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A Manifesto for Manikins

The Education of Henry Adams as a Meta-Autobiography

Takayuki Tatsumi

As was the case with his great-grandfather and second American President John Adams, the youngest of the Boston Brahmins Henry Adams's historical sensibility also seems strangely out of joint. While John Adams's anti-British manifesto "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law" (1765), written in the pre-Revolutionary age, went so far as to vindicate American Puritans by republicanizing them as typical Classicists, his great-grandson's autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907-18), coinciding with the heyday of American Naturalist literature, reread the most Mariolatrical implication into the most technological function of the Dynamo he had just seen at the Paris Exposition in 1900, the very year that saw the publication of Theodore Dreiser's Naturalist magnum opus *Sister Carrie*.

At a first glance, John Adams's republican attack on feudal Medievalism sounds incompatible with Henry Adams's seemingly nostalgic reappraisal of hardcore Medievalism. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that, unsuccessful though he was as a politician, Henry Adams atavistically shares with his grandfather the highly ironical sense of anachronism, with which he was able to criticize and decontextualize the political consensus in his time, and to witness the paradigm shift storming the turn of the century. The Adams family, be it republican or medievalist, could well be characterized by their aristocratic heritage

contradictory to American democracy. And yet, it is through this anachronism that they could develop the critical consciousness of the contemporary discourses they lived in. The aim of the paper is to reexamine the way the Adamsian creative anachronism gives an insight into the essence of the twentieth century, as well as into sexual complexity deeply hidden within historical textuality.

I. The Limits of American Medievalism

British America, from its beginning, has been obsessed with a spectre called medievalism. For example, the infamous Salem witchhunt in 1692 could not have taken place without the dominance of medievalistic beliefs and conventions. As R. C. De Prospro pointed out, to critics like V.L. Parrington, purveyors of medieval culture are either villains like Cotton Mather or victims like Jonathan Edwards(1). Medievalism, however, gave tremendous impact upon a variety of supposedly “democratic” American writers ranging from the representative Puritan Nathaniel Hawthorne, the All-American humorist Mark Twain, the champion of the Jazz Age Scott Fitzgerald through the proto-hardboiled novelist Ernest Hemingway. Such an ironical convergence attests to the medievalistic unconscious within the United States. In this respect, John Fraser convinces us that in both the South and the West there had in fact been a complex cultural transmission and replication of European patterns, types, and values. While the Southern planters promoted aristocratic slavery, the Western ranchers made the most of chivalric values like courage, hardihood, prowess, and trustworthiness as we might have easily seen in the life of typical cowboys (51). Thus, insofar as American cultural history is concerned, we find it very difficult to keep intact the binary opposition between medievalism and Americanism, or between aristocracy and

democracy.

Clarifying the cultural historical background, Jackson Lears states that the appeal of anti-modernist discourses like medievalism and Orientalism stemmed from the American culture's drift toward "a weightless modernity" caused by various trends that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially after the Civil War: 1) the fragmented nature of capitalist society; 2) the upper-class fear of class degeneration; 3) the increase in neurasthenia due to the luxury of urban life; 4) the lack of an arena for physical and moral testing; 5) the dissolution of rigorous Protestantism and its replacement by indiscriminate toleration; 6) the emphasis on rationality to the exclusion of powerful emotions; 7) the stifling effect of social and sexual propriety; 8) the fragmentation of the integral self (Lears, *No Place of Grace* 98; Kim Moreland 8). To say nothing of President J. F. Kennedy's famous "Camelot," Medievalism has always questioned the modernistic distinction between aristocracy and democracy. For medievalism not only served the oppressors of the South, but also gave the icons of liberty that would condemn the horrors of oppression (Bernard Rosenthal et al, "Introduction," *Medievalism in American Culture: Papers of the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies* 5).

This ambivalent logic of American medievalism makes it hard for us to take at face value Henry Adams's autobiography. Though it helped establish the author as one of the greatest American autobiographers, a perusal of *The Education of Henry Adams* gives you not only a microcosmic view of the writer's private life, but also a macrocosmic view of American history with the Civil War as the first

climax and the Expositions in Chicago and Paris as the second. While Benjamin Franklin, in the late 18th century, canonized the genre of autobiography as a careerist narrative of the individual, Henry Adams, at the turn of the century, decanonized and redefined it as a Paradise Lost narrative of the family. But, his anti-autobiographical challenge enabled Adams to start questioning the very discourses dominating the existing order of society, and fulfilling the requirements of what John Carlos Rowe designates “quintessential modern autobiography” (Rowe 1, 645).

