

"a message to garcia"

the subsidized hero

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Elbert Hubbard's essay, "A Message to Garcia," has been called a "showpiece" of the "onward and upward literature" of turn of the century.¹ Certainly, if the numbers in which it was distributed are any test, it was not only the best known example of the secular, inspirational literature of the period, it was probably, with the exception of the Bible, the most widely disseminated piece of writing in the history of American printing. R. W. G. Vail estimates that from its first publication in 1899 to Hubbard's death on the *Lusitania* in 1915, more than 40,000,000 copies were printed and distributed.² Its massive subsidization and distribution make it a significant and revealing document in American social and cultural history and especially in the history of class relations. However, to read it simply as one example of the popular writing intended to lift the morale of the working classes by convincing them of the opportunities offered them by capitalism, as, for example, Henry Steele Commager and James Hart do,³ is to misunderstand the essay and its complex appeal to those who purchased and distributed it.

"A Message to Garcia" is important not because it improved the morale, or altered the behavior, of railroad brakemen or factory workers or seamen; it may be seriously questioned whether many of them bothered to read it at all. The essay's significance lies, it seems to me, in what it reveals about the values and attitudes of those who paid for and distributed it in such overwhelming numbers.

"A Message to Garcia" is a brief homily which takes as its starting point the delivery of a message by Lieutenant Andrew Rowan of the United States Army from his superiors to General Calixto Garcia deep in the interior of Cuba during the Cuban insurrection. Hubbard offers Rowan as the true hero of his time because Rowan could take an order and carry it out without asking questions. The remainder of Hubbard's

tract is a harangue against the "imbecility of the average man" who is incapable of doing what he is told to do, of "carrying a message to Garcia."

Hubbard, himself the paternalistic despot of Roycroft, a pseudo-medieval manufactory which he had established in the manner of William Morris, could express the easy assumptions of the moral and cultural superiority of the managerial class because he shared them so totally. A self-educated, self-made man in the best nineteenth-century American tradition, Hubbard had accumulated his fortune as a manufacturer and brilliantly innovative advertiser of soap. In 1893, at the age of 37, he sold his share in the soap business, and, in the pursuit of culture, enrolled at Harvard. He left Harvard after three unhappy months to enter the world of commercial publishing. In 1895, the first volume of his little magazine, *The Philistine*, appeared, and four years later, "A Message to Garcia" was to make him world famous. In writing it, Hubbard brought a lifetime of experience as a successful businessman, employer and publicist; his predispositions were clear.⁴

Hubbard wrote his famous essay in 1899, and it appeared, without a title, in the back pages of *The Philistine* as part of a longer column of general commentary entitled "Heart to Heart." To his apparently genuine surprise, the essay, which had been written as filler in less than an hour, caught the attention of George H. Daniels, who was Passenger Agent of Cornelius Vanderbilt's New York Central Railroad. Daniels telegraphed Hubbard requesting 100,000 copies of the essay in pamphlet form. Hubbard's presses were too small to fill Daniels' order, and after printing three smaller editions, Hubbard gave Daniels and the New York Central permission to print it themselves.

By January 1, 1900, over one million copies, in 100,000 lots, had been printed; by the end of 1900, over eleven million copies had been printed. Shortly after, the pamphlet caught the attention of Prince Hilakoff, Director of the Imperial Russian Railways, who was visiting the United States as a guest of the New York Central; he ordered it translated into Russian and distributed to every employee of the Russian railway system. Copies were then given to every Russian soldier in the Imperial Army. During the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese, finding the pamphlet in the possession of the Russian soldiers, ordered it translated into Japanese and distributed to every soldier in the Japanese army and, eventually, to every employee of the Mikado. It was in turn to be translated into German, French, Spanish, Turkish, Chinese and Hindi under the auspices of a variety of organizations. Here in the United States, it was ordered, in the main, by employers for their employees, but was also ordered by scoutmasters for their boy scouts, by school superintendents for their teachers and students, by ministers for their congregations, and even, in 1919, by the United States Army and Navy for their personnel.⁵

What is illuminating about this phenomenon is not only the sheer

numbers of pamphlets that were distributed (though that, of course, is what made this otherwise trivial pamphlet significant), but rather that, in the overwhelmingly greater number of cases, these pamphlets were purchased by one group to be read by a group in a subordinate position to that held by the purchasers.

Certainly, the ultimate recipients of the essay were not the readers envisioned by Hubbard. At one point, he addresses his intended audience directly: "You, reader, put this matter to a test: you are sitting now in your office—six clerks are within call." Clearly Hubbard wrote his essay for that middle-class, managerial audience which shared his own uneasy respect for high culture and his sincere respect for practical achievement, that class which swelled his subscription lists.

