Bostonia and Bohemia

LETTERS AND JOURNALS OF THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

VARIATIONS. By James Gibbons. Huneker. New York: Scribners.

"WHEN we get back," William James wrote to an old friend in 1900, "we must see each other daily, and may the days of both of us be right long in the State of Massachusetts! Bless her!" It was an amiable confirmation of Holmes's comment forty years earlier: "Boston Statehouse is the Hub of the Solar System. You couldn't pry that out of a Boston man if you had the tire of all creation straightened out for a crowbar."

In the place called Boston today there are very few genuine Bostonians. Most of those who consider themselves such are like Aldrich, but not as candid as he was when he confessed that he wasn't really Boston—only Boston-plated. The real Frogpondian must trace back—like Emerson's Concord roster—Bulkeley, Hunt, Willard, Hosmer, Merriam, Flint—unchallenged to the seventeenth century. That is why

William James was almost presumptuous in speaking so fervently of Beacon Hill and its dependencies; and why Henry Adams could be considered hardly more than an adopted son before he became a prodigal. ("My deah! Before *John* Adams, who ever heard of the family? And as for *his* social position! Well, really—"). There are, however, some few scions of the Mayflower who really belong to the place, and whose actions truly smack of the soil.

One is baffled to say just what is the root difference between Boston and Philadelphia. The clever bromides about the surviving traditions and all that are interchangeable. Yet, somehow, the Boston tradition seems to have been mainly centripetal, while Philadelphia seems to have tossed off more coruscations to the outer world. At any rate, against the many Bostonians of stable single-mindedness Philadelphia offered as many examples of facile versatility. This is what John Adams himself recognized when he wrote back from the Continental Congress to Mistress Abigail (whose mother was a Quincy!): "I met Mr. Francis Hopkinson. . . . He is one of your pretty little, curious, ingenious men. . . . I wish I had leisure and tranquillity of mind to amuse myself with those elegant and ingenious arts of painting, sculpture, statuary, architecture and music. But I have not." And it is this same contrast that nearly a hundred and fifty years later is suggested by the posthumous volumes of Thomas Wentworth Higginson and James Gibbons Huneker.

Mr. Higginson was born in Boston in 1823, played with little James Lowell, went to Harvard, preached himself out of orthodoxy, joined the anti-slavery forces, backed John Brown, headed a negro regiment in the Civil War, and nad a hand in the early numbers of the *Atlantic*. He wrote books on American history and literature, on "Common Sense About Women," on "Old Cambridge" and "Cheerful Yesterdays" and "Contemporaries" and "Carlyle's Laugh," and did lives of Whittier and Longfellow and Margaret Fuller. He knew Arnold and the Brownings and Fitzgerald and Sainte-Beuve and Stepniak. He read dispassionately. He edited the poems of Emily Dickinson and ignored Whitman. He lived broadly a life of affairs, but he was a local man, in the best sense a hearty provincial, a fit representative of Bostonia.

Mr. Huneker was born in Philadelphia in 1860, his grandfather an Irish poet, his father a musician. He passed by way of a military and a law school to ten years as student and teacher of piano. He enjoyed much residence and frequent travel abroad, though for his last thirty years until his death in 1921 he was a New York journalist, writing on music, the drama, and painting. One of his favorite phrases became the title of *The Seven Arts Magazine*. He wrote on Chopin and Liszt, on the modern European dramatists in "Iconoclasts" and the painters in "Promenades of an Impressionist"; on New

York in "The New Cosmopolis"; on whatever he chose to in "Ivory Apes and Peacocks" and "Unicorns" and "Bedouins"; and on himself in "Steeplejack" (two volumes). He knew George Moore and Joseph Conrad and Antonin Dvorak and Bernard Shaw and Caruso. He read omnivorously, and everything he wrote was a palimpsest on which the traces of his reading were apparent. He delighted in Flaubert and Verlaine, and had recovered bravely from Whitmania. He was a cosmopolitan of the sidewalks, and to the end of his life a boyishly naughty Bohemian.

Mr. Higginson in his declining years published "Part of a Man's Life," and Mr. Huneker gave out his autobiography just before his sudden death. Now appear Higginson's "Letters and Journals" culled from all along his life, and Huneker's last journalistic articles —"Variants." We could easily dispense with the autobiographies.

It would hardly be fair to judge Colonel Higginson by what he issued at eighty-two. In addition to local reminiscences (the gist of which is in earlier volumes), he wrote on children's sayings, on butterflies in poetry (the real winged things, not ephemeral poets), on little read books (praising a man who had read Gibbon four times), and on the close of the Victorian epoch. Only one chapter out of the fourteen seems to have been written because he really wanted to say something: "The Cowardice of Culture," which decries the cheap pessimism of the perennial calamity-wailer. In the rest of the book he figures as the venerable talker whose distinction obliges his listeners to conceal incipient yawns.

Mr. Huneker's much heralded "Steeplejack" is no better in its way and it would be less than charitable to judge him by it. Thirty years in the opera house, the theatre, the concert hall, and the art galleries, with thirty years of intimate conversation and professional interviewing and cormorant reading and eating and drinking, might have marshalled for us a rather splendid pageant of the arts. Instead, we are taken into the side streets, and get little except a vague impression from out of the beery, shrill-voiced confusion —Dvorak with his nineteenth cocktail, de Pachmann fiercely demanding his cognac, Agnani drunk, and big nights when the celebrants were brought home in the cold, gray dawn, under the pilotage of benevolent cabbies. We are dining with a gourmand rather than with an epicure.

