“Floundering between Worlds Passed and Worlds Coming”:
The Charm of the Unstable Balance in Henry Adams*

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Abstract
At the turn of the century, Henry Adams flounders between the past and the future, trying to keep up with scientific discoveries and predict the outcome of new social forces. For most critics, Adams’s predictions express an entropic view of history or justify the ends of the American empire. This article addresses the role of time in Adams’s historical theorization as a critique of his contemporary capitalist and imperialist discourses. Through a close reading of Adams’s historical essays, I show how the immeasurability of time frustrates his attempt to triangulate the future, and shapes his theory of history. For Adams, the future is inherently unpredictable insofar as the historian should ask “how long” man will keep developing new phases and “what direction” his genius can take. Adams poses this question in The Education, as the historian becomes the modern intellectual who faces the new socioeconomic forces while keeping a critical mind against their ends. Adams thus reinstates the importance of social critique when the limits between knowledge and power are hard to define.

Keywords
Henry Adams, history, temporality, equilibrium, imperialism, capitalism, social critique

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At the turn of the twentieth century, the surge of scientific discovery is unleashing new forces, which are shaking the assumption of an ordered universe that follows a predictable course. As Henry Adams describes in his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, “In 1900 he entered a far vaster universe, where all the old roads ran about in every direction, overrunning, dividing, subdividing, stopping abruptly, vanishing slowly, with side-paths that led nowhere, and sequences that could not be proved” (400). This anarchic universe disrupts scientific paradigms of historical continuity, such as nineteenth-century theories of evolution, and necessitates different ways of educating the “new American” (501). Adams wonders in *The Education*, “What could become of such a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the twentieth?” (4).

For most critics, this question suggests Adams’s anxiety about the possibility of a representative American self, as well as his prophetic insight into the power of the nascent American empire. However, Adams’s concern about the meaning of new forces for the education of his compatriots shows an intense preoccupation with the future, which goes beyond the attempt to predict the destiny of the new empire. In fact, Adams criticizes this attempt by developing a model that breaks with the progressive teleology of Enlightenment conceptions of history. Adams’s historical model hinges on the impossibility of fulfilling the end, because the future is—and needs to remain—unforeseeable. In this article, I argue that Adams comes to this realization through his scientific inquiry, which fails to yield a value for time and predict the changes in the historical equilibrium. The unpredictability of the future underwrites Adams’s historical theorization in *The Education*, where he offers a critique of his contemporary imperialist and capitalist discourses.

To foreground the importance of temporality in Adams’s oeuvre is to unite his scientific and historical concerns around a fundamentally modern question: the possibility of critique in a society where the limit between knowledge and power is inherently porous. As Paul Bové argues, *The Education* proposes a new model of managerial intelligence, which needs to adjust to capitalist practices so that the self

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1 John Carlos Rowe describes how the conflicting interests of race, gender, and class threaten the representative American self (Introduction 12-13), and stresses Adams’s attempt to imagine the new “representative man” in John Hay, the diplomat who orchestrates a new balance of power for the American empire (“Henry Adams’s Education” 107). Harold Kaplan reads Adams’s imperialist logic in the context of a naturalist politics, which culminates in the totalist fusion of order and power (80), while Paul Bové suggests that the substitution of the old *raison d’état* with new forms of market intelligence poses the need to think how the mind can survive and critique the new economic order (83).
can learn how to work within and against their discursive power (82). By extending Bové’s analysis to Adams’s historical essays, I demonstrate how the possibility of a new mind is inextricably related to the question of the future, which cannot be answered insofar as it is constantly asked. I thus provide a new perspective on Adams’s involvement in turn-of-the-century political and economic discourses. As opposed to John Carlos Rowe’s influential argument for the tacit endorsement of imperialism in *The Education* (“Henry Adams’s *Education*” 107), I suggest reading Adams’s sociopolitical views in the context of his understanding of history. Rather than justifying the ends of imperialist endeavors, Adams accounts for their inherent incompleteness, and illustrates the new intelligence in the modern historian, who can address the forces of the future only by questioning their ends.

**The Inherently Unstable Equilibrium in Adams’s Historical Essays**

In the Introduction to *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, Henry Adams’s posthumously published collection of historical writings, his brother, Brooks Adams, summarizes the task that confronts the modern historian as Henry had understood it: “we present the aspect of a society in extremely unstable equilibrium, which is being attacked on every hand by potent forces from without, and which is yet being preyed on from within by a destructive tumor” (116).² To calculate the acceleration of the social equilibrium, Henry turned to science. In 1894, shortly after the 1893 economic depression and the victory of the “capitalistic system with all its necessary machinery” (*The Education* 344), he urged American historians to establish a scientific foundation for history.

