HIGHBROW LOWBROW

THE EMERGENCE OF CULTURAL HIERARCHY IN AMERICA

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For my friends

Herbert Gutman
Warren Susman
John William Ward
and
Nathan Irvin Huggins

Whose deaths have taken from us
their vision, their generosity,
and their laughter

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The writers of a time hint the mottoes
of its gods. The word of the modern,
say these voices, is the word Culture.

Walt Whitman,
Democratic Vistas (1871)

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Prologue

I WAS STANDING in the halls of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., a few years ago chatting with a scholar who had just seen several Buster Keaton films. He was so enthusiastic and admiring of Keaton's skills that I relaxed my usual reserve when discussing such matters with my fellow academics. "Yes," I agreed, "Keaton was a great artist." I had rung the bell inadvertently and my colleague was about to prove Pavlov correct once again. He appeared puzzled for a moment and then came the familiar adjectival correction: "A great *popular* artist." Some time later I spoke at a symposium that accompanied a superb exhibit of Grant Wood's art. When the museum director was thanked publicly by the show's curator for his cooperation and his willingness to present the work of a painter whose artistic credentials have been under attack since he was first exhibited, the director called out from his seat in the very last row of the auditorium: "Just don't bring me Norman Rockwell next time!" It got a laugh, and like all jokes it had a message: There were, he was taking pains to make clear, depths beyond which even someone brave or foolish enough to exhibit Grant Wood could not be induced to sink.

Recently, the *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Gerald Nachman attended a performance of Rossini's *Barber of Seville* and wondered why operagoers would put up with its "silly and sentimental" libretto when Broadway producers continually refused to revive musicals by Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, or Richard Rodgers on the grounds that "although the score is terrific, the book is laughable." If operas originally had been written by Americans, Nachman suggested, "they'd be dismissed as moronic," and concluded: "I realized it must be the American reverence for all things European and our tendency to take for granted all things quintessentially American. I thought

we were over that but it's too ingrained; we're patriotic about everything but our art." The idea that Americans, long after they declared their political independence, retained a colonial mentality in matters of culture and intellect is a shrewd perception that deserves serious consideration. So does what Nachman himself termed the "outrageous" argument that *Showboat*, *Guys and Dolls*, or *Babes in Arms*, might be compared favorably with *The Barber of Seville*, *Norma*, or *La Traviata*. In fact, is the idea of a serious comparison of American musicals and opera really so outrageous? Are we certain we would learn so little about opera, musicals, and our own culture from making it? Irreverence, however, has its limits and even as he was fashioning these bold suggestions and assertions, Nachman felt it necessary to place his iconoclasm in proper perspective by making a bow to the prevailing icons and traditional definitions: "Nobody's talking culture here. I'm talking enjoyment."[1]

These episodes are repeated in book after book; even in Raymond Carney's sensitive study of the film director Frank Capra, which maintains that Capra can be understood fully if he is placed within a larger tradition of post-romantic expressive culture in America. It is a refreshing and important approach to Capra, but here too we get the characteristic hedging. "Capra's work must be considered alongside the work of Hawthorne, Emerson, Homer, Whitman, Eakins, James, Sargent, and Hopper, to name only the most obvious examples," Carney insists on the second page of his preface, and then, *in the very next sentence*, the familiar barricades begin to appear: "I want to emphasize that in making comparisons between the work of Capra and these other artists I am not trying to equate their respective achievements or to dignify Capra with a fancy intellectual pedigree."[2] The problem of course is that to place a film director *alongside* noted authors and artists, rather than *under* them, is to risk eroding hierarchy, though in fact we might learn a great deal from the process.

Stuart Levine of the University of Kansas faced a similar dilemma. In the early 1970s he began to lecture about how scholars might approach the values and institutions of high culture, and argued that art forms were not necessarily the product of "cosmic truths, but are rather the result of certain peculiarities in the way in which our culture operates." He was surprised by the response

his lectures generated: "On both occasions in which I presented these ideas, some people in the room misunderstood them, taking them to be an attack on the elite arts, a kind of cynical and even snide put-down of humanists on the part of a social scientist dabbling in the arts." When Levine put his ideas into print, he found it prudent to add some "confessional material"—a sort of cultural loyalty oath—which made his allegiances unmistakable:

> Let me say that I have no training in the social sciences beyond what my students have taught me, that for many years I made my living teaching American literature and the history of American painting, that I also have training in American architecture and American music, and that for a number of years before entering the academic world I supported myself as a professional concert musician. I still love all these arts, still perform from time to time, still spend happy hours in museums and concert halls . . . I carry many of the values described in this essay. But I refuse to believe that it is bad to attain sufficient detachment from them to recognize them for what they are—attitudes I hold, values by which I make judgments, but not necessarily universal truths.[3]

This world of adjectival boxes, of such crude labels as "highbrow," "middlebrow," "lowbrow," of continual defensiveness and endless emendations; this world in which things could not be truly compared because they were so rarely laid out horizontally, next to one another, but were always positioned above or below each other on an infinite vertical scale, had much to do with the genesis of this book and, I suspect, it will have more than a little to do with its reception. The latter will have to take care of itself, but let me here say a few words about the former. Let me, that is, heed the implicit counsel of the French historian Marc Bloch who in his posthumously published book, *The Historian's Craft*, spoke to his fellow historians of "the curious modesty which, as soon as we are outside the study, seems to forbid us to expose the honest groping of our methods before a profane public."[4]

The "honest groping" that helped lead to this volume began with a redundant discovery. More than a decade ago, while working on a study of Afro-American culture, I read through a series of minstrel shows to derive some more exact sense of how antebellum whites depicted black culture. What arrested my at-

tention was the ubiquity of Shakespearean drama in the humor of the minstrels who would ask each other such riddles as, "When was England offered for sale at at very low price?" and answer, "When King Richard offered his kingdom for a horse," or lampoon the "Seven Ages of Man" soliloquy from *As You Like It:*

> All the world's a bar,
> And all the men and women merely drinkers;
> They have their hiccups and their staggerings . . .

