

HIGHBROW AND LOWBROW

VAN WYCK BROOKS

“The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends.”—TIMON OF ATHENS

AT the time when he was trying to release humanity from the cross of gold on which, as he said, it was crucified, the Apostle of Free Silver announced that the opinion of all the professors in the United States would not affect his opinions in the least. Now that, plainly, was a very odd state of affairs. On the one hand we had a body of supposed experts in economic theory, on the other a man whose profession it was to change and reform economic practice—the one knowing, the other doing; and we found that not only was there apparently no compatibility between them, but that an openly avowed and cynical contempt of theory on the part of practice was a principal element in the popularity of a popular hero. But was Mr. Bryan to blame for it? To know anything of the sort of economic theory which is taught in American universities—in many cases compulsorily taught—is to confess that blame is not the right word. For this economic theory is at the least equally cynical. It revolves round and round in its treetop dream of the economic man; and no matter how much the wind blows political economy never comes down. Incompatibility, mutual contempt between theory and practice, is in the very nature of things.

One might extend the illustration to literature, merely substituting one professor for another and putting any typical best-selling novelist in the place of Mr. Bryan. It is a peculiar twist in the academic mind to suppose that a writer belongs to literature only when he is dead; living he is, vaguely, something else; and a habitual remoteness from the creative mood has made American professors quite peculiarly academic.* “Literature,” as distinguished from excellent writing, is a thing specially associated in the American universities with Westminster Abbey

* So long as the “Ph.D.” superstition remains in the ascendant they are bound to become more and more so.

and the dead generally; it is a thing felt to have been done, and while for all one knows it may continue to be done the quality in it which makes it literature only comes out, like the quality in wines, with age.* Now I suppose that most of the American novelists in our day are university men; they have learned to regard literature as an august compound of Browning, Ben Jonson, and Hesiod; and consequently when they themselves begin to write it is in a spirit of real humility that they set themselves to the composition of richly-rewarded trash. I am sure of this: it is modesty that lies behind the best-seller, an extreme reluctance to set oneself up as a competitor with Ben Jonson. And there is an aspect in which the spectacle of writers regarding themselves as humble tradesfolk has a certain charm. But the conception of literature as something, so to speak, high and dry, gives to the craft of authorship in America a latitude like that of morality in Catholic countries: so long as the heavenly virtues are upheld mundane virtues may shift as they will. In a word, writers are relieved of responsibility, and while their ethical conscience remains quite sound they absolve themselves from any artistic conscience whatever. And the worst of it is that precisely these writers of immitigable trash are often the bright, vigorous, intuitive souls who could make literature out of American life. Has it ever been considered how great a knowledge of men, what psychological gifts of the first order their incomparable achievement of popularity implies?

These two attitudes of mind have been phrased once for all in our vernacular as Highbrow and Lowbrow. I have proposed these terms to a Russian, an Englishman, and a German, asking each in turn whether in his country there was anything to correspond with the conceptions implied in them. In each case they have been returned to me as quite American, authentically our very own, and, I should add, highly suggestive.

What side of American life is not touched by this antithesis? What explanation of American life is more central or more illuminating? In everything one finds this frank acceptance of twin values which are not expected to have anything in com-

*Or distance. The principle is now pretty generally recognized that literature can be produced in foreign countries, even at the present time.

mon: on the one hand a quite unclouded, quite unhypocritical assumption of transcendent theory ("high ideals"); on the other a simultaneous acceptance of catchpenny realities. Between university ethics and business ethics, between American culture and American humor, between Good Government and Tammany, between academic pedantry and pavement slang, there is no community, no genial middle ground. The very accent of the words Highbrow and Lowbrow implies an instinctive perception that this is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs. For both are used in a derogatory sense. The Highbrow is the superior person whose virtue is admitted but felt to be an inept, unpalatable virtue which is no object for emulation; while the Lowbrow is our equivalent for the good fellow one readily cottons to, but with a certain scorn for him and all his works. And what is true of them as personal types is true of what they stand for. They are equally undesirable, they are incompatible, but they are complementary; and they divide American life between them.