Adams’s presidential address to the American Historical Association, which was read in his absence at the annual meeting, points toward an “absolute” science of history that “must fix with mathematical certainty the path which human society has got to follow” through the assumption of a “necessary sequence of cause and effect” (“The Tendency” 129). His address assumes a prophetic tone, which warns of an impending crisis that will crown the series of “disasters” and “cataclysms” his

² Brooks was also a devoted historian, who published *The Law of Civilization and Decay* in 1895. Although Henry did not wholeheartedly concur with his brother’s view of history in terms of economic competition and fearful human instincts, he saw merit in the scientific ground of Brooks’s work. Still, he insisted that Brooks’s economic articulation of history should primarily be an “energetic” one. Henry undertakes the task in his historical essays and *The Education*, where he puts forward a “dynamic” theory of history.
generation has already seen (132). Adams’s biblical associations suggest a castigating attitude toward his contemporary historians, who find themselves on the curve of the twentieth century and do not reflect enough on the future. Yet, for Adams, historical inquiry needs to focus on the future rather than the past. As William Jordy remarks in his seminal study of Adams’s historical career, Adams shifted the question of how far history had come to “how much further it could go,” and organized this inquiry around prediction and limitation (132-33).

In the years that followed his provocative address, Adams’s study of medieval unity in *Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres* paved the way for a temporal formula that would explain how the “assumption of unity which was the mark of human thought in the middle-ages has yielded very slowly to the proofs of complexity” (Cater 558). As Adams writes to the medieval historian Henry Osborn Taylor in January 1905—shortly after the private publication of *Chartres*—he seeks a formula to express the “law of expansion from unity, simplicity, morality, to multiplicity, contradiction, police” (Cater 558). He aspires to use the twelfth century as the “fixed element of the equation,” in order to make a “time ratio” that will predict the apocalyptic moment of the end: “Explosives would reach cosmic violence. Disintegration would overcome integration” (Cater 558-59). In his quest for a measurable historical sequence, Adams turns to science in “The Rule of Phase Applied to History” (1909) and “A Letter to American Teachers of History” (1910). The latter essay describes history as “the Science of Vital Energy in relation with time” (207) and calls for the mathematical expression of historical degradation. Thus, Adams formulates a mathematical equation based upon Josiah Willard Gibbs’s theory of phase.

In “The Rule,” Adams explains how Gibbs’s phases entail the change in the equilibrium of a few component parts: “Ice, water, and water-vapor were three phases of a single substance, under different conditions of temperature and pressure; but if another element were added,—if one took sea-water, for instance,—the number of phases was increased according to the nature of the components” (268). Adams finds this theory pertinent to all sciences, because it can explain why and when the changes in the equilibrium are possible. Thus, two points are useful for his historical inquiry: first, every equilibrium has “the capacity of self-disturbance” (276), and, second, every phase begins and ends with “a critical point” (277) that

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3 *Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres* was privately printed and distributed to a close circle of friends in December 1904. In his letter to Taylor, Adams explains why he did not “propose to invite attention to it [Chartres] by offering it to anyone except personal friends”: it was a “sketch-study” intended for his own and his nieces’ amusement (Cater 559). Nevertheless, *Chartres* elicited wide enthusiasm and fulfilled Adams’s secret wish for professional recognition. For more on this, see Samuels 259-310.
varies according to temperature and pressure. Through a convenient substitution of these catalysts for acceleration and attraction, Adams comes up with a quadripartite historical schema, which is structured around the mechanical phase of 1600-1900, preceded by a religious phase and followed by the electric and ethereal ones. He then takes the “law of inverse squares” as a provisional standard of social acceleration (291). Adams concedes the arbitrariness of his method, as he has to resort to “some fiction” or “some infinitesimal calculus” that “may be left as general and undetermined as the formulas of our greatest master, Willard Gibbs, but which gives a hypothetical movement for an ideal substance that can be used for relation” (292-93; emphasis added). Adams’s scientific construct seems to teeter here, since he does not make clear whether this “ideal” substance is human thought as the current of history (as Comte would have it), or time as the constant that allows each critical point to be superseded by the next.4

The complexity of Adams’s account is heightened by his representational choices of this “substance.” He first chooses the comet as a “sort of brother of Thought”; it travels “in a direct line” (“The Rule” 301) and, if not deflected from its orbit, approaches the sun, whence its motion accelerates and swerves into a curve before resuming its straight course (Figure 1).

4 Jordy points out that Adams used Gibbs’s phase rule “in the simplest of metaphors” to express a view that was rather closer to Comte’s theory of “stages” (141). Ernest Samuels makes a similar point when he notes that Adams overlooked key elements in Gibbs’s theory, such as the simultaneous coexistence of several phases when a chemical equilibrium was reached (441). For all his arbitrary use of “phase,” Adams is intrigued by Gibbs’s theory because it allows him to calculate the limits of historical equilibria according to the principles of thermodynamic entropy.
According to Jordy, Adams’s graph of the curve of thought—based upon the typical course of a comet like that of 1843—substitutes the accuracy of temporal representation for the balance of visual representation, and thus represents “not time but the totality of thought possible to history” (147). As Jordy notes, “the successive time units comprising the longest phases in history obviously receive the shortest segments on the graph” (147). A similar discrepancy is discernible in Adams’s second analogy to thought, the curve of ice, water, and steam, which Adams represents as a hyperbolic curve, “running off to the infinite in almost straight lines at either end, like the comet, but at right angles” (“The Rule” 305) (Figure 2).
For Jordy, this graph is equally deficient, because it has no coordinates and does not correspond to Adams’s calculations; instead of showing how time affects thought, the graph illustrates “thought which affects thought” (150). Though Jordy’s critique is carefully argued, it rests upon the assumption that Adams sees time as a measurable dimension that can be accurately represented as a sequence. Adams’s graphs, however, complicate this assumption and thematize the difficulty of representing the fin-de-siècle break in historical continuity.

