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THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS : AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

(Capes-Agrégation)

“Ignorance must always begin at the beginning.”

By way of introduction to the book (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, Sentry Edition, 1946), I propose to answer three questions:

- Who is H. Adams?
- Is *The Education* an autobiography?
- What is *The Education* according to H. Adams?

1) Henry Brooks Adams was born on February 16th, 1838 in Boston, Massachusetts. His was one of the first families of the USA ; his ancestors played a prominent role in the history of the Republic :

- a Samuel Adams was one of the organizers of the American Revolution;
- Adams’ great-grandfather, John Adams, was one of the makers of the Republic and one of the four drafters of the Declaration of Independence. He was also the first Vice-President and the second President of the USA;

– his son, John Quincy Adams, was Minister to Prussia, Holland and Russia, Senator, Secretary of State and 6th President of the USA;

Charles, Francis Adams, the father of Henry, was also elected to Congress and was appointed Minister to Great-Britain by A. Lincoln; Henry Adams served as private secretary to his father during that period.

The seat of the family, Quincy, is also close to Boston, the scene of some of the most important historic events in the days of Colonial America : the Stamp Act (1765) ; the Boston Massacre (1770) ; the Boston Tea-Party (1773), etc. cf. p. 43 : “One lived in the atmosphere of the Stamp Act, the Tea Tax and the Boston Massacre”.

So H. Adams was American history in the flesh ; as a critic put it : “he was history even as he wrote history”

With such a background and such family traditions it is no wonder that young H. Adams expected to play a prominent role in US politics; cf. p. 16: “The Irish gardener once said....one Adams more”. We know that H. Adams failed to meet the standards of public eminence set by his ancestors; the failure can be accounted for by several reasons we’ll go into later on, but there’s hardly any doubt that H. Adams “wanted it handed to him on a silver plate.”

1854-1858: Attended Harvard College and at the end of his academic education, he sailed for Europe to study civil law at the University of Berlin. He travelled in Europe and started sending letters to Boston papers including an interview with Garibaldi. He returned to the US in 1860 to serve as a private secretary to his father recently re-elected to Congress. It is in this capacity that H. Adams followed him to London on a diplomatic assignment.

1861-1868: He lived in London where he observed British society and contributed to the *New York Times* and the *North American Review*.

1868-1870: H. Adams returned to Washington and became a free-lance political journalist for the *Nation* and the *North American Review*. Cf. 211: “The Press was an inferior pulpit...the nearest approach to a career for the literary survivor of a wrecked education.”

1870: In spite of all his prejudices against education and teaching, he became assistant professor of medieval history at Harvard and editor of the *North American Review*.

1872: Married Marian Hooper – wedding trip to Europe and Egypt.

1877: He gave up teaching and moved to Washington. Published *The Life of Albert Gallatin* (US statesman and Secretary of the Treasury 1801-1813) and began work on a monumental 9 volume *History of the US during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*.

1880: Published *Democracy: An American Novel* anonymously. It had a considerable “succès de scandale”.

1884: Published *Esther* under a pseudonym.

1885: Suicide of Marian Adams in Washington.

1886-1892: Travelled extensively: Japan; Hawaii; Australia; Ceylon; Europe.

1893: H. Adams was elected President of the American Historical Association for 1894. Then travelled in Cuba and Mexico (cf. p. 410: “A tourist-student”). Generally speaking, during the 1890’s, H. Adams became an inveterate wanderer ; he went to the Near East, Russia and Scandinavia ; he also stayed in France, in Paris where he kept an apartment in spite of his deep-rooted prejudices against France and things French, cf. p. 96 : “[he] had wanted no French influence in his education. He disapproved of France in the lump.” Ironically enough, though, he fell more and more under the influence of French ways of thinking and writing, witness the opening lines of chapter XXVII: “Inevitable Paris beckoned...every side.” (p. 403).

A turning point in H. Adams’s life and travels: the discovery of Mont Saint-Michel in Normandy that gave him “a new sense of history.”

1902: He completed (in December) *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* and printed it privately in 1904. A trade edition was issued in 1913. This study must be read in conjunction with *The Education*; the two books balance each other.

1904-1905: He worked on *The Education* and completed the manuscript in 1906. He had 100 privately printed copies sent to friends and acquaintances for comment and revision. *The Education* was not available to the general reading public until 1918 when it was published under the auspices of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

1908: He wrote *The Rule of Phase Applied to History*, which testified to his growing interest in historical, scientific and theoretical speculation

1910: *A Letter to American Teachers of History* was sent to various professors of history.

1911: Published *The Life of George Cabot Lodge*, one of his friends and former students at Harvard.

1912: Suffered a heart attack in April and was seriously ill throughout the summer

1914: Was in France at the outbreak of war but managed to escape to England

1918: Died in Washington on March 27th and was buried beside his wife. Publication of *The Education*.

2) Without going as far as a critic who asserts that “*The Education* has nothing (or little) to do really with the person of H. Adams,” one may wonder whether the term “an autobiography” is an apposite description of the nature of Adams’s book. The subtitle was added to the 1918 version without authorization from Adams himself; as the ventriloquizing Editor’s Preface which he wrote in 1916 to appear over the signature of H.C. Lodge in the 1918 public edition, makes it perfectly clear the only subtitle Adams might have used is “A Study of 20th century multiplicity”; however the 1st preface (written in 1907) firmly places the book within the tradition of St Augustine’s *Confessions* and mentions such predecessors as J.-J. Rousseau or Benjamin Franklin. Two other models are evoked in the narrative: Th. Carlyle and Gibbon (“Memoirs of my Life and of my Writings”)

Although H. Adams himself composed two biographies, he was very distrustful of the gender and of biographers, cf. his letter to H. James: “The volume is a mere shield of protection in the grave. I advise you to take your own life in the same way, in order to prevent biographers from taking it in theirs.” His approach is, to say the least, paradoxical and deserves careful consideration.

The paradox lies in the fact that the self is Adams’ necessary subject but he seeks at all costs to avoid the traps of the ego; Adams does not wish to follow in J.-J. Rousseau’s footsteps; he sees his predecessor’s work negatively as “a monument of warning against the Ego”. Being convinced that « *le moi est haïssable* », H. Adams will resort to all sorts of self-distancing and self-diminishing devices such as the “manikin technique”, cf. “Preface”: “Since his time...clothes. The object of study is the garment, not the figure.”

Thus, H. Adams hopes to turn the reader's attention away from the ego toward instruction instead of revelation. Whereas autobiography relies on a direct personal recollection requiring the 1st person pronoun to impart to the reader a sense of intimacy, *The Education* is characterized by a consistent avoidance of the 1st person singular pronoun. To guard against intrusion of the ego, H. Adams resorts to 3rd person narration and irony. By telling his story in the 3rd person, Adams achieves an effect of objectivity and detachment at the expense of naturalness since most readers experience a slight psychological jar at encountering "He" where they would normally expect "I". A case in point is to be found on page 5, 2nd paragraph: "He first found himself sitting...with a baked apple."

Irony is also a distancing device which leads the reader to sense the difference or discrepancy between the self-conscious teller and the observed self and to infer the direct opposite of the literal meaning of the words, cf. p. 77 : "Adams never learned to speak German well...German education."

Adams consistently writes of himself as "H. Adams" ; "he" ; "one" ; "a young man", etc. and never takes himself as "I" i.e. as an individual, master of his fate with a mind trained "to react, not at haphazard, but by choice, on the lines of force that attract the world." (p. 314) but as the object of a process of education, someone "things happen to." This is quite in keeping with his assertion that whatever he did or accomplished in life, he did by accident and not as a result of reasoned purpose. The manikin is not an author's ego but a kind of projected and geometrical point upon which cosmic lines of force imping. The manikin's figure serves both to protect the real author from excessive self-revelation and to emphasize the main thesis of the book, i.e. that education is everything and the man little or nothing.

Besides the use of the 1st person pronoun, autobiography involves (at least theoretically) absolute honesty and a willingness to lay bare one's innermost feelings. *The Education*, on the contrary, is characterized by reticence and a form of self-imposed censorship: details are omitted and emotions concealed. A case in point is the 20-year gap between Chapters XX and XXI: H. Adams draws a veil over the events of his private life during that period. In the same way, he never alludes to his relationship with Mrs. Cameron (the most important woman in H. Adams' life after his wife died; he carried on with her a discreet and platonic romance) and hardly touches upon the question of his relations with his brothers.

Far from being a mere record of facts and events, *The Education* is also a work of imagination, the work of a contemporary and, to some extent, disciple of H. James (mentioned on page 163) i.e. one who knew that life gives the artist either too much or not enough and that either way, life is nothing without the ministry of an answering imagination, intelligent where life is stupid, economical where life gives a waste. Hence H. Adams' concern for literary form (cf. Editor's Preface) and also his avowal (p. 43): "This was the journey he remembered...no interest for education."