II

They always have divided American life between them. And to understand them one has to go back to the very beginning of things, for without doubt the Puritan Theocracy is the all-influential fact in the history of the American mind. It was the Puritan conception of the Deity as a kind of absentee landlord, not alone all-determining, but precisely responsible for the practical affairs of the race, constituting, in fact, the State itself, which precluded in advance any central bond, any responsibility, any common feeling in American affairs and which justified the unlimited centrifugal expediency which has always marked American life. And the same instinct that made against centrality in government made against centrality in thought, against common standards of any kind. The imminent eternal issues the Puritans felt so keenly, the equally imminent practical issues they experienced so monotonously threw almost no light on one another; there was no middle ground between to mitigate, combine, or harmonize them. So that from the beginning

we find two main currents in the American mind running side by side but rarely mingling—a current of overtones and a current of undertones—and both equally unsocial: on the one hand, the current of Transcendentalism, originating in the piety of the Puritans, becoming a philosophy in Jonathan Edwards, passing through Emerson, producing the fastidious refinement and aloofness of the chief American writers, and, as the coherent ideals and beliefs of Transcendentalism gradually faded out, resulting in the final unreality of most contemporary American culture; and on the other hand the current of catchpenny opportunism, originating in the practical shifts of Puritan life, becoming a philosophy in Franklin, passing through the American humorists, and resulting in the atmosphere of contemporary business life.

Thus the literature of the seventeenth century in America is composed in equal parts, one may fairly say, of piety and advertisement; and the revered chronicles of New England had the double effect of proving how many pilgrim souls had been elected to salvation and of populating with hopeful immigrants a land where heaven had proved so indulgent. The Puritan fathers, it is true, were all of a piece—what indeed would have become of us all if in their eyes there had been any rift between religion and real estate? They were too busy for these subtle distinctions. And we may in a sense be grateful that no unexpected turn of fortune enabled them to be men of leisure, for who can figure the number of witches they would then have felt themselves impelled to burn? It was a kind destiny that never permitted Puritans to be fancy-free and gave them only one day in the week in which to expatiate *in vacuo*. But it was a costly kindness.

For three generations the prevailing American character was compact in one type, the man of action who was also the man of God. Not until the eighteenth century did the rift appear and with it the essential distinction between Highbrow and Lowbrow. It appeared in the two philosophers Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin, who share the eighteenth century between them. In their amazing purity of type and in the apparent incompatibility of their aims they determined the

American character as a racial fact, and after them the Revolution became inevitable. Channing, Lincoln, Emerson, Whitman, Grant, Webster, Garrison, Edison, Mr. Rockefeller, Mrs. Eddy are all, in one way or another, permutations and combinations of these two grand progenitors of the American character.

The intellect of Jonathan Edwards was like the Matterhorn, steep, icy, and pinnaced. At its base were green slopes and singing valleys filled with all sorts of little tender wild-flowers—for he was the most lovable of men; but as soon as the ground began to rise in good earnest all this verdurous life came to an abrupt end: not one green or living thing could subsist in that frozen soil, on those pale heights. The kind God himself was disturbed by this draught of cold air from below; he closed his shutters, stirred the coals together in his fireplace, and resolved to have nothing more to do with the human race until warmer weather set in. It was this that led Jonathan Edwards to believe that he was angry; but it can be said quite literally that it was only the logic of Edwards which made him so and that Edwards himself at bottom (like the professors of political economy) was the most reasonable and humane of men. He was even the most romantic of men, as I thought once, and I well remember that immense old musty book of his, covered with mildew, with its desert of tiny print, which I carried out with me into the fields and read, in the intervals of birdnesting, under the hedgerows and along the borders of the wood. The sun fell for the first time on those clammy old pages and the pallid thoughts that lay in them, and the field-sparrows all about were twittering in a language which, to tell the truth, was no more unintelligible to me. But the sentiment of romance, like the fiat of the Pope, can make the darkest ways plain, and in my mind's eye I used to see Jonathan Edwards in his lonely parsonage among the Indians, looking out across the snow. Yet it is certainly true that he spun those inept sublimities of his by subtracting from his mind every trace of experience, every touch of human nature as it really was among his innocent countryfolk, certainly true that he exhibited for the first time the infinite inflexibility of the upper levels of the American mind, just as

Franklin exhibited for the first time the infinite flexibility of its lower levels.

What indeed could Poor Richard have in common with an Angry God? And what can Mr. Bryan have in common with political economy?

