

The Young Contributor

William Dean Howells

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This etext was produced by David Widger widger@cecomet.net

LITERATURE AND LIFE The Young Contributor

by William Dean Howells

THE EDITOR'S RELATIONS WITH THE YOUNG CONTRIBUTOR

One of the trustiest jokes of the humorous paragrapher is that the editor is in great and constant dread of the young contributor; but neither my experience nor my observation bears out his theory of the case.

Of course one must not say anything to encourage a young person to abandon an honest industry in the vain hope of early honor and profit from literature; but there have been and there will be literary men and women always, and these in the beginning have nearly always been young; and I cannot see that there is risk of any serious harm in saying that it is to the young contributor the editor looks for rescue from the old contributor, or from his failing force and charm.

The chances, naturally, are against the young contributor, and vastly against him; but if any periodical is to live, and to live long, it is by the infusion of new blood; and nobody knows this better than the editor, who may seem so unfriendly and uncaring to the young contributor. The strange voice, the novel scene, the odor of fresh woods and pastures new, the breath of morning, the dawn of tomorrow these are what the editor is eager for, if he is fit to be an editor at all; and these are what the young contributor alone can give him.

A man does not draw near the sixties without wishing people to believe that he is as young as ever, and he has not written almost as many books as he has lived years without persuading himself that each new work of his has all the surprise of spring; but possibly there are wonted traits and familiar airs and graces in it which forbid him to persuade others. I do not say these characteristics are not charming; I am very far from wishing to say that; but I do say and must say that after the fiftieth time they do not charm for the first time; and this is where the advantage of the new contributor lies, if he happens to charm at all.

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I.

The new contributor who does charm can have little notion how much he charms his first reader, who is the editor. That functionary may bide his pleasure in a short, stiff note of acceptance, or he may mask his joy in a check of slender figure; but the contributor may be sure that he has missed no merit in his work, and that he has felt, perhaps far more than the public will feel, such delight as it can give.

The contributor may take the acceptance as a token that his efforts have not been neglected, ap; The new contributor who does charm can have little notion how much he charms his first reader, who is the editor. That functionary may bide his pleasure in a short, stiff note of acceptance, or he may mask his joy in a check of slender figure; but the contributor may be sure that he has missed no merit in his work, and that he has felt, perhaps far more than the public will feel, such delight as it can give.

The contributor may take the acceptance as a token that his efforts have not been neglected, and that his achievements will always be warmly welcomed; that even his failures will be leniently and reluctantly recognized as failures, and that he must persist long in failure before the friend he has made will finally forsake him.

I do not wish to paint the situation wholly rose color; the editor will have his moods, when he will not see so clearly or judge so justly as at other times; when he will seem exacting and fastidious, and will want this or that mistaken thing done to the story, or poem, or sketch, which the author knows to be simply perfect as it stands; but he is worth bearing with, and he will be constant to the new contributor as long as there is the least hope of him.

The contributor may be the man or the woman of one story, one poem, one sketch, for there are such; but the editor will wait the evidence of indefinite failure to this effect. His hope always is that he or she is the man or the woman of many stories, many poems, many sketches, all as good as the first.

From my own long experience as a magazine editor, I may say that the editor is more doubtful of failure in one who has once done well than of a second success. After all, the writer who can do but one good thing is rarer than people are apt to think in their love of the improbable; but the real danger with a young contributor is that he may become his own rival.

What would have been quite good enough from him in the first instance is not good enough in the second, because he has himself fixed his standard so high. His only hope is to surpass himself, and not begin resting on his laurels too soon; perhaps it is never well, soon or late, to rest upon one's laurels. It is well for one to make one's self scarce, and the best way to do this is to be more and more jealous of perfection in one's work.

