

William Dean Howells and Altruria

This is the second and concluding instalment of an article by RUSSEL B. NYE, of Michigan State College, in which the author depicts some of the literary aspects of the early days of the Georgist movement.

★ THE UNIT OF Altruian life was the home; indeed, the entire nation was but the projection of the family circle into a larger sphere. Each family was provided a standardized home by the state built upon state-owned land; "Not a foot of land," said Homos, following Henry George, "was remitted to private hands for the purpose of selfish pleasures or the exclusion of any other from the landscape." Altruians wore the same clothes, ate the same food, read the same books, and followed the same pleasures under state supervision. There were no cities in the land to breed disease and crime, for the population had been dispersed throughout the country, where fresh air and sunshine were free and plentiful. There were, however, Regional Capitals and a National Capital, which served solely as meeting places for the administrative officers of the government and as centers to which artists and scientists might go to study and

create. Community groups met informally for sports, discussion, and social pleasures whenever they wished. Once each year, however, all citizens of a Region met in the capital for better acquaintance, and once each four years in the National Capital.

The government of the state, the instrument of the people's power, was carefully planned. Every Altruian, schooled in the proper administration of public affairs, was prepared to discharge the duties of any office within the range of his capabilities. Every administrative official—local, regional, and national—alternated every year. Since absolute economic and social equality prevailed, and the motivating force of Altruian life was the common good, to hold public office became an honor demanding the best a citizen could give rather than a means of self-improvement or personal gain. The ballot remained the supreme power, and those whom it put into power were expected to perform their civic duties wisely and well. In a word, Altruian life was founded upon the belief that human nature is naturally altruistic, that if fear is taken away and security guaranteed, men will gladly work for others as well as for themselves. Altruria is the heaven of Christianity existing on earth, for, as Homos says, "We believe ourselves the true followers of Christ, whose doctrine we seek to make our life, as he made it His."

Of such is the Utopia of William Dean Howells made. It is only a general picture, lacking in many details and bearing the broad outlines of a sketch, but it is clearly the super-state of Bellamy, without its monopolistic and capitalistic tinge, founded directly upon Christian, New Testament ethics. Howells, of course, goes beyond Bellamy in his method of attainment, for what in Bellamy is the outcome of a naturally monopolistic process of the

absorption of all economic and social activity in a corporate Leviathan, becomes in Altruria the result of a socialistic, religious, and purely democratic process of communal ownership and direction by legislative means. As such, however, it is open to similar objections. Experience, the sole arbiter of judgment as to the advisability of such a Utopia, has shown that a state is made up of individuals, and that the capacity of individuals for consistently wise and eternally righteous action is always questionable. States, as do individuals, make errors, and will continue to do so as long as the human element is involved. The advisability of delegating to any state, no matter how perfectly designed, such tremendous and far-reaching powers as those given it in Altruria, is doubtful despite careful education of its constituents in their duties and in proper use of the voting franchise.

Economically, the Altrurian practice of producing only that which is "useful" brings up a question of definition which the book fails to answer; exactly what is meant by "useful," what is useful and what is not, and by what criterion may the state so judge? In addition, it is noticeable that Howells explains nothing of the actual

administrative plan of the super-state itself. The mechanical complexity of such a government, with its multitudinous functions dealing with every aspect of public and private life, is staggering to contemplate, and to the realistic critic it seems that such a bureaucratic monster might in time collapse of its own weight.

Again, nothing is said by Howells of the education of individuals for the acceptance of such a state; unless its originators were blessed with a completely blank and docile population, devoid of any preconceived ideas or established customs, its formation might be difficult and meet with opposition from the people themselves, particularly since (as Homos admits) the process is a matter of centuries. Further, absolute and unyielding civic regimentation of such a great number of personal affairs might not be acceptable to all citizens, no matter how insistent Homos may be upon the Altrurian's retention of his individuality. It is evident that in Howells' Utopia the individual choice is suppressed—clothing is standard, food is standard, social life is supervised and orderly, even public buildings and art are the result of civic choice—and the fate of individual variances of opinion and taste in Altruria is left vague.

The central question from which all others stem, however, is that posed by the minister at the end of the book. "When I remember," he says, "what I have seen of men, when I reflect what human nature is, how can I believe that the Kingdom of God will ever come upon the earth?" Homos answers that the only solution to the question lies in trial. That it is possible, that men can live together by the teachings of Christ, is Howells' hope, and the principle by which Altruria may find its way into reality.