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Philosophy 520

**THE VICTORY OF STATE STREET:
THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS**

Preface: What Henry Adams means to me

“Philosophers, as a rule, cared little what principles society affirmed or denied, since the philosopher commonly held that though he might sometimes be right by good luck on some one point, no complex of individual opinions could possibly be anything but wrong; yet, supposing society to be ignored, the philosopher was no further forward. Nihilism had no bottom. For thousands of years every philosopher had stood on the shore of this sunless sea, diving for pearls and never finding them. All had seen that, *since they could not find bottom, they must assume it.*” (*Education*, ch. 29, italics added)

I’m always relieved to find that another person has found a dilemma I struggle with worth mentioning. What I read (or perhaps read into) this passage to mean is this: ‘It is all very well and good to intellectually pick apart the foundations of society – any child can do it, and most do. But what is gained? To be nihilistic or anarchistic is ultimately self-annihilating. So if a person is to live, he must devise for himself a philosophy of life that, while not able to withstand intellectual rigor in all particulars, will allow him to face each new day with some hope and faith.’ (Interestingly, Adams was uncertain about whether he agreed with the stated sentiment; he was only relating it.)

In many ways, I feel a kinship with Henry Adams. His writing speaks to my concerns. Even though the world has changed greatly in the 85 years since *Education* was written, and I therefore have difficulty understanding many of the reference points Adams used, a great deal of what he wrote still hits home. Questions about the meaning of life, the meaning of progress, the power of science to destroy custom, the merits and drawbacks of capitalism, the identity of America, and the value of conventional education still remain contested or unanswered. I came away from my reading of *Education* with the belief that, though these questions may never be answered, the attempt is worth the effort.

Introduction: the Degradation of Henry Adams

The strongest impression I received from *Education* was the incredibly bad light in which Adams, who was a man of no small achievement, portrayed himself. One chapter was even titled “Failure.” Even granting that Adams was pressured by the weight of his family heritage, and that avoidance of vanity was an Adams obsession¹, the self-abuse written in *Education* is remarkable. These comments are among others:

“He never gave his father the smallest help, unless it were as a footman, a clerk, or a companion for the younger children.” (ch. 8)

“Henry Adams had failed to acquire any useful education; he should at least have acquired social experience. Curiously enough, he failed here also.” (ch. 13)

“As a professor, he regarded himself as a failure. . . He had accomplished nothing that he had tried to do.” (ch. 20)

“Never had the proportions of his ignorance looked so appalling.” (ch. 28)

Also, the selective use of facts is remarkable. Adams was married, and his wife committed suicide – neither fact is even hinted at in *Education*. His famous histories of the Jefferson and Madison administrations are given only token acknowledgement. His novels are unmentioned. Though he did credit himself with writing ability, he also seemed in places to believe that he had little of use to say.

For a book purported to be an autobiography, *Education* has little of interest or accuracy to say about the author’s public (as opposed to private) life.

So, if this book is to have value, it must lie less in the factual realm than in the thematic one. What was Adams trying to say? What was the purpose of the book?

Far smarter men than I have spent far greater time answering this complex question. With that in mind, I focused my study on one part, perhaps the main one, of the book’s theme – the difference between old and new; the individual and the dynamo; Quincy and State Street.

¹ Harbert, Earl N. *The Force So Much Closer Home*. New York: New York University Press (1977); pg. 23.

Quincy: the Colonial past

“ . . .the only distinctive mark of all the Adamses. . .had been their inherited quarrel with State Street. . .His Adams ancestors must have been right, since they were always hostile to State Street. If State Street was wrong, Quincy must be right!” (ch. 1)

The town of Quincy, a suburb of Boston that was the Adams’ seat of power for four generations, symbolized to Henry Adams everything that the Adams family stood for: statesmanship, public service, integrity², liberty, the Constitution, and Harvard College (ch. 22).

Quincy was the 18th century; it was the repository of old values. Religion was an integral part of life (ch. 1). Anti-slavery was an unbreakable creed (ch. 1, 2, 3). Government was by the best, not the prettiest: New England was represented by giants such as Daniel Webster, Edward Everett, Charles Sumner, and John Quincy Adams (ch. 2). Leaders were expected to have integrity and take responsibility. Adams wrote of the discussion about whether John Hay, then ambassador to England, should accept promotion to Secretary of State:

“ . . .if he were a mere office-seeker he might certainly decline promotion, [but] if he were a member of the Government he could not. No serious statesman could accept a favor and refuse a service. Doubtless he might refuse, but in that case he must resign.” (ch. 24)

I can’t imagine that level of principle in our present government.

Breeding mattered in the world of Quincy. Adams seemed to believe that the sole value of his attendance at Harvard College was social (ch. 4). Family influence was important, with traditions and attitudes handed down from old to young as a matter of course (ch. 1, 2).

Quincy was American history – a town that looked backward as much, if not more, than forward. Adams stated that as late as 1846, the battle of Bunker Hill “remained actual”; “the tone of society was colonial”; and “the eighteenth century ruled society long after 1850” (ch. 1). This would not be a place that welcomed change.

² Harbert, pg. 15.