The editor's conditions are that having found a good thing he must get as much of it as he can, and the chances are that he will be less exacting than the contributor imagines. It is for the contributor to be exacting, and to let nothing go to the editor as long as there is the possibility of making it better. He need not be afraid of being forgotten because he does not keep sending; the editor's memory is simply relentless; he could not forget the writer who has pleased him if he would, for such writers are few.

I do not believe that in my editorial service on the Atlantic Monthly, which lasted fifteen years in all, I forgot the name or the characteristic quality, or even the handwriting, of a contributor who had pleased me, and I forgot thousands who did not. I never lost faith in a contributor who had done a good thing; to the end I expected another good thing from him. I think I was always at least as patient with him as he was with me, though he may not have known it.

At the time I was connected with that periodical it had almost a monopoly of the work of Longfellow, Emerson, Holmes, Lowell, Whittier, Mrs. Stowe, Parkman, Higginson, Aldrich, Stedman, and many others not so well known, but still well known. These distinguished writers were frequent contributors, and they could be counted upon to respond to almost any appeal of the magazine; yet the constant effort of the editors was to discover new talent, and their wish was to welcome it.

I know that, so far as I was concerned, the success of a young contributor was as precious as if I had myself written his paper or poem, and I doubt if it gave him more pleasure. The editor is, in fact, a sort of second self for the contributor, equally eager that he should stand well with the public, and able to promote his triumphs without

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egotism and share them without vanity.

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II.

In fact, my curious experience was that if the public seemed not to feel my delight in a contribution I thought good, my vexation and disappointment were as great as if the work had been my own. It was even greater, for if I had really written it I might have had my misgivings of its merit, but in the case of another I could not console myself with this doubt. The sentiment was at the same time one which I could not cherish for the work of an old contributor; such a one stood more upon his own feet; and the young contributor may be sure that the editor's pride, self-interest, and sense of editorial infallibility will all prompt him to stand by the author whom he has introduced to the public, and whom he has vouched for.

I hope I am not giving the young contributor too high an estimate of his value to the editor. After all, he must remember that he is but one of a great many others, and that the editor's affections, if constant, are necessarily divided. It is good for the literary aspirant to realize very early that he is but one of many; for the vice of our comparatively virtuous craft is that it tends to make each of us imagine himself central, if not sole.

As a matter of fact, however, the universe does not revolve around any one of us; we make our circuit of the sun along with the other inhabitants of the earth, a planet of inferior magnitude. The thing we strive for is recognition, but when this comes it is apt to turn our heads. I should say, then, that it was better it should not come in a great glare and aloud shout, all at once, but should steal slowly upon us, ray by ray, breath by breath.

In the mean time, if this happens, we shall have several chances of reflection, and can ask ourselves whether we are really so great as we seem to other people, or seem to seem.

The prime condition of good work is that we shall get ourselves out of our minds. Sympathy we need, of course, and encouragement; but I am not sure that the lack of these is not a very good thing, too. Praise enervates, flattery poisons; but a smart, brisk snub is always rather wholesome.

I should say that it was not at all a bad thing for a young contributor to get his manuscript back, even after a first acceptance, and even a general newspaper proclamation that he is one to make the immortals tremble for their wreaths of asphodel—or is it amaranth? I am never sure which.

Of course one must have one's hour, or day, or week, of disabling the editor's judgment, of calling him to one's self fool, and rogue, and wretch; but after that, if one is worth while at all, one puts the rejected thing by, or sends it off to some other magazine, and sets about the capture of the erring editor with something better, or at least something else.

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III.

I think it a great pity that editors ever deal other than frankly with young contributors, or put them off with smooth generalities of excuse, instead of saying they do not like this thing or that offered them. It is impossible to make a criticism of all rejected manuscripts, but in the case of those which show promise I think it is quite possible; and if I were to sin my sins over again, I think I should sin a little more on the side of candid severity. I am sure I should do more good in that way, and I am sure that when I used to dissemble my real mind I did harm to those whose feelings I wished to spare. There ought not, in fact, to be question of feeling in the editor's mind.