The diction and allusions of the pamphlet further reveal Hubbard's class bias. "In all this Cuban business, there is one man stands out on the horizon of my memory like Mars at Perihelion" is the pamphlet's opening sentence. One suspects that the phrase, "Mars at Perihelion," must have been a puzzle to the first generation immigrant laborer laying track for the New York Central. In the course of the essay, Hubbard accuses the average American working man of "imbecility," "dowdy indifference," "moral stupidity" and a variety of other similar failings, none of which appears rhetorically calculated to win the confidence or good will of the working-class reader. After its initial distribution by Daniels and the New York Central, another railroad man, George Heafford of the Milwaukee and St. Paul, protested "this outrage upon civilized humanity" and declared it an "insult even to the lowest average of intelligence and ability," but his was the only objecting voice from the managerial class, which otherwise embraced it.⁷

If, as it appears, then, that the essay was not intended by Hubbard for the working-class reader, why were forty million copies paid for, printed and passed into his reluctant hands? What did "A Message to Garcia" mean to George H. Daniels and the thousands of other employers who, following his example, purchased and distributed it?

To begin, I suggest that it is of particular significance that a major functionary of one of America's largest railroad systems should have been the single person most responsible for the popularity of Hubbard's essay. Without George H. Daniels' intercession, "A Message to Garcia" might well have remained buried, untitled and unmourned, in the columns of *The Philistine*. Daniels, like Hubbard a "self-made man," was not merely a professional railroad official; he was a professional spokesman for the American railroad system, lecturing regularly for the Redpath and Lyceum circuits on the importance of railroads for America's progress.⁸ In his double role as major administrative officer and publicist for the railroads, he was particularly sensitive to the threat that "Debs' rebellion" and the Pullman Strike had leveled against the

American railroad system only five years before the publication of "A Message to Garcia."

The wide-spread distribution of "A Message to Garcia" can best be understood by considering the climate created by the Pullman Strike of 1894. In that year, a relatively small local strike had escalated into a nationwide, industry-wide strike, and had almost become a nationwide strike in all industries. The Pullman Strike, wrote Selig Perlman, was "the only attempt ever made in America of a revolutionary strike on the continental European model. The strikers tried to throw against the associated railways and indeed against the existing social order the full force of a revolutionary solidarity."⁹ Only the combined efforts of a massive employer association, the Federal Government, the Army and the United States Attorney General, who was on the Board of Directors of the New York Central, were able finally to defeat the strikers. The railroad system, which was the nerve center of the American economy, survived the challenge to it by relying upon naked force. It was not gracious in its victory, firing and blacklisting employees who had been active strikers, and forcing others to sign "yellow dog" contracts in which they committed themselves never to join a union.

"A Message to Garcia" should be read in the light of this retributive atmosphere that was the aftermath of the Pullman strike. The essay, then, emerges, not, except in the most minimal way, as a morale-building document encouraging working men with the visions of possibility extended to them by the American economic system, but rather as an ultimatum, threatening violent reprisal for any further disaffection from that system. Though it is true that one can detect the presence of the conventional carrot-and-stick argument in the essay, a careful reading reveals that the carrot is a remarkably small one: the essay does not really promise much to the obedient workman beyond his economic survival and the approval of his superiors.

Hubbard's achievement in "A Message to Garcia" was to catch, perhaps inadvertently, the precise tone—threatened, angry, irritated—and the value structure of the American business community at the turn of the century, and to articulate them in terms with which that community could immediately identify. His predispositions express themselves in the essay explicitly through his thesis and implicitly by his drawing on the immediate historical context and by evoking provocative images and metaphors. Hubbard sets forth his thesis by extolling Lieutenant Rowan's ability to take orders without question or comment, deplors the inability of the average man to act in this fashion, pleads for sympathy for the employer "whose hair is fast turning white" in the struggle against the "slipshod imbecility and heartless ingratitude" of his workers, and concludes with a call for men "who can carry a message to Garcia." However, what vitalizes Hubbard's thesis is his reliance on the events of his time and on the structure of images and allusions to transform

the essay into a deeply felt expression of middle-class, managerial hostility toward the lower classes.

