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Howells and Harvard

Daniel Aaron

IN SEARCHING for a subject suitable for this occasion, I decided that a few words about Howells and Harvard might be in order — not only because the Howells family has presented the Kittery Point house to the University but also because Howells' occasional references to Harvard tell us something about his not-so-simple attitude toward the whole Boston-Cambridge social scene.

It must be said at once that Harvard did not bulk very large in Howells' life nor was Harvard much affected by his proximity to it. Harvard took notice of him, of course, as early as 1867, when it conferred upon him an honorary A.M. degree. It is not known whether or not he welcomed the accompanying privileges of wearing an academic gown, marching in Commencement Day parades, and voting for the Overseers. A few years later he was pressured by President Eliot into accepting a university lectureship (he lectured for the next two years on modern literature to a small class), and in 1886 he had the good sense to turn down the offer of the Smith professorship.

I say "good sense" because, although he was flattered by Harvard's offer (as he had been flattered in 1882 when he was invited to join the faculty of The Johns Hopkins University), he knew in his heart that teaching college boys would not be the best use of his time. James Russell Lowell, his friend and mentor, had advised against it:

A professorship [Lowell had written him] takes a great deal of time, and, if you teach in any more direct ways than by lectures, uses up an immense stock of nerves. Your inevitable temptation (in some sort your duty) will be to make yourself *learned* — which you haven't the least need to be as author (if you only have me at your elbow to correct your English now and then, naughty boy!).

Besides Lowell's caveats, there were the practical considerations to think about. For the bait of alleged security to be gained from a university position, he would take a sizable cut in earnings. And, to top it off, he did not really like lecturing — even though he found that he was pretty good at it.

So Howells stayed out of Academia and had the satisfaction of escaping what might have become an irksome chore while savoring the honor of being invited to join a worshipful company.

Some of Howells' commentators (taking his recollections of Cambridge perhaps too unequivocally) have made much of his awe of the Cambridge worthies and of his verbal knee-bendings. And it is true that he was, as he once put it, "conscious of my youthful inadequacy" when he first encountered men like Charles Eliot Norton (always a somewhat inhibiting if kindly Cambridge presence for the outsider from Ohio), Holmes, Longfellow, and Lowell. The *Atlantic Monthly* editor who never got beyond the eighth grade had to submit to Lowell's correcting "my erring *woulds* and *shoulds*." On one occasion, Howells recalled, "in the vast area of my ignorance, he specified my small acquaintance with a certain period of English poetry, saying, 'You're rather shady, there, old fellow.'" Fond as he was of Lowell, Howells was always conscious when with him "of an older and stricter civilization than my own, an unbroken tradition, a more authoritative status. His democracy was more of the head and mine more of the heart, and his denied the equality which mine affirmed."

The more one reads Howells' books and essays and reviews, the more apparent it becomes that his subservience is tinged with irony — and sometimes even with resentment. For example, his review of Professor Barrett Wendell's *A Literary History of America* in 1901 (when Howells no longer rolled around the Boston-Cambridge hub) was an uncharacteristically acidulous critique of Cambridge parochialism. Conceding the merits of Wendell's book, he still found it "priggish and patronizing."

It is as if, having been born a gentleman, he wished conscientiously to simplify himself, and to learn the being and doing of his inferiors by a humane examination of their conditions, and a considerate forbearance toward their social defects. If he had called his book "A Study of New England Authorship in its Rise and Decline, With Some Glances at American Literature," one might still have found him wanting in proportion.

What Wendell presumably failed to grasp, among other things, was that Boston had outlived its literary primacy and that as Harvard became less literary, the rest of the country became more so. Howells apologized to Wendell some thirteen years later for the harshness of his review (it was written, he said, "in a very abominable spirit"), but

it was an authentic expression of an attitude he usually repressed or more guardedly conveyed.

Harvard is not specifically mentioned in the many ironical asides on social inequality that dot his reviews, but it does figure prominently in one of his strongest novels, *The Landlord at Lion's Head*.

This novel, you will recall, is the story of a young maverick from New Hampshire. He is unafflicted by the New England conscience and is even a sort of blackguard in the Howellsian sense, but he is likable for all his ungentlemanly self-centered aggressiveness. Thomas Jefferson Durgin (his very name is an affront) stands out among the elegant scions of Boston like a bear at a tea party. In what Howells understood to be the Harvard student slang of the 1890s, he is a "jay," a term of contempt applied to the yokels or outsiders who attend the University. Jeff exhibits "bad form" by Harvard standards, partly because he is naughty by nature and partly (as even his severest critic in the novel concedes) because he has been socially ill-treated.