The Education is also a catalogue of bright imaginative moments selected for meaning and symbol; it is, as a critic put it: "the story of objects rising into symbols through the perspective of years" and, I am tempted to add, through the agency of the imagination. Two varieties of time are at work in *The Education*, actual or historical time within the framework of which the events of life take place, and imaginative time, less fleeting than the former, almost static and easily evocable.

Another element to be taken into account in any discussion of the autobiographic or anti-autobiographic nature of *The Education* is Adams' attempt to reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable modes of literary composition viz. to mix narrative and didactic purpose and style. *The Education* is meant to test and instruct its audience; it is both a work of art and a document in which Adams desired to treat only those aspects of his own personal history from which lessons of universal applicability could be drawn. H. Adams used himself or the manikin as the focal point or prism through which the various lights of the contemporary multiverse could be refracted. What the reader finds in *The Education* is not so much the author's self as a vision in which science, history, art and literature are brilliantly integrated. *The Education* inaugurates a new kind of autobiography in which the hero's life is far less important than the influences that shape it and the reader is given not a private record but a guide to contemporary influences. This didactic purpose turns *The Education* into an "extensive parable" almost ending as a myth: "the manikin is not only a tailor's dummy but, as the etymology makes clear, the Little Man [*"l'hommelette"* as J. Lacan would put it] who seems to be the Everyman of the twentieth century"; on p. 16-17, H. Adams associates his name with that of Adam and Eve.

To conclude this review of the main characteristics of Adams' book, I'll say that *The Education* is in a class by itself; it is more an "anti-biography" than an autobiography; it transcends the limitations of the

genre in that multiplicity lies at its core: *The Education* contains three things: *a self*; *a critique of the age* in which the author lived, and *a theory of history culminating in metaphysics*.

3) Education according to H. Adams.

Education is the main theme or object of H. Adams' undertaking and the author takes great pains, both in the Preface and at various stages in the narrative to get this fact across to the reader: cf. Ch. XXI p. 314: "Once more...not meant to amuse them." Cf. also the metaphor of the tailor on p. XXIV: "The tailor's object...equipped for any emergency." It is obvious that H. Adams was determined to write a book of educational autobiography.

What does Adams mean by "education"? First of all, one must note that the concept has nothing to do with the systematic training and instruction provided by schools or colleges. Adamsian education and academic education are poles apart and Adams repeatedly passes strictures on the education of the schools. The natural enemy of H. Adams is the schoolmaster: "A schoolmaster...that is, a man employed to tell lies to little boys." (p. 9); cf. also p. 37: "If school helped, it was only by reaction...The passionate hatred of school methods was almost a method in itself." or again, p. 55: "The chief wonder of education...is that it doesn't ruin everybody concerned in it teachers and taught."

And the same holds true for higher education: "Four years of Harvard College...resulted in an autobiographical blank...stamped." (p. 55). As for "the experiment of German education" in Berlin, Adams comes to the same conclusion: it recognizes no other faculty than the memory and boils down to time wasted, "studies neglected; vices indulged" *i.e.* "education reversed... accidental, unintended, unforeseen." (80) Adams' opinion of State education is worth quoting in full: cf. p. 78: "All State...for State purposes." (Note the use of the dynamo metaphor).

It is no wonder then that after so many disappointments, H. Adams should conclude that "the education he received bore little relation to the education he needed (53) and also that "the more he was educated the less he understood." (44)

Paradoxically enough, Adams, who hated schoolmasters and all their ways eventually became one and remained one for 7 years. Forgetting his scorn for college, H. Adams in 1897 "broke his life in halves again in order to begin a new education, on lines he had not chosen, in subjects for which he cared less than nothing." (294) so he accepted a professorship in mediaeval history but, I quote: "He could see no relation whatever...literary, accidental, indifferent." (293) However, this temporary renunciation or relapse into orthodox education does not radically alter Adams' indictment of traditional methods of teaching. Hence his definition of himself as "a searcher for knowledge" (220) and the description of his journey through life as "Adventures in search of knowledge" (98).

Academic education does not suit H. Adams because it is inertial education whereas what he requires is dynamic education *i.e.* one enabling "the mind to react to any purpose on the forces that surround [man]" (314) cf.: "The object of education...attract their world."

Education, in that sense, partakes of dynamics, it is a method for assimilating experiences and above all, for reacting to the various forces molding the individual; it aims at "encouraging foresight and economizing waste of mind." (501). Education is a continuous process of assimilating and organizing data, it posits a dynamic relation between the mind and the forces surrounding it, a dialectic of force and reaction bringing about realizations and implying reciprocity. Here lies the originality of Adams' conception of man and education; p. XXIV: "Man himself, the Subject of education, is a certain form of energy and the object to be gained is economy of his force."¹ Adams conceives man as an atom being trapped in a field of forces (Nature or the Universe) and subject to attraction and gravitation; he develops this dynamic theory of education in chapter XXXIII, p. 474: "A dynamic theory...education."

1. It is worthwhile to remember that the notion of "Economy" is the theme of the opening (and longest) chapter of another classic of American literature: *Walden* by H. D. Thoreau. The concept of economy was created by Aristotle; the word derives from "*oikos*" / house and "*nomos*" / law, and means « *la science des lois de l'économie domestique et du patrimoine* », but in his book Thoreau uses the notion in a significantly wider sense since it means both the management of one's expenses but also, as he explains later in the chapter, "*that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy*". Thus the concept means something like "*philosophy of living*".

From which he also infers that: “Man’s function as a force of nature [is] to assimilate other forces as he assimilated food.” (475) Consequently, to sum up the preceding observations, it is possible to maintain that education, according to H. Adams, is just another way of talking about the attraction of external masses of energy upon the particle of energy which is a human being. Successful education results in the proper adjustment of the individual to the forces operating in the world around him. The individual whose mind has been trained to react with vigor and economy” is given the chance to master or ride his fate instead of being merely swept along by it. Hence, the second original aspect of Adams’ theory: education is the means to power *i.e.* effectiveness in one’s actions and influence over others; it gives an individual a measure of control over the energies at large in nature and society. The third original aspect is that for Adams education functions somewhat like Darwin’s natural selection: it preserves the individual best adjusted to his environment, helping him triumph in the race for survival. This of course an elitist theory and Adams repeatedly stresses the fact “that barely one man in a 100 owns a mind capable of reacting to any purpose on the forces that surround him and fully half of these react wrongly” (315)

This conception of education accounts for the author’s reiterated judgment of himself as a failure. H. Adams failed because, he said, his own education was inadequate and did not enable him to achieve success *i.e.* power and control in the field of politics. I will revert to that point later on but we know enough already to see that what H. Adams actually relates in his book is the story of his own *mis-education*, his vain pursuit of the kind of training and knowledge a man must achieve to adjust adequately to the forces shaping his time. *The Education* is for the most part a chronicle of the various types of makeshift educations H. Adams encountered in different fields of endeavor. H. Adams distinguishes several sub-categories besides the fundamental opposition between academic and dynamic education:

– first of all, there is what he calls “Accidental education” (83) *i.e.* education relying on chance or good fortune to assimilate useful experience; it is an indiscriminate process because “nothing comes amiss” to one who “learns by accident” (82). This process is also called “irregular education” (145) and characterizes the years spent in Germany and, on the whole, the decade 1858-1868, cf. p. 236: “The long ten years...1858” However, H. Adams’ travels in Europe will bring him face to face with some unpleasant realities – poverty, suffering – but they will never affect his social consciousness very deeply. A case in point is the Black District; on p. 72, H. Adams evokes “the plunge into darkness lurid with flames...the revelation of an unknown society of the pit” and concludes, with shocking indifference, “The Black District was a practical education... disliked.” (73) Such blindness to the social evils of an industrial age is one of the most unpleasant shortcomings of H. Adams, the New-England patrician.

– the opposite of accidental education is “systematic education”, *i.e.* carefully planned and organized, and methodically following the usual channels of learning – schools, colleges and universities – unless the term refers to education based on some system of doctrines or philosophy (but such interpretations are not mutually exclusive) is also found fault with; cf. p. 313: “Education, systematic or accidental, had done its worst.”

– there is one type of education that H. Adams hardly touches upon: “sensual² education” (74): the most interesting and moving passage is to be found early in the book, in the description of the countryside around Quincy; cf. p. 8: “Boys are wild animals...winter was school.” Here Adams defines Nature and the cycle of seasons as he most decisive force he ever knew” (9). However, such passages are rare although Rome and Italy lend themselves to evocations full of sensual undertones. I have already stressed the utter lack of references to any “sentimental education” whatever but despite H. Adams’ discretion and reticence on that score, the narrative depicts if not the kindling of love or passion at least H. Adams’ awakening to a sense of beauty and aesthetic pleasure. The various trips to Italy, the visit of Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres are so many fundamental stages in what might be called Adams’ “education of eye and ear.”