That these and the other parodies related in the next chapter were popular with the extremely heterogeneous audiences which attended minstrel shows brought me to the realization that Shakespeare must have been well known throughout the society since people cannot parody what is not familiar. Although Shakespeare's widespread popularity was already known among theater historians and the relative handful of cultural historians who had bothered to study the nineteenth century stage, my "discovery" had a dynamic effect upon me. Being the product of my own society in which Shakespeare is firmly entrenched in the pantheon of high culture, I was surprised, and fascinated, by the notion that his plays might have been popular culture in the nineteenth century, but initially I resisted the idea. How could a playwright whom I had been taught to consider so formidable a talent as to be almost sacred, and whose plays were demanding even for educated readers in the twentieth century, have been accessible to the broad and far less well educated public a century earlier? It took a great deal of evidence to allow me to transcend my own cultural assumptions and accept the fact that Shakespeare actually *was* popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America.

The evidence was there, overwhelmingly, but that was only the beginning; I still had to struggle with the temptation—to which many scholars have succumbed—to be guided by my prior expectations and to dismiss the popularity of Shakespeare as aberrant or irrelevant since plain people could not possibly have appreciated him for the "right" reasons: not for his poetry or philosophy or wisdom but for his buffoonery, lewdness, sensationalism. This urge has assumed many forms. Take the following sentence from a 1974 history of mid-nineteenth-century Amer-

ican society and culture written by a scholar who has pioneered in the study of, and taught us an enormous amount about, American popular culture:

> Shakespeare was tremendously popular (in Philadelphia sixty-five performances in 1835 alone) but his plays were either produced as vehicles for a popular star—like Edwin Booth's Lear or Forrest's Macbeth—or treated as blood-and-thunder spectacles, which accounted for frequent appearances of *Richard III*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Merchant of Venice*.[5]

What was the purpose of this curious "*but*"? Did it really negate, or qualify, or explain the fact of Shakespeare's popularity in any meaningful way? The more I stumbled into these inescapable qualifiers, the more I concluded that their effective—though not necessarily deliberate—function was to protect the historian and the historian's culture. By inserting a strategic "but" here and there, scholars were shielded from having to confront the perplexing implications of Shakespeare's popularity, a popularity that challenged the very cultural expectations which had taught us to believe such a thing was improbable if not impossible. To avoid this cultural trap it was necessary to do what historians should always strive to do, however imperfectly they succeed: to shed one's own cultural skin sufficiently to be able to perceive Shakespeare, as nineteenth-century Americans perceived him, through the prism of nineteenth-century culture.

Before this could be accomplished there was still another problem: the difficulty I had believing that I was worthy to work on Shakespeare—another legacy of my own culture. Could I, a non-specialist, possibly possess the credentials necessary to do research involving a figure my culture had taught me to revere as one of the barely accessible Classic Writers who could be approached only with great humility and even greater erudition? It was only when a friend in Washington, D.C., tired of my dilatory tactics, made an appointment for me to speak with a librarian at the Folger Shakespeare Library and I found myself one morning actually sitting in that fine research center reading through playbills of nineteenth-century American productions of Shakespeare, that I began to feel myself treading familiar ground and realized that the dimensions of this historical problem were no greater

than others I had investigated with some degree of success; that in fact a historian of American history with no special training in drama, and no special knowledge of Shakespeare, might just be able to bring a refreshing perspective to a neglected subject.

Nevertheless, cultural dispositions die hard and I continued to shove my slowly evolving article on Shakespeare's relationship to nineteenth-century Americans into my desk drawer at the slightest excuse. The drawer opened permanently only when I was invited to participate in a conference in Budapest in 1982 on the relationship between high and low culture. Perhaps the prospect of making my first public scholarly comment on Shakespeare in a foreign country appealed to me as less formidable than doing so in my own country. Whatever the reasons, I decided to roll the dice: if they accepted my proposal to contribute a paper demonstrating that Shakespeare was part and parcel of nineteenth-century American culture and speculating about the process by which he was transformed into high culture at the turn of the century, I would finally complete it. They did and I did. The fact that the paper was greeted with enthusiasm and that my American colleagues encouraged me to publish it, eroded whatever resistance remained in me. Indeed, once the article was published the opposite reaction set in and I began to play with the notion of expanding it and exploring to what extent the case of Shakespeare was *sui generis*: did the other elements of what was to become high culture at the turn of the century—symphonic music, opera, the fine arts—undergo the same transformation? How and when did the cultural categories I had been brought up to believe were permanent and immutable emerge? They clearly did not exist in the case of Shakespeare until the turn of the century. Was this true of other forms of expressive culture as well?

This question had become increasingly important to me as I continued my work on a study of American culture during the Great Depression and found myself hampered by the imprecise hierarchical categories culture has been carved into. How did one distinguish between "low," "high," "popular," and "mass" culture? What were the definitions and demarcation points? The arresting films of Frank Capra, one of the 1930s' best known and most thoughtful directors, were labeled "popular culture" as