As Adams writes to the English politician Charles Milnes Gaskell in 1903, he has been trying to get a value for a historical equation, such as “1823: 1863:: [sic] 1903: x,” which he measures in fields like “space, energy, time, thought, or mere multiplicity and complexity” (Selected Letters 438). His measurements, however, refuse to yield a number, because the ordinary understanding of these fields has been contested; the “time-sequence is beginning to be threatened” just as space has
been “upset” by the recent scientific discoveries (438). As new forms of energy disrupt the coordinates of time and space, they complicate the solution of Adams’s historical equation. In a previous letter to Gaskell, he describes the impossibility of seeing the last term of the equation; if “x” comes out as “infinity” or “infinity minus x,” it is not his fault that he is “so vague and strange” (Letters 1892-1918 280). Given Adams’s idiosyncratic usage of science, this might serve as an excuse for many scientific inconsistencies, which scholars redeem through the aesthetic qualities and the literary merit of his work. The emphasis on Adams’s literary temperament, however, cannot do full justice to his scientific acumen, which is particularly attentive to the contradictory aspects of his contemporary discoveries: much as they change the way we think about the future, they rest upon old metaphysical questions such as the problematic relation between time and space.

As the seemingly slow succession of units in Adams’s parabola rises boldly from the present to the future, where time is almost dissolved into thought, Adams expresses the epitome of man’s metaphysical anxiety: how to come up with a number as a limit to the future if the present itself defies the analogy of time to a mathematical line. This aporia has furnished the metaphysical inquiry since Aristotle, who has sustained the analogy of each “now” to a point—and hence the representation of time as a mathematically definable line—only insofar as “the extremities of a line form a number, and not as the parts of the line do so” (Physics IV 220a14-16). For Aristotle, each point as part of the line is a “number” insofar as it represents the limit between two lengths, marking the end of one and the beginning of another. If this were the case for time, however, it would defeat its continuity; each “now” as a point would arrest the flow of time as a pause, unless it coexisted with another “now” in passing away, which Aristotle dismisses as impossible. To circumvent this conundrum, he regards time not as a series of points (or potential limits) but as a line in “act,” hence in terms of its telos: the desired fulfillment of the points into a line that can yield a number on the basis of its extremities. Time can then admit of enumeration and be represented as a curve that is delimited by points.

According to William James, Adams’s attempt to make sense of the present by calculating the final term of the equation suggests a similar teleology, which the

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5 See Spiller; Martin; and Munford.
6 For more on the spatialization of time from Aristotle to Hegel, see Jacques Derrida’s “Ousia and Grammê,” where he shows that the problematic unity and identity of “nows”—their inability to “coexist with an other (the same as itself)” is not a “predicate of the now, but its essence as presence” (55). Thus, presence and the entire system of metaphysical oppositions, such as potentiality and act, have always been thought on the basis of an impossible possibility, time.
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former criticizes as conducive to determinism. For James, “the determination of a curve by points” makes space merely a “sufficient theatre for these statistically determined relations to be arranged in” (243). He sees no point in the use of time “unless the future contains genuine novelties” and “the present is really creative of them” (243). Adams’s response playfully concedes the uselessness of time, assuring James that he expects soon “to dispense with it [time] altogether, and try the experiment of timeless space” (Letters 1892-1918 490). Adams’s later historical graphs seem to illustrate this experiment, as time appears to be dissolved into the timeless space of thought.

Nevertheless, this space is truly “timeless” only if we grant that Adams undertakes a Hegelian gesture of resolving the contradictions of the present into a future (the ethereal phase), which is unmediated by time and hence impervious to all relation but to itself. As Adams points out, “Thought in terms of Ether means only Thought in terms of itself, or, in other words, pure Mathematics and Metaphysics, a stage often reached by individuals” (“The Rule” 308). The subsidence of the current of history into an “ocean of potential thought” or “mere consciousness” might result in an “indefinitely long stationary period” (309); in this case, “the current would merely cease to flow” (309). Hence, the end of time would truly be the end of history as the negation of temporality. If Adams had faith in this end, his graph would be the re-presentation of the future as a statistically determined relation to present possibilities—as James fears—because each point would represent the undifferentiated repetition of the archē of history. In this “timeless” space, the end and the beginning of history would coexist in each point on the graph, begging the same question:

The problem to the anthropoid ape a hundred thousand years ago was the same as that addressed to the physicist-historian of 1900:—[sic] How long could he go on developing indefinite new phases in response to the occult attractions of an infinitely extended universe? What new directions could his genius take? (Adams, “The Rule” 298)

Thus, given the elimination of temporality, the identity of the question would secure the unity of history.

