

“EDITHA”—A (REALIST-IDEALIST) CRITIC’S STORY

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Abstract: Though one of William Dean Howells’s most frequently anthologized pieces, “Editha” may be said to have attracted rather sparse, meager scholarship and little critical attention. As “the father of American realism” himself showed, in both his life and work, a rather unusual contradiction between his critical (realist) thinking and the (idealist) “genteel tradition of his imaginative writing, this paper attempts to show that “Editha” was written more by the critic than the fiction writer, a fact that seems to be apparent in the deliberate and insistent focus on language as such, on “words,” the almost exaggerated intertextuality, the combination of realism and naturalism and romantic subjectivity, and even the choice of the title itself.

Keywords: Howells, “editha,” realism, war, contradiction

Mostly self-educated (almost no formal schooling at all—hardly one year), novelist, short-story writer, essayist, critic, memorialist, playwright, biographer, translator..., William Dean Howells (1837-1920)—the author of over one hundred books in these and other genres, finally included in the 41-volume edition of his Complete Works—has been variously described as “the most influential novelist, editor and critic of his generation...,” and as having been “at the center of American literary culture for over fifty years” (Schamhorst), a “dominant critical voice” and “arbiter of taste and fashion” in literature, or the “Dean of American Letters” (1999 book by J. W. Crowley)—so, the most powerful and valuable literary critic in the country from 1870 to 1900; still, both his fiction and politics have been relatively ignored (as tainted), mainly as a result of his inability to practice his own theoretical assertions. As a matter of fact, in a letter to his father (Letters Home, 2009), he admitted that “it is a comfort to be right theoretically and to be ashamed of one’s self practically...”—i.e. a rift between his views and his actions (literary action included); so what we are looking at in this case is two different personalities, mainly that of the critic (and essayist) and of the literary creator properly speaking (and politician, as he also openly admitted his political hypocrisy).

As to his “literary hypocrisy,” that his hostile critics (H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis most prominently) were only too eager to comment on, one could have used any of his two dozen novels (A Modern Instance—1882, The Rise of Silas Lapham—1885, or A Hazard of New Fortunes-- , among them), only his almost ubiquitously anthologized short story “Editha” seemed to fit our purposes best; i.e. something of a double contradiction, as Howells—though the story seems to be written more by the critic than the fiction writer—does not really “practice” in it his critical assertions.

And these assertions (especially in his 1891 Criticism and Fiction, but also elsewhere—My Literary Passions, Literature and Life, My Mark Twain..., in the Atlantic and Harper’s critical pieces on Zola, Ibsen, Turgenev, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Verga, Galdos, Tolstoy, Stendhal..., Shakespeare, Dickinson, James, Crane, Harte, Wharton, Norris, Jewett, Dunbar, Chestnutt...) refer mostly to realism and its relationships with idealism; his realism, simply put, consists in “the truthful treatment of material,” with the artist very close to the commonplace, the down-to-earth, “the average” (he was also described as the most democratic of novelists, or an “intimate historian of his age..., who produced the most

extended and accurate transcript of American life yet made by one man”—Carl Van Doren, 1921; and, in fact, the initiator of the school of American realists); still, his realism was also “selective, respectable, official,” with too much gentleness about it (*ibid.*); the writer’s moral obligation to portray the truth is accompanied by his subjective belief in the inherent goodness of humanity; Criticism and Fiction again: “if a book is true to what men and women know of one another’s souls /very little, in fact, from our po-mo point of view/ it will be true enough, and it will be great and beautiful.” the contradiction now is between what is objectively observed and what is assumed (namely and Emersonian America of “smooth surfaces”).

One great influence here was Tolstoy’s “Christian socialism,” resulting in his impossibility of adhering to his own moral code; so Howells failed to live and act (and create) according to the assertions about which he so faithfully wrote: “I am perpetually false to that sublime ideal myself, still the ideal remains with me, to make me ashamed that I am not true to it.” And so the critic can write about the obsessive relationship between the real and the ideal: “...the people who have been brought up on the ideal grasshopper, the heroic grasshopper, the impassioned grasshopper, the self-devoted, adventurous grasshopper, good old romantic grasshopper, must die out before the simple, honest, and natural grasshopper can have a fair field” (Criticism and Fiction). Not unexpectedly, (see *infra*) Richard Lovelace had written an “ode” in ten quatrains titled “The Grasshopper,” on the old Aesopian theme of the contrast between the ant and the singer (cricket, grasshopper, or cicada in different variants), between summer and winter, light and darkness, knowledge and ignorance (“Editha,” after its original publication in Harper’s Monthly in January 1905, was included in Howells’ 1907 volume Between the Dark and Daylight—Harper and Brothers).