I know from much suffering of my own that it is terrible to get back a manuscript, but it is not fatal, or I should have been dead a great many times before I was thirty, when the thing mostly ceased for me. One survives it again and again, and one ought to make the reflection that it is not the first business of a periodical to print contributions of this one or of that, but that its first business is to amuse and instruct its readers.

To do this it is necessary to print contributions, but whose they are, or how the writer will feel if they are not printed, cannot be considered. The editor can consider only what they are, and the young contributor will do well to consider that, although the editor may not be an infallible judge, or quite a good judge, it is his business to judge, and to judge without mercy. Mercy ought no more to qualify judgment in an artistic result than in a mathematical result.

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IV.

I suppose, since I used to have it myself, that there is a superstition with most young contributors concerning their geographical position. I used to think that it was a disadvantage to send a thing from a small or unknown place, and that it doubled my insignificance to do so. I believed that if my envelope had borne the postmark of New York, or Boston, or some other city of literary distinction, it would have arrived on the editor's table with a great deal more authority. But I am sure this was a mistake from the first, and when I came to be an editor myself I constantly verified the fact from my own dealings with contributors. A contribution from a remote and obscure place at once piqued my curiosity, and I soon learned that the fresh things, the original things, were apt to come from such places, and not from the literary centres. One of the most interesting facts concerning the arts of all kinds is that those who wish to give their lives to them do not appear where the appliances for instruction in them exist. An artistic atmosphere does not create artists a literary atmosphere does not create literators; poets and painters spring up where there was never a verse made or a picture seen.

This suggests that God is no more idle now than He was at the beginning, but that He is still and forever shaping the human chaos into the instruments and means of beauty. It may also suggest to that scholar—pride, that vanity of technique, which is so apt to vaunt itself in the teacher, that the best he can do, after all, is to let the pupil teach himself. If he comes with divine authority to the thing he attempts, he will know how to use the appliances, of which the teacher is only the first.

The editor, if he does not consciously perceive the truth, will instinctively feel it, and will expect the acceptable young contributor from the country, the village, the small town, and he will look eagerly at anything that promises literature from Montana or Texas, for he will know that it also promises novelty.

If he is a wise editor, he will wish to hold his hand as much as possible; he will think twice before he asks the contributor to change this or correct that; he will leave him as much to himself as he can. The young contributor; on his part, will do well to realize this, and to receive all the editorial suggestions, which are veiled commands in most cases, as meekly and as imaginatively as possible.

The editor cannot always give his reasons; however strongly he may feel them, but the contributor, if sufficiently docile, can always divine them. It behooves him to be docile at all times, for this is merely the willingness to learn; and whether he learns that he is wrong, or that the editor is wrong, still he gains knowledge.

A great deal of knowledge comes simply from doing, and a great deal more from doing over, and this is what the editor generally means.

I think that every author who is honest with himself must own that his work would be twice as good if it were done twice. I was once so fortunately circumstanced that I was able entirely to rewrite one of my novels, and I have always thought it the best written, or at least indefinitely better than it would have been with a single writing. As a matter of fact, nearly all of them have been rewritten in a certain way. They have not actually been rewritten throughout, as in the case I speak of, but they have been gone over so often in manuscript and in proof that the effect has been much the same.

Unless you are sensible of some strong frame within your work, something vertebral, it is best to renounce it, and attempt something else in which you can feel it. If you are secure of the frame you must observe the quality and character of everything you build about it; you must touch, you must almost taste, you must certainly test, every material you employ; every bit of decoration must undergo the same scrutiny as the structure.

It will be some vague perception of the want of this vigilance in the young contributor's work which causes the editor to return it to him for revision, with those suggestions which he will do well to make the most of; for when the editor once finds a contributor he can trust, he rejoices in him with a fondness which the contributor will never perhaps understand.