Besides love, there is another subject H. Adams is rather reticent about: war. Although his brothers enlisted in the ranks of the North, H. Adams kept aloof from the fray and never showed any eagerness “to get educated in a fury of fire” (112)³. While in Great Britain, he sometimes toys with the idea of “going home into the army” (129) but soon dismisses the notion under the pretext that “he would never forgive

2. Relating to or consisting in the gratification of the senses or the indulgence of appetite ; sensory ; voluptuous.

3. On that score cf. P. Carmignani’s paper “Henry Adams et la guerre de Sécession”, accessible en ligne (Hal-Archive ouverte) sous la référence Hal-01741466.

himself for leaving his father and mother alone to be devoured by the wild beasts of the British amphitheater.” (129). He even deludes himself into believing that “army life ruined a young man less fatally than London society.” (195) Actually the years spent in London are essentially devoted to “social education” (134) (“Gradually he aspired to become a gentleman; just a member of society like the rest.”, p. 145) and to study the British mores, which made him familiar, as the whole tribe of Adamses had been for three generations, with “the impenetrable stupidity of the British mind.” (122)

Among the different kinds of education H. Adams “suffered” or experienced, one must mention a financial set-back that nearly ruined the millionaire that he was (he has a yearly income of \$ 50,000 whereas an ordinary worker made less than \$ 1,000) cf. p. 337: “As a starting-point for a new education...recommended.” However, everything turned out all right in the end and H. Adams did not need to cut down expenses.

I come now to what exerted the greatest influence on H. Adams, that “creature of teaching” (419) *i.e.* “diplomatic” and “political” education: he maintains, half in jest, half in earnest, that “the most costly tutors in the world were provided for him at public expense...by the British Government and by the American Government.” (149)

His family background and natural bent predisposed him to go in for politics and failing this, to take a deep interest in current politics more often – unfortunately – as an observer (witness the success of his annual review of politics published by *The New American Review* under the title of “The Session”) than as an active participant (with the possible exception of the unofficial position in the American Legation). However, H. Adams may have influenced some of the diplomatic moves of his friends in power. However that may be, H. Adams who knew twelve Presidents and twice as many Congressmen and senators, never held an official position and was greatly annoyed at the Government’s indifference (“Why had no President ever cared to employ him?”, p. 322) thus H. Adams was doomed to become simply, in his own words, “a stable-companion to statesmen, whether they liked it or not” (317) – three of his friends: Sumner, Lodge and Hay were prominent statesmen – and this association led him to several pessimistic conclusion I’ll quote in the lump:

- “The effect of power and publicity on all men is the aggravation of self” (147);
- “Every friend in power is a friend lost” (248);
- “The greatest politicians in history had seemed to regard men as counters” (148);
- “Truth in politics might be ignored as a delusion” (159)

Thus, as H. Adams puts it at the beginning of chapter XII: “Knowledge of human nature is the beginning and end of political education.” (180). His own political education reached a climax with the election of Grant. Adams, who defined himself as “a young man who had hitched his wagon to the star of reform” (271) had entertained fond hopes of a political New Deal after the Civil War had done away with the great national sin of slavery. He had assumed that the reborn nation would live up – morally, intellectually and politically – to the legacy of the war and was shocked to see that instead of the long-expected reforms, Grant’s election ushered in an age of scandals and corruption that M. Twain exposed in *The Gilded Age* (as opposed to the Golden Age). That period was characterized by a shameless exploitation of America’s natural and human resources and by the distortion of native American values: “The world, after 1865,” says Adams, “became a bankers’ world” (247) and he describes with biting irony the situation of “scores of men worth...equivalent to money” (348). So, *The Education* is also a record of H. Adams’s disillusionment with the victorious Union and with the administration of the man who symbolized victory: General Ulysses S. Grant. Unfortunately, “a great soldier [may] be a baby politician” (262) and as a result of Grant’s blunders and failings “no thought of effectual reform could revive for at least one generation.” (262) Grant was not fit for the task of reforming America: “The type was pre-intellectual, archaic and would have seemed so even to cave-dwellers.” (265) – “He had no right to exist. He should have been extinct for ages... The progress of evolution...upset Darwin.” (266) Adams is so disgusted that he gives up writing his “sessions” for the *N.A Review*; his “Session” of 1869-1870 proved to be his last study in current politics (280); the conclusion he infers from the current state of affairs is worth quoting in full; cf. p. 280: “The political dilemma...the most inefficient.”

Thus, “the process of political or financial or newspaper training” came to an end, but “the last lesson – the sum and term of education” was still in store for Adams. It came with the horrible death of his sister after a cab accident; tetanus set in and she died after ten days of torture; the loss was all the more painful as

it was heightened by the contrast between the harrowing spectacle of his sister's mortal agony and the rich and sensuous surroundings [...] glowing with the Italian joy of life." The episode is related on pp. 287-288. This death left a deep imprint on the author's mind; he declares on p. 288: "For the 1st time, the stage-scenery of the senses collapsed; the human mind felt itself stripped naked, vibrating in a void of shapeless energies..."

Thus, H. Adams had run the whole gamut of possible educations; the combination of what he calls "the most intimate personal tragedy, and the most terrific political convulsion he has ever known or was likely to know" (291) accounts for his decision, at the end of the period entitled "Chaos" to accept a professorship at Harvard. The 1st part of H. Adams' education is over and will not be resumed until twenty years later, and the judgment he passes on this period is final: "Religion, politics, statistics, travel had thus far led to nothing." H. Adams was back to base or square one.

THE EDUCATION: STRUCTURE AND STYLE

The Education is a double book in which the reader is thrust simultaneously outward into the reality of American history and inward to the issue of autobiographical reference. It is based on duality and underlain by metaphors of dividedness. Duality is also emphasized by the fact that *The Education* must be read as a sequel to *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* published in 1913. The two books are equivalent to landmarks or points of reference enabling Adams to survey or to chart the ground covered by Man between the 13th and 20th centuries. *Mont Saint Michel* is a "study of 13th century unity" and *The Education* "A Study of 20th-century Multiplicity", which accounts for the many facets of the book and its protean nature: it is part autobiography and history, part philosophy and scientific theory, but the versatility of the book parallels the multiplicity of the age it depicts; similarly, its digressions and omissions are a forceful reflection of the cultural confusion of the transition period between the 19th and 20th centuries. Form and contents are closely linked; Adams sates on p. 389 that: "The form is never arbitrary, but it is a sort of growth like crystallization, as any artist knows too well", and goes on to say that: "The result of a year's work depends more on what is struck out than on what is left in." The observation is perfectly applicable to *The Education* which can be described – like H. Adams' life – as a "broken arch" *i.e.* two halves separated by a 20-year gap. Such division is also borne out by what Adams writes on p. 235; his life is seen as "a very long, anxious, tempestuous, successful voyage, with another to follow, and a summer sea between." The summer sea refers to his married life, but those still waters were troubled by the suicide in 1885 of his wife Marian Hooper who killed herself by drinking potassium cyanide, a chemical used for developing films (she was an amateur photographer). H. Adams' book breaks in two at this point, thus showing in its visible sequence the principle of division underlying its composition. On the other side of that gap, 20 years later, Adams resumes his narrative without ever alluding to this intimate tragedy, but the reader cannot help wondering about Adams' degree of responsibility: the question will go unanswered.

It is worth noting however that even if Adams leaves out this episode, the two parts of *The Education* end in the same way *i.e.* with the death of someone the author loved dearly. The 1st part culminates in the death of Adams' sister (it was "the last lesson...the sum and term of the education"); the 2nd in that of his close friend, Hay, which was preceded by the death of King, another kindred spirit: "The three friends had begun life together; and the last of the three had no motive – no attraction – to carry it on after the others had gone." (505) However, one can distinguish other lines of demarcation within that diptych; cf. Hochfield:

"*The Education* is, or contains three things: a self, a critique of the age in which the author lived, and a theory of history. Naturally, the three are not distinct but dependent upon one another, part of a whole [...] *The Education* begins in intense self-scrutiny, gradually widening its range until about the 9th chapter and the year 1862. From then on, the personality of the hero and the events of his private life tend progressively to diminish in importance. His experience comes more and more to be a means of insight into the world about him. His attention is directed toward that world, and his his own self requires less explanation, his thought about the world widens in scope, seeking a final impersonal generalization. Chapters XXV to XXX strain toward this end, and Chapters XXXI to XXXIV cross into pure abstraction: history cut free from human dependency and become metaphysics."