III

But now, since a matter of this kind is at bottom a personal matter, let us imagine what may be the private history of one of our maligned economists or professors of literature. Let us imagine that he has grown up, as an American typically does grow up, in a sort of orgy of lofty examples, moralized poems, national anthems, and baccalaureate sermons; until he is charged with all manner of ideal purities, ideal honorabilities, ideal femininities, flagwavings and skyscrapings of every sort; until he comes to feel in himself the hovering presence of all manner of fine potentialities, remote, vaporous, and evanescent as a rainbow. All this time, it can fairly be said, he has not been taught to associate himself personally with ends even much lower than these, he has not been taught that life is a legitimate progress toward spiritual or intellectual ends at all, his instincts of acquisition, pleasure, enterprise, and desire have in no way been linked and connected with disinterested ends; he has had it very firmly embedded in his mind that the getting of a living is not a necessity incidental to some higher and more disinterested end, but that it is the prime and central end in things, and as a corollary to this he has been encouraged to assume that the world is a stamping-ground for every untrained impulse in him which is private, empirical, and greedy—that, in short, society is fair prey for what he can get out of it.

Let us imagine that, having grown up in this way, he is sent to college. And here, in order to keep the case a typical one, we shall have to exercise a little discrimination in the choice of a university. It will not be Harvard, because the ideal of Harvard, as I shall point out, is not a typically American ideal; nor will it be one of the modern utilitarian universities, which have no ideal at all. It will be any one of the others, and when I say

this I mean that each of the others is in one way or another a development of the old country American college: its ideal, its experience, its tradition spring out of and lead one back to that. Now among these old colleges Harvard might have been figured as an ever-developing, ever-liberalizing catholicism, of which they were all sectarian offshoots, established on a principle of progressive theological fragmentation, each one defending an orthodoxy its predecessors had outworn or violently setting up in defence of some private orthodoxy of its own. They founded themselves each on a remote dogma, or system of dogma, as their central and sufficient basis—they were grouped roughly about the professor of Moral Philosophy, and just as in a mediæval university all the wheels turned, as it were, in relation to the central theological dynamo, so all their wheels turned in relation to him. In a sense, of course, this was true also of Harvard, but with a marked difference. The theologians who founded Harvard were men of action as well; in the seventeenth century a New England minister was also a politician and the education of ministers for which Harvard was mainly established implied also an education for public affairs, an education for society, so far as the word society can be used in connection with the early Puritans at all. Thus at the outset the founders of Harvard drove in the wedge of secularism; Harvard had from the beginning a sort of national basis, at least among New Englanders, and its dogmatic structure consequently reflected and shifted with and accommodated itself to the currents of national thought. Remaining in touch with society, it educated to a certain extent, relatively to an extraordinary extent, the social function of its students; and it is thus no accident that so large a proportion of the political, the literary, and the scientific life of America has sprung from it. But in the eighteenth century the conditions under which Harvard had been established had ceased to exist. The minister was no longer a man of affairs—he was a stark theologian, and usually of a type which the majority of his parishioners had outgrown. Yale, Princeton, and practically all the other typically American colleges were founded by men of this type. Jonathan Edwards may figure for them all; the motive which led him to become

the president of Princeton being precisely that his flock in Connecticut could no longer see the anger of God eye to eye with him. Already in his time the fathers and mothers of Young America had submitted to the charms of Poor Richard's Almanac, they had themselves, for the most part, become inveterately Lowbrow; but they seem to have believed that an angry God might still be a good influence over Young America himself.

To return now from this long digression, let us imagine that the father and mother of our budding economist have exercised an equal care in the choice of a university. They would not, of course, being Good Americans themselves; yet if their case were typical, as we have been supposing, their choice of a university would naturally be typical also. Having arrived there would our future professor be confronted with an angry God, or any sort of direct theological dogma? By no means. But there would have remained in the air a certain fragrance and vibration, as if an ideal had passed that way and not stayed, there would be intangible whispers and seductions, there would be a certain faint, rarefied, remote, but curiously pervasive and insistent influence—like the sound of an æolian harp or the thought of Plato in some uncouth slum; there would be memories and portraits of many an old metaphysician, white, unearthly, fragile. It would all seem very much as if, the significance of these remote dogmas having evaporated, only the remoteness, in a way, had remained.