Howells’s own “grasshopper story” is a thinly disguised summary of “Editha” (so the critic had had it in his mind at least ten years before its publication); otherwise, it is the story of Editha who attempts to make her fiancé, George, enlist for a war effort; he does finally enlist, is killed in the war, and Editha has her portrait painted in her lovely mourning outfit (irony is also pervasive in the story); in somewhat more detail: this is the beginning of the 1898 Spanish-American War; the setting is mostly Balcom’s Works in upstate New York (Edith Wharton thought Howells was “the first to feel the tragic potentialities of life in the drab American small town”—A Backward Glance, 1934, Chapter 7); Editha Balcom, eager for war but ignorant of its consequences, fives George Gearson, her fiance who opposes war (Howells seems to have always had a sense of guilt about his failure to take part in the Civil War of 1860-1865) some kind of ultimatum (in a letter): enlist or lose her; George goes to the town meeting and returns as an enlisted Captain of Company A; soon, on one of the first skirmishes, word comes he is dead; Editha sees Mrs. Gearson in western Iowa, is indicted by her, but gets over it (and George’s death) as female artist encourages her; or another critic’s synopsis (Schamhorst in Heath Anthology...): “a satire of a young woman who challenges her weak-willed lover to win glorious honors in battle”; or, once more, critic Howells’s own first paragraph (on the model of James’s “First Paragraph in The Ambassadors—a novel for which Howells and his diplomatic experience seems to have provided some inspiration—by Ian Watt): “The air was thick with the war feeling...; Editha sat looking out into the hot spring afternoon.../the war lasted from April 25 to August 12, 1898/... and panting with the intensity of the question whether she could let him go. She had decided that she could not let him stay... George!” According to Watt, writes-critics tend to concentrate a whole novel/story in their first paragraphs as a result of having thought their narratives backwards, as it were.

As far as the relationship realism/idealism goes, one tends to believe that most (real-istic) men would not want to die for a loved woman, while most (real-istic) women would not send their fiancés to die in a war; hence, for one thing, the story is “not realistic” (Michael O.

Bellamy). But here is Howells again: “Is it /the story/ true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual /rather than real?/ men and women?” One is no longer sure, as the advocated focus on the democratic, the normal and/or the commonplace is here dominated by the ideal, sentimental, aristocratic and even bizarre; as a matter of fact, the “father of American realism” shows distinct traces of not only romanticism, but also naturalism (Godspeed-Chadwick: the pre-existence of some determining factor or force; characters who are unconscious of such forces; the relations between sexes...); in fact, Editha possesses energy, will, and language, which isolates her from the typical gender role of that time period.

As far as language goes, the critic is once again the dominant writer: any novelist presumably uses words chosen with as much care as his effectiveness requires, but only the critic has a linguist’s attention as to how words really perform in the various contexts; thus, the critic’s Editha does not really understand the power of words (in their relation to experience); in fact, she herself thinks (also the critic, naturally) that she uses language in her war rhetoric without the responsibility of action; in her plea for his going to war, “she was conscious of parroting the current phrases of the newspapers, but it was no time to pick and choose her words;” while imitating patriarchal sentiment and masculine language from yellow journals and poets (Lovelace), Editha also “had noticed that strange (our emphasis) thing in men; they seemed to feel bound to do what they believed, and not think a thing was finished when they said it, as girls did;” one like Paul Grice would have his own things to say about this; this was in response to George’s “I’ve no business to think so, unless I act so, too.”

One cannot help noticing that George comes and goes three times: first, when he decides to leave for the town meeting without staying to dinner, the implied narrator notes the slight discrepancy between his thoughts and his “spoken words”; the second time he leaves “after the whirling words that seemed to fly away from her thoughts and refuse to serve them”; the third time he leaves for good—as a character who only returns as a word: “word comes that George is dead,” and no character in the story sees him so; and we also remember that George “knew... his father” only from words, from his mother’s “report of him and his opinions”; during this last meeting, Editha is required to say—“I am yours, for time and eternity—time and eternity;” and the critic’s comment is—“She liked the words; they satisfied her famine for phrases.”

It is also here that another synopsis of the story is inserted by the critic—Editha’s letter that threatens their engagement if he does not enlist: “George:--I understand when you left me. But I thing we had better emphasize your meaning that if we cannot be one /union!/
in everything we had better be one in nothing. So I am sending these things for your keeping till you have made up your mind.

I shall always love you, and therefore I shall never marry anyone else. But the man I marry must love his country first of all, and be able to say to me,

***‘I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honor more!’***

There is no honor above America with me. In this great hour there is no other honor. Your heart will make my words clear to you. I had never expected to say so much, but it has come upon me that I must say the utmost. Editha.”

