the new nation to break cleanly from the colonial past. “A type for each generation’s eventual failure to adapt to change,” in the words of Robert Ferguson,²⁶ Rip exposes the social and cultural limitations of the American Revolution. The real fault in the story, though, is not Rip’s anticapitalist attitude. The fault is a function of literary form: the capacity of the narrative to move from one historical episode to another, twenty years later, without skipping a beat. Historical change, Irving implies, is broken at this point of development.

If “Rip Van Winkle” is finally a tale of recovery, when the outcast Rip is welcomed back into the community,²⁷ then the *Education* dwells in the gap of time that Irving opens. Adams exposes a gap in American history, an “intermediate period” bookended by his own history of Jefferson and Madison and his friend John Hay’s biography of Lincoln – a gap that cannot be filled because the redeeming energy of the nation was itself showing signs of check (325). The *Education* is riddled with moments of discontinuity, but the nineteenth century becomes a special and more profound kind of rupture. The century is its own middle ages for Adams, an unnarratable period between the classical past, echoed in the values of eighteenth-century republicanism, and the new capitalist modernity of the twentieth century.²⁸ History has broken in halves along the fault of the nineteenth century.

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Figure I.2. Joseph Jefferson playing Rip Van Winkle, photograph by Napoleon Sarony (1869). Jefferson's movie versions of Irving's tale placed American modernity in conversation with the failures of the past. Credit: The Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, X-2216.

As both “Rip Van Winkle” and the *Education* suggest, historical rupture is a condition of American identity. Narrative is especially equipped to enact these sudden breaks in time as a felt reality. Like Irving, Adams strives to tell the story of catastrophe, and to do so he turns again to Clarence King. King emerges at the end of the “Failure” chapter as the ideal American type, handsome, educated, many-sided, scientific – unlike

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Adams, King could look backward and forward along a straight line (312). His energy had already earned him great success in geology. “Whatever prize he wanted lay ready for him – scientific, social, literary, political – and he knew how to take them in turn. With ordinary luck he would die at eighty the richest and most many-sided genius of his day” (313). But the catastrophist becomes a catastrophe.²⁹ The Great American Success turns out to be a Great American Failure after all:

The tragedy of King impressed him intensely: “There you have it in the face!” he said – “the best and brightest man of his generation, with talents immeasurably beyond any of his contemporaries; with industry that has often sickened me to witness it; with everything in his favor but blind luck; hounded by disaster from his cradle, with none of the joy of life to which he was entitled, dying at last, with nameless suffering alone and uncared-for, in a California tavern. *Ça vous amuse, la vie?*” (416)

King’s failure is so instructional not least because King provides Adams with the theory of catastrophism through which he understands the movement of history. King tries to understand catastrophe as a geological phenomenon, but gets dragged personally into its experience. And if that theory of catastrophism posited sudden jumps and gaps in time, then the personal failure of King is only fully explicable through events *not* present in the text: King’s surprising double life in New York passing as James Todd, supposedly an African American Pullman porter, and his thirteen-year relationship with Ada Copeland, a woman of color and a former slave. It remains unclear whether Adams knew of King’s alter ego at the time of writing the *Education*, though he elsewhere observed King’s love of what Adams called “archaic races,” his choice “in favor of Indians and negroes”: “it was not the modern woman that interested him; it was the archaic female, with instincts and without intellect.”³⁰ In the *Education*, Adams gets close to admitting his knowledge of King’s relationship and acts of miscegenation (he had five children with Copeland) when he remarks in “Failure” that King “knew women; even the American woman; even the New York woman, which is saying much” (311). King’s final breakdown of his racially torn identity is not explicitly named but is described instead as “complexity,” “catastrophe,” and a love of “paradox” (313). For Adams, the catastrophe of King comes from his failed effort to span in his life two cultures and, implicitly, two periods of time. He is caught between a belief in an archaic, antievolutionary past, embodied troublingly in the black female whom King considered “rich in inheritance of every animated energy back to the polyps and the crystals,”³¹ and the modern era of “multiplicity” and science. King becomes the embodiment of a fault line that