One would be very insensitive who did not feel the quite unbalancing charm of this quality—so different from its comparatively robust Oxford parallel—in the old New England colleges, as in Princeton, Yale, and the other universities which have developed out of them; but one would also, I think, feel something vaguely Circean in it. And in fact, given the preliminary method of bringing up which I have sketched for our typical student, what would be its effect upon him? Suddenly confronted during four years with just this remote influence of ideals, out of which the intellectual structure has evaporated and which never possessed a social structure, would he not find them too vague, too intangible, too unprepared for to be incorporated into his nature, would he not inevitably pass

out of their presence into a manhood which would closely duplicate his childhood because the university had not enabled him to modify it? Would not the ideal have served him precisely as the water and the fruit served Tantalus? Would not ideals themselves have become permanently catalogued in his mind as wholly dreamlike, vaporous, impracticable things; would not the outward course of his life inevitably continue with an ever-increasing cynicism, covering a world of chagrins, thwarted impulses, bitterness and disillusion?

Indeed there is nothing so tragic and so ominous as the familiar saying that college is the happiest time of one's life. Yet I think the majority of college men think of their college life in this way. They deliberately put their Golden Age behind them—and, as things are, they know it is behind them. But consider what a comment this is on the American university itself,—a place, one can fairly say, where ideals are cherished precisely because they are ineffectual, because they are ineptly and mournfully beautiful, because they make one cynical, because they make life progressively uninteresting, because, practically and in effect, they are illusions and frauds and infinitely charming lies. There surely is the last and the most impenetrable stronghold of Puritanism, refined to the last degree of intangibility, which persists in making the world a world inevitably sordid, basely practical, and whose very definition of the ideal consequently is that which has no connection with the world!

Thus far our future economist is only a typical university graduate, who has not yet decided to become an economist. He has been consistently educated in twin values that are incompatible. The theoretical atmosphere in which he has lived is one that bears no relation to society, the practical atmosphere in which he has lived bears no relation to ideals. Theory has become for him permanently a world in itself, a *ding an sich*; practice has become simply a world of dollars. Now supposing he has already felt the pull of economics, three courses are open to him: either he can give himself once for all to economics; or he can go the way of all flesh, i. e., into business; or he can hesitate between the two, becoming an economist for the time being and eventually going into business. If he is prepon-

derantly intellectual he will choose the first course and let society take care of itself; if he is preponderantly a man of action he will take the second course and let ideals take care of themselves; but just so far as he is a normal man, with intellect and action in equal parts, just so far he will be on the fence. The probability is that in this case he will become an economist for as long as he can stand it and then burst into business and become a first-rate millionaire as quickly as possible. The sense of action in him will rebel against the sense of theory and finding no basis of action, no relation to action, in his theory will press him into a fresh life where the theoretical side of his nature will at least be of some slight use in furthering private ends.

IV

My political economist is, of course, only typical. Any branch of human activity that is represented by professors at all—and which is not?—would serve as well. Human nature itself in America is divided on two irreconcilable planes, the plane of pure theory and the plane of stark business; and in the back of its mind is heaven knows what world of poetry, hidden away, too inaccessible, too intangible, too unreal in fact ever to be brought into the open, or to serve, as the poetry of life rightly should serve, in harnessing thought and action together, turning life into a disinterested adventure. Argue which way you will, from the individual to society or from society to the individual, it is the same. Just as the American attitude toward the State has been the attitude of an oratorical, vague and self-sufficient patriotism which has not based itself on a concrete interest in public affairs; just as, in consequence of this, the “invisible government” of business has swept in and taken possession of the field and become the actual government under which we live, overgrowing and supplanting the government we recognize: so also in the case of the individual. The cherishing of ideals that are simply unmapped regions to which nobody has the least intention of building roads, the baccalaureate sermons that are no just organic comment on the educational system that

precedes them—just these themselves strengthen the forces from below; the invisible government of self-interest, built up carefully from the beginning by maxim and example, by the contact of everything that in the actual world passes as actual, takes possession of the field.