There are several interesting things about this letter: first, “these things” refer to all her other letters, some gifts, the withered petals of the first flower, their engagement ring, and this very letter are all tied together in a packet with a red, white, and blue ribbon; as the writer presents her as pushing, threatening, and compelling, the critic makes her use “the Continental Colors” of the American flag (red=valor, white=innocence, blue=justice); then—“She thought she had worded her letter well, worded it in a way that could not be bettered; all

had been implied and nothing expressed”; or, as a matter of fact, very much the opposite: all expressed and very little implied, as most critics would have it; however, their final embrace, right then and right there, was “as ineffable as their words...” (our emphases throughout this paragraph); and still, the critic does not seem to have had enough of his intrusions, and makes George say: “What a gorgeous flower you are, with your red hair, and your blue eyes that look black now, and your face with the color painted out by the white moonshine;” so, Editha herself is the American flag, the “Old Glory,” American nationalism, the symbol of strength and unity (“we are united” by engagement at the very beginning of the story), a source of pride and inspiration—somewhat less inspiration here, one would think.

And last but not least, the text within a text within the text, i.e. the inter-intertext: the last two lines from “To Lucasta, Going to the Wars” by Richard Lovelace (1617-1657), one of the Cavalier Poets, living and writing alongside other “cavaliers” and “metaphysical” in the seventeenth century (Richard Crashaw, Abraham Cowley, Robert Herrick, Thomas Stanley, Andrew Marvell...); Lovelace/loveless (like George) had interpreted “Lucasta” as “lux casta,” “pure light” in a poem about sacrificing something valuable, precious, dear, for what one thinks is more important (honor, patriotic zeal) in the grand scheme of things (the greater appeal of Mars over Venus, in fact); and he also authored fable-like poems on animal life—“The Snayl,” “The Falcon,” “The Toad and the Spyder,” “A Fly Caught in a Cobweb,” and, of course, “The Grasse-hopper,” which the critic liked so much for its realism/idealism theme (supra).

Only the same critic has other quotes up his sleeve, as it were, so, as George describes the town meeting in which “there was a lot of speaking,” he can innocently quote from Julius Caesar (Shakespeare’s 1599 play)—“Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war.’ That was the style...” (Antony’s soliloquy after the murder of Caesar in III.1.274); and Iago’s drinking song from Othello is also in order, as they celebrated with libations: to Editha’s “never touch it again!,” George—“What! Not let the cannikin clink? Not let the soldier drink?...”(II.3.64-68).

But “Editha”’s ten pages of prose has room for more of the critic’s intertext: during their second meeting, George’s “you’ve had a long row to hoe” is from an old popular song during the Civil War (“When This Cruel War Is Over”); earlier in the story, after meeting Editha’s parents, our “hero” kept talking wildly (n.b.)—“What a thing it is to have a country that can’t be wrong, but if it is, is right, anyway; and to Editha’s “There is nothing now but our country...,” George’s “our country—right or wrong.” Here one needs to remember that captain, commodore, navy commissioner, and celebrated war hero (five navy ships named after him, stamps, silver certificates, and at least 46 communities, plus streets, schools, even an island—in Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Tennessee, Michigan...--also named after him) Stephen Decatur, Jr. (1779-1820), during a social gathering in April 1616, in an after-dinner toast, proclaimed: “Our country—in her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right, and always successful, right or wrong...;” in Alexander Slidell MacKenzie’s 1846 Life of Stephen Decatur, the whole thing became—“but right or wrong, our country,” with the variant—“my country, right or wrong, but still my country.”

Curiously enough, the determining event constituting the historical background, the Spanish-American War (taken lightly, in the story, by both George and Editha’s father) is never definitively mentioned in “Editha” (so, the hidden or implicit intertext); it started with the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana harbor and ended with the Treaty of Paris (American victory, Spain relinquishes sovereignty over Cuba to US, cedes Puerto and Guam to US, cedes Philippine Islands to Us for \$20 million—and thus, the decline of the Spanish Empire and the turning of US into a major world power); what is “not expressed” in the story is that, on June 22-24, the Fifth Army Corps under General William R. Shafter landed at Daiquiri and Siboney, east of Santiago, and on June 23 the Spanish troops initiated a skirmish with

Americans near Siboney, with four American skirmishers killed (the likes of George among them?).

