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## HENRY BLAKE FULLER'S SATIRE ON HAMLIN GARLAND

by John Pilkington

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, perhaps no young American novelist showed so much promise as Chicago's Henry Blake Fuller. Praised extravagantly by such eastern critics of the Genteel Tradition as Charles Eliot Norton and James Russell Lowell for writing the delightful European idylls, *The Chevalier of Pensieri-Vani* and *The Chatelaine of La Trinité*, Fuller, in 1892, returned from Europe to Chicago, where everyone expected him to continue to write in the same romantic vein. But Fuller surprised everyone, including such close friends as Hamlin Garland, Zulime Taft, and her sculptor-brother, Lorado Taft, by publishing two hard-hitting, naturalistic novels that seemed to make him a disciple of William Dean Howells. *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893) and *With the Procession* (1895) exploded on a Chicago public that thought it belonged to the culturally elite because of the success of the World's Columbian Exposition. In Chicago, where art was booming, few respected the harsh comments Fuller made in his two novels about the Windy City. Many of his friends wished he had continued the gentle, romantic European stories that were half fiction and half travel.

Fuller did go back to Europe. He did write additional stories in what many believed was a continuation of the earlier vein; but when the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, Fuller returned to write some angry verses in which he denounced American conduct in the Philippines. *The New Flag* (1899) surprised his friends even more than his earlier fictional attacks on Chicago, and they viewed with dismay Fuller's pessimism over the plight of the arts and the artists in America. Fortunately, since not many copies of *The New Flag* circulated, few persons understood the depth of Fuller's feeling. Even fewer persons—probably not even Garland and Lorado

Taft—realized that already Fuller's best work was behind him; and they were pleasantly surprised when, in 1901, Fuller brought out another volume of satires full of humorous hits at many of his artist friends. They greeted *Under the Skylights* with open delight, even when, as in the case of Garland, they found themselves the targets of Fuller's fun. But beneath the laughter in the book, there was a much more serious purpose than they realized. It was, in fact, a statement of Fuller's artistic principles, a defense of his career, and a criticism of all he found bad in the Chicago art boom of the 1890's. As such, it deserves more attention than it has received.

*Under the Skylights* is a collection of three novelettes, or long short stories: "The Downfall of Abner Joyce," "Little O'Grady vs. the Grindstone," and "Dr. Gowdy and the Squash." The title of the book is probably a reference to the fact that during the 1890's many of the artists in Chicago, for example, Ralph Clarkson, Charles Francis Browne, Bessie Potter, and Lorado Taft, had studios on the tenth or top floor of the Fine Arts Building. Although neither a painter nor a sculptor, Hamlin Garland was considered one of this group. Most of them were also members of the famous "Little Room" that Fuller frequented for many years. Although he knew them well, visited them almost daily, and admired their work, he did not hesitate to laugh at their peculiarities and to differ with their ideas about art.

In "The Downfall of Abner Joyce," Fuller's principal target is his best friend, Hamlin Garland. The plot seems deceptively simple. Abner Joyce (Hamlin Garland), a farm boy, educated at Flatfield Academy, has achieved literary fame with his first book, *This Weary World* (Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads*), a book of twelve stories—"clods of earth"<sup>1</sup>—stressing the unpleasant aspects of farm life and advocating populist measures of agrarian reform. Although neither Garland nor *Main Travelled Roads* was mentioned by name, no one even reasonably literate could have failed to recognize the portrait. "*This Weary World*," wrote Fuller, "was grim and it was rugged, but it was sincere and it was significant" (p. 3). Indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Blake Fuller, "The Downfall of Abner Joyce," in *Under the Skylights* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1901), p. 4; hereafter references to "The Downfall of Abner Joyce" appear in the text.

added Fuller, only a farmer's boy himself, who had spent years behind the plow, could have given the book its earthy qualities. "The soil itself spoke," declared Fuller, "the intimate, humble ground; warmed by his own passionate sense of right, it steamed incense-like aloft and cried to the blue skies for justice" (p. 4). Some of the stories appeared composed "not so much by the hand as by the fist" (p. 5), and Abner with the fierce indignation of youth declared he would never compromise. Garland's zeal for land reform, for justice to the farmer, and for the populist cause, Fuller set forth with the mocking irony of an accomplished satirist which, in fact, Fuller was.

After leaving Flatfield Academy, Abner Joyce inbibed to the full the gospel of the "Readjusted Tax" (Henry George's Single Tax program) and incorporated his enthusiasm for it in his second novel, *The Rod of the Oppressor* (probably *Jason Edwards*), described by Fuller as very much like Abner's first book both in content and in tone. Fuller termed it "the first of the long series that Abner was to put forth with the prodigal ease and carelessness of Nature herself; and it was as gloomy, strenuous and positive as its predecessor" (p. 13). Both books reflect the blunt earnestness of the reformer and the socially ragged edges of the author. Abner harshly refuses to make the slightest compromise with wealth, gentility, or luxurious living.

Abner's reforming crusade, however, attracts attention, and soon the socially prominent Mrs. Potter Pence (possibly Mrs. Potter Palmer) invites him to her salon to meet the charming Medora Giles (Zulime Taft). Abner also begins to frequent the studios of other artists, especially those of Adrian Bond (Fuller himself) and Stephen Giles (Lorado Taft). Despite Abner's insults and occasional rudeness, they tolerate him with good humor. Abner has little regard for the book which Adrian is writing on *The City's Maw* (a glance at Fuller's *The Cliff-Dwellers*). Instead, Abner continues to advise his friends to "write about the things you know and like" (p. 41), and he recommends that Medora read his first book, *Jim McKay's Defeat*, or *Less Than the Beasts*, or *Regeneration*, the volume which he is currently writing.