Twenty, even ten, years ago, it would have been universally assumed that the only hope for American society lay in somehow lifting the Lowbrow elements in it to the level of the Highbrow elements. But that quickening realism which belongs to contemporary thought makes it plain on the one hand that the mere idealism of university ethics, the mere loftiness of what is called culture, the mere purity of so-called Good Government, left to themselves, not only produce a glassy inflexible priggishness on the upper levels which paralyzes life and turns its professors to dust; but that the lower levels have a certain humanity, flexibility, tangibility which are indispensable in any programme: that Tammany has quite as much to teach Good Government as Good Government has to teach Tammany, that slang has quite as much in store for so-called culture as so-called culture has for slang—that the universities, while most emphatically not becoming more “practical,” must base their disinterestedness on human, moral, social, artistic, and personal needs, impulses, and experience.

*But society cannot become humane of itself; and it is for this reason that the movements of Reform are so external and so superficial. The will to reform springs from a conviction *ex post facto*, and is strictly analogous to the “culture” of business men who retire at sixty and collect pictures. Nothing so exemplifies it as the spectacle of Mr. Carnegie spending three quarters of his life providing steel for battleships and the last quarter of it trying to abolish war. He himself surely has not been conscious of any inward revolution; plainly with him as with others the will to create disorder and the will to reform it spring from the same inner condition of mind. The impetus of Reform springs from a hope that at least a sufficient number of reformers can be trained and brought into the field to match the forces of business—the one group serving precisely to undo the work of the other group, creating order precisely so far as*

the other group has created disorder. The ideal of Reform, in short, is the attainment of zero.

The only serious approach to society is the personal approach; and what I have called the quickening realism of contemporary social thought is at bottom simply a restatement for the mass of commercialized men, and in relation to issues which directly concern the mass of men as a whole, of those personal instincts that have been the essence of art, religion, literature—the essence of personality itself—since the beginning of the world. It will remain of the least importance to patch up politics, to become infected with social consciousness, or to do any of the other easy popular contemporary things unless, in some way, personality can be made to release itself on a middle plane between vaporous idealism and self-interested practicality; unless, in short, self-fulfilment as an ideal can be substituted for self-assertion as an ideal. On the economic plane that implies socialism; on every other plane it implies something which a majority of Americans in our day certainly do not possess—an object in living.

V

It is perhaps just as well that Cervantes lived and died in Spain three hundred years ago; if he had been born an American of the twentieth century he might have found that George Ade had killed the possibility of satire. Yet his fable, which has its personal bearing in all men always, has in America a social bearing that is perhaps unique. Don Quixote is the eternal Highbrow under a polite name, just as Sancho Panza is the eternal Lowbrow; and if the adorable Dulcinea is not a vision of the night and a daily goal in the mind of our professors, then there is no money in Wall Street. One admits the charm of both extremes, the one so fantastically above, the other so fantastically below the level of right reason—to have any kind of relish for muddled humanity is necessarily to feel the charm in both extremes. But where is all that is real, where is personality and all its works, if it is not essentially somewhere, somehow, in some not very vague way, between?

MORE ABOUT "INSPIRED MILLIONAIRES" *

An English View

WILLIAM MACDONALD

"INSPIRED MILLIONAIRES" is attracting much attention, but no more than is fairly due to it as the most American contribution to literature which America has given us. I do not, with Mr. Dickinson, exclude Whitman in making this comparison: for Whitman is at most two-thirds American, and one-third a caprice of those remoter gods who send into the world from time to time a being without kindred. It is an eloquent testimony, indeed, to the urgency of Mr. Lee's theme and the originality of his thesis that the arresting literary qualities of his work have been but little commented on. Serious readers have felt that they must go straight to the matter of a book so tense with actuality, and say right there, for the relief of the public mind or their own, what they think of it as a challenge or a prophecy.

That it should be received without question or understood without misprision was hardly to be expected in the case of a work written against the background of a different and a distant social scene from ours: written, also, with the perilous intellectual play—with the audacities, the implicitness, the essential and dynamic ambiguities even—of a mind which, having wrestled as it were with God for the truth, has won its own deliverance from a good many of the besetting prepossessions of all of us before beginning to speak. A mind in that condition, which sees things clean, has to pay a penalty in kind for bringing into its discourse with the world so little of the rather sticky mental context—the passions, the prejudices, the misconceptions and the honest moral stupidities—that the world does its thinking with. The penalty is doubtless foreseen and is paid gladly, to save time, and many preparatory and detergent treatises. What Mr. Lee says of a new truth may in fact be said of every real truth-bringer: "You may know it by the fine manly intelligent dan-

* By Mr. Gerald Stanley Lee, author of *Crowds*.