Again “implied” is that the US had then an army of about 25,000, 50,000 new men being needed as volunteers, and 220,000 signed in, the final count being 2,910 dead; hotly contested in America, the war was seen as imperialistic, unjust, traumatic, dehumanizing (George’s mother), but there were also those (Editha) who say it as big, just and righteous, “sacred” and “glorious.” And so two fragments from this absent intertext looming in the historical background: this had been “a splendid little war” (John Hay, at the time the US Ambassador to the United Kingdom, former secretary to Abraham Lincoln, then Secretary of State under McKinley and Roosevelt, writing from London to his friend Theodore Roosevelt; see also title of a 2012 fantastic fiction book by Derek Robinson); and “the Spanish-American War was fomented on outright lies and trumped up accusations against the intended enemy...; the accidental sinking of the USS Maine was deliberately, and falsely, attributed to Spanish villainy...” (History Professor Paul Atwood in War and Empire of 2010).

In the story we are given both the realistic version of this war (George’s death, ironically diminished in its effects and implications) and the glamorized mask behind such large issues as nationalism, patriotism, power of sacrifice beyond insignificant personal matters such as engagements, or family relationships, because the ethics of any war, right or wrong, had long been defined by none other than Stephen Decatur; and there was also the even older renaissance romantic (Howells’s “romanticist”) superstition that the hero, whether a born fighter or a conscientious objector, must do something (like save her or perform some valorous act, as in Lovelace’s second stanza: “True, a new mistress now I chase,/The first foe in the field,/And with a stronger faith embrace/A sword, a horse, a shield...”) to win the heroine.

A heroine who, quite appropriately for a critic’s creation, is obviously interested in herself as a heroine of a sentimental story (Howells himself had been seen as a symbol of the “genteel tradition” and as a man of polite timidities), but who is, in some kind of random order, sentimental and selfish, unrealistic and immature, impressionable and arrogant, pretentious and ignorant, with a false sense of values and a lack of consideration for others; all in all, a questionable character and, as such, the real villain of the story (see also Susan Harris); and, at least at times, she also seems deranged—see infra (her sinister view that if George were to lose an arm, like his father in the Civil War, “then he would have three arms instead of two, for both of hers should be his for life;” and this was not long after “she thrilled with the sense of the arm round her; what if that should be lost?”).

In his turn, non-heroic George Gearson, with no bloodlust in him, is rather ambiguous (a possible projection of the writer/critic?): in his mother’s view, he was “always a timid boy,” “afraid of a good many things,” and “somewhat girlish” in appearance; a wishy-washy meek preacher turned lawyer, always thoughtful and musing but also of an ironic, even sardonic wit; no wonder he is part of Howells’s project of reversing gender roles, with Editha as the dominant and demanding personality.

Even so, she is totally unprepared to match witty, boisterous, and opinionated Mrs. Gearson (an invalid now; Elinor Howells’s last twenty years, until 1910, were marked by some chronic illness, and daughter Winifred had to be confined in an asylum), her cold bitterness and irony: she attacks Editha for her foolish and reckless actions, even for wearing mourning clothes, but mostly as the murderer of her son. Time for a (foreign) reader to wonder about the uncommon, unusual name, which—accidentally?—reached its apex popularity rank as a birth name—rather than Edith—in the US during the 1890-1899 decade, and thus continue the intertext by going to Britannica: editha is the small genus of large, brightly colored (maybe red, blue, and white?) sand wasps, predators of butterflies; after

capturing and paralyzing their prey, they strip the wings/arms?/ off before placing the bodies in an underground cell /burying them/ to serve as good for the wasp larva; some of these Carbonidae may prey on cicadas /i.e. tree crickets/or grasshoppers?/ with a loud song (mostly at night) and very short life cycles (sic!); so, does Mrs. Gearson identify Editha with a cicada killer? Does Howells? Is the reader invited to? Only thus, one runs the risk of seeing connections and intertexts all over the place (and wonder, for instance, if “Balcom’s Works” and Junius H. Balcom have got anything to do with Homer G. Balcom—1870-1938--, born in Chili, New York, the most prominent consulting structural engineer, responsible for designing the Empire State Building, the Rockefeller Center Plaza, Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, Grand Central Railroad Terminal and others; only these came later than Howells.

Irrespective of which of the three—Mrs. Gearson, Howells, the reader—was also an entomologist (not only a critic, which all three are), Editha misses Mrs. Gearson’s lesson about the ugly realities of war, and the false attitude of some people, including her fierce sarcasm: “I thank my God they killed him first, and he ain’t livin’ with their blood on his hands!” And so the critic/Howells finally needs a lady painter’s “empirical touch,” as Editha is going to have her portrait painted in her black crapes mourning outfit, a symbol of her refusal to acknowledge the reality of war and decide that George’s mother must be insane, or at least “vulgar”—a word that “solved the mystery that had bewildered her,”-- and begin to “live again in the ideal”; the critic’s (critical) realism and the imaginative writer’s non-realism can both occupy this privileged imaginative and imagined space.

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