

Failure as Success in *The Education of Henry Adams*

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## Failure as Success in *The Education of Henry Adams*

A series of intimate portraits of dozens of historical figures. A reflection of a particular kind of New England mind. A theoretical statement of several provocative historiographic premises. A compendium of witty aphorisms, memorable images, and malicious observations. An elaborate disquisition on the perennial defeat of principle by power. A devastating critique of 19<sup>th</sup> century culture and politics. A damning prophecy of 20<sup>th</sup> century reality. An eccentric version of at least three literary genres—history, the confession, and the memoir of a public man. . .

*The Education of Henry Adams* is up to so many things that it would take Adams himself to do justice to the unity of its multiplicity. Which, of course, is exactly what he did in the thirty-five chapters and four hundred pages of the book, which was published in the fall of 1918, five months after Adams's death, and awarded the Pulitzer Prize posthumously in 2019. I want to share some thoughts tonight about the several elements of the book that intrigue me most right now: its union of individual fate and social fact; its silences; and its paradoxical implication that to fail is to succeed.

To be born an Adams on Beacon Hill in 1838 was to face, from the start, a confusion of the realms of history and autobiography. The portraits of John Adams and John Quincy Adams on the walls of the Old State House were part of his family album. And his grandfather, the old man with a hat who silently walked him to school in Quincy

was, himself, part of the curriculum. “Had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple, and circumcised in the synagogue by his uncle the high priest,” the justly famous opening page reads, “he would have scarcely been more distinctly branded” (723). When the Irish gardener told him as a child “You’ll be thinkin’ you’ll be President too!”, Adams, recalling this at nearly seventy, writes that “The casualty of the remark made so strong an impression on his mind that he never forgot it. He could not remember ever to have thought on the subject; to him, that there should be a doubt of his being President was a new idea. What had been should continue to be” (734). But Boston was not Jerusalem and so, as T.S. Eliot observed in a review of *The Education* in 1919, Henry Adams was “born to the governing-class tradition without the inherited power . . . he was born to exercise governance, not to acquire it” (362).

He soon learned it didn’t work that way. To govern in America, or to succeed, whatever one’s name, one first had to seek and acquire power. Which Henry Adams the author suggests means acquiring an education that fits him for following the family tradition of leadership—which he insists, again and again, in his third-person account, his main character “Henry Adams” consistently fails to do.

As a boy he listened as his father Charles Francis Adams met with Charles Sumner to organize the anti-slavery Free Soil Party; as a young man he went to England as private secretary when his father was appointed minister to the Court of St. James during the Civil War. From all that he observed then and afterward he determined that the compromises, the secret, and often double, dealing, and the people pleasing that a political career entailed were not for him. While in England, he turned to political journalism, hoping to find his path to influence and power that way. “Any man

who was fit for nothing else could write an editorial or a criticism,” he tells us (914). In a series of pieces that he wrote between 1861 and 1870, he sought to outline reform positions that would establish his credentials as a candidate for a Presidential brain trust, if not for the Presidency itself. As he sat in the Congressional gallery listening to President Grant announce his Cabinet—to his mind the worst and most corrupt in American history—he found that path, too, was closed.

When President Eliot of Harvard wrote in 1870 to invite him to become an Assistant Professor of History at Harvard, the Adams *alma mater*, it was “nothing he wanted.” But after being encouraged by his family and friends he decided to “begin a new education, on lines he had not chosen . . . in as place he did not love” (988). He claims to have been a failure here, too, and gave up his position at Harvard in 1877. It was then that he turned to the full-time writing of the history, and also fiction, which would be the way he made a name for himself in the American story. Not that he saw it that way, or acknowledges it in his book. Because he was an Adams, the struggle to find a place for himself in the corridors of power, the effort to find a fit means to use his intelligence and talents, seemed to him to say as much about America as it said about him. And what it seemed to say was that his failure was, somehow, his country’s and history’s.