Let me illustrate this point with “Education” as the author describes it. Here Henry Adams does not necessarily concentrate on his own school days, but reorganizes and expands the very idea of education in the narrative of modern American life. The following statement testifies to what he envisioned as the ideal of American education: “...the press was still the last resource of *the educated poor* who could not be artists and would not be tutors. ...The press was an inferior pulpit ; an anonymous school-master ; a cheap boarding school ; but it was still the nearer approach to a career for the literary survivor of *a wrecked education* ” (Chapter XIV “Dilettantism” 913-914, italics mine). Of course, it is rather difficult to find American writers who did not start literary career by working as journalists. But, unlike the representative writer-journalists such as Benjamin Franklin, Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, who are all self-taught men, Henry Adams graduated from Harvard University and, after working as a newspaper journalist and serving as an assistant to his father Charles Francis Adams’s ambassadorship to England, spent seven years teaching medieval history at his own alma mater. It is his remarkably higher academic background that makes Henry Adams’s critique of education

extremely provocative.

What is more, he was so moved by the Exposition in Chicago in 1893 as to find his “education spreading over chaos”: “The first astonishment became greater every day. That the Exposition should be a natural growth and product of the Northwest offered a step in evolution to startle Darwin” (Chapter XXII “Chicago” 1030-1031). At this point, the audience of the text must discover the author’s deeper speculation upon the significance of “chaos”, which cannot easily be contrasted with “order” in the conventional way. Recall Chapter XVI “The Press” composed in 1868, in which the author rethinks that “Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit” (948), and you can easily understand why in Chapter XXXI “The Grammar of Science” written in 1903, Henry Adams, deeply inspired by the scientist Karl Pearson, had to set up a well-known formulation that “Chaos was the law of nature ; Order was the dream of man” (1132). The thirty five years of meditation on chaos and order led him not into nostalgic sentimentalism, but into critical medievalism.

II. The Virgin, the Dynamo, and Chaos Theory

At this point, let me take the opportunity to reconsider, only once again, the too-well-known metaphors of Chapter XXV entitled “The Dynamo and the Virgin.” Every text of American literary history tells us that here in the very chapter the author undertakes to delineate the medievalist unity of the Virgin Mary being displaced by the modern multiplicity of the Dynamo. A close rereading, however, will demystify such a simple-minded schematization :

...to Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew

accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, *much as the early Christians felt the Cross*. The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revolution, than this huge wheel, revolving within arm's length at some vertiginous speed, and barely murmuring,—scarcely humming an audible warning to stand a hair's breadth further for respect of power,—while it would not wake the baby lying close against its frame. Before the end, *one began to pray to it*; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force. (1067, italics mine)

On the above passage, Leo Marx, in his highly acclaimed classic of cultural history *Machine in the Garden*, gives a traditionally Hegelian comment: “Adams uses the opposition between the Virgin and the Dynamo to figure an all-embracing conflict: a clash between past and present, unity and diversity, love and power” (347). But, then, how can we comprehend the author beginning “to pray to it” (the dynamo)? A couple of companion poems “Prayer to the Virgin of the Chartres” and “Prayer to the Dynamo” (1901) written one year after the completion of “The Virgin and the Dynamo” will enable us to rediscover Adams’s dialogue with “the atom,” in which he predicts a point when the “Tireless Force” (1204) of the Dynamo would control man more than man controlled it. What Adams does here is undoubtedly a radical transfiguration of the Virgin in the form of the Dynamo symptomatic of the high-technological century. To be more precise, it is not that the modern Dynamo replaced the medievalist Virgin, but that it is the Virgin that had long dominated Europe as an archetype of the Dynamo: “She (Diana or any oriental Goddess) was Goddess because of her

force; *she was the animated dynamo*; she was reproduction---the greatest and the most mysterious of all energies; all she needed was to be fecund”(1070, italics mine). The author medievalizes modern civilization and modernizes medieval iconology at once. Therefore, the advent of the modern dynamo as another cultural icon gave us a chance to update and renovate and "resurrect" the Virgin. As he drops hints elsewhere in the text, Henry Adams's concept of history does not form a linear dialectics, but a chaotic complexity, jeopardizing the ordinary connection between cause and effect. Thus, his anti-autobiographical autobiography takes us to the plateau of anti-educational education.

