

ROBERT HERRICK'S USE OF CHICAGO

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With few exceptions the novelists who have used Chicago in fiction have been concerned with more than a locale for a story. They have been intent upon probing beneath the city's many assertions of strength in an attempt to discover the full impact of a town which prides itself on its fantastic growth. When many important American urban areas were well-known, Chicago was a mere mud-hole beside Lake Michigan. In 1837 a thriving community centered around Fort Dearborn was incorporated, and only the villagers seemed to have had faith in the project. However, in less than a hundred years, the city which had grown large with the capital and enterprise of the newly-arrived citizens had been rocked by a panic, had been destroyed by fire, had rebuilt itself, and in 1893 had challenged the rest of the world with its pretensions of culture in the World's Columbian Exposition. Still later it was to become the center for all of the reputed lawlessness and recklessness of the age as the major syndicates settled openly in the city.

This tremendous growth has fascinated many novelists, from Henry Blake Fuller through Theodore Dreiser to James T. Farrell, Nelson Algren and Willard Motley. Although there does not appear to be a unifying creed linking the "Chicago novelists," there does appear in their work the idea that Chicago is more than a city. The early writers saw it as a symptom of the evolving industrialism of the country, and it became a symbol for an attitude or a force which acts, often adversely, upon the people who live within its corporate bounds. Some of the Chicago writers have been repelled by the city; others have rejoiced in it, but all of them have shown an awareness of the power -- real or imagined -- of Chicago.

One of the early novelists who investigated the force of the city was Robert Herrick, a New Englander, who came from the cloisters of Harvard to teach at the new University of Chicago. By the time of his arrival the pattern of the city was fairly well established, but evidences of what had taken place were still obvious in the 1890's. From the tradition-bound East to the buoyant Middle West was a tremendous shift for Herrick. Arriving in Chicago during the last days of the World's Columbian Exposition, Herrick was amazed by the contrasts to be found in the city. To him the university, which he later called "The University in the Mud," was unnecessarily bare and bore all the earmarks of the business culture which had inspired it.

Basically Herrick viewed Chicago with dispassion, but he could not refrain from introducing moral judgments into his fiction. He repeatedly posed the question: what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? Perhaps Herrick had the answer, but his novels present an array of characters who, when faced with the question, react in various ways in their search for an answer.

Herrick asserted that Chicago was not only evil but also a catalyst bringing out the evil in men. Yet for him the city had another importance. By becoming a symbol for what was happening in America, Chicago furnished the particular by which the general might be explained. The industrialism, the materialism, the extreme optimism, the emphasis on bigness, the worship of money or success (interchangeable terms in Herrick's universe) and the ruthlessness of businessmen were characteristics of Chicago society; however, in varying degrees these were also characteristics of American society, and Herrick looked beyond the confines of the city and wrote of the nation. Consequently it is not surprising to find that the major theme running through the novels by Herrick is the statement of the price mankind must pay for commercialism and industrialism. And he chose to explain this theme through its relationship to the professional or business man who became susceptible to the new business techniques. When his novels vary it is not in theme but in approach. Perhaps by accident -- more than likely by design -- he chose to place his theme in the city of Chicago.

While he often returned to the dominant themes to be found in his so-called "Chicago novels," by 1905 and the publication of Memoirs of an American Citizen Herrick had obviously declared a truce with the major problems of Chicago. By 1910 and the publication of A Life for a Life he had fully explored the power of the city upon man. His later novels lost the intensity of his anger; he had compromised with the city's claims upon his creativity, and the cycle which began with so much promise in The Gospel of Freedom (1898) was completed twenty-eight years before his death.

Although only one-third of its action takes place in Chicago, The Gospel of Freedom is significant because Herrick defines the city and attempts to show how it differs from other cities. Apparently he felt rather strongly about his definition for it is implicitly stated in his other novels.

