HENRY ADAMS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY, HISTORY AND THE VOID

Remus Bejan,
Ovidius University of Constanta

Abstract. *In* Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography *(1992), Paul John Eakin makes the interesting remark that "*The Education of Henry Adams *(1907) is probably the first autobiography to make the relation between an individual life and history its presiding theme, and it remains the most self-conscious attempt to provide a theory for this kind of life story, "a new sense of the historicity of the individual life" (145, 147*). *In particular, the American writer endeavors to shed light on the effects that one's continuously changing personal experience has on the concepts of self, identity, and knowledge.*

Key words: autobiography, history, Henry Adams, self, identity

"There have been men in all ages, who have been impelled as by an instinct to propose their own nature as a problem, and who devote their attempts to its solution." (206).
T.S. Coleridge, *Biographia literaria*

The antinomies characteristic of an individual's lived experiences make them impenetrable and unique and, for this reason, inaccessible to conceptual cognition. Nonetheless, Wilhelm Dilthey claims, in "Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason" (c. 1910), that, as parts of a self that they are related to – this is the only constant thing in the continuous flow of one's life – they are inwardly and structurally connected to form a "nexus," *a vital totality*. In spite of its apparent fragmentariness and multiplicity, each life has its own sense and generates direction, which makes autobiography as a historical self-portrait, composed retrospectively, "the highest and the most instructive form of the understanding of life" (Dilthey 221). The reason for this distinctive status of autobiography is that the individual who explains his own life is the same as the one who created it. A particular intimacy of understanding results of from this. He who seeks the connections in the history of his life has already created coherence in that life, from a different point of view, i.e., lived experience, and the narrative of the self he produces is merely its literary expression. The fact that autobiography is necessary selective and influenced by hindsight does not strike Dilthey as a disadvantage; instead, these features of memory are part of what gives autobiography meaning and brings it closer to history, for as with the latter, it is the future that corrects the autobiographer's fleeting slipups about the meaning of his own life. Selectivity and the construction of connections between life events allow autobiography to be something more than a mere reproduction of experience, because understanding is inevitably involved in the process. The 'story of one's life' therefore yields illuminating insight into a person's life – as the works of Augustine, Rousseau and Goethe ostensibly testify to – which consists of the distinctive way in which such categories as *purpose*, *sense* and *meaning* combine in various possibilities to actualize specific values.All individuals engage in autobiographical reflection on their lives,

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although they may never take written form. Such reflection does not simply revive the shadows of one's past for, in recounting them, Dilthey insists, "the self grasps the course of his life in such a way as *to bring to consciousness the bases of human life*, namely *the historical relations in which it is interwoven*" (225, emphasis added), in other words, arrive at true historical vision. Only those who comprehend their own lives in such perspective are capable of understanding history, their own history included.

Despite his wide learning and his assiduous reading of English, French and German historians and scientists, Henry Adams does not seem to be aware of the distinctions that his contemporary was drawing between *Naturwissenshchaften* and *Geisteswssenschaften* and the possibilities of historical knowledge, about the same time as he was working at his own 'self-narrative'. In his own way – he thought of himself as standing on one foot in the eighteenth century and on the other in the twentieth – granting foundational status to his personal experiences, locating himself as subject of American and European history in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918), and attempting to clarify its effects on changing concepts of self, identity, and knowledge, Adams too was moving toward a comprehensive, integrative understanding of life in history, as a letter to Clara Hay, 15 May 1907 seems to suggest:

> All I have sought has been the direction, or tendency or history, of the human mind, not as religion or science, but as fact – as a whole, or stream and this *with no view to this relation to me* or my benefit [emphasis added]. (quoted in Chaflant 9)

However, Adams' stratagem to efface from his writings is only a technique of indirection, for, as J. C. Levenson rightfully notices, the American writer decided to contend for his world picture "*as an artist*, not as a scientist or historian or philosopher" (300, emphasis added). In other words, the 'historian of the self' chose to approach *his role of culture critic* from a different position, as he had done until then. In a letter to William James, he insists on the tentative nature of his work, emphasizing its formal aspects, which entails both redemption and disapproval of content:

> As for the volume [*Education*], it interests me chiefly as a *literary experiment*, hitherto, as far as I know, never tried or never successful. Your brother Harry tries such experiments in literary art daily, and would know instantly what I mean; but I doubt whether a dozen people in America except architects or decorators would know or care. (Adams, *Selected Letters* 490, emphasis added)

Adams often underlines (in his letters, in particular[1]) that writing is crucial for the assertion of his own sense of being. Like Saint Augustine, whose *Confessions* served as a model, *The Education* too portrays the failures and efforts of a youth to uncover the development of a full-grown consciousness that will make it possible for him to interpret and understand the world he lives in. Nonetheless, self-consciousness remains an illusion for its author: "As educator, Jean Jacques was, in one respect, easily first; he erected a monument of warning against the Ego. Since his time, and largely thanks to him, the Ego has steadily tended to efface itself…" (*Education*, vii-ix).