State Street: the Imperial future

“What could become of such a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the twentieth?” (ch. 1)

“. . .he found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, with his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new.” (ch. 25)

These new forces, unleashed by capitalism, were the subject of the second half of Adams’ book, and the bane of the second half of his life.

To Adams, the symbol of these new forces was the dynamo. It mesmerized Adams. The dynamo was a “symbol of infinity”: an almost inaudible supplier of almost unimaginable power. He felt “the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross.” (ch. 25)

(The discovery of new forces in nature was a major theme of *Education*. Due to my limited science background, I can only mention this – I’m unable to explain it with any authority.)

Upon Adams’ return from England in 1868, he saw the old elements of agriculture, handwork, and learning – the world he fit into – replaced by railroads and telegraphs. Steam-power was triumphant (ch. 16).

Adams described himself and his generation as “mortgaged to the railways” and “for sale”. The young were no longer nurtured and apprenticed by the old; a young man was forced “to impose himself. . .on his elders, in order to compel them to buy him as an investment.” (ch. 16)

Americans no longer worshipped – they wasted. Even the supposed American worship of money was waste – to worship money is to hold onto it, and “except for the railway system, the enormous wealth taken out of the ground since 1840 had disappeared.” (ch. 21) Under the twin blows of growing materialism and Darwinism, religion had disappeared. (ch. 15, 21)

Force took over from individuality. Instead of rule by statesmen, America now had rule by party organization (ch. 3) and unseen, irresistible force. Instead of learning and principle, the new America demanded energy, stamina, and capital (ch. 16).

Adams seemed to see this change, looked at impersonally, as morally neutral. Was the stupendous graft brought about by the new system (ch. 16) any worse than the devastation wrought by the idealistic, principled Civil War? (ch. 18)

Young Henry Adams saw the world as his predecessors had: “chiefly as a thing to be reformed, filled with evil forces to be abolished.” (ch. 1) But reform was not to be – if Adams would not join the world, the world would leave Adams behind.

Conclusion: the “Nunc Age” and the victory of State Street

“As he came into [New York Harbor] again, November 5, 1904. . .he found the approach more striking than ever – wonderful – unlike anything man had ever seen – and like nothing he had ever much cared to see. . .Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable, and afraid.” (ch. 35)

Despite the fervent desires of Henry Adams, the victory of State Street and unfettered capitalism was assured by the outcome of the Civil War. The industrial might built between 1861 and 1865, combined with the complete victory of mercantilism, sparked phenomenal American industrial growth.

The new age began in America with the onset of the Grant administration in 1869. The moral laxity, the blindly laissez-faire attitude toward business and corruption, and the Cabinet appointments of dubious merit signaled to Adams that times had changed. (ch. 17)

In Europe, the new age dawned when newly capitalist Germany pounded *vieux*, out-dated France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Adams gave a poignant description of the French army confidently and artistically marching to war “like an opera of Meyerbeer.” (ch. 19)

But how much of a new age was it? How relevant was Adams’ experience in the entire American scheme of things?

The answer hinges on a question of history and philosophy: how much of what we who consider ourselves well-informed know is only applicable to the upper and/or learned classes?

I’m not sure that the “new age” was that much of a change for the working classes. From time immemorial to the present, these people have been mainly concerned with survival and material accumulation.³ They could never afford morals, philosophy, and the other finer distinctions of life.

³ For parts of this analysis, I’m indebted to *Class*, by Paul Fussell.

Any contemporary description of Imperial London includes a chapter on the slovenliness and sacrilege of the poor in the East End.

If anything, these classes, especially the middle class, probably benefited from the change in conditions. Living standards improved. The cost of industrialization, measured in loss of philosophy, principle, and individualism, never touched the working classes – how can one lose what one never had?

I don't criticize these classes for their lack of interest in the higher arts. When a person has no proud family ancestry, no educational tradition in his religion, no learned parents, and no other motivation to care about the world of the spiritual and abstract, why would he be expected to care? To explore (as opposed to wonder about) the non-material and philosophical is not a natural instinct; it is a calling. A person not called is unlikely to go.

I am not doubting the value of philosophy here; as a novice of the learned class, that would be self-defeating. What I do question is whether the direct (as opposed to indirect) effect of philosophy, and its rank as a matter of concern for most people, is as great as philosophers seem to think. The “ivory tower” of academia is a well-known metaphor for the narrow scope in which academics are broad-minded. The answer to my question is to be supplied by either smarter men than I or by myself at a later age: I confess that for now I only have my doubts, suspicions, and interest.

Whether Adams himself thought about this is also unknown to me, though his ingrained self-doubt leads me to believe it a possibility. By 1905, the end of *Education*, he was old and tired, and had other matters on his mind. All of his friends had died but John Hay, and Hay was very ill. Adams' education was unfinished and futile. The “obnoxious” and “unscrupulous” trusts and corporations ruled all, “[tearing] society to pieces and [trampling] it under foot.” (ch. 35)

After Adams received word of Hay's death, he walked disconsolately through Paris. He looked to the future, and hoped that “then, for the first time since man began his education among the carnivores, they would find a world that sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shudder.” (ch. 35)

We're still waiting.