

## LITERARY REALISM ON THE RESERVE, OR "HUCK ON THE CUYAHOGA"

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In his book, *Crumbling Idols* (1894) in an essay "On Veritism," Hamlin Garland praised the West as the source for distinctly American literature. Although doubtless inspired to some extent by Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" or Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for an American poet, Garland's statement points up the importance of the Western lands as an inspiration for American writers to forge a new kind of literature:

For twenty years an infinite drama has been going on in those wide spaces of the West -- a drama that is as thrilling, as full of heart and hope and battle, as any that ever surrounded any man; a life that was unlike any ever seen on earth, and which should have produced its characteristic literature, its native art chronicle . . . It is only to the superficial observer that this country seems colorless and dull; to the veritist it is full of burning interest, greatest possibilities. (144-145)

Two things should be noticed in Garland's essay: his interest in the West and the concept which he calls "veritism," which the modern reader would be more likely to recognize as realism. Garland suggests that the history of the West and the development of realism are linked, a thesis that has particular relevance for the Western Reserve. For it was William Dean Howells, Ohio native and resident of the Reserve, who was the most influential and persistent advocate of literary realism in America in the second half of the nineteenth century. His own works, as well as his advocacy of other American realists writers, were important in creating American realism.

There is much in Howells' biography as well as in his literary output that indicates an early allegiance to close observation of real life. His father was a newspaper editor, and when the Howells' family moved to Ashtabula and then to Jefferson in the 1830's, the young William Dean Howells was quick to note the differences from southwestern Ohio where he had spent his childhood. He was impressed in Jefferson by the level of education, as well as the unique mixture of people that differed so from his early home. In *Years of My Youth* (1916), he describes the family's first impressions of northeastern Ohio:

Our county was the most characteristic of that remarkable group of counties in northern Ohio called the Western Reserve, and forty years ago the population was almost purely New England in origin, either by direct settlement from Connecticut, or indirectly after the sojourn of a generation in New York State. We were ourselves from southern Ohio, where the life was then strongly tinged by the adjoining life of Kentucky and Virginia, and we found these transplanted Yankees cold and blunt in their manners; but we did not undervalue their virtues. They were very radical in every way, and hospitable to novelty of all kinds. I imagine that they tested more new religions and new patents than have ever been heard of in less inquiring communities. (88)

The Howells family--particularly William's father who had been a radical and a utopian himself--were struck also by the intellectual tone that was so integral a part of life in a small, western village. They observed that orthodox religious groups were foundering on the Reserve; the Congregationalists in Jefferson no longer held regular services, but

if our villagers were not religious, they were in a degree which I still think extraordinary, literary. Old and young they read and talked about books, and

better books than people read and talk about now, as it seems to me, possibly because there were not so many bad ones . . . I might exaggerate the fact, but I do not think I have done so, or that I was much deceived as to a condition which reported itself, especially to me whose whole life was in books, through the sympathy I met in the village houses. (106-107)

It is tempting to look in Jefferson for the source of Howells' lifelong commitment to realism. He defined the realistic movement in many essays in the *Atlantic* and *Harper's Weekly* and in his literary biographies, *My Literary Passions* and *Years of My Youth*, as well as in his letters. He admired European realists, but there is little doubt in Howells' writings that American realism differs from that of the Europeans.

Some differences lie in the movement's derivation from the writings of the local colorists, who had extended the predilections of the romantics but with a stronger commitment to direct observation of local landscape and regional particularity. In "Criticism and Fiction," Howells writes, "A great number of very good writers are instinctively trying to make each part of the country and each phase of our civilization known to all the other parts; and their work is not narrow in any feeble or vicious sense" (*My Literary Passions* 260). An early letter from Ashtabula confirms Howells' own ability to record a scene in careful detail:

I cannot describe to you my delight on seeing the lake. I would willingly walk to it every day. It is a thing which never loses its interest. Yesterday when we were there the waves were running about three feet high, and the lake was covered with white-caps, and the shore was one continuous line of foam. It was fine swimming [sic], I can assure you. The waves come floating over you, and knocking you about, lifting you off your feet, and placing you in water knee deep, and then come roaring back, covering you all over. After the late hard storm, our harbor presents rather a dilapidated appearance. (*Letters* 1:6)

Though Howells did write two nominally "Ohio" novels--*The Kentons* (1902) and *The Leatherwood God* (1916)--unfortunately he never exploited his early years on the Reserve in fiction. Several critics have pointed out the obvious influence of village life on his works,<sup>1</sup> but only in his letters and biographical works does the Reserve play a significant role.