Howard Horwitz suggests that Adams’s “Dynamic Theory of History” in The Education pivots on this question, which causes “the force called will to attach objective symbols to phenomena that are reflections of the will in the first place” (142). For Horwitz, Adams’s historiography is the “grand narrative of this reflexive
self-confirmation that constitutes human identity” and presents history as completed from the outset through the repetition of the same question (142). Following this argument, the timeless space of Adams’s graph would express a Hegelian model of history: thought returns to itself through the negation of time and the erasure of the end in the beginning of history, which Adams describes as man’s “innate” and “intuitive” impulse toward unity (“A Letter” 242). In this context, Horwitz affirms the Augustinian model of autobiography as the appropriate vehicle for Adams’s theorization of history, since history can reach its object—the negation of the distinction between subject and object—by obliterating the temporalization that enables the distinction in the first place (143). Thus, the subject can reach the end, or, as Adams describes, thought can reach “the limit of its possibilities” (“The Rule” 308), only after this limit has been erased and man returns to the question that posed the historical problem in the first place: “How long could he go on developing indefinite new phases in response to the occult attractions of an infinitely extended universe?” (298; emphasis added).

Yet this question presupposes the persistence of the temporalization that the Hegelian model aspires to erase. In fact, it poses the incalculability of the future as the doubt that has already marked the beginning of history and sustains the need for the historian to ask: “What new directions could his [the physicist-historian’s] genius take?” (“The Rule” 298). Thus, Adams can consider the future insofar as the end of the history remains temporally undecidable. As he tries to fix the limits of the Mechanical Phase, Adams admits that “the question remains to decide the probable date of its close” (306). It is because of this open limit that the temporal span of the equilibrium cannot be fixed, and the historian has to resort to some “fiction,” in order to decide it. If the “time required for establishing a new equilibrium varies with the nature or conditions of the substance,” Adams needs a constant such as Gibbs’s formula to circumvent the contingency of time (277).

This formula allows Adams to make hypotheses and calculate their “probable” outcome only because there is the variable of time. Had it not been for the “x” in his historical equation, the historian would have had no reason to formulate the equation, or keep trying to solve it despite the awareness that “x”

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Adams writes to William James that “St Augustine alone has an idea of literary form—a notion of writing a story with an end and object, not for the sake of the object, but for the form, like a romance” (Selected Letters 486). For Horwitz, this is the expression of a “teleological aesthetics,” which fulfills man’s intuitive impulse to unity, of which the sentimental is one manifestation. Its prime expression is Adams’s racially-inflected conceptualization of history as “the unfolding of an ineluctable dynamic intuitable by those of proper inheritance” such as the Secretary of State John Hay (Horwitz 146-47).
always comes out as “infinity” or “infinity minus x” (Letters 1892-1918 280). Even if Adams’s calculations are not scientifically or aesthetically exact, they end up being more historically precise. Through the nonequivalence between his mathematical calculations and their visual representation, Adams expresses the asymmetry between the coordinates of time and space, which causes the doubt that is the origin and the end of history: “How long could he [the physicist-historian] go on developing indefinite new phases in response to the occult attractions of an infinitely extended universe?” (“The Rule” 298). Locating the origin of history in doubt and formulating its expression as a question that already admits a doubtful end, Adams identifies a fissure in the archē of history, which makes it impossible to fix a telos and unravel a predictable sequence. Rather, this telos is constantly displaced. As in the case of the anthropoid ape, who saw “no possible limitation of time” (298), modern man would think that “the phase to which he belonged was the last and briefest” (297). Yet, in thinking so, he has already been overtaken by time, which has upset the equilibrium and has triggered the need to rethink whether the critical point of his phase could have been the end.

No one is a better illustration of this than Adams himself, who feels constantly superseded by time, and tries to recover his balance by establishing a temporal sequence that runs from the “twelfth century as the fixed element of the equation” in Mont-Saint Michel and Chartres (Cater 559) to the unpredictable outcome of the twentieth century in The Education. The twelfth-century Transition, however, can hardly be fixed as a cardinal point from which to measure the sequence and determine its end. In one of the most suggestive passages in Chartres, Adams expresses the doubt between the immeasurability of faith and the rationality of science that splits as it unites the moment of Transition:

the sum is an emotion—clear and strong as love and much clearer than logic—whose charm lies in its unstable balance. The Transition is the equilibrium between the love of God—which is faith—and the logic of God—which is reason; between the round arch and the pointed. One may not be sure which pleases most, but one need not be harsh toward people who think that the moment of balance is exquisite. The last and highest moment is seen at Chartres, where, in 1200, the charm depends on the constant doubt whether emotion or science is uppermost. At Amiens, doubt ceases; emotion is trained in school; Thomas Aquinas reigns. (143)
As a synopsis of Adams’s perspective in *Chartres*, this passage evokes architecture, philosophy, and religion to ask the question that every human endeavor negotiates: whether faith or reason, in other words, incalculability or calculation, is “uppermost.” For Adams, the negotiation is an equilibrium, which does not let man see the answer that tips the scales. Just as it is not possible to see “where the massive construction ends and the light construction begins” (*Chartres* 36), the round arch and the pointed—or, the past and the future—come together in a moment, which is torn by the doubt whether the old Romanesque or the new Gothic style should prevail. Yet at the same time the doubt keeps the equilibrium in place by letting neither answer tip the scales. Split and unified by a question, the balance is inherently unstable and yet exquisitely charming.