The two posthumous volumes are more substantial. From Colonel Higginson's Journals we get a view of a stalwart optimist in the midst of a substantial community. At twenty-five he was challenging the leaders of his denomination in open convention. "I told them that the one thing that interested us (younger men) in them was the capacity we saw in them of being better than they were." Soon he was on cordial terms with Professor Crosby. "He has a taste for heretics, and comes to see me constantly." At thirty-eight, according to his own account, he was a tol-

erantly amused pariah in Cambridge. He was an eclectic liberal, very conscious of the difference between himself and the miscellaneous "come-outers" who cheered for everything new on general principles. At forty-three he alluded to an Englishwoman as "very radical" because she wished women to vote and be physicians, and a year or two later he described Albert Dicey and James Bryce in the same terms. Another young man to whom he gives more space was later to share diplomatic honors with Mr. Bryce. Here is a description of a military picnic which was "got up" for a young Mr. Hay, President Lincoln's private secretary, "a nice young fellow, who unfortunately looks about seventeen, and is oppressed with the necessity of behaving like seventy. . . . About four came the band, the officers, the young ladies, General Saxton without his livelier half, Mr. Hay laboring not to appear newmown."

Higginson's humor was always pleasantly unforced, as when he wrote of Philadelphia that he had been to the opera and then home with "the Petersons, who have $100,000 a year from *Peterson's Magazine*, and horrify the ancient Philadelphia families by the good taste with which they spend their money."

Mr. Higginson's breeding was far more distinguished than his culture—or "cultivation," as he preferred to call it. In ethics as in etiquette he had the sort of impeccability that seems rather to be born of natural balance than of self-control. Of beauty he was as abstinent as Thoreau was of his material things. He liked literary men, but had no passion for books; as for the other arts, if his pages were to be the sole evidence of them, the evidence would be *nil*. He revealed at times a happy gift of phrase, but no style or even stylisms. He was a thoroughly Saturday Clubbish manner of man, good-humored, cheerful, self-contained, capable of a good fight though anything but pugnacious, and withal a conscious and reasoned optimist.

Mr. Huneker's "Variants," the publishers' prefatory note explains, is composed of essays written after "Bedouins," and "lacking the advantage of his personal selection and supervision." It might have been well to add that it is also composed in part of striking passages already printed in "Steeplejack"—notably four picturesque ones on Dvorak, de Pachmann, Georg Brandes, and Theodore Roosevelt. In the first-third of the book, in a baker's dozen of essaylets, Mr. Huneker makes various excursions into the fields of literature, etching, painting, and sociology. There are two papers on George Moore, two on Flaubert, two on etchings and prints, and one each on Pater, Baudelaire, and Cézanne. And then music and musicians for the remaining two-thirds—Huneker at home and in the mood for anything from Cosima Wagner to Oscar Hammerstein, from Bach to Offenbach.

It is a jolly youngster at play. The man who wrote these pages was an abounding individual who loved persons

and personalities, and was a personality himself. He cared more for conditions than for theories; principles were of little interest to him, but the applications of principles were all-engrossing. He loved talk for its own sake, and was much given to monologue. Like that great but unrecognized modern genius, Robinson's Captain Craig, Huneker would not have been Huneker without his verbosity. His type, in fact, is never succinct. They are extravagant of time, of gesture, of words. Out of the abundance of their hearts their mouths speak all sorts of irresponsible, whimsical, and sometimes exalted extravagance.

Instead of mentioning a type, he bombards you with twenty names. Here is the third sentence in the book: "Buddha, Jesus and Moses; Arius and Aristophanes, Mohammed and Napoleon, Paul and Augustine, Luther and Calvin, Voltaire and Rousseau, Darwin and Newman, Liszt and Wagner, Kant and Schopenhauer—here are a few names of men. . . ." There's no denying it! In "Pennell Talks About Etching," the subject of one sentence is composed of twenty-six names of art critics. He once wrote of himself, anent G. B. S., "George probably thought of me as a pie-eyed youth who was all roses and raptures." Such an estimate would have had a large element of truth even when Mr. Huneker's youth had come to three-score years.

Yet this incorrigible sophomore, who in his valedictory wrote of "spiritual tapeworms," "the lascivious caterwaulings of the contemporary poets, unvarnished damphools," "going to the theater with impunity and another fellow's girl," and so on, and so on, and so on,—this same man could write with nicest discrimination of the prose rhythms of Pater and Flaubert, and, when he chose, showed that he could do what he was talking about. For example: "The gallery is rather narrow, but long and lofty; the light is diffused and gentle. A tiny staircase leads to mysterious retreats where, Piranesi-like, may be descried other galleries, though not peopled by prisoners of the fantastic Italian etcher. A familiar voice welcomes the visitor who, weary of the monotonous mobs on the avenue, finds here a haven where, surrounded by the ingratiating arts of black-and-white—mezzotint, etching, lithograph, and line-engraving—he may soothe his soul and rest his bones."

One cannot quite imagine Mr. Higginson and Mr. Huneker in the same company. The Bostonian would doubtless, after escaping with a sigh of relief, have referred to the Bohemian as "very radical." It is just as well not to speculate on what the Bohemian, escaping with murmured expletives, would have called the Bostonian. No room has yet been built that would have held them both comfortably. Yet the country was big enough for both of them, and needs both their kinds, and is the better for both of their active, communicative lives.

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