

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

STS.464 Technology and the Literary Imagination
Spring 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

Brian McCammack
STS464, Profs. Williams and Marx
Final paper
5.19.08

Reconciling Continuity and Rupture: Rhetorical Strategy in Seeing Escalators as Tipping Points in the Writings of Thomas Carlyle, Henry Adams, and Bill McKibben

Separated by more than a century and a half, Thomas Carlyle and Bill McKibben both argue that their own historical present represents a unique departure from the past. They both articulate a declension narrative of humankind's relationship to Nature, punctuated by radical disjunctures that figure more as differences in kind than differences in degree; they express, to borrow an expression from evolutionary theory, a sort of "punctuated equilibrium" in which the ruptures are inspired in large part not only by humankind's technological (or, in Carlyle's case, mechanical) alteration of the physical environment, but the ways in which that technological alteration affects humankind's *understanding* of Nature (both conceived in terms of inward human nature and outward nonhuman nature). Situated roughly temporally equidistant from Carlyle writing "Signs of the Times" in 1829 and McKibben writing *The End of Nature* in 1989, Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*, first privately printed in 1907, expresses much the same historical view of a radical disjuncture in consciousness forced in large part by technological development.

Could these three men, each separated by three-quarters of a century, possibly *all* be correct? Could each of their particular historical periods be a time in which technological change leads to a radical shift in consciousness? Or perhaps maybe only one or two of their interpretations have stood the test of time? Certainly each man places emphasis on the changes of his *own* historical era; Adams and McKibben, for instance, emphasize the uniqueness of the turn of the century and the 1980s, respectively, in comparison to earlier historical eras. While it

is well beyond the purview of this essay to determine who may be “right” or “wrong” in his historical assessment if, indeed, such a thing can even be determined, I do wish to explore the seemingly persistent tension between continuity and rupture in historical assessments of the present, especially as it concerns technology’s role in mediating the humankind-nature relationship. In so doing, I will modestly suggest that it seems as though an author’s assessment of his own lifetime, historically viewed—at least when using Carlyle, Adams, and McKibben as representative signposts (perhaps an unjustifiable reduction in and of itself, though necessary for this project)—tends to err toward an interpretation of radical disjuncture rather than historical continuity in part in order to inspire alarm and, ultimately, action on the part of the reader.

But before engaging with the similarities evident in Carlyle, Adams, and McKibben, it might be advisable to entertain, however briefly, the counterargument to their theories of radical historical disjuncture. Although he does not explicitly argue for a theory of history based on continuity, in *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams does point out that a declension narrative of radical disjuncture from a more desirable past can be traced all the way back to the original fall from Eden. In a sense, then, one thing consistent throughout history is humankind’s tendency to see inconsistency; as Williams puts it, “Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent” (12). This nostalgic impulse to look back toward a past fundamentally different and better than one’s own present is what Williams calls the escalator phenomenon; no matter what historical era one chooses, one can find the same impulse. The idyllic past is always a moving target, changing generation by generation. Whereas someone living in the 1890s might see the 1820s as an era of idyllic stability, someone living in the 1980s might see the 1890s as an idyllic era of stability in comparison to his own (and, of course, the person living in the 1820s might not perceive his own era as idyllically stable at all)—and so on, ad infinitum. Whereas Williams

employs his escalator metaphor primarily in reference to the literary pastoral tradition, Kate Soper similarly argues in *What is Nature?* that the lay conception of nature is used as a “spatial and temporal marker” and that the desire to “get back” to some earlier nature is an inevitable function of modernity characterized by an accelerating lifestyle in which technology is increasingly prevalent. Soper, then, extends Williams’s escalator from the literary pastoral to the general human relation to nature, framing it explicitly in terms of modern consciousness. Both Soper and Williams see historical continuity in the very tendency to see discontinuity.