Two historical factors might be seen as providing images which would have shaped the middle-class reader's response to "A Message to Garcia." The first has been mentioned above, the Pullman strike and the uneasy labor peace that had been imposed on the country by Federal troops. The Pullman Strike itself was the culmination of a decade of widespread tension between labor and management. During 1886, over 600,000 men were out of work because of strikes, over three times the average of the previous five years. Rather than winning the sympathy of the middle class, however, labor experienced considerable public hostility because of the Haymarket bombing in the same year. In 1892, Federal troops had crushed strikers in the Coeur D'Alene district of Idaho and turned the miners' jobs over to strike breakers. Also in the same year, 3800 steelworkers at Carnegie's Homestead Plant in Pennsylvania had struck over wage cuts and were broken by Henry Frick's Pinkertons. In the following year, 1893, the country sank into a great depression, bringing on increasing wage cuts, layoffs and strikes, setting the stage for the greatest strike of all, the Pullman strike of 1894.

For several reasons, beyond a simple class alignment based on employer-employee antagonism, American employers came to identify strongly with the railroad system. Although hardly popular or representative of American industry in general, the railroads had provided the models for many centralized companies desiring to decentralize as their growth made owner-operator control ineffective. The decentralization procedures developed by the railroads depended upon the creation of a managerial class which could make decisions at the level where problems occurred and where the greatest expertise existed. The models provided by the Erie and the Pennsylvania Railroads, for example, were to be adapted by major businesses when their founders retired and as the companies continued to grow.¹⁰ Finally, I suggest that the railroads, with their emphasis on schedules, time-tables, efficiency, rigid itineraries, were to serve as a model for American industry and business in general, and by extension, for the health of the nation itself.

The second historical factor which would have prompted the middle-class reader's enthusiasm for "A Message to Garcia" and provided him with another compelling model was the Spanish-American War. Writing at the end of the successfully completed War, Hubbard offered to peacetime America a soldier as hero and, by extension, a military model as the most appropriate structure for the modern industrial state. Both the Pullman strike and the "splendid little war" against Spain had been settled quickly and efficiently by Federal troops. The attractiveness of this military model for the purchasers of Hubbard's essay lay in its vision of a social structure in which power moves only from the top to the bottom, in which the distinctions between civil and military ends

are obscured, and in which the civil strike, consequently, could be treated as if it were a military insurrection. Though Rowan was historically an officer, he functions in Hubbard's tract as the least of privates; merely carrying his message from principal to principal, he is reduced to a willing, movable part. The actual heroic dimension of Rowan's action is of no real concern to Hubbard;¹¹ he dismisses it in one sentence: "How 'the fellow by the name of Rowan,' took the letter . . . and delivered his letter to Garcia are things I have no special desire now to tell in detail." The interest of Hubbard and his customers is focused exclusively on Rowan's efficiency and obedience: "The point I wish to make is this: McKinley gave Rowan a letter to be delivered to Garcia; Rowan took the letter and did not ask, 'Where is he at?' by the Eternal! there is a man whose form should be cast in deathless bronze and the statue placed in every college in the land."

Perceived this way, Rowan becomes a superb example of Thoreau's "marine, such a man as an American government can make . . . there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense . . . and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well."¹² Hubbard's achievement was to take Thoreau's "wooden" man and translate him into heroic bronze, for an iron age.

In addition to these models suggested by immediate historical events, several allusions can be understood as influencing the middle-class reader's response and reinforcing the essay's essential argument: that the managerial class is entitled to unquestioning obedience from the laboring class and, if it does not receive such obedience, is justified in employing force in exacting it.

Hubbard's argument clearly establishes two antagonistic groups: we—the authorial, authoritative voice and the employer class for whom that voice speaks, and they—the laborers. On the one hand, "they," the laborers, are presented in a series of brief glimpses: the "fishy-eyed" clerk who cannot perform a relatively simple task, the bookkeeper who cannot be trusted to pass a saloon, the "regular firebrand of discontent" walking the streets looking for work, "the wind whistling through his threadbare coat." They are "frowsy," "dowdy," "deformed"; they are "foolish," "imbecile," "insane." They are Swift's Yahoos, but in Hubbard we find none of the pain that Gulliver felt at being a Yahoo himself. Their otherness is absolute.

On the other hand, the "we" for whom the author speaks is associated with two allusions which serve to reinforce the managerial class' sense of community and self-worth. I would like to examine two of these allusions as they serve to support the "right" of the middle class to demand and to exact by force obedience from the working class.