This perception becomes the basis for his particular approach to history in the remaining four decades of his life. Henceforth, Alfred Kazin notes, his stance was that of an intellectual excluded from power—like Tocqueville in his *Recollections* of the 1848 Revolution or Trotsky in his *History of the Russian Revolution* (288). His theme was “the submission of principle to power,” and his focus was on his “personal consciousness of

history,” of history as “his own personal universe” (289-290). His quest was for understanding of the forces behind the dissipation of human energy, the loss of one set of values and their replacement with another, which resulted in the waste and misuse of talents such as his in the industrializing and materialistic 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Toward the end of his historical masterpiece, his nine-volume *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* (1889-1891)—currently available in the two-volume Library of America edition—in a chapter titled “American Character,” Adams’s personal experiences led him to formulate an historical observation: “the scientific interest of American history centered in national character, and in the workings of a society destined to become so vast, in which individuals were important chiefly as types” (1332). Something had gone wrong in this society, he felt, since those who by tradition, intellect, and culture should lead—i.e., Adams and his “type”—were no longer in charge. To examine America’s types, an impersonal, historical task, then, would allow him to address his personal disappointment too.

In his unfinished but highly provocative study of Adams, R.P. Blackmur suggests that Adams’s novels *Democracy: An American Novel* (1880) and *Esther* (1884)—the first published anonymously and the second under the pseudonym of a woman, “Frances Snow Compton”—and his two most famous later works, *The Education* and *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*, may be viewed as linked explorations of this theme of decay and disarray. In *Democracy* and *The Education*, he writes, Adams attempts to define the nature and causes of the decay of political writing and direction in the culture of his own time; while in *Esther* and *Mont Saint Michel* he explores the religious vision,

now lost, which once provided stable tradition and values (15). The “Editor’s Preface” to *The Education* defines his intentions in the two later works in slightly different terms. It links them by describing *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* as “a study of thirteenth-century unity” and *The Education* as “a study of twentieth-century multiplicity” (719). But both are, at base, also studies of his own efforts to understand himself and his own place in history.

In the opening chapter of *The Education*, he describes grappling with these issues as a boy from the perspective of the end of a life of grappling with them as a man and historian. The passage offers a critical statement of his point of view: “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” (731).

If the impulse behind Adams’s method and focus were personal, the method and focus themselves were common. But in fiction, not history. Before Adams, American history writing was personified by George Bancroft and his ten-volume *History of the United States* (1854-1878)—a history of heroes whose every deed demonstrated the nation’s Manifest Destiny. The kind of history Adams sought to write—where individual fate met social fact through the type—was the province of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realists and naturalists; of Balzac and Zola, Flaubert and Tolstoy. Adams is often described, like Francis Parkman, as one America’s great “literary” historians, because of the quality of his writing and his stylistic control. (Read any page of *The Education* and you will see why.) But his work is also literary, perhaps more successfully literary in his history than

in his fiction, in his fundamental use of the fate of individuals as an index of the state of their societies. And the source of this approach, I have been suggesting, was personal before it was theoretical, psychological before it was historical.

To me, the degree to which Adams's *Education* is focused on exploring the themes I have been circling is as clear in what he doesn't say as in what he does, in how he misleads his readers as in how he leads them.

Consider the book's two prefaces, which link it with Rousseau's and Augustine's *Confessions*. What they say is clear, but misleading. Adams first published *The Education* in 1907, in a privately printed edition of one hundred copies that he circulated to colleagues and friends for their consideration and suggestions. The "Editor's Preface" to that edition also appeared in the 1918 trade edition. It reports that Adams "used to say, half in jest, that his great ambition was to complete St. Augustine's 'Confessions,' but that St. Augustine, like a great artist, had worked from multiplicity to unity, while he, like a small one, had to reverse the method and work back from unity to multiplicity. The scheme became unmanageable as he approached its end" (719). In the author's own Preface he compares his book to Rousseau's *Confessions*, observing that "Jean Jacques . . . erected a monument of warning against *Ego*. Since his time . . . the *Ego* has steadily tended to efface itself, and, for purposes of a model, to become a manikin on which the toilet of education is to be draped in order to show the fit or misfit of the clothes" (712-22).