And yet I do not want to argue that Carlyle, Adams, and McKibben are merely falling into an age-old trap of sorts by arguing that their own eras were times of radical change. For one, there is more than a grain of truth to their assessments; industrialization, mechanization, and globalization were all phenomena that undoubtedly changed the way people perceived their relationship to Nature, whether in 1829, 1907, or 1989. But more than that, I want to argue that Carlyle, Adams, and McKibben all employ variations of an apocalyptic narrative—a jeremiad of sorts—to inspire their readers to take action and try to redirect if not reverse the trajectory of history characterized by life after the disjuncture. For Carlyle, the change he seeks to inspire is one that more evenly balances the Dynamistic consciousness with the Mechanistic consciousness he feels has gained too much sway over all aspects of life. Although one gets a stronger sense of fatalism from his long essay, McKibben nevertheless hopes to inspire people to curb their own energy consumption and greenhouse gas production in order to preserve the environment (even if “Nature” is dead). For Adams, the case for change is perhaps least clear-cut. His assessment of where society had gone wrong seems more complex than either Carlyle’s or McKibben’s, and his prescription for rectifying the wrong is left much less clear. But I would argue that the final chapter of *Education*, titled “Nunc Age” (translated from the Latin, according to my edition, to

mean “now follow through, now act” or, more literally, “now go”), is a call for readers to interrogate and challenge the consolidated social power bound up in financial and technological changes of the turn of the century.

But let us begin with Carlyle in 1829. For him, the chief problem of what he calls the “Age of Machinery” is that “the same habit regulates, not our mode of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavor, and in natural force, of any kind” (444). In Carlyle’s assessment, then, a mechanical way of understanding the world external to the human body has come to dominate the internal understanding of human nature as well. To be sure, Carlyle does not dismiss the violent, hierarchical implications of a mechanical understanding of physical nature; his authorial voice is loaded with trepidation if not disdain when he writes that “We remove mountains, and make seas our smooth highway; nothing can resist us. We war with rude nature; and, by our resistless engines, come off always victorious, and loaded with spoils” (442). But unlike later nature writers like McKibben who look outside the self and find the infinite in the external world, for Carlyle infinite meaning is rooted internally, in human nature. These “primary, unmodified forces and energies of man, the mysterious springs of Love, and Fear, and Wonder, of Enthusiasm, Poetry, Religion, all which have a vital and truly *infinite* character” (448-9) can only be understood by Dynamic, not Mechanic science, he argues.

Thus the true tragedy for Carlyle is not that Mechanistic thought exists or that it can be employed in the destruction of the environment, but that it has breached the divide between physical and metaphysical, threatening to irreparably rob human nature of its infinite meaning. This shift in consciousness marks a radical disjuncture with earlier thought in which Mechanistic and Dynamistic were distinct, allowing “nature [to] hold on her wondrous, unquestionable

course; and all our systems and theories are but so many froth-eddies or sand-banks, which from time to time she casts up and washes away” (451). But with Mechanistic thought intruding upon the Dynamistic realm, those froth-eddies and sand-banks begin to look less like New Orleans levees and more like Hoover Dams, (nearly) impervious to natural forces. Yet Carlyle harbors hope for changing society’s recent Mechanistic tendencies. The solution, he writes, lies “only in the right co-ordination of [Mechanism and Dynamism], and the vigorous forwarding of *both*” (452), and “we are but fettered by chains of our own forging, and which ourselves also can rend asunder” (458). The task is not to banish artifacts of the mechanical arts like the steam engine; Carlyle understands that the clock cannot simply be turned back on industrialism. Instead, the task is to put invention and technology back in its rightful place, so to speak, and resist mechanistic thought’s tendency to bleed into all facets of consciousness. Further, Carlyle concludes his essay with an appeal to each individual reader to rend asunder the Mechanistic chains and re-establish the balance between Mechanism and Dynamism. “To reform a world, to reform a nation, no wise man will undertake,” he writes, “and all but foolish men know that the only solid, though a far slower reformation, is what each begins and perfects on *himself*” (459).

