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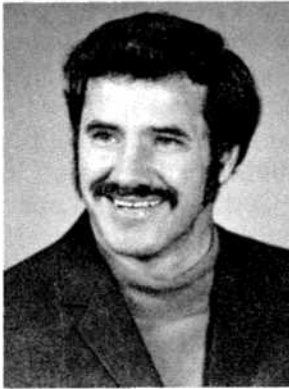
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# Howells' Debate With Himself About God

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Melville, as Lawrence Roger Thompson suggests, quarreled with God. The diminished force of God for the intelligentsia a generation later may be reflected by the fact that William Dean Howells, the pre-eminent literary figure of the last quarter of the 19th century, quarreled, not with God, but with himself about God. For Howells, God was less a Creator to shake one's fist at than an interesting subject for polemics. So his novels, his letters, and his various other writings reflect Howells' internal debates again and again, for until very late in his life, Howells could neither ignore Christianity nor accept it in faith.

This apparent ambivalence of Howells was first evident toward "Spiritistic Science"—man's contact with the spirit world—and then toward Christianity. Although an unimportant sidelight of traditional Christianity, "Spiritistic Science" interested

Howells all his life. Swedenborg, his spiritual forebear, had first heard voices from the spirit world in middle age when he was a reputable scientist, and this seems to have impressed Howells. For in *The Undiscovered Country*<sup>1</sup> he portrays Dr. Boynton sympathetically even though Boynton spends a good part of his life trying to make contact with the spirit world, and more particularly, with his deceased wife, by using (and abusing) his daughter Egeria as a medium.

Perhaps, though, Howells sympathizes more with Dr. Boynton's ultimate search for God than with his efforts to contact the spirit world. For when Egeria timidly objects to their attempt to contact the spirits, Boynton replies:

Let us beware how we refuse the light of our day, because the light

of the past still shines. Shines? Flickers! In many it is extinct. How shall faith and hope be rekindled? Egeria, you must not try to argue with me on this point.<sup>2</sup>

That may sound Emersonian, but Howells too is concerned about a diminishing spiritual life. He presents Dr. Boynton as an honest man interested in proving the existence of the spirit world, presumably to rekindle dying faith. And although the skeptical Ford, the newspaper reporter in the novel, thinks Boynton an "absurd dreamer," even Ford comes to sympathize with Boynton as a man.

Yet Howells' own position should not readily be identified with any one of Boynton's statements. For Boynton himself says of Ford's disbelief, "There is a fascination, which I can still recognize, in the clean surface which complete negation gives."<sup>3</sup> And certainly Ford, with his level-headed logic, is not a character to be dismissed as a radical or a fool. Howells apparently wants both sides to be considered tenable, for each is presented sympathetically.

Howells' sympathy for the Christian faith did not come from a stranger. He had been brought up in Swedenborgianism, whose tenets were derived from the four gospels and several Old Testament books. Probably because it was a rare religion, there were no churches specifically set up to propagate this faith. Consequently, Howells seldom went to church in his youth, getting his religious training instead from his father at home.

This may be the reason why in *The Undiscovered Country* Dr. Boynton makes a plea near the end of his life for ". . . a clergyman, a priest—I should like to know the feeling of such a man . . ." Boynton may be expressing Howells' awareness of his own peripheral view of

Christianity. But whether he felt this or not, certainly Howells could not forget his early religious training, as his recognition of man's moral responsibility clearly shows. Swedenborg had been a good teacher on this score, for he had said, "All religion is related to life, and the life of religion is to do good."

But even though Howells couldn't forget his early religious training, neither could he make the necessary leap of faith. He was apparently like Ford in *The Undiscovered Country* who says of his religious belief:

It left me. It seemed to have left me. I don't realize it now as a faith, but I realize that it was always present somewhere in me. It may be different with those who come after us, to whom it will never have been imparted; but we who were born in it—how can we help it, how can we escape it?<sup>4</sup>

One might wonder from this how Howells felt about religious training, but he was very clear on this point. He frequently expressed concern about the morality of the next generation, a generation which he feared would be unschooled in any religion. He saw that religion was a stabilizing moral influence in society.