While ostensibly writing about himself, Adams uses the third person, i.e. the 'character' Henry Adams, as the protagonist of his life-narrative, whom he defines as "a manikin on which the toilet of education is to be draped in order to show the fit or misfit of the clothes" (*Education*, x). Whether we read it as the "*homunculus scriptor*," the self-

[1] See in particular Letter to William James, February 1908, Letter to Barrett Wendell, 12 March 1909, in *Selected Letters of Henry Adams* (250 and 255-257 respectively).

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consciously little writer, the store window dummy, or as the marionette, suggesting a lifeless form on which the author may randomly hang the diverse lessons that he picked up in life, *we confront with a denial of life-writing as a process of self-discovery*.

Consequently, the mature author of the *Education* can offer little insight into the changes and reverses of his early life. Adams cautions the reader looking for a complete record of his life: "This is a story of education – not a mere lesson of life" (*Education*, 243). For all this, in the final paragraph of the 1907 Preface, he warns readers that the manikin, as a measure of "human condition . . . must be taken for real; must be treated as though it had life" (*Education*, x). Then, acknowledging that the book is autobiographical, Adams ends on the question, "Who knows? Possibly it had!" "The concession," William Decker argues,

> is major: the human form cannot (or if it can it must not) be effaced of its past; if it is to be renewed, and kept recognizably human, it will be through the office of bequeathable resources" (61).

It is the essential emptiness of the manikin, the absence of a fixed point for the structure of thought, which makes the "object of study ... *the garment*, not the figure. The tailor adapts the manikin as well as the clothes to his patron's wants" (*Education*,10, emphasis added). The metaphor, which reminds us of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdrockh* (1833-34), is used to distinguish appearance from essential reality.[2]Adams's *homo autobiographicus* is pushed and pulled by forces beyond his control. Throughout *The Education*, man and thought are often spoken of as *energy* or force – and, for that reason, he may hardly be designated as the originator of his own life. For Adams, the traditional overarching concepts of "author" and "subject," as the origin and ultimate substantiation of the text, have lost their integrating power. Instead of the discovery of one's self, we are offered an "education," as indicating possibilities of finding new meanings. Adams rejects the Augustinian formula because "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" (*Education*, vii-viii), which explains the intricate and deceivingly loose structure of the *Education.* Indeed, Adams labels his self-portrayal as *The Education of Henry Adams: a Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity* and, in a sense, it is a motley collection of essays, entitled variously: "Quincy," "Rome," "Eccentricity," "The Abyss of Ignorance," "Chaos," "Nunc Age," etc.

The Western mind-set, Adams seems to imply, is obsessed with the dream of an ultimate and permanent order: "Unity and Uniformity were the whole motive of philosophy" (*Education*,226). And, indeed, the nineteenth-century world picture seems to have been constructed to do away with differences and rule out multiplicity and variation. By contrasting the two locations where he was brought up as a child – Quincy and Boston –, Adams stresses the conflict between the stern eighteenth-century spirit of his paternal ancestors, John and John Quincy Adams, and the more innovative and commerce oriented nineteenth-century spirit of his mother's family. As a result of his loyalty to the Enlightenment morals, he never feels comfortable with the spirit of his own day (*Education*, 9). Contemporary American politics show the fourteen-year-old boy that the attempt to reconcile conflict is frequently effected at the cost of principles. He discovers the true George Washington, the man who commanded respectability and authority more than any other American, along a ragged Southern road during a "pilgrimage" to Mount Vernon where

[2] The half-serious and half-mocking speculations of Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, from Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (the Tailor Re-tailed), on a "Philosophy of Clothes" claim that meaning is to be worked out of phenomena, continually changing over history, as cultures construct and reconstruct themselves in shifting fashions, power-structures, and faith-systems.

