



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Fame at the End Was Fickle

WHEN I think, as I often do, about the literary life in America throughout the years, I always come back to the career of William Dean Howells, just because it was so untypical. He did not die young as Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen Crane, Hart Crane, Thomas Wolfe, and so many others did. He was not driven into silence by neglect, as Herman Melville was. He did not feel the black gloom that Mark Twain felt so often in his later years. Howells lived a long and productive life, and, until near the end, was almost universally esteemed.

In 1912, when Howells's seventy-fifth birthday was being observed by his illustrious contemporaries in and out of the arts, Henry James wrote a letter to be read at the congratulatory banquet. After speaking as one craftsman to another of Howells's gifts as a novelist, James attempted to sum up the achievement of his old friend: "Stroke by stroke and book by book your work was to become, for the exquisite notation of our whole democratic light and shade and give and take, in the highest degree *documentary*: so that none other, through all your fine long season, could approach it in value and amplitude." But "documentary" was not for James an altogether complimentary word, and he went on: "You may remember perhaps, and I like to recall, how the great and admirable Taine, in one of the fine excursions of his French curiosity, greeted you as a precious painter and a sovereign witness. But his appreciation, I want you to believe with me, will yet be carried much further, and then—though you may have argued yourself happy, in your generous way, and with your incurable optimism, even while noting yourself not understood—your really beautiful time will come."

Most of those participating in the festivities—including, perhaps, as James hinted, Howells himself—must have been astounded by the suggestion that

there could be a more beautiful time than this for a man whom the President of the United States had chosen to honor with his presence. In half a century he had published nearly one hundred books, and though he would have acknowledged that some were trifles, he knew how much substance there was in the best of them. In the opinion of the majority of his literate countrymen he was, and long had been, the greatest of living American novelists. Moreover, as assistant editor and then, for a decade, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and after that as a regular contributor to *Harper's*, he had more influence on the literary taste of the American middle class than any other person of his age.

He had lived, in more ways than one, an exemplary American life. Born in the Middle West, son of a printer, he was largely self-educated, but from an early age he had literary ambitions, which centered his attention on New England. When, as a young man, he visited Boston, Cambridge, and Concord, and talked, both as journalist and as worshipful disciple, with Lowell, Holmes, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Emerson, he had found his spiritual home. In the same year, 1860, he wrote a campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln, chiefly for local consumption, and was given the consulship in Venice as his reward. Although this, his first visit to Europe, strengthened his conviction of American superiority, especially in morals, he was always and increasingly conscious of his debt to European culture. When he left Venice, married to the woman with whom he was to live, apparently happily, for almost fifty years, he had written enough to attract the attention of editors and publishers. Beginning humbly, as in the opinion of the nineteenth century an American should, he rose rapidly to an eminence he maintained for decade after decade.

By the time of his seventy-fifth birthday, however, there was a muttering of

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dissatisfaction with the Dean of American Letters, as he was often called, which was to become a roar and would eventually drown out his voice, seemingly forever. Discontent was directed chiefly against the attitude that had most commended him to his admirers—his almost unqualified adherence to what a later generation was to denounce as Victorian prudishness. In *Criticism and Fiction*, for instance, he had said that literature "was all the more faithfully representative of the tone of modern life in dealing with love that was chaste, and with passion so honest that it could be openly spoken of before the tenderest society bud at dinner." He, for one, he declared, would not write "things for young girls to read which you would be put out-of-doors for saying to them," nor would he deny himself "the pleasure—and it is a very high and sweet one—of appealing to these vivid, responsive intelligences."

There were scores of such observations that the young rebels could hurl back at Howells, so that he was nearly buried before his death in 1920. What the rebels forgot was that Howells stood for honesty as well as what he believed to be decency, and that in case of conflict he had almost invariably put honesty first. Not only had he urged his fellow-countrymen to read Tolstoy, Hardy, even Zola; he had championed Ed Howe, Stephen Crane, Franklin Garland, H. H. Boyesen, Frank Norris, Charles Chesnutt, Abraham Cahan, and virtually every other young American who was pressing against the barriers of

Victorianism. He deplored "the Southwestern, the Lincolnian, the Elizabethan breadth of parlance" that Mark Twain practiced in conversation, but this diminished neither his fondness nor his admiration for his friend, who, he said, would "bask in the same light as Cervantes and Shakespeare." The man who wrote *My Mark Twain* was not wholly a prude.

The young rebels assumed that realism was primarily a matter of candor, a willingness to present and examine all the aspects of life that the Victorians had tried to ignore and about which they had commanded writers to be silent. This was not, of course, what Howells had meant by realism when he was waging his fifty years' war on its behalf. In one of his early novels, *Their Wedding Journey*, Howells wrote, "Ah, poor real life, which I love, can I make others share the delight I find in thy foolish and insipid face?" He was challenging not only the frankly romantic novelists, Scott and his myriad disciples, but also such contemporaries as Dickens and Thackeray, who, as he saw it, found it necessary to improve on "real life" to hold their readers. Says a character in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*: "The novelist who could interpret the common feelings of the common people would have the answer to 'the riddle of the painful earth' on the tip of his tongue."