The inherent instability of this moment introduces a series in Adams’s oeuvre, which expresses the historical problem in terms of time-sensitive and constantly changing equilibria. Adams writes to the American geologist Raphael Pumpelly that *Chartres* is the “first volume of the Series,” which demonstrates the law that the “Letter to American Teachers of History” announces and *The Education* illustrates (*Letters 1892-1918* 542). As Adams’s autobiographical persona, the famous manikin of *The Education*, tries to balance against the uncertainty of the fin-de-siècle, Adams illustrates how the unstable equilibrium sustains man’s need to think about the future.

### The Habit of the Artificial Balance in *The Education*

Adams describes the fin-de-siècle as a moment that is out of joint, a chasm of “dead-water” (*The Education* 435), which frightens him and challenges his balance; he often refers to his manikin as “an acrobat, with a dwarf on his back, crossing a chasm on a slack-rope, and commonly breaking his neck” (434). Wavering in the breach between old and new worlds, Adams must learn to address his “normal condition” of “unstable artifice” by developing a habit of “artificial balance” (434).

In order to do this, he has to “shape himself to his time” (*The Education* 269). In fact, *The Education* is the account of a belated wanderer, who experiences an almost innate feeling of being misplaced because of time. At the very beginning, Adams defines himself as a “child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,” who cannot come to terms with the nineteenth-century taste and style, and is ill-equipped to play the game of the twentieth century (4). As a result, “he felt himself shut out of Boston as though he were an exile” (51) who would always be “somewhere else” (52). The feeling of spatial and temporal alienation becomes
more intense toward the turn of the century, when Adams feels outrun by the increasingly fast speed of new scientific discoveries, political developments, and social upheavals. As he is looking for a rest “between past and future” (318), Adams realizes he is “in a fair way to do himself lasting harm, floundering between worlds passed and worlds coming, which had a habit of crushing men who stayed too long at the points of contact” (83). For all his awareness of the need to “march with his world” (460), Adams has trouble keeping up his pace and deciding the direction of his course. In a letter to the librarian Theodore Frelinghuyse Dwight as early as 1891, he confesses: “At present I have come to a stand, undecided what to do next, and waiting till I find myself decidedly turned in one direction or another” (Cater 255). Yet, in order to decide his future, Adams has to choose how and when to act.

His call for a new education derives from the need to develop this skill, since the eighteenth-century models of rationality are becoming extinct by the urgent pace and the unpredictable direction of social change. Henry’s father, Charles Francis Adams, illustrates the obsolescence of this paradigm of thought. He possesses a “perfectly balanced mind,” which is “singular for mental poise”: “a balance of mind and temper that neither challenged nor avoided notice, nor admitted question of superiority or inferiority, of jealousy, of personal motives, from any source, even under great pressure” (The Education 27). Henry is perplexed by the perfection of his father’s mind; it is in no way exceptional, but it works with “singular perfection, admirable self-restraint, and instinctive mastery of form” (27). Thus he concludes, “Within its range it was a model” (27).

However, the artificial balance of this model fails, because it excludes any kind of aberration. Henry admits that he had never seen his father “flatter or vilify, or show a sign of envy or jealousy; never a shade of vanity or self-conceit” (The Education 28). As the son’s list goes on, the tone moves from admiration to surprise, incredulity, and, finally, reserved indignation: “Never a tone of arrogance! Never a gesture of pride!” (28). His father’s critics share these feelings; they thought “such perfect poise—such intuitive self-adjustment—was not maintained by nature without a sacrifice of the qualities which would have upset it” (28). Hence, Charles Francis Adams’s “artificial” perfection is held together by the attempt to erase any trace of deviation, which would naturally upset the regularity of his poise. Nevertheless, he eventually falls prey to his own strategy, as he has difficulty inflecting his self-sufficient rationality to the political maneuvering of the negotiations with Great Britain. For Henry, his father illustrates the failure of a model, which comes amiss because its regularity does not tolerate the possibility of
exception. The new education must develop a different “economy” of forces, which redeploys its tools each time from scratch because it is built upon the necessity of tackling any “emergency” (xxx).