In order to draw out similarities between Carlyle and McKibben, I will hold Henry Adams in abeyance for the time being, jumping ahead from pervasive mechanism in the early nineteenth century to global warming in the late twentieth. I would argue that we can understand Carlyle and McKibben as two sides of the same coin. Whereas Carlyle turns *inward*, resisting the breakdown of the human-nature dichotomy for the damage it threatens to *human* nature, McKibben turns *outward*, resisting the same breach (although under vastly different circumstances) for the damage it threatens to *nonhuman* nature. In a new introduction to *The End of Nature*, McKibben reasserts his main argument, writing that anthropogenic greenhouse gas

emissions altering the weather meant that “for the first time human beings had become so large that they altered everything around us. That we had ended nature as an independent force”

(xviii). In the original text, he elaborates on this point, writing:

This new rupture with nature is different not only in scope but also in kind [...] We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us. (50)

It may initially appear that while Carlyle despairs a change in consciousness, McKibben despairs a change in physical reality. Yet for McKibben, the physical reality of weather influenced by anthropogenic greenhouse gases actually signifies a change in the *meaning* of nature which, necessarily, can only be arrived at by human consciousness. Both Carlyle and McKibben, then, regret a shift in human consciousness; it is just that while Carlyle turns inward and concerns himself more with the loss of infinite meaning associated with human nature, McKibben turns outward in regretting the loss of infinite meaning associated with nonhuman nature.

McKibben’s tendency to see Dynamistic mystery in the external world where Carlyle finds it internally is further evident in the last pages of *The End of Nature*. Insinuating that humans have perhaps lost the ability to rectify their corruption of “microscopic” and “middle” nature, he turns to outer space, writing that “this vast nature above our atmosphere still holds mystery and wonder” (184), echoing Carlyle’s rhapsodizing about the “mysterious springs” of human nature. Yet, as this conclusion indicates, McKibben seems far more pessimistic at the prospects of real change than Carlyle—and perhaps pessimism is the merely the consequence of accelerated modern change scarcely imaginable in Carlyle’s time. But McKibben is conflicted, not resigned. He holds out the prospect of a “humble path, in which the rich world meets the poor world halfway” (173) as a way to at least attenuate human impact on the globe, even if we

have passed a point of no return and complete reversal is an impossibility. The overriding theme of McKibben's solution, like Carlyle's, is one of balance: humility, coordination, meeting halfway. For both, striking the right balance is the best way to restore (at least partially) the divide between humankind and nature, working to recover lost meaning, whether it be external or internal.

Henry Adams is a slightly more difficult case than either Carlyle or McKibben. He is more deeply ambivalent about his sense of historical disjuncture and less explicitly solution-oriented. Indeed, it is tempting to see Adams as the profoundly ambivalent middle ground between Carlyle the optimist and McKibben the hopeful pessimist when it comes to prospects for repairing the historical ruptures wrought by technology. Where both Carlyle and McKibben are fairly clear about the distinct ruptures they perceive in their own eras, Adams is more self-conscious and equivocal. On the one hand, he asserts that "radical change" was announced by world production of "sixty or seventy million tons of coal" and using perhaps "nearly a million steam-horsepower" (33). Radical historical change could be, then, not only physical and technological but quantifiable as well. Yet on the other, he contemplates the meaning of Chicago's 1893 World's Fair and writes, "Here was a breach of continuity—a rupture in historical sequence! Was it real, or only apparent?" (286). For Carlyle and McKibben, there was little question whether the rupture was real or apparent.

Yet one does hear echoes of Carlyle and anticipation of McKibben in Adams's *Education*. Adams's contention that "In plain words, Chaos was the law of nature, Order was the dream of man" (377), is more or less a restatement of Carlyle's theory of Mechanistic and Dynamistic thought, recast as Order and Chaos, respectively. And his Dynamic Theory of History which "defines Progress as the development and economy of Forces" (395) attempts to

resolve the historical rupture between humankind and nature by reconstituting the divide and striking a balance between the two. As Adams writes, “A dynamic law requires that two masses—nature and man—must go on, reacting upon each other, without stop” (398).¹