Chicago is an instance of a successful, contemptuous disregard of nature by man. Other great cities have been called gradually into existence about some fine opportunity suggested by nature, at the junction of fertile valleys, or on a loving bend of a broad river, or in the inner recesses of a sea-harbour, where nature has pointed out, as it were, a spot favourable for life and growth. In the case of Chicago, man has decided to make for himself a city for his artificial necessities in defiance of every indifference displayed by nature. . . . Life spins there; man is handling

existence as you knead bread in a pan. The city is made of man; that is the last word of it. Brazen, unequal, like all man's works, it stands a stupendous piece of blasphemy against nature. Once within its circle, the heart must forget that the earth is beautiful. 'Go to,' man boasts, 'our fathers lived in fear of nature, we will build a city where men and women in their passions shall be the beginning and the end. Man is enough for man.' (101-104 passim.)

Having defied the laws of nature, Chicago is not subject to those laws. According to Herrick, Chicago was made by men subject only to the laws of men. With this rather tragic limitation Herrick presented a series of novels set in Chicago and influenced by its indefinable yet indomitable force.

The Web of Life (1900) centers around Howard Sommers, a promising young physician who represents one man's rebellion against the obligations which life in Chicago have required of him. He gains social prestige and professional distinction because of the wealthy and influential Hitchcocks whose daughter, Louise, looks upon him as a matrimonial possibility and whose friend, the wealthy and famous Dr. Lindsay, opens a place for him. In short, Howard Sommers is in favor with the gods as he travels Chicago's road to Success. But his professional conscience will not leave him in peace, and he becomes intolerant of the conventions of a fashionable practice in a business section of the city. Making it quite clear that he does not want to be subservient to the rich, that he does not care for their life of leisure, that he is unsympathetic with the imagined ills of neurotic women, Howard Sommers is soon expelled from Dr. Lindsay's office. The beginning of his long, disheartening existence is complicated by his affair with Mrs. Preston, a widow who scorns marriage.

The poor people of the city, among whom he had hoped to work, are suspicious of his training and reject him. Eventually he and Mrs. Preston move into an old Greek Temple, a fast-crumbling relic of the World's Columbian Exposition. The city which has placed so much emphasis upon material success, the city which has cared little for professional integrity, has forced the well-trained Dr. Sommers into dire poverty. Yet his attempt to move himself to another time and place inevitably lead to tragedy. Somewhere, Herrick seems to say, a compromise must be made. The city might be evil, but life in a rotting Greek Temple offers no solution. Using the Temple and the other disintegrating buildings of the Fair, Herrick makes it clear that the false standards of city life will eventually crumble as do the sham remnants of the 1893 spectacle. When Dr. Sommers can find peace within himself, when he realizes that escape cannot be the answer nor can revolt against the established order solve his problem, he can make the necessary adjustments and return to the city as a doctor of the highest integrity.

The Common Lot (1904), which represents another facet of Herrick's theme, might well serve as a companion-piece to The Web of Life. Jackson Hart, an architect with certain artistic ideals, must solve the same problem which Howard Sommers had faced. Both men were forced to live in a city which placed great emphasis upon business success. However, Jackson Hart hoped that the death of his uncle, Powers Jackson (one of the influential magnates of Chicago), would release him from "this unlovely metropolis, where even the baked meats of life were flung at one ungarnished" (33). But the freedom for which he longs is not to be his. Aside from an adequate but small sum bequeathed to him, the bulk of the estate is delegated to trustees for the purpose of founding a school for the "children of workingmen of the city of Chicago." By the nature of his uncle's will, Hart, who had assumed that "by the right of fortunate birth he was to be spared the common lot of man," is condemned to Chicago and to the "common lot" after all.