The prime example of this economy is Thurlow Weed, a younger diplomat who arrives in London to help Adams’s father with the negotiations of the American Legation with the British government in 1863. Adams describes Weed extensively because the latter introduces a new style of negotiation that breaks with the unbending regularity of eighteenth-century rational models of thought. Although Weed remains within the purview of this tradition—he retains the careful perfection of Benjamin Franklin’s benevolent simplicity—his mind is “naturally strong” and “beautifully balanced” in a different way: he handles quietly and smoothly the “threads of management” with “irresistibly conquering confidence” (*The Education* 146; emphasis added). Albeit remarkable in its success, Weed’s practice is not far from the political machinations that Adams fears as endemic to power and inherently corruptive for those who wield it. It is no coincidence that Adams describes Thurlow Weed in the chapter entitled “Political Morality,” where he grabs at the chance of another tirade against the “tumor” and “the diseased appetite” for power (147) that he has memorably captured in the ruthless character of Senator Ratcliffe in his 1880 *Democracy*.

However, what makes Weed different is a pliability that relies on his self-effacement: “his apparent unselfishness” (*The Education* 147). As Henry describes, “He [Weed] thought apparently not of himself, but of the person he was talking with. He held naturally in the background. He was not jealous. He grasped power, but not office. He distributed offices by handfuls without caring to take them. He had the instinct of empire: he gave but he did not receive” (147; emphasis added). Thus, although both Charles Francis Adams and Thurlow Weed display a similar effect of humility in their demeanor, the latter’s style works more “naturally” in welcoming the contribution of his interlocutor to the priority of the goals he has set for himself. Adams describes Weed as a “rare immune” (147), who can protect his self only by giving himself over to the erasure of personal goals and an irregular—if not excessive—distribution of power to the people he negotiates with.

To do this, Weed has to embrace the risk and the uncertainty in the direction of the negotiation. Yet this is what makes his diplomatic skills exceptional: it helps him forget he should work toward a calculated end and makes his political bargain “an object to be pursued for its own sake, as one plays cards” (*The Education* 147). Weed can master this game because its unknown outcome makes him think how to manage a process where each round brings different cards and changes the stakes
according to their relative values. Adams points out, “Mr. Weed looked on it as a question of how the game should be played” (147); his answer was that principles and general rules had better be left aside because the relative values of cards were enough (148). Taking each opponent as a card to be played at face-value according to the combinations needed in each round, Weed substitutes Charles Francis Adams’s intuitive self-adjustment to principles for an instinctive management, where principles are constantly under question because each round brings new demands.

Thurlow Weed is thus faced with the same problem that Adams has identified as the driving question of history in “The Rule”: how to manage his stakes if the direction of the game is unknown due to the impossibility of predicting the end. For Adams, this impossibility keeps the direction of history open and necessitates the management of our goals by challenging the rigidity of our principles. In this sense, Adams is duly fascinated with Weed, because the latter’s management vindicates the view of history as a series of unpredictably changing equilibria that allow for management but no fixed balance. In fact, Weed’s model fits into the series of Adams’s oeuvre, because his management is an “instinct,” which seems to run from the “anthropoid ape” of “The Rule” to the “physicist-historian” of the “Letter” and eventually to the autobiographical persona of The Education; Adams writes, the anthropoid ape is assumed to “have potentially contained the future, as he actually epitomized the past . . . to him, as to us, the phase to which he belonged was the last and the briefest” (“The Rule” 297; emphasis added). Confronted with a similar urgency about the future, Weed epitomizes the past, yet offers an answer that fits the political and economic changes at the turn of the century: he substitutes Charles Francis Adams’s unnaturally self-adjusted artifice—based on the exclusion of aberration for unbending rationality—for an intuitive adjustment of goals based on the management of risk and speculation that brings economy to bear on political discourse.8 In doing so, Weed’s model also becomes the actual containment of the

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8 My analysis of Weed’s managerial intelligence is indebted to Paul Bové, who suggests that Weed represents the transition of the old political mind to the “intelligence of management, anticipation, and control” (81). The new mind fit Adams’s historical moment, when one was caught in the “uncertain emergent” and could make sense of the transition only after a new system had provided the tools to address the change (82). Although Bové emphasizes the temporal dimension of the relation between knowledge and power, he acknowledges the need to extend his analysis to the bearing of science to Adams’s historical theorization (99). My article develops this aspect in order to establish a connection between Adams’s historical and scientific interests that marks him as a truly modern thinker.
future by aligning his economy of forces with the rising forces of capitalism in American society.

Despite his fascination with Weed’s model, Adams remains ambivalent of its repercussions on political management, which he sees threatened by capitalist practices after the economic crisis of 1893: “All one’s friends, all one’s best citizens, reformers, churches, colleges, educated classes, had joined the banks to force submission to capitalism” (The Education 344). For all his ecstatic admiration of Weed’s “beautiful” balance and generous “instinct of empire” (147), the young Henry detects a threat in the erasure of the limits that protect the self against the monstrosity of the future; the “convulsion of 1893” signified the “whole mechanical consolidation of force, which ruthlessly stamped out the life of the class into which Adams was born, but created monopolies capable of controlling the new energies that America adored” (345). Even though Adams’s stakes in this are highly personal—he loses a big part of the family fortune and sees his close friend Clarence King financially ruined—she proximity of Weed’s self-effacement to a capitalist model of management makes him doubt the possibility of drawing the limit between the two.