In his several reminiscences of childhood, Howells did explore the theme of boyhood which became one of the hallmarks of American realism. In *My Year in a Log Cabin* (1893), *A Boy's Town* (1890), and *Years of My Youth* (1916), Howells unsentimentally depicted the antebellum West with a humorous and critical eye. Through these works he won the admiration of his longtime friend Samuel L. Clemens, whose fictions of American boyhood are at the center of American literary life in the years between the Civil War and 1900. The Howells/Clemens correspondence delineates clearly the important role played by Howells in encouraging Clemens while he wrote the Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn books; Howells observed in *Harper's Weekly*, 13 February 1897,

I like Huck Finn, as I like the Prince and the Pauper, for the reality in it . . . . Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are enduring types of universal boyhood; their lifelikeness substantiates the truth of local conditions already passed. (155)

Clemens had written Howells on 27 November 1890, "A Boy's Town is perfect--perfect as the perfectest photograph the sun ever made" (Anderson 293).

Exactly to what extent Howells' boyhood reminiscences fulfill the requirements of realism or whether they rightfully belong to the local color movement is a question debated by literary historians and critics. Twain's fictions are scrutinized in similar fashion, for they bear many of

the identifying marks of the local colorists. Warner Berthoff in the *Ferment of Realism* points out that

The liveliest local-color writing . . . continued to come mostly from those regions that had been settled and built up earliest but were now being left behind in the economic and social revolution of the post-Civil War years. (90)

Alfred Habegger in his recent collection of essays, *Gender, Fantasy, and Realism in American Literature*, excludes Twain from the ranks of the realists (as did Henry James) because of the nostalgia he feels motivates much of his work. "Local color's devotion to odd places and speech ways and curious veins and outcroppings from the past all reflected a deep rejection of the contemporary world" (104), he states, but goes on to include a Clevelander, Constance Fenimore Woolson, among the realists; he describes her as "one of the best of novelists on the border between local color and realism" (105).

In a series of stories set in the pietist community of Zoar, there is no question that Woolson revels in depicting "odd places and speech ways," though at the same time she analyzes the powerful conflicts within a community which can finally crush the lonely and the sensitive. In the story "Wilhelmine," published originally in *The Atlantic Monthly* in June, 1875, Woolson describes Zoar life in language that would do credit to a sixteenth century Italian pastoralist:

The silver-haired shepherd came last with his staff and scrip, and the nervous shepherd dog ran hither and thither in the hope of finding some cow to bark at; but the comfortable cows moved on in orderly ranks, and he was obliged to dart off on a tangent every now and then, and bark at nothing, to relieve his feelings. Reaching the paved court-yard each cow walked into her own stall, and the milking began. All the girls took part in this work, sitting on little stools and singing together as the milk frothed up in the tin pails . . . (45)

In the course of the story, the narrator is made aware of her romantic notions brought along from industrial Cleveland; the reality behind this bucolic paradise is the sad death of a young girl caught between the utopian ideals of a fanatic religious community and the encroaching presence of post-Civil War America. Woolson is able to maintain a tenuous balance on a tightrope between unthinking pastoralism and cynicism of the type that would characterize the revolt-from-the-village movement of the next generation.

Contemporaneous with Woolson and fully a decade before the publication of *Huck Finn*, another child of the Reserve, Albert Gallatin Riddle, was also launching a literary career. Except locally, his novels have been forgotten, but they unquestionably bear a second, modern, look for the ways in which they are analogous to the works of his more illustrious contemporaries. Born in 1816 in Massachusetts, Riddle moved with his family when a year old to Geauga County; he later represented that county in the U. S. House of Representatives as well as recording his recollections of the Reserve in a series of novels. His first novel, *Bart Ridgeley: A Story of Northern Ohio* (1872), derives much of its authenticity from Riddle's own experience as a student of Seabury Ford and from his own law practice.<sup>2</sup> In his typescript memoirs in the Western Reserve Historical Society, Riddle says, "Bart's words and deeds were mine -- his genius, good looks, and successful love, his own" (*Fifty-five years* 42).

Bart Ridgeley is not optimistic about the chances for an American novel, especially from the West. In this passage he answers the pressing questions of Miss Giddings -- the novel's love interest -- about his own pursuit of literature:

I like books, as I like art and music, but I somehow feel that our state of society at the West and indeed our civilization is not ripe enough to reach a first excellence

in any of these high branches of achievement. Our hands are thick and hard from grappling with the rough savagery of our new rude continent. We can construct the strong works of utility, and shall meet the demands for the higher and better work when that demand actually exists. (BR 280-281)

Ridgeley's criticism echoes a letter of W. D. Howells to James Russell Lowell, written 31 August 1860:

For myself, I believe that so far as Western Poetry has deserved recognition, it has received it. The sad error has been on the part of its friends, the belief that cockle and cheat with sufficient cultivation will turn to grain, and they have delved and dug about in fields, that would never have yielded anything but weeds, whether upon the Ohio, or the Charles. (*Letters* 1:60)

But the West was unsuppressible. The year after the publication of *Bart Ridgeley*, A. G. Riddle published *The Portrait: A Romance of the Cuyahoga Valley*, which cast an unblinking eye on the banks of the Cuyahoga. Here is to be found no charming or sentimentalized picture of youth but in some ways an unvarnished view of life in the 1830s on the Reserve. Fred, the hero, though his noble birth is ultimately revealed, nevertheless begins life in rude and unpleasant circumstances. When the novel appeared, no less a Reserve prominence than James A. Garfield reviewed it in the *Washington Republican* which was reprinted on 18 February 1874 in the *Geauga Republican*, suggesting that Riddle might be founding "a new school of novel writing" (Wehner 572).