Indeed, the Puritanistic heritage of education had obstinately repressed the problems of sexuality, as the author himself explicates: "...the monthly-magazine-made American female had not a feature that would have been recognized by *Adam*. The trait was notorious, and often humorous, but anyone brought up among Puritans knew that *sex was sin*" (1070, italics mine). Now, discriminating the Puritanistic Adam from Henry Adams as the medievalistic Adam, the writer attempts to unveil the force of sexuality American Puritans had made every effort to suppress as the greatest taboo.

Adams began to ponder, asking himself whether he knew of any American artist who had ever insisted on *the power of sex*, as every classic had always done; but he could think only of Walt Whitman; Bret Harte, as far as the magazines would let him venture; and one or two painters, for the flesh tones. All the rest had used sex for sentiment, never for force; to them, Eve was a tender flower, and Herodias an unfeminine horror. American art, like American language and American education was as far as

possible sexless. ...Symbol or energy, the Virgin had acted as the greatest force the western world ever felt, and had drawn man's activities to herself more strongly than any other power, natural or supernatural, had ever done; the historian's business was to follow the track of the energy; to find where it came from and where it went to; its complex source and shifting channels; its values, equivalents, conversions" (1071-72 & 75, italics mine).

Precisely sharing the idea of the "will to power" with his contemporary philosopher Nietzsche, Henry Adams's metaphysic observation discloses the paradigm shift around the turn of the century as well as the complexity of sexual politics inherent within modern society, secularizing the icon of the Virgin as a great Goddess. This notion of "force" derives from the chaotic sense of "energy" in one of the earlier chapters "Chaos" (Chapter XIX): "The first serious consciousness of nature's gesture,—her attitude towards life,—took form then as a fantasm, a nightmare, an insanity of force. For the first time, the stage-scenery of the senses collapsed; the human mind felt itself stripped naked, vibrating in a void of *shapeless energies*, with resistless mass, colliding, crushing, wasting and destroying what these same energies had created and labored from eternity to perfect" (983, italics mine). The force creates and destroys at once, Henry Adams admits. With this contradictory and highly chaotic concept of "force" in mind, it becomes easier for us to grapple with the author's notion of modern social dynamics outlined in Chapter XXVIII "The Height of Knowledge": "Modern politics is, at bottom, a struggle not of men but of forces. The men become every year more and more creatures of force, massed about central power-houses. the conflict is no longer between the men, but between the motors that drive the men, and the

men tend to succumb to *their own motive forces*" (1105, italics mine). Postmodern theoreticians could well be reconsidering such a miraculous coincidence between the Virgin disfigured and the Dynamo transfigured as the very moment of the "edge of chaos." But, by the same token, we should not ignore the almost surrealistic complexity of "force" easily linking distant items like medieval iconology and modern technology and even deconstructing the difference between the most sacred and the most profane.

The Adamsean notion of force could well be redefined, in view of today's "chaos" theory, as a prototype of "Strange Attractors," the magnetic basins or points of instability at the heart of a chaotic system, which help us understand the dynamical interaction between the most microcosmic and the most macrocosmic, or between order and disorder. What the work of strange attractors teaches us is that a small change in one variable can have a disproportional effect on other variables—the flapping of a single butterfly's wing today may produce a change that affects other variables so that what the global atmosphere actually does diverges from what it otherwise would have done. Harriet Hawkins skillfully applied this theoretical frontier of postmodern science, "the butterfly effect," to the avant-garde of literary criticism, presupposing that "in literature, as in life, momentous, tragic and unforeseeable results often come from very small causes" (xi). Thus, in her comparative rereading of John Milton's *The Paradise Lost* (1674) with Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1991), Hawkins brilliantly reinvented the butterfly effect as "the apple effect," exemplifying the logic that "Eve plucks and eats an apple and subsequently the whole global atmosphere is exponentially altered" (41). This intriguing theory certainly endorses the strange attraction between the Virgin and the

Dynamo.