The first of these appears in the opening sentence to which I have already alluded. I suggest that the phrase "Mars at Perihelion" functioned as a sort of shibboleth for Hubbard and his subscribers, linking

them to each other and to the prestigious world of scientific culture. The phrase acquired widespread middle-class currency in the period from 1892 to 1899 during what came to be known in the journals and reviews as the "great Mars Boom."¹³

Mars comes into perihelion with the earth, that is, closest to the earth, at irregular intervals of roughly 15 to 17 years. However, the perihelion of 1892 was of particular public interest because during the previous decade several major new telescopes of great magnitude had been built, capable of showing Mars more clearly than ever before. Only a few years earlier, an Italian astronomer, Giovanni Schiaparelli, had published his "discovery" of a system of canals on Mars, and the 1892 perihelion was seen as an opportunity to verify or disprove their existence. When the event turned out to be disappointing to the viewers because of the low elevation of Mars above the horizon, Percival Lowell, heir to the Lowell cotton mill fortune, built the Lowell Observatory at Flagstaff, Arizona, in order to view Mars personally under the best possible conditions. In 1895, after a year of observations, he published his results in a book called *Mars*¹⁴ in which he fully corroborated Schiaparelli's discovery of canals on Mars and added a number of canals and irrigation ditches of his own.

The book was an extraordinary popular success and was reviewed at some length in such essentially middle-class journals as *The Critic*, *The Dial*, *The Edinburgh Review*, *Spectator*, *Littell's Living Age*, *The Nation*, *Popular Science* and *Science*.¹⁵ In 1895, the *Atlantic Monthly* published four major sections of the book in four successive monthly installments. "Mars at Perihelion" had been transformed from a scientific, technical term to a popular, middle-class allusion to a whole series of scientific, pseudo-scientific and journalistic imaginative speculations on life upon the red planet. These speculations would eventually appeal to a broad audience through their popularization in such science-fiction works as Edgar Rice Burroughs' "Mars" series; however, they remained an almost exclusive phenomenon of the middle-brow journal before the turn of the century.

In the second allusion which would have enhanced the managerial class' self-esteem Hubbard seems to propose a test to his employer-reader in order to demonstrate the general inadequacy of the working class:

Summon any . . . [clerk] and make this request: "Please look in the encyclopedia and make a brief memorandum for me concerning the life of Correggio." Will the clerk say, "Yes, sir," and go to the task?

On your life, he will not. He will look at you out of a fishy eye, and ask one or more of the following questions:

Who was he? . . .

Which encyclopedia? . . .

Don't you mean Bismarck? . . .

Is he dead? . . .

Explicit in Hubbard's illustration is the assertion that the employee will not know or care who Correggio was; in it also is the flattering implication that the employer-reader both knows and is concerned with that particular artist and, by extension, with art in general.

America, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, was enjoying something of an art boom. Wealthy collectors were importing great quantities of European art, and Correggio was a prominent name among the Old Masters eagerly sought for. In the decade before the turn of the century, at least a half a dozen books or articles on Correggio had appeared, one of which was Bernard Berenson's appreciation entitled "Fourth Century of Correggio" in *The Nation* in 1894.¹⁶ Appropriately, *The Nation*, then one of the country's most influential journals appealing to middle-class readers, was also leading the attack on "Debs' Anarchists" and applauding the use of Federal troops against them during the Pullman strike in precisely the issue in which Berenson's "Correggio" was published. The enthusiasm for art collecting which had begun among the upper classes in the eighties had become tremendously accelerated by 1893 when Mrs. Potter Palmer entertained all "the best people" visiting the Columbian Exposition in her Lake Michigan castle with its three-tiered, seventy-five foot long art gallery. The Exposition itself had included a loan exhibition of "Foreign Masterpieces Owned by Americans," and the list of contributors was studded with names like Cornelius Vanderbilt, Charles T. Yerkes, Jay Gould (all "self-made," uneducated men) and, of course, Mrs. Palmer.¹⁷ Hubbard's reference to Correggio, then, was resonant with overtones not merely of taste, but of class, fashion and money.

Thus, the references to "Mars at Perihelion" and "Correggio" in "A Message to Garcia" linked the middle-class reader to the worlds of Science and Art, or, more properly, to the worlds of popular science and fashionable art. This conjoining of Art, Science and the managerial class permits Hubbard to link the values of that class with nothing less than "Civilization" itself: ". . . the man who, when given a letter for Garcia, quietly takes the missive, without asking any idiotic questions, and with no lurking intention of chucking it into the nearest sewer, or of doing aught else but deliver it, never gets 'laid off,' nor has to go on strike for higher wages. Civilization is one long anxious search for such individuals."