But instead of being cowed by his classier classmates, Jeff feels contempt for their weaknesses and pride in his own manliness, and it tells us something about Howells that he later confessed a decided liking for his blunt amoral hero who shocked his betters and felt no guilt about his effrontery.

Howells' picture of Harvard in *The Landlord at Lion's Head* is complemented by an essay George Santayana wrote for the *Harvard Monthly* in 1892, five years before the publication of the novel. It was called "A Glimpse of Yale." In this piece, Santayana posed simple barbarian democratic Yale (where "divisions of wealth and breeding" were "not made conspicuous"), against sophisticated Harvard, dominated by a city "with well-marked social sets, the most fashionable of which sends all its boys to college." They form, he wrote, "the most conspicuous masculine contingent of Boston society, and the necessity falls upon them of determining which of their college friends are socially presentable. This circumstance brings out at Harvard an element of snobbery which at Yale is in abeyance."

Clearly Jeff Durgin would have been happier at Yale where the students according to Santayana were not over-scrupulous, loved life, trusted in success, and deployed "a ready jocoseness" and "democratic amiability, and a radiant conviction that there is nothing better than one's self."

So far as I know, Howells knew or cared little about Yale, and

besides the targets of his satire were right under his nose. He is at his best when he shows a procession of proper Boston girls led by a Boston matron scouting the territory of the Yard occupied by the jays and their "folks" and advancing toward them "with something of that collective intrepidity and individual apprehension characteristic of people in slumming." Jeff, along with a few other jays, is invited by one of his proper classmates to a proper tea. Their presence is expected to add an agreeable *frisson* to the fashionable gathering. For "society," Howells blandly notes, "had just been stirred by the reading of a certain book [he was obviously referring to the Rev. Charles M. Sheldon's lachrymose evangelical best-seller, *In His Steps*, published a year before *The Landlord*] which had then a very great vogue, and several people had been down among the wretched at North End doing good in a conscience-stricken effort to avert the millenium which the book in question seemed to threaten." Hence the lady-hostess who had already done good work at the North End "caught at the chance to meet the college jays in a spirit of Christian charity" and enlisted "several brave girls who would not be afraid of all the jays in college."

The reviewer in the *Advocate* faulted Howells' one-sided view of Harvard and maintained that the term, "jay," signifying "the rustic-rowdyish class of men," was "already obsolete here, if indeed it was ever heard." He found many virtues in Howells' novel but concluded that the author's knowledge of Harvard had "been acquired more by hearsay than observation."

Howells himself, in a prefatory note he wrote for the 1909 edition of *The Landlord at Lion's Head*, conceded that undergraduate life could only be "truly learned" from "its own level" and that he had "always been ready to stand corrected by undergraduate experience." Presumably his son, John Mead Howells (who graduated from Harvard in 1891) provided him with local color about Harvard's "moods and manners" — at least Edwin Cady so informs me. And Howells intimates as much in his preface. Granting that the word "jay" might be obsolete, he thought that Jeff Durgin was not "altogether out of drawing." What he chiefly prized in Durgin, he wrote, "if I may go to the bottom of the inkhorn, is the realization of that anti-Puritan quality which was always vexing the heart of Puritanism, and which I had constantly felt one of the most interesting facts in my observation of New England."

The modest claim that his handling of the Harvard scene was not far off the mark is borne out by two entries on Cambridge "muckers" which appeared in the 1906 volume of the *Harvard Advocate*. The first complained about the ragamuffins infesting the Yard: "Their speech is neither agreeable nor their manners subdued, and their whole attitude points to an obscure if not questionable origin." The other objected to the presence of the non-Harvard Cantabrigians at "our evening lectures," and the Sunday invasion of the Yard "by young men and women of the lower classes and tastes." Only by barring the gates to "this unsightly and meddlesome crowd . . . who are really our enemies" could the "beauty and dignity" of Harvard be preserved. Howells the realist in search of his material might, I suggest, have come across similar-sounding paragraphs so offensive to his equalitarian bias.

Whether so or not, Howells had been affirming his faith in a Jeffersonian natural aristocracy from his earliest days in the *Atlantic*, and it may not be amiss to end my remarks with a quotation from a piece he wrote in 1870 during his Harvard lectureship: a review of *The Bazar Book of Etiquette. The Care of the Person, Manners, and Ceremonials*.

Men and women born into rich and fashionable society will always be *au fait* in its customs; and people whose wish to rise into that kind of society is cruelly granted will not be kept from betraying their unfashionable origin by all the behavior books that ever were written . . . All the wisdom needed for the career of the ordinary republican aspirant can be condensed into three rules, which he may write down on his reversible paper cuff: 1. Keep out of fine society; 2. Be cleanly, simple, and honest; 3. Never be ashamed of a blunder. Everything beyond these is vanity.

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