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"slavery struck him in the face; it was a nightmare; a horror; a crime; the sum of all wickedness! Slave States were dirty, unkempt, poverty stricken, ignorant, vicious!" (*Education*, 44) The question of "how to deduce George Washington from the sum of all wickedness" suggests the failure of his inherited Puritan morality. The political lessons of 1850-1851 provide no acceptable answer. Equally disturbing is the compromise negotiated by the Free Soil Party, campaigning on an anti-slavery platform, and the Massachusetts Democrats. By supporting Charles Sumner's election to the Senate, at the cost of the Democrat, George S. Boutwell, a known anti-abolitionist, in the governor's office, young Adams finds himself caught in almost absolute confusion:

> Thus, before he was fifteen years old, he had managed to get himself into a state of moral confusion from which he never escaped. As a politician, he was already corrupt, and he never could see how any practical politician could be less corrupt than himself (*Education*, 50).

In Europe, on the occasion of the traditional Grand Tour, the young Adams is faced up with the same problems he hoped to have left behind: "Education went backward" (*Education*, 73). The English Black Districts of Manchester and Birmingham reveal a social oppression that chases away the idealistic haze in which Trollope and Thackeray had enshrouded English life in their novels. The disciplined training of the German students of Friedrichs-Wilhelm-Werdersches Gymnasium, whose student he is for a while, dramatizes the methods of a society founded on a rigid interpretation of law. Instruction is simply mechanical indoctrination, the leveling of all differences and variations: "All State education is a sort of dynamo machine for polarizing the popular mind; for turning and holding its lines of force in the direction supposed to be the most effective for State purposes (*Education*, 78).

Any effort to analyze historical movement in terms of man's will and power always collapses in "the sheer chaos of human nature" (*Education*, 153). Beneath all the major political decisions, Adams finds out only instincts, prejudice, and cultural divergences. As secretary to his father, the American ambassador to London during the Civil War, he has the task of preventing the recognition by the British government of the Confederacy, which would have thwarted the Administration hopes for a victorious ending of the conflict. With the benefit of hindsight, the autobiographer wonders how his (and his father's) success had had to do with any real understanding of the personalities and the political forces they were engaged with, how little they had understood of the motives driving British policy: "They made a picture different from anything he had conceived and rendered worthless the whole painful diplomatic experience (178). This questions not only his own ability, but also man's, in general, to derive any sensible answer from one's own experience. His own reaction to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln is emblematic of his own awareness of a divided self: "His identity, if one could call a bundle of *disconnected memories and identity* seemed to remain; but *his life* was once more *broken into separate pieces* (209, emphasis added). Historical evidence argues that man alone is responsible for the quagmire he finds himself. History can express only the recurring failures of man's desire to assign meanings to his experiences, a condition which Adams evokes by means of one of his favorite images: "he was a *spider* and *had to spin a new web* in some new place with a new attachment" (idem, emphasis added).

Since the modern Western scene, both American and European, suggests nothing but violence and chaos, the protagonist of the *Education* moves back into history, in search of a solid point of departure. In Rome, he does find a source without which "the Western world was pointless and fragmentary" (*Education*, 89). Yet, the historical chaos of the city makes "cool and minute investigation" impossible: "In spite of swarming impressions he knew no more when he left Rome than he did when he entered it" (*Education*, 93). The only moral to

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be inferred on the steps of the Church of Santa Maria di Ara Coeli is one of failure: the ignominy of identifying no meaningful pattern in human history. From the Forum to St. Peter's, Adams traces the collapse of the West's two [ancient Rome and Vatican] most complicated and extended attempts at historical order, and ironically comments that "nothing proved that the city might not still survive to express the failure of a third" (*Education*, 91).

New advances in the natural and physical sciences seem to offer exciting possibilities of furthering our understanding of the ways of the world and the ways of people. Substituting natural selection and natural uniformity for historical sequence and divine design respectively, Charles Darwin's theory on the evolution of species (1857) seems "the very best substitute for religion" (*Education*, 225). For all this, the attempt to affirm the protagonist's faith in the new theory breaks down in the face of *Pteraspis*, the fossil ganoid fish that Sir Charles Lyell made the original ancestor of man: "Out of his millions of millions of ancestors, back to the Cambrian mollusks, everyone had probably lived and died in the illusion of Truths which did not amuse him, and which had never changed" (*Education*, 231). The case of *Pteraspis* is illustrative of the failure of the Darwinian evolutionary theory to fully account for accident and mutation, and simply points to the inescapable conclusion, namely, that 'unity' is mere 'wishful thinking':

> Ponder over it as he might, Adams could see nothing in the theory of Sir Charles but pure inference, precisely like the inference of Paley, that, if one found a watch, one inferred a maker. He could detect no more evolution in life since *Pteraspis* than he could detect in architecture since the Abbey. All he could prove was change. (*Education*, 230).