If we combine all those clues, we can divide *The Education* into five different stages:

1) Pages 1-97: Adolescence;

- 2) Pages 98-207: Early manhood;
- 3) Pages 208-313: Waking up from one's illusions (Darwinism; Politics...);
- 4) Pages 314-402: A new departure;
- 5) Pages 402-505: The realm of metaphysics

The narrative is for the most part set in motion by the dialectics of success and failure; success referring naturally to other people's whereas failure only applies to Adams, "the champion failer of all" (Letter to W. James). This is the dominant theme of the book, but it is worth noting that in addition to exposing Adams as a failure, *The Education* exposes the failure of his society and century. *The Education* deserves being called, in the words of a critic, "a classic of disillusionment" and Adams "the self-appointed Hamlet of the new century"; H. Adams initiated the period of self-criticism through which the country has been passing since then. By focusing on failures rather than successes, experience rather than mere sentimentality, H. Adams was surprisingly modern.

The most paradoxical aspect of *The Education* is however that in the brilliance and intellectual daring of his metaphysical quest, Adams manages to convert failure into heroism; *The Education* is, to use Faulkner's phrase concerning *The Sound and The Fury*, "a splendid failure". *The Education* is much more than a cosmic blind alley, it is an enduring and invigorating work of art. It is also typically American, at least if one shares the opinion that "American literature thrives upon the conditions of failure" and also that "much American literature achieves its vitality by a conscientious labor to transform the mere state of failure into the artistic success of forms and pageants." *The Education* is a perfect illustration of this challenging theory.

If H. Adams, the "searcher of knowledge" (220) or education failed, H. Adams, the man, realized his full potential as an artist and a writer. One can even maintain that "art took precedence over autobiography in his personal narrative," all the more so as "the art of writing itself was a refuge for a misplaced person whose world could offer no active role."

Adams' concern for literary form and technique, his awareness of the difficulties involved in writing ("No one means all he says, and yet very few say all the mean, for words are slippery and thought is viscous." 451) show that he wished to work not primarily as historian or as biographer but as artist. *The Education* is a literary experiment in form in which the adoption of 3rd-person narrative turns the self into datum, a documentary or exemplary.

It would be tempting to consider style in the light of the manikin metaphor inaugurating the narrative as the garment or costume in which the author's thought is clad; this would be a serious mistake. Style is not a mere ornament, but "the man himself" according to Buffon's hackneyed definition; it is also, according to J. Starobinsky, "the act of an individual [...] the fashion in which any writer satisfies the conditions of the genre" and uses the margin of liberty left to him. We have already seen in way way Adams modified certain characteristics of the autobiographical genre so that at this stage I shall confine myself to Adams's idiosyncrasies.

Adams' style is dominated and shaped by his didactic aim and his reticence on personal matters so that the whole of *The Education* is characterized by a literary strategy of balance and division. The prose he uses is quite in keeping with the character of the New-Englanders whom Adams describes "as sane and steady men, well-balance, educated, and free from meanness" (101) Adams uses plain, concrete words and combines them in fairly short sentences where he practices what he preaches *i.e.* "to strike out every superfluous word" and "condense one's sentences" to the utmost; so, "the grammar is correct; the punctuation painstaking; the syntax disciplined." (Hume)

Spareness or even terseness are thus the features of Adams' style which, however, sometimes betrays a certain unnaturalness (c. the repeated use of "one" or "that" in some sentences and strikes the modern reader as being a bit too genteel or stilted. But Adams' prose is not always to be taken at its face value; one must take into account the "Janus-faced element" *i.e.* the use of irony or exaggeration to conceal certain emotions or unpleasant facts.

In the last analysis, *The Education* seems to be written in "the best-tradition of English International Prose" *i.e.* the literary medium characterizing such cosmopolitan authors as W. Irving or H. James. It is a language that does not evince any distinctively American traits; it is sober, refined and conventional, but it does not incorporate much of America. This is all the more striking if we compare *The Education* with

another novel published 30 years before: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) where one can hear the echoes of the true voice of America. With that novel, M. Twain made a literary medium of the American language *viz.* the idiom (or vernacular) spoken in the West or along the bank of the Mississippi (the greatest writing is always in touch with the human voice). In *The Education*, it is impossible to catch the accent of the American, and this is no doubt its most disappointing shortcoming. As a critic put it “The communication is dated from Washington, but it really hails from somewhere in the stars equidistant from London, Rome, Boston and Mont Saint Michel. It is beautiful, it is strong...but it forbids us to claim H. Adams.”

DE L'UNITE A LA MULTIPLICITE

The Education = une anti “*success story*” Pourquoi ? La réponse se trouve dans l'excellente introduction de D.W. Brogan : “*The story of one who failed because, trained to be at home in Franklin's world, he had to live in a world transformed by the new science and the new technology.*”

H. Adams est un homme qui s'est trouvé coincé entre deux époques et deux mondes : un qui n'en finissait pas de mourir et l'autre impuissant à naître (cf. “*two worlds: one dead and the other powerless to be born*” M. Arnold). H. Adams est un homme “*born out of his time*”, un anachronisme, un homme du XVIII^e siècle plongé dans le XX^e : dès la première page, il évoque cette inadéquation entre “*a 20th century career*” et “*associations so colonial – so troglodytic*” (3) ; de même p. 4 il écrit : “*What could become of such a child of the 17th and 18th centuries, when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the 20th ?*”

Ce 18^e siècle, Adams en a un vivant vestige sous les yeux : son grand-père, le Président John Quincy Adams : “*The end of this 1st or ancestral and Revolutionary, chapter...vanished.*” (20). H. Adams est totalement déterminé – condamné presque – par son nom, l'histoire de sa famille et le poids de son milieu social : “*Whatever was peculiar...18th century inheritance which he took with his name*” and “*Resistance to something...resistance.*” (7) En fait, comme il l'écrit plus loin, il s'agit de résistance au changement : “*the old Puritan nature rebelled against change.*” (26) De cet héritage familial, social et idéologique, Adams tire ses principes, ses idéaux et ses conceptions politiques. Ainsi, du Pouvoir : son exercice doit être pour Adams tempéré par les vertus civiques et morales. Le pouvoir politique reste soumis à l'éthique faute de quoi, ce n'est qu'un instrument au service d'une ambition personnelle et un facteur de corruption. D'où la violence de sa réaction devant la Présidence de Grant : “*Grant's administration wrecked my own life.*” (Lettre à un ami) car elle porte un coup fatal aux aspirations d'un idéaliste de la vieille école.

La démarche philosophique de H. Adams porte également la marque d'un temps révolu où les hommes de pensée s'efforçaient de trouver hors de l'homme – dans la société, la nature ou l'histoire – le fondement des valeurs morales. Donc, héritage, tradition et même éducation en un sens, tout conspire à renforcer chez lui le sentiment et l'illusion de la continuité : “*What had been would continue to be.*” (16) C'est la source de sa volonté de réconcilier des principes totalement opposés : “*Even at that early moment...party organization.*” (49), que ce soit, comme ici, dans le domaine politique ou dans celui de l'histoire, de la science ou de la philosophie.

La tragédie de H. Adams est, précisément, que son univers mental et social marqué par la stabilité, l'équilibre, la continuité va être bouleversé par l'irruption des temps modernes avec leur cortège d'énergies (électricité, atome), de théories (Marx, Comte, Darwin, Einstein) et de techniques (chemins de fer, voiture, avion, etc.) nouvelles. Cf. ce qu'il dit d'un de ses amis anglais : “*but he belonged to the generation of 1830...again.*” (206) et qu'il s'applique : “*Adams had been born with the railway system...and the world hurried on to its telephones, bicycles and electric trains...the bicycle.*” (330) Thème très bien illustré dans la littérature américaine et particulièrement bien étudié par Leo Marx dans *The Machine in the Garden* analysant l'irruption de la machine, héraut du Progrès, dans le monde paisible de la pastorale. Cf. : “*For him, alone, the old universe...Boston and Albany Railroad.*” Devant l'assaut de ces forces nouvelles, la société éclate, elle est “atomisée” : “*Society had no unity; one wandered about in it like a maggot in cheese.*” (197)

Adams localise très précisément le point de rupture :

“*In 1900, the continuity snapped.*”; “*The child born in 1900...multiple.*” (457)

“[1893-1900] *In these seven years man had translated himself into a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old.*” (381)

Le monde n'est plus unité mais multiplicité (“*the one had become several*”, 471) et ses cadres conceptuels éclatent sous l'effet de “*the metaphysical bomb called radium*” (452) Rappelons que 1905 – date de composition de *The Education*, voit aussi Einstein publier les prémices de sa théorie révolutionnaire. D'où le désarroi de H. Adams, qui se trouve “*floundering between worlds passed and worlds coming*” (83) et conclut avec nostalgie qu'il préférerait : “*his 18th century education when God...scientific universe.*” (458) L'Homme n'est plus l'enfant de l'humanisme, mais celui des énergies nouvelles : “*The new American...dynamo... parentage.*” (466) et “*The child of incalculable...nature.*” (496) et la société mesure ses progrès à l'aune de l'accroissement de la production industrielle : “*Society...agreed in measuring...coal-output.*” (490) et, parallèlement : “*the difficulties of education...coal-output.*” (498) Notre humaniste du 18^e siècle va cependant, conformément à sa théorie de l'éducation, réagir. Comment ? Tout naturellement, en essayant de comprendre ce qui lui arrive. C'est l'étude de cet effort de compréhension, d'analyse et de théorisation (“*theoria*” est issu de “*theorein*”: contempler, observer) que nous allons aborder.