It will not do to write for the editor alone; the wise editor understands this, and averts his countenance from the contributor who writes at him; but if he feels that the contributor conceives the situation, and will conform to the conditions which his periodical has invented for itself, and will transgress none of its unwritten laws; if he perceives that he has put artistic conscience in every general and detail, and though he has not done the best, has done the best that he can do, he will begin to liberate him from every trammel except those he must wear himself,

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and will be only too glad to leave him free. He understands, if he is at all fit for his place, that a writer can do well only what he likes to do, and his wish is to leave him to himself as soon as possible.

V.

In my own case, I noticed that the contributors who could be best left to themselves were those who were most amenable to suggestion and even correction, who took the blue pencil with a smile, and bowed gladly to the rod of the proof-reader. Those who were on the alert for offence, who resented a marginal note as a slight, and bumptiously demanded that their work should be printed just as they had written it, were commonly not much more desired by the reader than by the editor.

Of course the contributor naturally feels that the public is the test of his excellence, but he must not forget that the editor is the beginning of the public; and I believe he is a faithfuller and kinder critic than the writer will ever find again.

Since my time there is a new tradition of editing, which I do not think so favorable to the young contributor as the old. Formerly the magazines were made up of volunteer contributions in much greater measure than they are now. At present most of the material is invited and even engaged; it is arranged for a long while beforehand, and the space that can be given to the aspirant, the unknown good, the potential excellence, grows constantly less and less.

A great deal can be said for either tradition; perhaps some editor will yet imagine a return to the earlier method. In the mean time we must deal with the thing that is, and submit to it until it is changed. The moral to the young contributor is to be better than ever, to leave nothing undone that shall enhance his small chances of acceptance. If he takes care to be so good that the editor must accept him in spite of all the pressure upon his pages, he will not only be serving—himself best, but may be helping the editor to a conception of his duty that shall be more hospitable to all other young contributors. As it is, however, it must be owned that their hope of acceptance is very, very small, and they will do well to make sure that they love literature so much that they can suffer long and often repeated disappointment in its cause.

The love of it is the great and only test of fitness for it. It is really inconceivable how any one should attempt it without this, but apparently a great many do. It is evident to every editor that a vast number of those who write the things he looks at so faithfully, and reads more or less, have no artistic motive.

People write because they wish to be known, or because they have heard that money is easily made in that way, or because they think they will chance that among a number of other things. The ignorance of technique which they often show is not nearly so disheartening as the palpable factitiousness of their product. It is something that they have made; it is not anything that has grown out of their lives.

I should think it would profit the young contributor, before he puts pen to paper, to ask himself why he does so, and, if he finds that he has no motive in the love of the thing, to forbear.

Am I interested in what I am going to write about? Do I feel it strongly? Do I know it thoroughly? Do I imagine it clearly? The young contributor had better ask himself all these questions, and as many more like them as he can think of. Perhaps he will end by not being a young contributor.

But if he is able to answer them satisfactorily to his own conscience, by all means let him begin. He may at once put aside all anxiety about style; that is a thing that will take care of itself; it will be added unto him if he really has something to say; for style is only a man's way of saying a thing.

If he has not much to say, or if he has nothing to say, perhaps he will try to say it in some other man's way, or to hide his own vacuity with rags of rhetoric and tags and fringes of manner, borrowed from this author and that. He will fancy that in this disguise his work will be more literary, and that there is somehow a quality, a grace, imparted to it which will charm in spite of the inward hollowness. His vain hope would be pitiful if it were not so shameful, but it is destined to suffer defeat at the first glance of the editorial eye.

If he really has something to say, however, about something he knows and loves, he is in the best possible case to say it well. Still, from time to time he may advantageously call a halt, and consider whether he is saying the thing clearly and simply.

If he has a good ear he will say it gracefully, and musically; and I would by no means have him aim to say it barely or sparsely. It is not so that people talk, who talk well, and literature is only the thought of the writer flowing from the pen instead of the tongue.