Under the combined impetus of a desire for greatness and a desire for wealth, Hart gives in to the attractive offers made to him by Graves, a dishonest contractor. By turning out inferior work, permitting illegal tampering with specifications, agreeing to the bribery of building inspectors, he becomes a party to every dishonest trick known in the trade of building and construction. But he is able to rise quickly above the "common lot" who remain for a lifetime at their drawing boards. However, two disgraces follow each other. The school erected with his uncle's money is discovered to be an adulterated piece of architecture from beginning to end. In the meantime, a fire-proof hotel, designed by Hart, burns, causing many deaths. These two deceptions are only a fragment of Hart's scheme "to beat the system." The people around Hart either condemn him for getting caught or lament his weakness for getting involved with Graves, but his wife places the blame on Chicago.

[She saw] how Chicago had moulded him and had left his nature set in a hard crust of prejudice. The great industrial city where he had learned the lesson of life throttled the finer aspiration of men like a remorseless giant, converting its youth into iron-clad beasts of prey answering to one hoarse cry, 'Success, Success, Success!' (406).

In The Web of Life and in The Common Lot Herrick presented the ambiguous nature of success. Success in the city of men meant achieving financial security no matter how much had to be sacrificed, and failure meant refusing to compromise professional ethics and personal integrity in order to gain wealth. Dr. Sommers, representing failure through most of The Web of Life, lost his position in commercialized medicine because he dared to criticize it. Jackson Hart, on the other hand, kept up with the capitalistic society even though it meant a loss of ideals. In the one, success was sacrificed in order to maintain ideals; in the other, ideals were sacrificed for success. The two could not co-exist in Herrick's Chicago.

With The Memoirs of an American Citizen Herrick offers still another approach to the subject of the influence of a purely capitalistic society upon man. For the first time he leaves the professional man and turns to a businessman for his central character. Edward Van Harrington tells his story of his rise from country boy to United States Senator. Learning early that Success was the keynote of life in Chicago, Harrington mused, "No one . . . ever came to Chicago . . . without a hope in his pocket of landing at the head of the game sometime" (47). He also learned rather early in his life what was to become a dominant philosophy in America. He recounts that after a childhood scrap for which he was punished by having to work on a farm he came to the following conclusion:

. . . if I wanted what my neighbor considered to be his, I must get the law to do business for me. For the first time it dawned on me how wonderful is that system which shuts up one man in jail for taking a few dollars' worth of truck that doesn't belong to him, and honors the man who steals his millions--if he works in the legal way! (21)

The kind of morality which is present in the previous novels is totally lacking here; yet the record of Edward Van Harrington, a record of one success after another, reveals only a shell of a man. Throughout his recital of his life's story, he convinces himself that everything he has done has been necessary. The strong must rule for it is they who will inherit the earth. Although one or two people who are quite close to him do not understand, Chicago understands and accepts him. Having climbed in such a short time from errand boy in a grocery store to small-time meat-packer to the eventual control of the meat-packing industry, Harrington is proud of his success. In one of these moments of pride, he can look over the city and say:

I, too, was part of this. The thought of my brain, the labour of my body, the will within me, had gone into the making of this world. There were my plants, my car line, my railroads, my elevators, my lands--all good tools in the infinite work of this world. Conceived for good or for ill, brought into being by fraud or daring--what man could judge their worth: There they were, a part of God's great world. They were done; and mine was the hand. Let another, more perfect, turn them to a larger use; nevertheless, on my labour, on me, he must build (346).

His final triumph is accomplished fully with the knowledge that the people about whom he cares the most have turned their backs on him. His family, his friends and his associates have practically been destroyed by his ruthless tactics. And the figure of the lonely man taking his seat in the United States Senate is a silent testament to the price he has paid for success. It is with this novel that Herrick moves from Chicago per se to Chicago as a symbol for American society.