The question of Adams calling his reader to action is more difficult to resolve; unlike Carlyle and McKibben, Adams makes no readily apparent direct appeal to his reader. But in order to get closer to Adams may have conceived as appropriate action for his readers to take, it is first crucial to understand exactly what his readers would have to fight against. For Adams, the radical historical disjuncture, when America goes astray, occurs in 1893. He writes:

For a hundred years, between 1793 and 1893, the American people had hesitated, vacillated, swayed forward and back, between two forces, one simply industrial, the other capitalistic, centralizing, and mechanical. In 1893, the issue came on the single gold standard, and the majority at last declared itself, once for all, in favor of the capitalistic systems with all its necessary machinery. (288)

So the American capitalist financial system, undergirded by technological developments of the nineteenth century, represents in part the twentieth century departure from the eighteenth century world into which Adams felt he was born. Adams’s final chapter, “Nunc Age,” may in fact call his reader to act against such financial interests, emulating the model of trust-busting Theodore Roosevelt. Again Adams seems to echo Carlyle’s idea that mechanical thought has broken down the human-nature boundary and corrupted the mind when he writes that “The attraction of mechanical power had already wrenched the American mind into a crab-like process which Roosevelt was making heroic efforts to restore to even action, and he had every right to active support and sympathy from all the world, especially from the Trusts themselves so far as they

¹ It also bears noting that while reflecting on his time in Germany, Adams writes that “Until coal power and railways were created, [Germany] was mediaeval by nature and geography, and this was what Adams, under the teachings of Carlyle and Lowell, liked” (74). Carlyle’s worldview was apparently, then, a direct influence on Adams. It would probably not be too much of a stretch to correlate Carlyle’s Dynamism, Germany’s mediaevalism, and Adams’s Dynamic Theory as all similar worldviews in opposition to a “mechanical” worldview, merely expressed with different inflections resulting from different and particular historical contexts.

were human” (416). Adams seems to doubt the possibility of restorative change a great deal more than Carlyle, who has faith in the ability of each individual to reclaim a Dynamic consciousness of human nature. One gets the sense that Adams would agree with Carlyle that “to reform a world, to reform a nation, no wise man will undertake,” but perhaps he saw Teddy Roosevelt as a representative figure upon which more individualized resistance could be modeled. Nevertheless, for Adams, like McKibben, the possibility for change (if not recovery) is still there, however faint.

Ultimately, then, I would suggest that Carlyle, Adams, and McKibben can all be read in terms of what M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer call the “apocalyptic narrative” of environmental writing, intended as a shock tactic to displace the narrative of progress (22). As Scott Slovic points out in the same volume, the apocalyptic environmental narrative can be seen as a variation on the jeremiad, whose “great advantage” is also “in the shock effect, which leads to immediate, albeit short-lived, awakening” (105). Although unlike the formulaic apocalyptic narrative that focuses on some disastrous future, all three texts I have examined tend to focus on the present era, I would argue that all three authors do, in fact, gesture toward the future and encourage the reader, whether implicitly or explicitly, to extrapolate a potentially apocalyptic future based on the present’s trajectory from the past. But perhaps more important than slippage of a present- or future-oriented view, as I have argued, all three texts are intended to *change* the future based on what they perceive to be wrong turns taken in the present. In order to shock the reader into recognition of this wrong path, Carlyle, Adams, and McKibben all displace the continuous narrative of progress by positing a radical disjuncture with the past. “This is where we have gone wrong,” they say, “and this is where we need to go.”

Works Cited

- Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Carlyle, Thomas. "Signs of the Times." *Edinburgh Review*. June 1829: 439-59.
- Killingsworth, M. Jimmie and Palmer, Jacqueline S. "Millennial Ecology: The Apocalyptic Narrative from *Silent Spring* to *Global Warming*" in Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown, eds. *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. 21-45.
- McKibben, Bill. *The End of Nature*. New York: Random House, 2006.
- Slovic, Scott. "Epistemology and Politics in American Nature Writing: Embedded Rhetoric and Discrete Rhetoric" in Carl G. Herndl and Stuart C. Brown, eds. *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. 82-110.
- Soper, Kate. *What is Nature?*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.