If Weed’s erasure of the self works successfully for playing with men as though they were just cards, it ends up stripping him of any capability of “feeling himself one of them” (The Education 147), a vacuity of emotion that Adams strongly associates with the profit-making mentality of capitalism. In other words, if Weed’s self-effacement gives rise to the “instinct of empire” (147)—the asymmetrical distribution of political power that exceeds the expectation of economic returns—it also leads to the inevitable loss of the bastion against the threat of illimitable greed: the humanity of emotion. In the end, Weed’s “rare immune” (147) fascinates Adams, because it illustrates the inherent vulnerability of politics to economics and the impossibility of drawing the line between the excessive economy of “empire” and the profit-making economy of imperialism.

For recent scholars, this impossibility accounts for Adams’s theorization of foreign policy as the establishment of commercial spheres of influence, aiming to consolidate America as the twentieth-century world power. According to Rowe, Adams furthers this aim as the personal advisor to his close friend and Secretary of State, John Hay, who fosters American expansionism by “developing commercial

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9 Adams’s distaste of capitalism can suggest the antimodern feeling of the “displaced patrician” who resists the insecurity of a new order. For more on this, see Brooks; and Hofstadter. For different interpretations of Adams’s antimodern impulse, see Lears, who reads it in the context of a larger crisis of cultural authority; and Rowe, who in Henry Adams and Henry James sees Adams’s skepticism as the precursor of modern consciousness.
trade routes, opening foreign markets favorable to the United States, and controlling regions by way of ‘spheres of influence’” (“Henry Adams’s Education” 95). Hence, *The Education* becomes the rhetorical companion to a model of empire akin to an “international corporation,” which is managed by a diplomat capable of negotiating balances of power in favor of American economic interests (Rowe, “Henry Adams’s Education” 106-07). Rowe thus subverts a long-held critical view of Adams as a polemic of American imperialism, and suggests the modernity of the latter’s authorial project not only in terms of content but also of practice. As he argues, Adams’s long digressions to “philosophical speculations, nostalgic medievalism, ‘scientific theorizing and prediction’” in the latter part of *The Education* are not merely suggestive of modernist diffidence and symbolic literary techniques, but mostly of modern identifications between knowledge and power (“Henry Adams’s Education” 107).10

Rowe’s remarkable analysis of Adams’s relation to Hay through their correspondence on foreign policy issues, such as the Spanish-American War, the Cuban crisis, the Russo-Japanese War, and the Open Door Policy in the Far East, provides extensive proof for Adams’s geopolitical interests and their role in shaping his historical theorization in *The Education*.11 Adams confirms this role in his acknowledgment that the “international relation was the only sure base for a chart of history” (*The Education* 422). I wish to complicate, however, Adams’s view of this relation by dwelling further on Hay’s management of the geopolitical balance of power. As Rowe suggests, Hay figures as the modern author of world politics, who can break the entropic drift of the West by composing new combinations of old elements; Adams’s penultimate chapters in *The Education*, “A Dynamic Theory of History” and “A Law of Acceleration,” lead directly to an extended elegy for Hay in the final chapter, “Nunc Age,” in which Hay represents the transfer of historical energy to the future of America as a world power (“Henry Adams’s Education” 110). Thus, Adams’s historical theorizing at the end of *The Education* accomplishes a “marvelous prosopopeia, in which the dead John Hay speaks” (Rowe, “Henry Adams’s Education” 111).

Rowe is right to argue that Hay’s death in the last chapter of *The Education* completes Adams’s historical theorization as the attempt to educate “the new man,”

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10 Rowe here revises his own thesis in *Henry Adams and Henry James*, where he suggested the modernity of Adams’s project mostly in terms of the latter’s modernist sentiment and literary technique.

11 For more on Adams’s views on imperialism and his relation to John Hay, see Samuels 236-44 and 396-411. See also Orr; and Manheim for interesting analyses of Adams’s divided imperial allegiances in his Tahitian memoirs.
who would come out of the conflict of forces “between the new and the old energies” (*The Education* 500). Yet Hay’s death concludes *The Education* not because it completes the transition to the new American empire but for the very opposite reason: it illustrates the impossibility of fulfilling this telos due to a necessary contingency that has to be taken into account but cannot be fully accounted for. As Hay comes close to resolving the conflict of forces, he falls short of what he needs most to stabilize his combine into an “intelligent equilibrium” (503): the amount of time needed to complete the task. Through his friend’s agonizing call for more time, Adams reinstates the importance of temporality in sustaining the instability of the historical equilibrium insofar as it allows for man to think about the future beyond the certainty of any telos.