The protagonist is thus forced to admit that the eighteenth moral certainties with which he had been brought up, and their nineteenth-century substitutes, with their belief in progress, could not makes sense of the modern world: "The progress of evolution from President Washington to president Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin" (*Education*, 266). Taken out of its scientific context, "evolution" provides Adams with a scale whereby he weighs up his own age. For a variety of reasons, Adams depicts himself, his generation, but also Grant or Garibaldi, as "accidents" of evolution (Ch. 20 "Failure"). Every effort to understand ends in confusion: "... in the eyes of history he might, like the rest of the world, be only the vigorous player in the game he did not understand. The student was none the wiser" (*Education*, 95). Ultimately, all scientific theorizing breaks down in the fact of (his sister's) death:

> The first serious consciousness of Nature's gesture – her attitude towards life – took form then as a phantasm, a nightmare, an insanity of force. For the first time, the stage-scenery of the senses collapsed; the human mind felt itself stripped naked, vibrating in a void of shapeless energies, with resistless mass, colliding, crushing, wasting, and destroying what these same energies had created and labored from eternity to perfect. Society became fantastic, a vision of pantomime with a mechanical motion; and its so-called thought merged in the mere sense of life, and the pleasure in the sense. The usual anodynes of social medicine became evident artifice. (*Education*, 288-9)

The "repetition" of the "accident" in his wife's suicide – the eternal feminine principle is central to the symbology of *The Education* – accounts for the ominous silence that surrounds the twenty years of Adams' married life (1871-1892), which he variously labels as 'after-life' or 'posthumous life'. His elaborate and protracted mourning bears the all

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the marks of what, in a classical study, Freud calls *melancholia.*[3] In a letter dated March 8, 1886, to Henry Holt, Adams writes of "the only chapter of one's story for which one cares is closed forever, locked up, and put away, to be kept, as a sort of open secret, between oneself and eternity" (*Selected Letters*, 5). Significantly, the metaphor equates his own life with a book that obviously he cannot author.

The great discourses of intellectual unity and order that were his Enlightenment heritage disintegrate in a progressive stepping up of chaos. Mont Blanc which, for Shelley, had been a symbol of the sublime, ordering "Power" behind all natural and mental processes ("Mont Blanc," 1816), becomes in the *Education* "a chaos of anarchic and purposeless forces" (*Education*, 289). Practically, "chaos" is the end of education. The *Education* reveals man's quest for order as a vain dream, and itself necessarily concludes on a Shakespearean note: "The rest is silence!" (504). The protagonist discovers that only change remains permanent; only it could provide the necessary foundation of meaning:

> Henry Adams was the first in an infinite series to discover and admit to himself that he really did not care whether truth was, or was not, true. He did not even care that it should be proved true, unless that process were new and amusing. (*Education*, 232)

At the end of chapter 29 of the *Education*, Adams suggests that the only thing one might assume as true is *relation*. The study of history could be only the study of such relations: "Past history is only a value of relation to the future, and this value is wholly one of convenience" (*Education*, 488).[4]

Although Adams' pursuit of unity in the cosmos and directionality in history apparently fails, he finds meaning in the diverse interrogations he makes of his own condition. In the preface to the *Education* Adams writes: "The training is partly the clearing away of obstacles, partly the direct application of effort" (x). Ultimately, *meaning resides in the individual alone*, yet man deludes himself that his knowledge might ever replace *the emptiness at the center of his being*. In his anxious need for order, man only destroys the difference and multiplicity on which his being and world are founded. The final "historical proofs" refuse to resolve the paradoxes of existence; they only harbor more doubt.

For Adams, the rational quest for absolute values must acknowledge ultimately the impossibility of determining them. Yet, this very recognition perpetuates the search and necessitates continuing acts of interpretation, a view that he shares with William James. Every "lesson" that the manikin learns centers on a choice that can be neither justified nor repudiated on the basis of any code of values. Unable to define history, Adams struggles to develop a method of education based on his own incomplete knowledge: "Education should try to lessen the obstacles, diminish the friction, invigorate the energy, and should train minds to react, not at haphazard, but *by choice* [emphasis added], on the lines of force that attract their world" (*Education*, 314). He thus affirms the power of consciousness to assign meanings to the accidental forces of a physically impelled universe. By a twist of irony, it is this capacity of man that makes survival possible. The desire for discovering a final order has

[3] ". . . a profoundly painful depression, a loss of interest in the outside world, the loss of the ability to love, the inhibition of any kind of performance and a reduction in the sense of the self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment. We have a better understanding of this when we bear in mind that mourning displays the same traits, part form one: the disorder of self-esteem is absent" (Freud 204).