This identification with "Civilization" not only serves to validate the sense of self-worth of the employer-reader, but also justifies the use of physical violence which runs through the essay. At one point its implied use is abstract and appeals again to the authority of the popular science of the period: ". . . out and forever out, the incompetent and the unworthy go. [One can detect in the repetition of the first phrase an echo of incantatory exorcism.] It is the survival of the fittest." At other points, however, violence is directly sanctioned and encouraged: "A

first mate with a knotted club seems necessary; and the dread of 'getting the bounce' Saturday night holds many a worker to his place." Further on, Hubbard tells us, after describing the "firebrand of discontent," "He is impervious to reason, and the only thing that can impress him is the toe of a thick-soled No. 9 boot." In both of these images we can catch the representative tone of a period in which direct physical violence was an almost reflexive response to class and economic conflict. The extraordinary reliance on Pinkertons, deputized scabs, armed strikers and militia rather than on negotiation and bargaining is one of the distinguishing characteristics of turn-of-the-century American labor history.¹⁸ Theodore Roosevelt's famous and much quoted aphorism, "Speak softly and carry a big stick," which was almost exactly contemporaneous with Hubbard's essay,¹⁹ epitomizes the muscular, truculent self-righteousness of the age, as well as the relative weights it placed on discourse and violence.

Historical factors and allusions upon which Hubbard draws to enrich his argument provide what might be called the "sub-text" of "A Message to Garcia." These can be seen as enhancing the essay's appeal to a managerial class dominated by self-made men whose economic privileges were under increasing attack and whose social and cultural pretensions, which in part served to justify those privileges, could always stand shoring up. This appeal led to the managerial class' massive subsidization and distribution of "A Message to Garcia," not solely because the essay would significantly alter or even modify lower-class attitudes or behavior, but because it served as a manifesto of shared principles and an affirmation of class identity, clearly defining that identity against the backdrop of the working class. The actual intention of the distribution of "A Message to Garcia" was not simply to win readers from the working class into the employer class, but to affirm also the gulf separating the two.

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notes

1. Freeman Champney, *Art and Glory* (New York, 1968), 89.
2. R. W. G. Vail, "A Message to Garcia: A Bibliographical Puzzle," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 34 (February, 1930), 71.
3. In *The American Mind* (New Haven, 1954), 231, Commager groups it with such works as Russel Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds" and the Horatio Alger novels. Merle Curti in his *American Issues: The Social Record* (Philadelphia, 1960), 879, also identifies Hubbard's essay with the "morale" building literature of the turn of the century. James Hart, in *The Popular Book* (Berkeley, 1961), 179, writes, "Readers who wanted assurance that the system of financial aristocracy was sound, that if a man but played the game diligently and efficiently he too might become president of a corporation, delighted in *A Message to Garcia*."
4. For the fullest account of Hubbard's business career and experiences at Harvard, see Champney, 25-60. Roycroft was both a manufacturing center of printed materials and artifacts and an experimental community where Hubbard's employees lived under his guidance and rule. Both Hubbard's Roycroft and Pullman, Illinois, the "model" community established by George Pullman for his employees, suggest something of the paternalistic attitude shared by these men.
5. Vail, 75-76.
6. In 1900, immigrants made up nearly half the work force in mining, textile goods

and steel, and in 1910 immigrants or men with at least one foreign parent made up nearly half the white male population in the United States. Thomas C. Cochran, *Business in American Life: A History* (New York, 1972), 261.

7. Champney, 89.

8. Major J. B. Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius: Memories of Famous Men and Women of the Platform and Stage* (New York, 1900), 356.

9. As quoted in Sidney Lens, *The Labor Wars* (New York, 1933), 89-90.

10. For an account of the role of the railroad industry in shaping modern American business and in creating the first modern managerial class, see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 87-121.

11. Stephen Crane, a friend of Hubbard's, was skeptical of Rowan's heroism. On May 1, 1899, he wrote to Hubbard:

He didn't do anything worthy at all. He received the praise of the general of the army and got to be made lieutenant col. for a feat which forty newspaper correspondents had already performed at the usual price of fifty dollars a week and expenses. Besides he is personally a chump.

Quoted in Dard Hunter, "Elbert Hubbard and 'A Message to Garcia,'" *New Colophon*, I (January, 1948), 33.

12. Henry Thoreau, "Resistance to Civil Government," in Wendell Glick, ed., *Reform Papers* (Princeton, 1973), 66.

13. "The Great Mars boom' [occurred] when public imbecility and journalistic enterprise combined to flood the paper and society with 'news from Mars.'" "New Views About Mars," *Littell's Living Age*, 211 (21 November 1896), 533-34.

14. Percival Lowell, *Mars* (Boston and New York, 1895).

15. See Ferris Greenslet, *The Lowells and Their Seven Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), 359-361.

16. *The Nation*, 59 (30 August 1894), 156-7.

17. See Aline Saarinen, *The Proud Possessors* (New York, 1958), 4-14.

18. Lens, 1-3.

19. Theodore Roosevelt frequently used this aphorism. The most usually cited source was in a speech he delivered at the Minnesota State Fair in 1901.