The last chapter of *The Education* opens with an apocalyptic description of New York in 1904. It illustrates the monstrous spectacle of a city delivered to the frantic feeling of hysteria, confronted with the unleashing of terrible forces: “Prosperity never before imagined, power never yet wielded by man, speed never reached by anything but a meteor, had made the world irritable, nervous, querulous, unreasonable and afraid” (499). As Adams looks at the turmoil of Fifth Avenue, he is “witnessing the anarchy, conscious of the compulsion, eager for the solution, but unable to conceive whence the next impulse was to come or how it was to act” (499-500). The future looms as a threat, and the time is pressing to find a way to resolve the convulsions of the new forces into a manageable stability. In this context, Hay’s attempt to convert the instability of political, economic, and technological forces into a stable equilibrium seems well justified. What is more, the odds are on his side: “In his eight years of office he had solved nearly every old problem of American statesmanship, and had left little or nothing to annoy his successor” (503). His great Atlantic combine—an idea that Adams also favored as the way to contain Russian expansion—12—is already a working system that has come very close to including Russia in an “intelligent equilibrium based on an intelligent allotment of activities” (503). The prospect of conflict resolution into a “true Roman pax”—Adams retains the imperial connotations (503)—is almost at hand. As Adams mentions, his “formula for Russian inertia” has proved to be

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12 Samuels notes that Adams was the one to display the coordinates of the Atlantic combine to Hay: “The United States should be the hinge of a great Atlantic combine that would contain Russia—and Germany—in the west . . . and of a Pacific combine, predominantly American, that would contain possible Russian expansion and keep China open to Western trade” (410). My point does not refute Adams’s support for an alliance of powers managed by the United States but rather complicates this management as a condition that can never be fully resolved insofar as it rests upon a temporally unpredictable equilibrium.
“exasperatingly correct” (502) while even the delay in the beginning of negotiations fits the required time scheme: “The delay measured precisely the time that Hay had to spare” (503; emphasis added).

Yet precisely at the moment when the way is clear, the time is measured, and the end is in sight, Hay’s strength starts to fail, and the time he needs is also the time he cannot have. Much as he tries to hold out for the peace negotiations with Russia, Hay knows he has exhausted the time needed to complete his end. His chilling realization, “I’ve not time!” (The Education 504) resonates with Adams’s end-of-the-world tone at the beginning of the chapter, and culminates into the inevitable fatality: “There it ended! Shakespeare himself could use no more than the commonplace to express what is incapable of expression” (504). Adams can only resort to silence to convey the full extent of “an idea trite beyond rivalry” (504) such as death. His deep sorrow over the death of his friend is certainly not trite, and can only be fathomed through Adams’s letters after the event. But the feeling of extreme weariness that sets the tone of his letters and throws him into “Shakespearean silence” at the close of The Education is not to be mistaken for a resigned evaluation of the futility that characterizes human existence. Rather, it is the ultimate expression of a realization that marks the entirety of Adams’s oeuvre: namely, the time that makes it possible to pursue an end makes it also impossible to fulfill it.

Right before Adams describes Hay’s death as the inevitable effect of being betrayed by time, he recapitulates his theorization of history and remarks that, if his calculations of acceleration are correct, “the mathematician of 1950 should be able to plot the past and the future orbit of the human race as accurately as that of the November meteoroids” (The Education 501). Although this prospect should fulfill the end of triangulating the future, Adams acknowledges the inherent contradiction of its outcome: it encourages foresight and economizes the waste of mind, but at the same time it is “profoundly immoral” because it tends to “discourage effort” (501). In a fair evaluation of his own impulse to know the future, Adams expresses his most profound understanding of the necessity in keeping it unfulfilled insofar as “the forces would continue to educate, and the mind would continue to react” (497); the only thing a teacher could hope for was to “teach its reaction” (497). As Adams concludes, if this was not itself education, “it pointed out the economics necessary for the education of the new American” (501); and, “There, the duty stopped” (501).

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13 For example, see Adams’s letter to Hay’s wife, where he writes, “My last hold on the world is lost with him [Hay]” (Selected Letters 461).
Thus, The Education is not an apologia for American imperialist policies, but a historian’s attempt to demonstrate the necessity in doubting their aims; the ends of empire are—and need to remain—in question. From the “constant doubt” of the moment of Transition in Chartres to the incalculability of the critical points of change in his historical equations, Adams expresses this question in The Education as the condition that triggers and fails the negotiation with new forces. In doing so, he does not attempt to excuse this failure or justify the impulse that drove it, but rather illustrates how the modern historian can work—yet not completely ally—with the forces of the future. In the end, there is nothing left for a historian “but to ask—how long and how far!” (The Education 345); and therein the new mind lies.

Works Cited


**Image Credits**

**Figure 1:**

**Figure 2:**

**About the Author**
Myrto Drizou did her undergraduate work in English at the University of Athens, Greece. She holds an MA in Politics and International Relations from the University of Warwick, UK, and an MA in Comparative Literature from the State University of New York at Buffalo, where she has also received her PhD. Her dissertation, “The Politics of Necessity: Negotiating the Future in Turn-of-the-Century American Literary Naturalism,” explores temporality as a force of critique in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature. She is currently teaching English Composition at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

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