Howells had written in *A Boy's Town*, "It seems to me that the best way to get at heart of any boy's town is to take its different watercourses and follow them into it" (726). He was remembering the rivers and canals of southern Ohio, but the statement is redolent of the metaphoric, mythic power of the river in American literature. We think, obviously, of Twain's Mississippi; Riddle's use of the Cuyahoga River in the *Portrait*, though not so laden with significance as the Mississippi, still has a central role for Fred's fated orphanhood. Riddle conveys an almost naturalistic sense of Fate, coupled with Time, on the river:

Fred looked about him, and went with a saddened face to the side of the river where his little canoe still floated; he thought of his two or three traps, set above, but somehow he did not care for them; and carefully baling the water from his boat, he loosed its fastening, and with his little paddle pulled himself across to the other bank. Here he landed; and pushing his boat out again into the rapid current, bow down stream, he abandoned it to its fate. (*Portrait* 29)

Riddle shares with Twain and Howells an affection for the past as a source of literary inspiration, though like them he is never blind to unpleasantness. Riddle's depiction of Joseph Smith, and his sojourn in Hiram in 1831-32, based on Riddle's first-hand experience of the Mormon prophet, is a unique early view of the erotic power which Smith held over his followers:

On the couch of reception, in the Pavilion of Vision, arrayed in a loose silken robe, which left the throat exposed, reclined the Prophet, in the trance of expectation, and so disposed that a circle of softened and rose-colored light rested like a halo about his head. A subtle perfume pervaded the room . . . (97)

The novel's depiction of a young man's journey from innocence to experience, while in no way the equal of Twain's Huck finding his conscience on the Mississippi, is nevertheless honest and fairly credible with many of the same fictional elements Twain was to use a decade later. Riddle's depictions are so true that more than a century later it is still possible to use the novel

as a guide to the Hiram-Mantua area. Riddle spoke of his love of the area in October, 1888, in the *Magazine of Western History*:

Few men have ever so intensely loved every outdoor thing, from birds and trees to hills and streams, as did I. Exquisite Newbury was my first and strongest love; then Mantua, where I lived from twelve to past fifteen; then Auburn between them; Russell west, Monson north, and oldest Burton east of it . . . It was only after my removal to Washington that I came to fully realize my passionate love for that beautiful region. (500)

Howells, writing to Edgar W. Howe in 1884, enthusiastic about receiving a copy of *A Story of a Country Town*, indicates how deeply the Western experience had affected his adherence to realism:

Consciously or unconsciously, it is a very remarkable piece of realism and whether it makes you known or not it constitutes your part of the only literary movement of our times that seems to have vitality in it. I have never lived as far West as Kansas, but I have lived in your country town, and I know it is every word true, down to the perpetual Scriptural disputes of the inhabitants. Fairview and its people are also actualities, which even if I had never seen them -- and I have -- your book would persuade me of. (*Letters* 3:96)

In Woolson, Riddle, and Howells -- as in John Hay and Charles W. Chesnutt for whom there is neither time nor space here -- the experience of the Western Reserve provided locale and inspiration. Hamlin Garland had bravely pronounced that "in every town in the interior there are groups of people whose firmness of conviction and broad culture make them the controlling power in all literary work . . . and their judgments are not dependent on New York or London" (146). Painesville, Cleveland, Mantua, Jefferson, for a time at least, were also the measure of realism in American literary life.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William D. Baker, *William D. Howells: The Influence of Ohio on his Life and Works* (Columbus: State Library of Ohio, 1979) and B. A. Sokoloff, "William Dean Howells and the Ohio Village: A Study in Environment and Art," *American Quarterly* 11 (Spring, 1959), 58-72.

<sup>2</sup> Howells mentions Riddle only once in his correspondence; on 16 February 1873 he responds to his father, W. C. Howells, "I haven't seen the novel [*Bart Ridgeley*] by Riddle of which you speak, but I dare say it will be sent to the magazine" (*Letters* 2:14). It is unlikely that they were not acquainted since their circle of friends both on the Reserve and in Washington contained many of the same people. Much of *Bart Ridgeley* is set in Jefferson where Bart is a student of Joshua Giddings.

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