If Chicago's being could be justified on the basis of its being the "order of nature," then the acceptance of those men who were called into existence was just as inevitable no matter how much one might revolt against them. Commenting in The Gospel of Freedom on one of his created critics of the city, Herrick maintained that "she could not see that in . . . whole-sale indictment of an eager, fresh civilization, she was condemning the order of nature" (132). Yet, this same character echoed Herrick's sentiments: "When you are in it [Chicago], you are cut off by a vacuum, as it were, from the surrounding world. You can't see outside, and you hear the voices of the others only faintly" (113). Whatever else the city may have been to Herrick and to some of his characters, Chicago was a prison binding not only the lives of its inhabitants but also their souls. In the three novels -- The Gospel of Freedom, The Web of Life and The Common Lot -- Herrick explored the meaning of freedom for his dominant characters: Adela Wilbur, Howard Sommers and Jackson Hart. Although the opportunity to escape presented itself to them, mere escape proved to be no solution. Unless the character could make peace with himself and re-enter the prison, disaster awaited him. Fundamentally, then, Herrick concluded that the businessman and the professional man could function, limited as might be their service, within the framework of the city. On the other hand, escape is the only answer for the true artist, and even he can be prostrated in his attempt. The artist who tried to reconcile his art to the city is stifled and eventually doomed, for the creative impulse cannot survive in the midst of gross materialism.

In The Gospel of Freedom Herrick developed certain character types who appear in his later novels with little or no alteration. There is usually the innocent character who criticizes Chicago in the process of being initiated into the city's ways and who attempts to explain the city. In this novel the role is assigned to Adela Wilbur, the wife of a businessman. Closely associated with the innocent are the dispassionate observers who live in the city but who are not of it. In many instances their professions are rather vague. The most definite aspect of the life of Thornton Jennings in The Gospel of Freedom, for example, is that he served as the chairman of a sub-committee of a Civic Association dedicated to blocking gang techniques in the legislature. Often, however, this character is a member of the medical profession. Although he is never a minister, his message is basically religious, and his examples are drawn from Christian principles. Usually the dispassionate observer has a minor role as far as the action of the novel is concerned, but as the deus ex machina he appears at the right moment to comment on the state of affairs and to give direction to what is to follow.

When he turned to the "insiders," the businessmen who were integral parts of the community, Herrick divided them into two groups -- the older men who had maintained integrity but who were generally out of the mainstream, and the newer ones who lacked integrity and who varied only in

degrees of corruption. These older men had made fortunes by sheer dint of effort but who were out of step with their times. In Together (1908) Herrick presented one of his best descriptions of these men. "They were brave and unselfish, faithful and trusting of the future. With the plainest personal habits and tastes, taking no tarnish from the luxury that rose about them, seeking things larger than dollars on their horizon, they made the best aristocracy that this country has seen. Their coat of arms bore the legend: Integrity and Enterprise" (208). Yet these men no longer have a place in the newly-established commercial order, and it is left to men like John Wilbur of The Gospel of Freedom to carry out the new business methods. These men are direct results of Chicago. "To John Wilbur," according to Herrick, "Chicago was like a congenial Alpine air, which stimulates his appetites. From the very first the strife for advancement summoned all his virility, and the sense of rapid success exhilarated him" (204).

While all of Herrick's businessmen indicate the mobility of American society, no doubt his best example of the rise of a man is to be seen in the life story of Edward Van Harrington who rose higher and faster than most of Herrick's businessmen. In many ways (and perhaps Herrick meant to suggest this) Harrington's rise paralleled the fantastic growth of Chicago. The single drive of Harrington toward success saved him from the moral anguish which faced so many of Herrick's characters. Right and wrong are very real concepts to the major characters of The Gospel of Freedom, The Web of Life and The Common Lot; and much of the dramatic intensity of these novels is based upon the attempted resolutions Adela Wilbur, Howard Sommers and Jackson Hart try to make in a world which is basically evil. Harrington, on the other hand, is faced with no such dilemma. He early recognizes Chicago for what it is, sees what he must do in order to succeed and with a purpose devoid of any moral overtones steadily marches toward his goal. And much of his success is due to his profound belief in himself and in his city. It is only by examining what happens to those around Harrington that the reader can detect the great damages done by Harrington's rise.