Howells' sympathy for Christianity kept him from satirizing it even when his faith was weakest. Its spokesmen are never straw men, but are reasonable, wise, and sane. Boynton and Ford's discussion illustrates this. Boynton asks:

"[A]nd is there absolutely nothing else but that [Christianity]? Nothing in science?"

"No."

"Nothing of hope in the new

metaphysics?"

"No, nothing."

"Nothing in the philosophy that applies theories of science to the moral world?"

"Nothing but death."

"Then that *is* the only hope, —that old story of a credulous and fabulous time, resting upon hearsay and the witness of the ignorant, the pedantic wisdom of the learned, the interest of a church lustful of power; and that allegory of the highest serving the lowest, the best suffering for the worst.—That is still the world's only hope."<sup>5</sup>

Boynton cannot believe at this point in spite of his intellectual admission. And Ford, the agnostic, is presented sympathetically. But Howells' judgment at this point seems to be that Christianity is the only hope. His reference is clearly to the New Testament gospel.

Howells' desire to present two tenable but opposing views is further illustrated by the fact that Boynton once held Ford's position on religion. When Ford has said that he had no religion, Boynton replies:

Yes, I find a great similarity of mind and temperament in us. At your age, I thought and felt as you do. There is a fascination which I can still recognize, in the clean surface which complete negation gives. The refusal of science to believe what it cannot subject to its chemic test has its sublime side.<sup>6</sup>

But Howells was not long deluded by the false claims of science. Dr. Boynton says of it:

It is a religion, and you cannot get away from religion. Whether

you say I believe, or whether you say I do not believe, still you formulate a creed. The question whether we came from the Clam or the Ancient of Days, whether we shall live forever or not forever or rot forever remains; you cannot put it aside by saying there is no such question.<sup>7</sup>

Already in 1880, one hundred years ago, Howells expressed the view that science is just another religion, not something based on observable data.

Howells further undercuts the pretensions of science in "Fabletale" published in *Imaginary Interviews*. The first speaker says:

"[S]cience leaves imagining things to religion and philosophy."

"Ah, that's where you're mistaken!" the woman who had caught on exclaimed. "Science does nothing but imagine things! . . . First the suggestion from the mystical somewhere—the same *where*, probably, that music and pictures and poetry come from; then the hypothesis; then the proof; then the established fact—established until some new scientist comes along and knocks it over."<sup>8</sup>

There is a sarcasm here which you will not find in Howells' treatment of Christianity.

Instead, when Howells' unbelief is apparent, it is not defiant but sad—not unlike Matthew Arnold's in "Dover Beach" when he writes:

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and  
round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright  
girdle furl'd

But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, with-  
drawing roar,  
Retreating to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast  
edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

Howells, I think, experienced the melancholy of which Arnold speaks.

For example, in "Though One Rose From the Dead," published in *Questionable Shapes*, the discussion begins on the related phenomenon of telepathy (it is not something to be flaunted), but soon shifts to the more fundamental issue: is there life after death for believers in Christ? Mrs. Alderling shows Wanhope these quotations: "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die," and "Nay, but except ye repent, ye shall likewise perish." To this Wanhope replies: "Yes, those are things we hardly know what to do with in our philosophy." But a little later Wanhope asks:

"Why should you base your conclusion as to that [future] life upon a promise and a menace which may not really refer to it in the sense which they seem to have?"

"Isn't that all there is?" she asked, and Alderling burst into a laugh.

"I'm afraid she's got you there, Wanhope," said Alderling.<sup>9</sup>

The last two statements, considering the "laugh" of Alderling along with the macabre ending with Alderling going out onto the lake to meet the spirit of his wife, never to be found again, cannot be construed as comforting pledges of faith, but they are not negations either. They seem to suggest Howells' inner conflict, especially during this later

period of his life. Clearly Christ's promise and warning weigh heavily on Howells' mind.