H. ADAMS, L'ARPEUTEUR/LE GEOMETRE DE L'HISTOIRE

Adams est un intellectuel doublé d'un historien ; à défaut de participer aux grands mouvements de pensée qui bouleversent son siècle, il va s'efforcer de les comprendre. Son apprentissage du métier d'historien se situe immédiatement après le sentiment d'impuissance, d'échec et de désarroi que lui inspire l'étude attentive du monde de la diplomatie et de la politique. À ce stade de son itinéraire intellectuel, Adams est dominé par deux grandes ambitions : trouver le sens de l'histoire (vers quelle fin tend l'histoire?) et dégager l'unité de l'expérience humaine, unité dont l'existence est évidemment hypothétique, mais c'est une hypothèse qu'il doit confronter aux faits, aux données de l'histoire.

Cette quête de l'Unité est un thème fondamental de *The Education* ; il apparaît dès la préface où Adams évoque le renversement de situations qui s'est opéré par rapport au prestigieux modèle et prédécesseur qu'il invoque : St Augustin : “*St Augustine...from multiplicity to unity...while he...from unity to multiplicity.*” Observation capitale, qui, d'entrée de jeu, souligne l'originalité et la nature Donquichottesque de son entreprise. St Augustin a pu ramener, résorber le multiple dans l'Unique, c'est-à-dire Dieu ; Adams doit, à partir de l'Unité posée par la pensée philosophique ou scientifique du 18^e siècle absorber, intégrer les mille et une innovations du 20^e siècle qui ruine à jamais tous les concepts et instruments d'analyse hérités des siècles précédents.

Le paradoxe et l'ironie de la situation de H. Adams est que, “*the weary Titan of Unity*” (455) est constamment confronté, dans l'histoire comme dans la science, à des ruptures, à des solutions de continuité qui rendent caduque toute explication fondée sur des principes d'unité et de continuité. Adams, à un certain moment, pense avoir trouvé dans le Darwinisme la théorie qu'il recherchait, mais il se rend vite compte que certains phénomènes échappent aux schémas d'explication proposés par le Darwinisme : nous avons déjà évoqué l'exemple, présenté sur le mode humoristique, de la Présidence de Grant (266), cette “*relic of the 18th century*”, mal adaptée aux problèmes du 20^e siècle. Mais la géologie présente l'énigme inexplicable des glaciations – catastrophes ruinant toute idée d'uniformité géologique (227) – la paléontologie celle de la *Terebratula* qui “*appeared to be identical from the beginning to the end of geological time*” (228) – alors que le poisson appelé *Pteraspis* semble surgir *ex nihilo* (229). Ces exemples sont déjà troublants et difficilement conciliables comme le note Adams : “*this was altogether too much uniformity and much too little selection.*” (228) Il revient d'ailleurs à la charge deux pages plus loin à propos de *Pteraspis*, ce cousin de l'esturgeon : “*Neither vertebra...All he could prove was change.*” (230)

L'histoire également lui fournit d'autres exemples inexplicables ; le cas sur lequel il revient le plus souvent est celui de la chute de l'empire romain (“*here was a breach of continuity, a rupture in historical sequence*” 340), catastrophe sur laquelle, à l'instar de son modèle, l'historien Gibbon, il ne cesse de réfléchir quand il médite sur les marches de l'église *Santa Maria di Ara Cæli*, comme Gibbon avant lui (historien anglais [1737-1794] qui visite Rome en 1764 et rédige *Histoire du déclin et de la chute de l'Empire romain* où il soutient que le triomphe de l'Église est lié au déclin de l'Empire romain) : cf. : “*the convulsion of 310 when the Civitas Dei...Civitas Romae.*” (452 et surtout 477) ; “*Rome could not be fitted...flat contradiction.*” (91) ; “*not an inch...the Fall...the charm remained intact.*” (91) De l'étude de tous ces exemples et contre-

exemples, H. Adams conclut ironiquement que : *“he was conscious that, in geology...did not select.”* (231) Adams perd foi en Darwin ; a-t-il d’ailleurs été sérieusement darwiniste ? On peut en douter car lui-même se qualifie de *“Darwinist for fun”*. Mais ce détour par Darwin lui permet de voir, comme il l’écrit lui-même, que *“what attracted his mind change...what he valued most was Motion.”* (231) Il va donc se tourner vers l’histoire, qui lui offre un nouveau champ d’investigation. C’est à ce stade qu’il nous faut évoquer la visite de Chartres et du Mont Saint Michel, qui lui ouvrent de nouvelles perspectives et enchantent littéralement le médiéviste de Harvard : *“Adams drifted back to Washington with a new sense of history.”* (355)

Pour mesurer le mouvement et le changement, Adams a besoin de points de repère, d’où les références nombreuses à la triangulation, à la trigonométrie ou à la géodésie (cf. 369 ou 423) qui reprennent d’ailleurs l’image géométrique du *“manikin”* (cf. Preface : *“as any other geometrical figure...the study of relation.”*) Rappel au passage de l’importance de cette notion de mise en relation, qui est au centre même de la théorie de l’éducation chez Adams, éducation qui doit lui permettre précisément de comprendre les liens sous-jacents unissant en profondeur des phénomènes apparemment sans rapports. De même, Adams insiste toujours sur ce qu’il appelle *“relation of sequence”*, car il refuse d’admettre l’anarchie liée à l’effet du hasard. Il ambitionne de trouver *“a historical formula that should satisfy the conditions of stellar universe.”* (376)

Le 1^{er} point qu’il va déterminer pour opérer cette triangulation de l’histoire, c’est le 13^e siècle. Pourquoi ? Le choix n’est pas arbitraire ; il résulte du choc produit par le spectacle de Chartres et du Mont Saint-Michel, de la soudaine prise de conscience que ces cathédrales témoignent d’une situation exceptionnelle dans l’histoire occidentale ; il s’agit du *“point of history when man held the highest idea of himself as a unit in a unified universe...Thereupon he sailed for home.”* (435) Passage capital, qui expose la démarche et la théorie de H. Adams.

Le 2nd point sera le 20^e siècle marqué, lui, par l’irruption du multiple ; grâce à ces deux repères, H. Adams peut constater que : *“The movement from unity into multiplicity, between 1200 and 1900 was unbroken in sequence...a new social mind.”* (498) Tel était effectivement l’objectif de l’éducation vainement recherchée par H. Adams : forger un nouvel esprit capable d’intégrer et de dominer cette incroyable multiplicité. Il faut cependant remarquer qu’à ce stade, Adams débouche sur un constat plutôt que sur une explication lui permettant de comprendre le problème de la dynamique de la destinée humaine. Pour trouver cette explication, Adams va se tourner vers la science et se faire l’historien des forces de la Nature.

L’HISTORIEN DES FORCES DE LA NATURE

Partant du constat que *“the old formulas had failed, and a new one had to be made”* (472), H. Adams va se mettre en quête de ce qu’il appelle dans la même phrase *“a spool on which to wind the thread of history without breaking it.”* Il définit l’histoire comme *“a mere instrument of measure, a barometer, pedometer, radiometer [...] restricted to the measurement of thought-motion.”* (456) Comme la précédente, cette nouvelle étape/phase de la pensée philosophique de H. Adams est liée à une observation : *“the great mechanical energies – coal, iron, steam – [have] a distinct superiority in power over the old industrial elements – agriculture, handwork and learning”* (238) et à deux lieux : la Grande Exposition de Chicago et celle de Saint-Louis (466) qui lui révèlent l’univers de la technologie moderne (*“he found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900 his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new”*, 382) et lui semblent poser la question fondamentale qui agite son esprit : *“Chicago asked in 1893 for the first time the question whether the American people knew where they were driving.”* (343)

À partir de là, va commencer ce que H. Adams appelle *“a new exploration along the shores of Multiplicity and Complexity”* (448), entreprise placée sous le double signe de la Vierge et de la Dynamo. Le rapprochement peut sembler sacrilège, mais aux yeux de H. Adams, il traduit une vérité de l’histoire. Pour comprendre cette curieuse association, il faut revenir aux réflexions qu’inspire à Adams l’étude du Moyen-Âge et de ces vitrines de la technologie de l’époque que sont aussi, d’une certaine manière, les cathédrales (cf. p. 468 à propos de Coutances). Ces trésors d’ingéniosité et de savoir-faire que sont les grandes cathédrales n’ont pu être édifiées que sous l’action d’une force, d’une énergie quasi miraculeuse cimentant, unifiant des milliers d’énergies disparates et individuelles en une grande entreprise commune, en un grand

dessein collectif. Cette énergie H. Adams en voit l'incarnation dans la Vierge, l'inspiratrice des grands bâtisseurs : *"symbol or energy the Virgin...conversions"* (388).