Here arises another question, however. What, then, is the small cause that invited Henry Adams to the grand narrative negotiating between medievalist iconology and modern technology?

III. Looking through the Show Window

This question very naturally carries us into a reinvestigation of the greatest mystery covering the text of *The Education*, that is, the blank of twenty years the author left between Chapter 20 “Failure” written in 1871 and Chapter 21 “Twenty Years After” written in 1892. Without giving any explanation of what happened to his life in the twenty years, Henry Adams, as if to develop the metaphors of the Virgin and the Dynamo, prescribes the way the American woman “must marry machinery” (1128), and constructs, in Chapter 30 “Vis Inertiae,” the theory of the forms of inevitable inertia, especially sex and race: “Inertia of race and bulk would require an immense force to overcome it, but in time it might perhaps be partially overcome. Inertia of sex could not be overcome without extinguishing the race, yet an immense force, doubling every few years, was working irresistibly to overcome it” (1129).

To understand his obsession with sex and race it is indispensable for us to reexamine a couple of facts Henry Adams excluded from the text, that is, his wife Marian’s suicide in 1885 and his journey to Asia in the subsequent years. It is true that as a representative intellectual of the times, he tried to support the right of women. And yet, in a letter of October 18, 1871, the previous year of his marriage, he claimed that it was “worse than useless for women to study philosophy” (to Charles Minds Gaskell). Moreover, in the fourth year of marriage, he gave the

Lowell lecture “The Primitive Rights of Woman” (1876), disclosing the way woman’s vigor of primitive types had long been converted into the silent suffering of Christianity under the protective influence of the modern family and the development of property law (Eugenia Kaledin 141). This vision of modern womanhood is further expanded by his novels *Democracy* (1880) and *Esther* (1884), both of which clearly show us the political and religious predicaments of capable and free-thinking women, to whom marriage provided no easy solution. Seemingly progressive, all Henry Adams did was reestablish the domesticity of women and recuperate the misogynistic cult of “True Womanhood.” Although we are not sure the reason why Marian committed suicide, it is highly plausible that the husband’s seemingly generous but actually conservative attitude towards modern women should have afflicted his own wife renown for intelligence and “eccentricity” (Kaledin 75).

Thus, the twenty years of silence between 1871 and 1892 correspond with the period of his confrontation and reconciliation with the memory of Marian. Now let us recall that, to recuperate from his wife’s suicide, Henry Adams took journeys to Japan (1886) and the South Seas (1890). While he was unable to find nirvana, or spiritual peace in the Far East, Henry Adams got fascinated with particular Polynesian women with primitive rights, in whom he could find the conservative ideal of the “Eternal or Archaic Woman.” As Kim Moreland suggests, in his description of Polynesian society Adams attempts to medievalize the civilizations of Samoa and Fiji, putting special emphasis upon their feudal and aristocratic nature (106). It is the medievalistic attributes he admired in the South Sea that sowed another chaotic seed of strange attractors, paving the anachronistic way for his subsequent immersion in the culture of the Middle Ages and

his concurrent commitment to Mariolatry and courtly love in *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (1904–13). With the sad loss of Marian, Henry Adams started applying his “Mariolatrical” reading into the most ethnic (Polynesian Woman) and the most mechanical (the Dynamo), desperately seeking for the possibility of miraculous resurrection in the Paradise Regained. Now Henry Adams’s mostly Exotic and highly Dadaistic concept of the Virgin coincides with his contemporary and representative Dada-Cubist Marcel Duchamp’s artwork of celibate machine, “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even” (1915–1923, unfinished). As I closely analyzed in *New York Decadence* (1995), Duchamp, in this techno-sexual masterpiece, gives a dazzling insight into the sexual mechanics of modern cityscape that Herman Melville had already predicated in a mysterious diptych “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1856) and Fritz Lang later incorporated into his characterization of the robot “Maria” in the film *Metropolis* (1926). In the heyday of modernism Exoticist discourse was not incompatible with Industrialist, for while the former promoted physical colonialization of underdeveloped countries, the latter inspired artistic reappropriation of the western unconscious.

Thus, in his transfiguration of the Dynamo as the New Virgin, Henry Adams succeeded in medievalizing the primitive and updating the Mariolatrical at once. The ultimate mystery remains unresolved, however. In the wake of Adamsean apocalypase, is the subjectivity of the very author still integral? Let us return to his polemic preface.