The critics could argue that the "real life" Howells saw was a small part of American reality, and that was true, although it is to his credit that he saw more and more as time passed. They said, too, that he wrote dull books about dull people, and sometimes he did. They said, finally, that his theory of realism led him to see only the surfaces of life, and here they were largely wrong. Whatever else may be true of the man who created Bartley Hubbard and Marcia Gaylord, Silas Lapham, Dryfoos and Lindau in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Northwick in *The Quality of Mercy*, Jeff Durgin in *The Landlord at Lion's Head*, and Dylks in *The Leatherwood God*, his knowledge of men and women was not superficial.

A "really beautiful time" did come for Henry James, though not until he had been dead for thirty years; but Howells's time hasn't come and probably never will. Although there have been many attempts to reawaken interest in his work, he drifts further and further away from us. He seems to be the kind of writer who speaks less and less clearly to people as the passage of the years works its ever swifter and swifter alterations in our society. If he is to be kept alive at all, it will be by the scholars, and they should keep him alive, for, if he is unlikely to be widely read, he deserves to be gratefully remembered.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



Konvitz vs. Hoffer

PROFESSOR MILTON KONVITZ's attack [SR, Apr. 8] on Eric Hoffer's essay on the Negro Revolution in *The Temper of Our Time* illustrates anew the typical liberal historian's misunderstanding of America's heterogeneous and diverse heritage, and his lack of faith in this diversity as a central pillar of American development. . . .

Hoffer's insistence on the development of Negro-created, -owned, and -run institutions, the development, in short, of a Negro community of which Negroes can be proud, as the only true road to successful and meaningful integration, is dismissed by Konvitz as "the rankest form of racism." "Racism without exploitation and with a large dose of race pride," says Konvitz, "is still racism." On the contrary, such community development and self-help has been the first step toward a positive role in American society for each ethnic or racial community in our history. The true tragedy of the Negro in America has been that his arrival on these shores destroyed, rather than helped create and extend, a sense of community pride and creativity.

HENRY M. SCHAFER.

St. Louis, Mo.

I WOULD LIKE TO CONGRATULATE Mr. Konvitz. I have the feeling that more than "60 per cent of the population outside the South" side with him rather than with Mr. Hoffer. We Northerners need to be more than tolerant—we must assume a responsibility to love, accept, and help.

PAT ZAHLER.

Hutchinson, Minn.

DOES MR. KONVITZ THINK for a moment that Hoffer is so shallow, so socially unconscious, that he does not understand or sympathize with the Negro plight? Hoffer is discussing our times in these essays—not just the ideals, not just what should be, but what *is*. His comments on the nature and temper of recent racial explosions are correct, bitingly correct, regardless of the zeal and high-mindedness of the Negro leaders. And to accuse Eric Hoffer of being unloving, by quoting St. Paul's hymn, is to utterly misunderstand the man.

VENT FISCUS.

Cleveland, O.

I WOULD DESPERATELY LIKE to meet Mr. Konvitz. He has grasped, with a "mature" mind, the fact that one cannot dismiss a human being with a wave of the hand and a belittling of that human being's problems. Nor can one simply say, "There is no justification here. Don't bother me." *Finally*, Mr. Hoffer, like so many others, assumes that because life is hard for everyone, it is meaningless to consider that for some life is harder than for others.

JAMES A. GORMAN.

Cummaquid, Mass.

PROFESSOR KONVITZ COMPLETELY MISSES the point of Eric Hoffer's writings on the Negro. Mr. Hoffer has the courage—and loving concern—to offer admonitions. It seems a strange perversion to call this a crude, murderous weapon! The reviewer satisfies himself with a quotation from a hymn to love, and deplores racism with pride. The professor does not tell us what he would substitute for pride, nor how, nor when.

ELIZABETH G. WAGNER.

Briarcliff Manor, N.Y.

Do Statistics Tell the Story?

IN MY OPINION, Fred J. Cook's review of *Overcharge*, by Lee Metcalf and Vic Reinemer [SR, Apr. 1], is one of the most biased I have seen in a long while.

I am not a principal in, nor am I an employee of, an investor-owned power company. I am a construction engineer, old enough to retire, who has been in a position to know about the power industry and the men who manage and control these investor-owned electric power companies. All of them whom I know are honest, hard-working, public-spirited Americans who are good businessmen with integrity.

You cannot compare the cost of producing electrical energy in Boston with the cost of producing it in Seattle, regardless of whether the energy is produced by a private utility or a municipality. The cost of electrical energy is made up of a good many things, such as fuel, labor, depreciation on plant and equipment, etc. I notice from the *Directory of Electric Utilities—1966 Issue*, published by McGraw-Hill, that practically all of the power produced by Boston Edison is produced by steam, and in my opinion the fuel is primarily coal, which is undoubtedly quite expensive around Boston.

The Department of Lighting, Seattle, Washington, is listed as having primarily hydro-electric plants of quite large size. Therefore, there is probably no cost for fuel and the plants were undoubtedly built quite a few years ago when labor was cheap. Even at that I have my doubts, when the power is sold for an average of about \$.01 per KWH, if all of the costs which go into producing this power are being charged to the production of power.

CURT E. BOTTUM, SR.

Ann Arbor, Mich.

"STATISTICS TELL THE STORY," Mr. Cook says. "In Boston, 500 kilowatt-hours cost \$13.41; in Seattle, the same amount of current costs \$.5." Do statistics tell the story? Seattle happens to be close to Grand Coulee and Bonneville dams, built with federal money, where large amounts of cheap power are available. Perhaps the Bostonians pay too much, or do the citizens of Seattle pay too little?

WM. K. MUNN.

Oakland, Calif.