Le Vierge est *"a channel of force"* (387) mais Adams ne limite pas cette force à son seul aspect spirituel ; il en élargit la portée et y intègre l'énergie sexuelle, la fécondité ; ainsi le symbole de la Vierge combine pour lui deux figures féminines – Marie et Vénus – la Mère et l'Amante : *"Diana : She was goddess because of her force ; she was the animated dynamo ; she was reproduction ; the greatest and most mystreious of all energies."* (384). De Marie à Vénus, H. Adams en arrive à la Femme ; il évoque *"the force of the female energy"* (388) et se lance dans une passionnante comparaison entre la France, l'Europe en général, terre d'élection du culte marial, et l'Amérique puritaine, fondée précisément sur le rejet de ce que les Américains appellent *"mariolatry"*, cf. : *"The Woman had once been supreme...sex was strength"* (384) et *"An American Virgin would never dare command ; an American Venus would never dare exist."* (385)

En revanche, *"the force of the Virgin was still felt at Lourdes and seemed to be as potent as X-rays"* (383) Et c'est cette même force qui attire H. Adams dans son pèlerinage d'une cathédrale à une autre (*"For him the Virgin...the formula"*, 469). Cette assimilation ou parenté entre la force qu'irradie la Vierge et celle qui émane de la dynamo permet à H. Adams de passer de l'une à l'autre (*"He turned from the Virgin to the Dynamo..."* 384). Le parallèle est établi à la page 380 : *"...but to Adams the dynamo...Christians felt at the Cross [...] Before the end, one began to pray to it."* (380). Adams va plus loin encore puisqu'il affirme que les rayons X sont *"the revelation of mysterious energy like that of the Cross ; they were what in terms of mediaeval science, were called immediate modes of the divine substance."* (383) et que la révolution technologique et scientifique de 1900 est comparable à celle de l'an 310 quand l'Empereur Constantin embrassa la foi chrétienne (p. 383)

La dynamo représente ainsi une nouvelle phase de l'histoire de l'humanité : *"they were new, they gave to history a new phase."* (342) La précédente, marquée par des forces moins mystérieuses (eau, chaleur, vapeur) a atteint son apogée avec *"the ocean steamer [...] the nearest of man's products to a unity"* (342). L'électricité avec les aimants, les dynamos, etc. inaugure *"an electro-magnetic civilization"* (412) qui verra l'irruption, l'explosion de nouvelles forces anarchiques (381).

Finalement, par opposition à la Vierge, principe d'harmonie, de cohésion et d'amour, la dynamo symbolise l'absence d'unité dans le foisonnement d'énergies. La Vierge est le symbole des vertus et des valeurs proprement humaines et de la capacité qu'a l'homme de se transcender ; la dynamo représente, à terme, la déshumanisation de notre société dominée par des forces qu'elle saura employer sans pour autant les maîtriser.

De cette incursion dans le domaine de l'énergie et de la science, H. Adams va rapporter deux choses : une théorie dynamique de l'éducation et une théorie dynamique de l'histoire.

UNE THEORIE DYNAMIQUE DE L'EDUCATION & DE L'HISTOIRE

H. Adams perçoit l'univers comme un champ de forces s'attirant et se repoussant. L'homme a, dit-il, donné à la plus forte d'entre elles le nom de divine (*"To the highest attractive energy, man gave the name divine and for its control he invented the science called religion"* 476). L'autre science, non-métaphysique, s'occupe des autres formes d'énergie. H. Adams va tirer de ces prémisses un certain nombre de conclusions qu'il va rassembler dans sa théorie de l'éducation dont je rappellerai les grands principes :

– l'homme est lui-même défini comme *"a certain form of energy"* (Preface) et *"a feeble atom or molecule"* (474). En tant que tel, il est, selon Adams, soumis aux lois de la gravitation et de l'attraction que Newton a formulées (Newton est dit être *"the starting-point"*, 376-77) ;

– *"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."* (478).

En conséquence, *"man [...] is attracted ; he suffers education or growth..."* (476) ; cf. également la force métaphysique qui pousse H. Adams à visiter les cathédrales de France.

Dans la logique de sa conception de l'éducation, Adams va proposer une théorie dynamique de l'histoire dont le moteur n'est autre qu'un processus d'attraction ou de répulsion entre des forces antagonistes : *"it defines Progress as the development and economy of Forces."* (474) C'est tout d'abord l'action des forces naturelles qui modèlent l'esprit humain puis interviennent les forces surnaturelles, qui

accroissent les facultés d'analyse et de synthèse – disons d'abstraction – de l'esprit et favorisent l'éclosion de la technique, de la science et de la métaphysique.

Adams fait remarquer cependant que dans le domaine des forces physiques, les progrès ont pendant longtemps (jusqu'en 1500 cf. 484) surtout consisté "*in economies of energy rather than its development*" ou l'art de gérer, d'utiliser. À partir de 1500, se produit une brutale accélération déjà mise en branle par l'invention de la boussole et de la poudre à canon (482). Bacon renverse l'approche traditionnelle qui avait cours jusqu'à lui : "*he urged society to lay aside the idea of evolving the universe from a thought, and to try evolving thought from the universe*" [484] ; "*The imagination must be given not wings but weights*" ; le monde devient champ d'observation et d'expérimentation, non de spéculation d'où l'usage du télescope, du microscope, de l'imprimerie, etc. (485) qui sont autant d'éducateurs nouveaux instruisant l'homme, modifiant son approche des phénomènes et modelant son esprit. Puis à partir de 1900, c'est l'apparition de forces nouvelles (magnétisme, radium, etc.) devant lesquelles "*the man of science stood at first as bewildered and helpless, as in the 4th century a priest of Isis before the Cross of Christ*" (487)

Dans le domaine des forces spirituelles, H. Adams met en lumière l'affrontement de diverses religions. Il fait remarquer, également, qu'une longue période d'équilibre est rompue quand le Christianisme, la force de la Croix, remplace dans l'Empire romain celle des divinités païennes : "*the empire, which had established unity on earth...to economize the gods.*" (478) Mais la conversion au Christianisme marque aussi le commencement de la fin pour l'Empire – scandale sur lequel Adams, l'historien, bute toujours (cf. 477). L'Empire, à l'apogée de sa puissance est miné par la contradiction entre "*the economic needs of a violently centralizing society*" et l'énergie sur laquelle s'est établie sa puissance : l'esclavage.

L'Empire adopte la Croix "*because, in its system of physics, the Cross had absorbed all the old occult or fetish-power*" (479) ; la *Civitas Dei* prend la place de la *Civitas Romae*. Plus tard, ce sera la partition de l'Empire et la lutte de la Croix et du Croissant (482). Mais l'attraction de la Croix inspire encore de grandes entreprises que H. Adams passe en revue (cf. 483) : Gutenberg et la Bible ; Colomb et l'Amérique ; la Saga des Puritains en Amérique ("*to found a Civitas Dei in State Street*") ; les grands astronomes, dont les découvertes ruinent l'édifice de la science antique, mais qui "*made a point of magnifying God through his works*" (484), etc. cependant, arrive le moment fatal où l'accumulation des forces et énergies nouvelles finit par s'opposer à la Foi et entre en conflit avec la Croix : "*Very slowly...remain the same.*" (485) C'est le divorce entre la science et la religion, qui ne peuvent plus, comme l'écrit Adams, "*go hand in hand.*"

Ainsi H. Adams découvre – ou découpe dans l'histoire – 4 phases successives qui seraient : *the city of man* – *the city of God* – *the forces of Nature* – *the occult forces of Nature* ; quatre âges différents qui voient l'homme placer sa foi dans quatre forces :

- **3000 BC**→**AD 300** : *the city of man* : *belief in the supreme authority of an aorganized human society* ;
- **400**→**1400** : *faith in the authority of the City of God* : *twin symbols Virgin/Cross* ;
- **1400**→**1800** : *ultimate authority in the forces of nature* ; *Bacon's Novum Organum is a gospel of this faith* ;
- **1800-1900** : *occult forces* : *electricity, radioactivity, etc. Social transformations are comparable to the phases of matter in the change from a solid to a liquid.*

Il se produit, bien sûr, une accélération constante entre le premier âge et le quatrième.