To aim at succinctness and brevity merely, as some teach, is to practice a kind of quackery almost as offensive

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as the charlatantry of rhetoric. In either case the life goes out of the subject.

To please one's self, honestly and thoroughly, is the only way to please others in matters of art. I do not mean to say that if you please yourself you will always please others, but that unless you please yourself you will please no one else. It is the sweet and sacred privilege of work done artistically to delight the doer. Art is the highest joy, but any work done in the love of it is art, in a kind, and it strikes the note of happiness as nothing else can.

We hear much of drudgery, but any sort of work that is slighted becomes drudgery; poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture, acting, architecture, if you do not do your best by them, turn to drudgery sore as digging ditches, hewing wood, or drawing water; and these, by the same blessings of God, become arts if they are done with conscience and the sense of beauty.

The young contributor may test his work before the editor assays it, if he will, and he may know by a rule that is pretty infallible whether it is good or not, from his own experience in doing it. Did it give him pleasure? Did he love it as it grew under his hand? Was he glad and willing with it? Or did he force himself to it, and did it hang heavy upon him?

There is nothing mystical in all this; it is a matter of plain, every-day experience, and I think nearly every artist will say the same thing about it, if he examines himself faithfully.

If the young contributor finds that he has no delight in the thing he has attempted, he may very well give it up, for no one else will delight in it. But he need not give it up at once; perhaps his mood is bad; let him wait for a better, and try it again. He may not have learned how to do it well, and therefore he cannot love it, but perhaps he can learn to do it well.

The wonder and glory of art is that it is without formulas. Or, rather, each new piece of work requires the invention of new formulas, which will not serve again for another. You must apprentice yourself afresh at every fresh undertaking, and our mastery is always a victory over certain unexpected difficulties, and not a dominion of difficulties overcome before.

I believe, in other words, that mastery is merely the strength that comes of overcoming and is never a sovereign power that smooths the path of all obstacles. The combinations in art are infinite, and almost never the same; you must make your key and fit it to each, and the key that unlocks one combination will not unlock another.

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VI.

There is no royal road to excellence in literature, but the young contributor need not be dismayed at that. Royal roads are the ways that kings travel, and kings are mostly dull fellows, and rarely have a good time. They do not go along singing; the spring that trickles into the mossy log is not for them, nor

“The wildwood flower that simply blows.”

But the traveller on the country road may stop for each of these; and it is not a bad condition of his progress that he must move so slowly that he can learn every detail of the landscape, both earth and sky, by heart.

The trouble with success is that it is apt to leave life behind, or apart. The successful writer especially is in danger of becoming isolated from the realities that nurtured in him the strength to win success. When he becomes famous, he becomes precious to criticism, to society, to all the things that do not exist from themselves, or have not the root of the matter in them.

Therefore, I think that a young writer's upward course should be slow and beset with many obstacles, even hardships. Not that I believe in hardships as having inherent virtues; I think it is stupid to regard them in that way; but they oftener bring out the virtues inherent in the sufferer from them than what I may call the 'softships'; and at least they stop him, and give him time to think.

This is the great matter, for if we prosper forward rapidly, we have no time for anything but prospering forward rapidly. We have no time for art, even the art by which we prosper.

I would have the young contributor above all things realize that success is not his concern. Good work, true work, beautiful work is his affair, and nothing else. If he does this, success will take care of itself.

He has no business to think of the thing that will take. It is the editor's business to think of that, and it is the contributor's business to think of the thing that he can do with pleasure, the high pleasure that comes from the sense of worth in the thing done. Let him do the best he can, and trust the editor to decide whether it will take.

It will take far oftener than anything he attempts perfunctorily; and even if the editor thinks it will not take, and feels obliged to return it for that reason, he will return it with a real regret, with the honor and affection which we cannot help feeling for any one who has done a piece of good work, and with the will and the hope to get something from him that will take the next time, or the next, or the next.