Similarly, in *A Traveller from Altruria*, the traveller speaks for all Christians when asked if Altrurians, who practice true Christianity, have any direct communications with the other world. He replies:

[W]e do not need any such testimony. Our life here makes us sure of a life there. At any rate, no exaltation of the supernatural, no objective miracle has been wrought in our behalf. We have had faith to do what we prayed for, and the prescience of which I speak has been added unto us.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the two responses to the traveller's profession again suggest Howells' dual responses. The woman replies, "Oh, I do believe it," but the manufacturer "... shook his head sorrowfully and sat down, and remained there, looking at the ground." The narrator then observes that "As for the more cultivated people who had met him, they continued to be of two minds on both points." Again the two characters seem to represent the two sides of Howells' mind.

Both faith and doubt are again apparent in "Tabletalk," published in *Imaginary Interviews*. The "closest listener" says:

"It is curious how much our beliefs are governed by our wishes in this matter . . . . It occurs to very, very few men to be convinced, as a friend of mine has been convinced against the grain, of the reality of the life after death . . . . He was fully convinced. He said, 'The facts are too many; the proofs I have are irresistible, and I have had to

give way to them in spite of my wish to reject them.”

“Yes,” the first speaker said, “that is uncommon. You think that if I were perfectly honest, I should envy him his experience? Well, then, honestly I don’t . . . . As to another life, I have acquired antipathy.”<sup>11</sup>

The character says this, but Howells himself never did acquire antipathy toward life after death or toward the Christian faith. In fact late in his life, Howells did affirm that his faith in God had returned. Dr. Boynton’s last statement in *The Undiscovered Country*, interestingly, foreshadows Howells’ own returning faith some forty years later. He says:

It is very curious . . . but the only thing that I have got by all this research is the one great thing which it never included,—which all research of the kind ignores . . . God . . . . It may be through an instinctive piety that we forbear to inquire concerning him of those earth-bound spirits. What could they know of Him? Many pure and simple souls in this world must be infinitely nearer him. But out of all that chaos I have reached him. No, I am not where I started: I have come in sight of him. I was anxious to know whether we should live hereafter; but whether we live or not, now I know that he lives, and he will take care.<sup>12</sup>

Then in *Imaginary Interviews*, the “closest listener” summarizes the final difference between Metchnikoff and himself, between the believer and the unbeliever, by saying, “we think we believe, and he thinks he knows.” Howells himself, in an essay

published in *In After Days* writes: “There are many things that I doubt, but few that I deny; where I cannot believe, there I trust.”<sup>13</sup> These three statements would seem to express Howells’ final belief.

But the strongest statement of Howells’ final belief appears in a letter dated July 10, 1917, when he was eighty years old. In a letter—never published but quoted—Howells wrote this to Mrs. John J. Piatt to console her on the death of her husband:

I know how it is with you while your sorrow is still so new; but after long unbelief, I am getting back some hope again and I am at last getting back peace, which seemed gone forever.<sup>14</sup>

That, then, was how Howells’ long debate ended. It is in many ways a very contemporary debate, but we are not likely to hear much of it, for Howells was unfairly labelled as Victorian, prudish, and senile, and for decades many critics assumed his debate was dated. Today we know better.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Dean Howells, *The Undiscovered Country* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1880; rpt. St. Clair Shores, Michigan: Scholarly Press, 1970).

<sup>2</sup>Howells, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup>Howells, p. 288.

<sup>4</sup>Howells, p. 364.

<sup>5</sup>Howells, p. 365.

<sup>6</sup>Howells, p. 288.

<sup>7</sup>Howells, p. 288.

<sup>8</sup>William Dean Howells, *Imaginary Interviews* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910), p. 190.

<sup>9</sup>William Dean Howells, *Questionable Shapes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1903), p. 176.

<sup>10</sup>William Dean Howells, *A Traveller from Altruria* (1908; rpt. New York: Sagamore Press Inc., 1957), p. 201.

<sup>11</sup>Howells, *Interviews*, p. 190.

<sup>12</sup>Howells, *Country*, pp. 370-71.

<sup>13</sup>William Dean Howells, *In After Days* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910), p. xxiv.

<sup>14</sup>Howells, *Days*, p. xxiv.