SCIENCE & RELIGION

L'évolution excessivement rapide des techniques, l'irruption de forces insoupçonnées et redoutables posent à Adams une série d'interrogations (*The Education* est une quête – et une enquête – en vue de trouver les réponses) et suscitent de profondes inquiétudes car il constate que ces formidables progrès scientifiques et technologiques ne s'accompagnent pas de progrès identiques dans le domaine de la morale, de la politique et de la vie en société. Si l'évolution est sensible dans le développement des pouvoirs de l'esprit (cf. 487), elle est plus que douteuse dans le développement de la conscience. *The Education* est en partie une sorte de dissertation sur le thème bien connu de « Science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme » (Montaigne). Il semblerait d'ailleurs que le remède à cet état de fait soit un retour aux vertus d'amour, de compréhension, de

compassion qu'incarne justement la Vierge (cf. la prière d'Adams). Mais l'évolution de la connaissance scientifique a également une autre conséquence néfaste : elle ruine toute conception du monde fondée sur l'unité. C'est là le cœur du problème que pose l'histoire de l'esprit humain ; cf. p. 429 où s'éclaire l'opposition entre Religion et Science : "*Modern science offered not a vestige of proof...modern science guaranteed no unity.*" vs. (430) : "*The Church alone had asserted unity with conviction.*"

On est passé de l'univers à ce que H. Adams appelle "*the new multiverse*" (458), de l'unité et de la simplicité, à la multiplicité et à la complexité, en un mot : au Chaos. D'où la paradoxe sur lequel H. Adams ironise : l'homme cherche éperdument une unité et un ordre que sa science ne cesse de nier et de ruiner : "*In 1900 they were...disproved.*" La conclusion s'impose : "*In plain words, Chaos was the law of nature ; Order was the dream of man.*" (495)

La réflexion d'Adams prend à ce stade une tournure métaphysique quand il s'interroge sur ce qui pousse l'homme à postuler un ordre et une unité dans l'univers et Adams aboutit à des observations qui sont très proches de celles de la science contemporaine concernant l'interdépendance existant entre l'observateur et l'objet observé : une particule n'aurait pas de réalité indépendante de son observation. De plus, l'homme projette sur le réel qu'il étudie un éclairage temporel, causal et substantiel qui serait l'attribut spécifique de sa sensibilité. Ainsi, "*Order and reason...solely associated with the mind of man.*" (450 : ordre et unité sont une espèce d'émanation de l'esprit humain, une exigence intérieure, intellectuelle que nous projetons sur l'univers qui nous entoure : "*The universe that had formed him took shape in his mind as a reflection of his own unity, containing all forces except himself.*" (475) Pour illustrer cette dialectique, H. Adams recourt à l'image de l'huître qui secrète sa perle comme l'esprit secrète son rêve d'ordre et d'unité : "*As history unveiled itself...reason.*" (458). Malheureusement, force nous est de reconnaître que "*Except as reflected in himself, man has no reason for assuming unity in the universe, or an ultimate substance, or a prime-motor.*" (484) On assiste, au contraire, à "*the multiplicity of unity*" (398), multiplicité et complexité qu'il paraît vain d'espérer résorber comme en témoigne H. Poincaré⁴, le grand mathématicien qu'Adams cite à la page 455 : "*Doubtless if our means...the last term.*"

La même dialectique est à l'œuvre entre Unité et Multiplicité : "*The two things were the same*" (431) et l'on ne s'étonnera pas, dans ces conditions, de voir Adams proclamer : "*in the last analysis, order and anarchy were one, but that unity was chaos.*" (406) et que : "*Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit*" (249) Le mathématicien contemporain, I. Ekeland, confirme dans son essai *Le Calcul, l'imprévu* que : « L'ordre et le chaos sont inséparables et toujours présents ensemble que ce soit en mécanique céleste ou dans les jeux de nombres. » Finalement : "*Chaos is all that science can logically assert of the supersensuous [...] The kinetic theory of gas is an assertion of ultimate Chaos.*" (451) Cette théorie semble constituer le terme et la conclusion logique de la quête et de la réflexion de H. Adams : "*Like most of his generation...motion.*" (431) "*the only escape is Death*" (même page). Adams finit par voir l'histoire (au sens le plus large) "*as a record of dispersal of energy*" ce qu'illustre la notion d'entropie⁵ (ou 2^e principe de la thermodynamique), qui sous-tend sa philosophie : "*the historian must define his profession the science of human degradation.*"

4. Cf. ce qu'écrit H. Poincaré dans *La Science et l'hypothèse*, pp. 162-64 : « Si nous étudions l'histoire de la science, nous voyons se produire deux phénomènes pour ainsi dire inverses : tantôt c'est la **simplicité** qui se cache sous des **apparences complexes**, tantôt c'est au contraire la **simplicité qui est apparente et qui dissimule des réalités extrêmement compliquées** [...] Sans doute si nos moyens d'investigation devenaient de plus en plus pénétrants, nous découvririons le simple sous le complexe, puis le complexe sous le simple, puis de nouveau le simple sous le complexe, et ainsi de suite, sans que nous puissions prévoir quel sera le dernier terme. » (Je souligne)

5. En fait, le second principe de la thermodynamique fait moins référence à la dispersion de l'énergie qu'à sa dégradation inéluctable au sein d'un système isolé ; l'entropie est la quantité thermodynamique qui mesure le niveau de dégradation de l'énergie d'un système. L'accroissement de l'entropie mesure l'accroissement du désordre : deux enceintes à des températures différentes mises en communication l'une avec l'autre verront la différence de température entre molécules chaudes et froides s'annuler et s'accompagner de l'accroissement du désordre : les molécules lentes et rapides, d'abord séparées, se mélangent et l'énergie totale du système se répartit statistiquement entre toutes ; en outre, les deux enceintes, au départ discernables, deviennent équivalentes (J. Monod). Dans la fiction américaine, la notion d'entropie a trouvé une traduction littéraire dans l'œuvre de Thomas Pynchon, notamment *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Cette fin pessimiste n'est nullement certaine ; d'ailleurs, l'angoisse qu'engendre ce second principe de la thermodynamique n'empêche pas Henry Adams de terminer son récit sur une note d'optimiste puisqu'il veut croire qu'un jour, peut-être, le monde aura changé : "*Perhaps some day – say 1938, their centenary –...they [the three friends that had begun life together] would find a world that sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shudder.*"

Manque de chance – et de clairvoyance –, la date retenue précède d'un an à peine le déclenchement de l'effroyable et sanglant chaos de la seconde guerre mondiale.

Finalement, les incursions de Henry Adams dans le domaine de l'histoire et de la science sont aussi audacieuses qu'abstruses ; il se définit d'ailleurs comme un aimable amateur adoptant parfois telle ou telle approche ou pose "for fun", aussi tout n'est peut-être pas à prendre au pied de la lettre. Le lecteur moyen ne peut guère se prononcer sur la validité de ses hypothèses et de ses conclusions et d'ailleurs, tel n'est pas notre propos. Je rappellerai que nous avons affaire à une œuvre littéraire et non à un traité scientifique et que le premier mérite de l'auteur est d'avoir justement, comme le résume un critique : "*turned scientific ideas into universal metaphors touched with the pathos of his personal life.*"

Il n'en reste pas moins que si la quête de Henry Adams échoue, elle est cependant, sauvée du naufrage total par sa dimension héroïque et son exemplarité. En montrant que le seul et unique principe ou fil conducteur qui se dégage de l'histoire est l'exigence et la recherche de l'Absolu, Henry Adams relève un des défis les plus nobles de l'esprit humain que la philosophe R. Bacon a formulé en ces termes : "*One must not try to know the unknowable, though one [is] quite powerless to ignore it.*" (428). Cf. également p. 12 : "*From the cradle to the grave this problem of running order through chaos....politics and economy.*"

THEMES, IMAGES & SYMBOLES DANS *THE EDUCATION*

"*Metaphor and simile have long been man's way of applying spurs to the faltering horse of language.*" (A critic)

Dualité

Une des notions fondamentales sous-tendant thèmes, images et symboles est celle de la "dualité". C'est elle qui gouverne la vision du monde de Henry Adams, cf. son poème "*Budha & Brahma*" :

*...we who cannot fly the world, must seek
To live two separate lives ; one in the world
Which we must ever seem to treat as real ;
The other in ourselves, behind a veil
Not to be raised without disturbing both⁶.*

Tel est bien le problème débattu dans *The Education* i.e. la difficulté de vivre à une époque-charnière entre deux mondes "*one dead...the other powerless to be born.*" D'où, également, l'opposition entre deux périodes : le 13^e s. et le 20^e s.