What is said here is misleading. First, because comparing the book we are about to read with Augustine and Rousseau's *Confessions* makes its readers expect a naked

exposure of the soul's agonies and body's lusts which will not be found in it. It is also cunning, for working from unity to multiplicity does not just refer to the sequence of *Mont Saint Michel* and *The Education*, it also refers to the movement from the unity of the self to the multiplicity of society, from the unity of innocence to the multiplicity of experience, from the unity of Quincy to the chaos of Washington and the world beyond. Which is very much the book's subject.

Second, it is misleading because the reader is not told in the "Editor's Preface" to this "confession," signed by his friend H(enry) C(abot) L(odge), that it was actually written by Adams himself. He instructed Lodge to print it over his name. Thus, the "Editor's Preface," one more statement of Adams's failure to achieve his goals—is as carefully crafted and artfully staged as the rest of the book. And, finally, it is misleading because Adams's claiming in his Preface that Rousseau's emphasis on the *Ego* has been replaced in modern times by a focus on education is laughable to anyone who reads the monument to both egoism and persistent self-deprecation that follows.

The silences here and elsewhere are most intriguing to me. Adams must be a failure because he is the embodiment of America in *The Education*. And anything which undermines that impression must be carefully suppressed, while the illusion of confession must be maintained. What he leaves out, primarily in Chapters 20 and 21, suggests an Adams behind the "Adams" he created for his purposes in the book who is quite different from his character. Chapter 20, about Harvard, is dated 1871; Chapter 21, dated 1892, is titled "Twenty Years After."



He titles this chapter about his seven years at Harvard “Failure,” when they were, in fact, the period of his first major successes. His appointment to the faculty also included appointment as editor of the *North American Review*, one of the most influential journals of the age, and in that role he began to “govern” through shaping the opinions of its readers. He also published two scholarly books and twenty-two reviews and articles. In his seminars, according to Garry Wills, he helped to shape the next generation of historians in the new methods of using original manuscripts, documents, and archives, instead of just books, to study the past (37).

Between Chapters 20 and 21 twenty years disappear without a trace or comment. During those twenty years (1872-1892), Adams completed both of his novels and almost all of his most important historical works—including the nine-volume *History of the United States*, *The Life of Albert Gallatin* (1879), *Documents Relating to New England Federalism* (1878), and *John Randolph* (1882). In 1872 he married Marian (Clover) Hooper, and for the next eight years, from his departure from Harvard in 1877 until 1885, they hosted the most fashionable salon in Washington, D.C. Adams’s influence and friendships grew steadily. (It’s been said that he knew everyone who was anyone, and no one who was not.) On December 6, 1885, Clover committed suicide. He burned all of their letters and her diaries. Shortly afterward, Adams moved into the majestic house they had been building across Lafayette Square from the White House, where he would live, a widower, for the remaining twenty-three years of his life. From 1885 to 1892 he spent much of each year roaming the world—to Japan, Cuba, Hawaii, Tahiti, Ceylon, Fiji, Australia, France, England, and the American West.

By any measure, the missing years in *The Education* are twenty of the most important of his life. The years of his greatest happiness, his greatest successes and triumphs, and of his worst sorrows. Aside from a brief claim for the importance of his *History of the United States*, he mentions nothing about his professional success, or about either his marriage or his wife's suicide, in *The Education*. All that remains of her in the book is a paragraph in Chapter 21 in which he describes visiting the famous sculpture in Rock Creek Park that Augustus Saint-Gaudens created for her gravesite. He does not mention her name, or say that it is there to mark her grave, but spends the paragraph talking about its artistic power and how other people responded to it (1020).

In a twist that is also totally consistent with what I've said earlier, in the book's remaining chapters Adams slowly fades from his own story, until he nearly disappears. The book's last chapters turn into a discussion of his rather abstruse theories of history, including his conviction that the energy unleashed by the nineteenth century's technology and growth will inevitably lead to entropy and chaos. This becomes the subject, and the character "Adams" becomes even more of a spectator. While the author Henry Adams ends wholly successful in his demonstration of his failure to have gained the education that would have fitted him for carrying on the family legacy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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