In each novel Herrick finds a place for the idealist who, unlike the dispassionate observer, moves along with the dominant character and gives voice to hopes totally unrelated to the commercial maelstrom. Interestingly enough, the idealist is usually a New Englander, and it is through his eyes that one is able to discern the contrasts between Chicago and the older, more tradition-filled cities.

In many respects Herrick's characters are not a memorable lot; however, it is impossible to forget the types which he has created as they attempt to reconcile themselves to the "City of Men." Nor is it possible to forget Herrick's answer to the problems raised by city life explicitly stated in The Master of the Inn (1908). If the regeneration of man and a rebirth of ideals could occur, they had to come after one found solace in nature which "offered peace to him who has escaped from the furnace men make" (15).

Obviously Herrick experimented with the nature-as-an-antithesis theme in The Real World (1901) when Jack Pemberton, a lawyer, in order to retrieve his initial ideals leaves the city to work in the country closer to nature. By 1904 and The Common Lot Herrick had developed his concept so that it became a more symbolic rebirth. Jackson Hart, realizing that he had reached the end of his rope, goes to the country and flings himself on the ground. And as if by magic there surges within him new strength to face his mistakes. In 1908 in Together and The Master of the Inn Herrick had developed his concept to the point where two doctors use nature as a cure for the ills of their patients who might then begin to cure the ills of the world. Yet even Herrick was aware that this solution was conspicuous for its impracticality. Even though he was to return to the theme in The Healer (1911), he had fundamentally given his answer for the problem of the city in A Life for a Life (1910).

To those who maintain that a work of fiction must be set in a definite and recognizable locale, A Life for a Life represents a curious paradox. Its principal action takes place in The City which is an obvious composite of the major American cities. Although there are many characters in the novel, Herrick was concerned with only three of them: Grant, the young man who comes to the city in search of "success"; Arnold, the businessman; and Anarch, an advocate of complete overthrow of the government. In a rather fantastic and sometimes poetic plot which is almost totally symbolic, Herrick presented the story of Grant who is employed by Arnold but who spends most of his time with Anarch who-- the reader gathers later in the novel -- is the unacknowledged son of Arnold. The City, in the end, is destroyed by fire; Arnold and Anarch are destroyed; even Grant perishes but not before he makes it possible for a better city to arise. In spite of the combination of reality, mysticism and fantasy, there is a definite statement of Herrick's attitude toward the power of the city. Early in the novel he stated: "The City was man! And already it was sowing its seed in the heart of the youth, this night. It was moulding him as it moulds the millions, after its fashion, warming his blood with desire, --the vast, resounding, gleaming City . . ." (4).

At the end of the novel Herrick notes that The City can not be saved by the businessman nor can it be saved by a complete reversal of government as advocated by Anarch. The title expresses what to Herrick was the philosophy of the city, and the youth represented the coming America which had to choose between two forces: Capitalism or an anarchial brand of Socialism. The life for which Grant is searching does not include either of these forces nor does Herrick see in them the answer for the present dilemma as evidenced by their complete destruction. Yet Grant, who entered The City searching for success, is also destroyed. The novel is partially saved from complete fatalism by the promise of the new city which will arise.

Thus beginning with a very definite city and moving to a mythical one, Herrick probed the meaning of city life. And his final answer was the total destruction of the city with the hope that a better one would rise like a

phoenix from the ashes. His career after the date of the publication of A Life for a Life represents simply the repetition of the cycle and the themes which had begun with The Gospel of Freedom. The dominant business culture of nineteenth-century Chicago continued to occupy his attention as he investigated -- sometimes with complete despair -- the major problems of American life. While he chose later in his career to write of other locales, Herrick never really rejected Chicago. What he did reject was the notion that there was another way; city life as evidenced by Chicago became the way.

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