Adams est très tôt conscient du fait que "*Life was a double thing*" (9) et la relation de ses années de jeunesse est dominée par cette évidence. Elle se partage entre deux époques – le 18^e et 19/20^e siècles et, comme l'enfance de Proust, elle est tiraillée entre deux côtés : celui de Quincy et celui de Boston qui représentent deux mondes totalement opposés : Boston est associé à l'hiver, au confinement, à l'école, à la discipline, à la contrainte, à la loi, à la famille maternelle (Brooks), etc. ; Quincy, qui n'est séparé de Boston que par 7 miles, est associé à l'été, à la diversité, à la liberté, à la sensualité, au naturel, à la famille

6. Il est un autre écrivain américain qui s'est confronté au même problème – R. W. Emerson, pour qui "*the world was a series of balanced antagonisms*" ; il a défini sa tragédie personnelle comme étant liée au fait que : "*while I was a believer in Unity, a seer of Unity, I yet beheld two*". Une des fonctions de son plaidoyer dans le célèbre essai "*Nature*" était de résoudre – et donc de "transcender" – de telles contradictions en commençant par la plus radicale : celle qui oppose l'Homme à la Nature.

paternelle Adams ; Boston, c'est la ville avec son confort, ses attraits, sa culture et son héritage britannique ; Quincy, c'est la campagne, univers rustique et simple aux vertus américaines ; c'est pour cela que "*Boston looked down on Quincy*" (10), cf. : "*Town was restraint.... Country...knowing it.*" (8) et p. 9 : "*Though Quincy was but two hours' walk...a different world.*"

Cette opposition spatiale et temporelle est redoublée et soulignée par celle des saisons : "*Summer.... Winter was school*" et "*Winter and Summer, town and country, law and liberty were hostile...*" (9) La dualité parcourt tout l'ouvrage ; rien n'y échappe, citons, à titre d'exemple, l'opposition entre passé et présent ; échec/succès ; *education/mis-education* ; *the ego/the garment* ; continuité/solution de continuité ; vie/mort ; Vierge/Dynamo ; Unité/Multiplicité ; Saint-Michel (église masculine)/Chartres (église féminine), etc. Elle sous-tend la structure du livre (deux parties éparées par 20 ans de silence) et anime la quête qu'il retrace (ordre/chaos ; progrès/entropie, etc.). Un remarquable exemple de la dualité qui est au cœur de la vie et de l'expérience : la relation de la visite effectuée par H. Adams à *Mount Vernon*, la demeure de G. Washington, p. 47 : "*Mr. Adams took the boy....George Washington.*" Première leçon sur une certaine forme de réalisme politique et de complexité morale...

Jeux, cartes, course, ligne de touche

Autre thème ou image fondamentale mise en œuvre dès le début de *The Education* ; la vie comme jeu, cf. p. 4 : "*Had he been consulted...his excellent hand.*" Cette métaphore explique à elle seule la vie de H. Adams : ne pouvant changer les règles du jeu (échec du réformiste), ne pouvant non plus, malgré qu'il en ait, y prendre une part active, H. Adams va se mettre sur la touche ("*on the sidelines*"), devenir l'observateur d'une partie qui se joue sans lui : "*As it happened...watching the errors of the players.*" (4) cf. également p. 316, l'image du concurrent qui quitte la course : "*he was or thought he was...he quitted the race-course.*" Le choix d'un rôle passif, celui de l'observateur et du commentateur, se traduit par l'utilisation d'un certain nombre d'images ayant trait aux fenêtres et vitraux ; cf. le critique K. MacLean : "*Chartres is all windows Adams said. And so is The Education. It is proper to regard its sharply bright imaginative moments as psychological windows enclosing the soul, running across a fairly grey mental grisaille.*" D'où, également, l'importance de la lumière, de la couleur auxquelles Adams est encore plus sensibilisé par son ami John La Farge, qui était à la fois peintre et tailleur de verre ; cf. un de ses souvenirs p. 5 : "*he knew only the color of yellow...strong sunlight.*" Puis, plus tard, toute une série d'illuminations : découverte de théories scientifiques ou visites de paysages, cathédrales, expositions, etc.

C'est encore l'image de la fenêtre qui revient sous la plume d'Adams lorsqu'il définit un aspect essentiel de sa personnalité, à savoir : "*the mania for handling all the sides of every question, looking into every window, and opening every door...*" (232) Et parmi les diverses "*doors of escape*" qu'il recherchera pour fuir une réalité américaine trop décevante, l'Europe sera la principale (cf. p. 61)⁷. Ainsi, l'héritage familial, le caractère et l'éducation ont contribué à faire de H. Adams un exilé volontaire⁸, "un émigré de l'intérieur", qui s'est cependant de plus en plus tourné vers l'Europe où s'était, selon lui, affirmée à une époque, désormais révolue, une inébranlable foi dans l'unité et l'harmonie.

Autre refuge : l'Art. La pente naturelle du roman américain serait, selon le critique R. Chase⁹, d'exploiter, de mettre à nu les contradictions et les discordances de la culture qui le produit : "*Many of the best American novels achieve their very being, their energy, their form, from the perception and acceptance not of unities but of radical disunities.*" Auquel, le critique français M. Zéraffa fait, en quelque sorte, écho quand il affirme que « *le rôle de l'artiste est de faire voir le multiple et non pas d'imposer l'unité.* » Opinion aussi intéressante que discutable : un autre critique, L. Goldmann, par exemple, soutient dans une de ses études que : « *la fonction la plus importante de la création littéraire et artistique est d'apporter sur le plan*

7. Sur ce point précis, cf. l'étude de P. Carmignani, "*De l'art de s'occidenter par le Sud*" (Hal-01736448) et "*Voyages en Méditerranée*" (cel-01761049) accessibles sur Hal-archivage ouverte.

8. Sur les notions d'exil et d'asile cf. P. Carmignani, "*Entre exil et asile : les écrivains 'linguistiquement délogés'*" (Hal-01716909).

9. *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. Baltimore (Md), The John Hopkins University Press, 1980.

*imaginaire cette cohérence dont les hommes sont frustrés dans la vie réelle*¹⁰. » En réalité, l'un n'exclut pas l'autre...

Images animales et florales

Il faut souligner l'importance considérable des images tirées du règne animal ; on en compte près d'une centaine, à tel point qu'un critique a pu parler des « quatre ménageries de Henry Adams ». *The Education* tient donc de la visite au zoo ! Nous ne les passerons pas toutes en revue :

- “*As far as he had a function in life, it was a stable-companion to statesmen.*”
- Après sa démission de Harvard : “*He went home as a horse goes back to his stable, because he knew nowhere else to go.*”
- Vivre à Washington, c'est, dit-il, “*like walking blindfold among the beasts of the jungle.*”

Mais l'image qui retiendra notre attention, c'est celle de l'araignée au milieu de sa toile, métaphore de l'homme tissant la toile de ses spéculations métaphysiques et captant les influences du monde qui l'entoure : “*For convenience as an image...the meshes of its trap.*” (474) et p. 209 : “*His identity, if one could call...with a new attachment.*” De même, dans une lettre, il écrit : “*I have grown so used to playing the spider, and squatting in silence in the middle of this Washington web and I have seen many flies and other insects caught and devoured in its meshes that I have now a little the sense of being a sort of ugly, bloated...highly*

Venomous hairy tarantula.”

La politique fournit évidemment son lot habituel d'images de requins et de vautours.

Quant aux images florales, je citerai surtout, celle, célèbre, qui compare Henry Adams à un « bégonia », plante décorative et peu utile d'après l'auteur de la comparaison, cf. p. 292.

On peut évoquer d'autres images ayant trait à l'atome/molécule ; routes/chemins ; géodésie et mannequin et je terminerai cette rapide revue par celle qui résume la vie de Henry Adams *i.e.* l'image de la Dérive/*Drift*, qui rappelle la passivité que demande, dans un premier temps, le processus qu'Adams appelle éducation, c'est-à-dire l'ouverture ou la soumission aux forces qui agitent le monde, suivie ensuite de l'action volontaire, réfléchi sur ces mêmes forces pour en infléchir le cours. Dérive = voyages, bohème, ouverture à l'expérience jusqu'au moment de la découverte, réaction, cf. “*After so many years of effort...progress oceanwards.*” Conclusion de Pascal : “*I have often said that all the troubles of man come from his not knowing how to sit still.*” (427)

10. L. Goldmann, *Marxisme et sciences humaines*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, 114.