As educator, Jean Jacques (Rousseau) was, in one respect, easily first; he erected a monument of warning against the Ego. Since his time, and largely thanks to him, *the Ego has steadily tended*

to efface itself, and, for purposes of model, to become manikin on which the toilet of education is to be draped in order to show the fit or misfit of the clothes. The object of study is the garment, not the figure. The tailor adapts the manikin as well as the clothes to his patron's wants. The tailor's object, in this volume, is to fit young men, in Universities or elsewhere, to be men of the world, equipped for any emergency ; and the garment offered to them is meant to show the faults of the patchwork fitted on their fathers. ...

The manikin, therefore, has the same value as any other geometrical figure of three or more dimensions, which is used for the study of relation. For the purpose it cannot be spared ; it is the only measure of motion, of proportion, of human condition ; *it must have the air of reality ; must be taken for real ; must be treated as though it had life ; ---Who knows? Possibly it had!*

February 16, 1907 ("Preface" 721-22, Italics mine)

With man as a force and events as reactions, Adams's pre-Foucauldian vision of complex history recharacterizes the autobiographer himself as an inhuman "manikin" lacking the logocentric "Ego" but having "the air of reality." Completing the whole text of the autobiography with this "Preface," the author turns out to have not merely revolutionized the concept of the medievalist Virgin but also replaced the romantic status of the very autobiographer with the modernistic one.

And yet, a glance at American cultural history around the turn of the century will make us notice that , as William Leach pointed out, the figure of manikin helped extract "form out of chaos," riveting the eyes to a few goods and creating an atmosphere of reality that aroused

enthusiasm and acted in an autosuggestive manner (65). Etymologically speaking, the term “manikin,” which signified “a little man” or “dwarf” back in the times of Shakespeare, comes to refer to “a model of the human body used for exhibiting the anatomical structure or for demonstrating surgical operations” in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1831 E. Baldwin explains “an apparatus called a manikin” as “a very perfect and ingenious piece of mechanism, constructed in Paris, representing a male figure of the full size” (OED). Throughout most of the nineteenth century, however, people saw full-bodied manikins mostly in dime museums, places well-known for their displays of freaks, “rare” animals and birds, and wax figures of dead kings and queens and notorious criminals. After 1875, during the period of Henry Adams’s silence between 1871 and 1892, more “refined” manikins could be viewed as “grouped figures” in the anthropological exhibits of the world fairs in Philadelphia and Chicago. By 1910, the concept of the “enclosed window” offered city stores much opportunity to exploit consumer fantasy, independent display companies supplying merchants a variety of decoratives, especially a remarkable new store fixture: manikin. And by 1912, with the rise of ready-to-wear clothes and the production of fully prepared garments, complete manikins gained a “wonderful popularity” (Leach 64).

To sum up, the modern sophistication of manikin, thus, not only coincides with Henry Adams’s own chaotic years around the turn of the century, but also the rapid growth period of the department store. In this period Lyman Frank Baum, the well-known author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), which was published in the same year as the Paris Exposition, was very active as a nationally recognized authority on window display, advising thousands of other window

trimmers on what he called the “arts of decoration and display” (Leach 41). Whatever else it does as economic or political parable, Baum’s story rehearses the history of manikins (Schwarz 116). Since Baum’s Oz series depicts a department store-like wonderland filled with a number of manikins or robots, it may be the glittering of Baumian show window aesthetics that seduced Adams to represent the Dynamo as another Immaculate Virgin, and the very autobiographer as one of the increased and multiplied manikins. If the Dynamo is the metaphor of chaos, and if manikins are children of the Dynamo, Adams had to live the ironically or self-referentially chaotic logic that it is the subjectivity of the manikin that re-ordered chaotic society.

Insofar as the preface is concerned, the major cultural impacts on *The Education of Henry Adams* are not limited to Expositions in Chicago and Paris; we should not ignore the way the flashy abundance of color, glass and light in the modernist cityscape could have inspired Henry Adams, another American Adam in the Paradise Regained, to feel anachronistic sympathy with the alluring manikins as post-Mariolatrical daughters, and to reframe his chaotic meta-autobiography itself as a post-cathedral department store.

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