Gradually Abner Joyce begins to enjoy his popularity and to realize that the ills of the world cannot be reformed by the Readjusted Tax or any other easy panacea. He finds he enjoys the society of persons whose dress is attractive and whose manners are refined. He falls in love with Medora, marries her, and learns to conform. In Fuller's words, Abner had dealt out his own fate and "crushed yet complacent, he lay among the ruins."

Yes, Abner had made his compromise with the world. He had conformed. He had reached an understanding with the children of Mammon. He—a great, original genius—had become just like other people. His downfall was complete.  
(p. 139)

Socially, Abner Joyce had adjusted to Chicago society. Unquestionably Fuller had drawn a portrait that was true to the life of Hamlin Garland, and the portrait could hardly be called flattering. Garland had come to Chicago with a reforming chip on his shoulder and been tamed by the charming and brilliant Zulime Taft with assistance, of course, from Lorado Taft, Fuller himself, and the other members of the "Little Room."

On the other hand, there can be little doubt that the satire which had found its mark had hurt, yet it is to Garland's credit that he never allowed Fuller's thrusts to interfere with their friendship. Very likely, he recognized the truth of Fuller's portrait. In his diaries and in his volumes of autobiography, however, Garland said nothing about Abner Joyce, though he recorded his immense enjoyment of the other two stories in *Under the Skylights*. When Fuller read the manuscript aloud to a small group which included Zulime, Garland, and Lorado Taft, Garland thought the other two stories both capital jokes.

Fuller's account of "The Downfall of Abner Joyce," however, went beyond the surface aspects of Garland's dress and manners. Fuller wanted to state a fundamental opposition between his own kind of writing and that advocated by Garland. In one brief scene, Fuller makes his point forcefully. Abner (Garland) and Adrian Bond (who speaks for Fuller) have been reading their unpublished

manuscripts aloud to a small group of friends. Abner has read the latest chapters he has written in *Regeneration*; and Bond, as Fuller says, "read a few pages to show what progress an alien romanticist was making in homely fields nearer at hand" (p. 58). In words that sound like a parody of Garland's *Crumbling Idols*, Abner endeavors to teach Bond:

The way to write about cows in a pasture . . . is just to write about them—in a simple, straightforward style without any slant toward history or mythology, and without any cross-references to remote scenes of foreign travel. (p. 58)

Indeed, Abner insists that "travel is a mistake" and that the writer had best leave the past alone. "Let the pasture furnish its own atmosphere," declares Abner.

Turning to Bond's use of reference to Theocritus, Abner declares, "Leave the past alone. Live in the present. The past,—bury it, forget it" (p. 59). But Fuller, whose knowledge of classical literature, sculpture, and architecture was, to say the least, comprehensive, could not resist a defense of the idols Garland was crumbling away. Bond replies: "So hard. Heir of the ages, you know. Good deal harder to forget than never to have learned at all" (p. 59). When pushed for a more specific defense of the Greeks, Bond declares, "They *finished* things. The temple wasn't complete till they had swept all the marble chips off the back stoop . . ." (p. 60). Finally, Bond says that he will stick to his regular field, which he defines as "griffins, gorgons, hydras, chimeras dire,—but no more cows. I was never meant for a veritist."

Fuller's argument, in the final analysis, rests upon taste rather than upon logic. Earlier in the story he had remarked through Adrian Bond that "I know I ought to . . . start in to accomplish something more vital, more indigenious—less of the marquise and more of the milkmaid" (pp. 40-41), but Fuller could never bring himself to admire the cow. And when Abner (Garland) enjoins him again to write, as all veritists must, about the things he knows, Bond states Fuller's dilemma in precise terms:

If to know and to like were one with me, as they appear to be with you! A boyhood in the country—what a grand beginning! But the things I know are the things I don't like, and the things I like are not always the things I know—oftener the things I feel. (p. 41)

Abner's reply was equally to the point. After admitting that Bond (Fuller) has style, Abner (Garland) adds that the great lack is "meat." And Bond ends the scene by conceding that "clearly the big thing, the sincere thing, the significant thing was beyond his reach. *The City's Maw* must remain unwritten" (p. 42).

Fuller had thought about these issues for many years. He could grasp the force of the arguments advanced by the realists and veritists who exhorted the American writer to deal with the local American scene "in a simple, straightforward style"—what Abner had called letting "the pasture furnish its own atmosphere." For Fuller, the local scene—the cow in the pasture—would mean Chicago, the hog-city, the black city, the ugly industrial city that he hated. To be successful, he would be forced to become a reporter instead of a writer—Abner refers to the artist as "the reporter sublimated" (p. 37). Worst of all, Fuller would have to abandon his concept of literature as the creation of beauty by the exercise of the imagination.

That Fuller felt strongly about the matter may be inferred from the fact that he never did write *The City's Maw* or anything like it. He had stated the case for the imagination, for the artist concerned primarily with beauty created mainly through form and style. Garland's position seems much closer to the naturalism that was to follow in Dreiser and his successors. Ironically, Garland, once settled amid the comforts of home provided by his wife, Zulime Taft Garland, lost much of his reforming zeal, and as the years passed, he became more and more sympathetic to Fuller's position. By 1901, when *Under the Skylights* was published, both men had already made their major contributions to American literature. At that time, however, only Fuller might have conceded the truth of this assertion.