[4] We cannot help noticing that Adams comes close to Dilthey's own statement: "Thus there is nothing more puzzling than the kind of continuum or nexus known as piece of life-history. *The only thing that remains constant about this nexus is that its form is a structural relation* (emphasis added)" (216).

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to be abandoned and so has "the traditional, unitary model of the self as innate and changeless in favor of a situational model of identity" (Eakin 19).

The Saint-Gaudens monument at Rock Creek Church commissioned in memory of his wife (Marian Clover Hooper), which Adams briefly comments in *The Education*, is a paradigm for this process. This is how Duco van Oostrum describes it:

> With one hand touching the lower face on the right side, the figure appears lost in contemplation. Only the face, neck, part of the right side, breast and shoulder, and the lower right arm are not veiled underneath the uniquely colored bronze cloak, and the figure's eyes and mouth are closed. While the figure finally bears the dress of a female figure, the gender of the figure remains slightly ambiguous. The pose reflecting the acceptance of the inescapable fate links the hand to the face, while the coat apparently veils the material reality of the inevitable. (158-159)

A composite of diverse theological and philosophical ideas from Eastern religions, mythic archetypes, and the modern arts, devoid of any references, – significantly *writing is notably absent* from this Memorial – the figure expresses an ironic unity that denies the languages of man and appears to raise more questions than to provide positive answers. Nevertheless, meaning and value are made possible by the very ambiguity of the figure. *Interpretation is* not external to the sculpture but *fundamental to its art*, as Adams comments:

> From the Egyptian Sphinx to the Kamakura Daibuts; from Prometheus to Christ; from Michael Angelo to Shelley, art had wrought on this eternal figure almost as though it had nothing else to say. *The interest of the figure was not in its meaning, but in the response of the observer*. (*Education*, 329, emphasis added)

The silence of the figure is not a denial of man and consciousness. Rather, it embodies the dream of man for unity as it reveals the fundamental silence of any such total order. Playing upon one of his favorite images, Adams now expresses his own theory in the figure of the spider and its web:

> For convenience as an image, the theory may liken man to a spider in its web, watching for chance prey. Forces of nature dance like flies before the net, and the spider pounces on them when it can; but it makes many fatal mistakes, though its theory of force is sound. The spider-mind acquires a faculty of memory, and, with it, a singular skill of analysis and synthesis, taking apart and putting together in different relations the meshes of its trap. (*Education*, 474).

Translating the image of the spider and web into the language of science, Adams formulates the following law: "A dynamic law requires that two masses – nature and man – must go on, reacting upon each other, without stop, as the sun and a comet react on each other, and that any appearance of stoppage is illusive" (*Education*, 478). Man is condemned to the critical activity of making tentative, elusive meanings out of an unremittingly altering universe. An entire system of values depends upon man's ability to affirm his own power to interpret his world, however illusory such a world might be. In his own way, and despite repeated failures, Adams envisages some possibilities of emancipation. Finally, he seems to have identified a method for expressing the functional interchange between man's dream of unity and experience of multiplicity that is as effective in its own way. Cutting and piecing together the history of his 'education', Adams constitutes meaning in the very struggle to find a place for himself in a bewildering modern world. The obligation that one must choose from among

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the disconnected narrative of a life in order to be-in-the-world remains constant. Although the scientific accuracy of "A Dynamic Theory" collapses in the end, the artistic qualities of the *Education* endure and Adams dramatizes his own notion that "unable to define Force as a unity, man symbolized it and pursued it, both in himself, and in the infinite, as philosophy and theology. . ." (*Education*, 476). His solution is an attempt to bridge the gap that separates imagination and science. Finally, Adams comes to value the world created by his imaginative will more highly than the world which his senses revealed to him. Thus, while testifying to the possible collapse of the modern mind through its acknowledged failure to arrive at a positive formulation of historical experience, the *Education* paradoxically reaffirms the vital, redemptive power of self-writing, and the humanizing importance of art on the subject of history[5]. In the end, the weary pilgrim of the *Education* has found the way back to his Ithaca, yet his quest is bound to continue: *Nunc age*!

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[5] That is one reason why we cannot sympathize with Edward Chaflant who sees the *Education* as "pathfinding work in a new literary field, the anti-biographical (11). Chaflant provides neither sufficient nor convincing arguments in favor of the new "genre". The unusual form of *The Education* does not prevent it from eliciting, as we have demonstrated, what Wilhelm Dilthey called a "life-nexus. J. P. Eakin, in *Touching the World* (1992), sees it as an "inversion" of the well-known model of autobiographical identity – the success story" (78).

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