

By BRANDER MATTHEWS

THE HIGHER LEARNING IN AMERICA:  
A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men. By Thorstein Veblen. New York: E. W. Huebsch. \$4.

**A**T luncheon in a London club twenty years ago or more a distinguished Englishman, who had just returned from a visit to America, told me that what had most struck him in the United States was the widespread interest in education. "With you over there," he said, "everybody is ready to talk about your schools and your colleges and your universities. Over here nobody ever talks about education, because nobody really cares about it."

I felt at the time that my English friend was overestimating our interest in education as he was underestimating that of his own people. But there was truth in his remark, even if he had exaggerated the difference between the two English-speaking peoples. The British have of late been awakened to the supreme importance of education; and yet there are many among them who would echo the saying of the cynical Lord Melbourne that it "a bore to educate, a bore to be educated, and a bore to talk about education." Of course, as we all know, Matthew Arnold was ever insistent on calling attention to the inadequacy of the British system—if that could fairly be called a system fifty years ago when it was a thing of shreds and patches, a chaotic complex of revered traditions and of hesitating experiments. He was a voice crying in the wilderness; but in the thirty years since he left us not a few ardent disciples have joined in a chorus of warning against the old attitude of "letting well enough alone" and of "muddling through."

On this side of the Western Ocean we began very early to believe in education. The men of Massachusetts founded a college in what was little better than a clearing in the woods. The Dutch brought over from Holland a deep-seated belief in the advantages of popular education; and there is a never-ending dispute as to whether our common-school system is to be credited to New York or to New England. We have in the past forty years superimposed a true university on the top of the four-year college course, as we are now engaged in underpinning the professional and the technical schools with two or three years of the college course. We have been forced to listen to prolonged debates over the merits and demerits of free electives, of the kindergarten, of manual training, of the Montessori method, of the Gary system, and of vocational training. This incessant discussion has been due to the fact that we have never been entirely satisfied with things as they are. Probably most of us were pleased to believe that we had done pretty well, even if we might have done better; and certainly some of us were not disposed to be content until we had done the very best we could. It may be doubted whether we were really more discontented with what we had than the French were or the English. The English have taken a great step in advance in the recent Education act; and the French have modified their educational organization three or four times in the half century of the Third Republic.

Perhaps the debate over the maintenance of the classical tradition—the Question of Latin, as the French termed it—has been conducted even more energetically and more acrimoniously in France than in the United States.

But neither in France nor in England has there been so incessant a succession of books as we have had in this country attacking what the valiant assailants deemed to be the weaknesses in our educational system. At one moment it is the common school which is the target, and at another the college is the centre of fire. As might be expected, these books vary in value and vary in temper—most of them are mediocre, a few of them are excellent, and more than a few are feeble and foolish. In which of these three groups is the latest of them to be included?

One thing is obvious even to the casual and cursory reader of Mr. Thorstein Veblen's "Higher Learning in America": it is a most unusual book. And it is unusual in half a dozen different ways. It is unusual in the first place because of the illiteracy of the author—or, if this is putting it too discourteously, because the author is deficient in the craftsmanship of writing. His opinions are doubtfully weighty, but his pages are undoubtedly heavy. His style is painfully awkward, and his phrasing is painfully slovenly. He writes English as if it were a foreign language which he had acquired late in life. His vocabulary is limited and he indulges in a fatiguing repetition of a dozen or a score of adjectives. His grammar is woefully defective, and in fact, as we turn Mr. Veblen's pages we have a feeling that we are at last entering into the grammatical millennium, for so many years ago by the late George T. Langan, "when the plural noun shall lie down with the singular verb and a little conjunction shall lead them."

On Page 28 Mr. Veblen asserts that "the material so made use of for technical ends are taken over and turned to account without afterthought," and on Page 32 he tells us that "within the university precincts any aim or interest other than those of irresponsible science and scholarship—pursuit of matter-of-fact knowledge—are to be rated as interlopers." Surely, it is not too much to ask that when a man invites us to consider what he has to say about the Higher Learning he shall first of all equip himself with the Lower Learning—at least, with the elementary grammar of the English language. Before he attempts to climb the lofty steps that lead to the university he ought to be able to prove that he has passed through the portals of the grammar school. So frequent and so flagrant are Mr. Veblen's violations of accepted usage that I was moved to look him up in "Who's Who," and I was astonished to learn from the autobiography he contributed that he is not only a college graduate, but that he is even a Doctor of Philosophy. It may be possible that, with a humor unrevealed elsewhere in his pages, he desires to proffer himself as a Horrible Example of the deficiencies of our university instruction.

Nor is his rhetoric any less at fault than his grammar. It is evident enough that Mr. Veblen does not write cleanly, because he does not think clearly. His presentation

of the results of his cogitation is so vague and so vaporous that the reader is often left in doubt as to what it is that the author believes he believes. He is verbose and repetitious, tautological and entangled, cumbrous and hazy. He ties himself in knots and trips over them. Words are his masters and not his servants. His metaphors play tag with one another. Here, for example, is a sentence on Pages 42 and 43:

And while the long-time drift of the modern idealistic bias may not permit the universities permanently to be diverted to the service of Mammon in this fashion, yet the unremitting endeavors of educators seeking prestige for worldly wisdom results [sic] at the best in a fluctuating state of compromise, in which the ill effects of such bids for popularity are continually being outworn by the drift of academic usage.

It would be difficult to deny that bids which can be outworn by drifts are likely to have strange effects.

In the second place, this book is unusual in its tone of condescensions, in its attitude of impregnable superiority, in its toplofty contempt for all men and for all things. From a contributing editor to one or another of the subsided weeklies, which vaunt themselves as the friends of the New Freedom and as the organs of the Uplift, we have no right to expect the persuasive urbanity which characterized every page of Newman's "Idea of a University"; but we are justified in looking for that respect for others which is a necessary companion of self-respect. Apparently Mr. Veblen has not taken to heart Robert Louis Stevenson's suggestive assertion that the pleasures of condescension are curiously one-sided. Mr. Veblen does not argue with his readers; he tells them. He demands com-

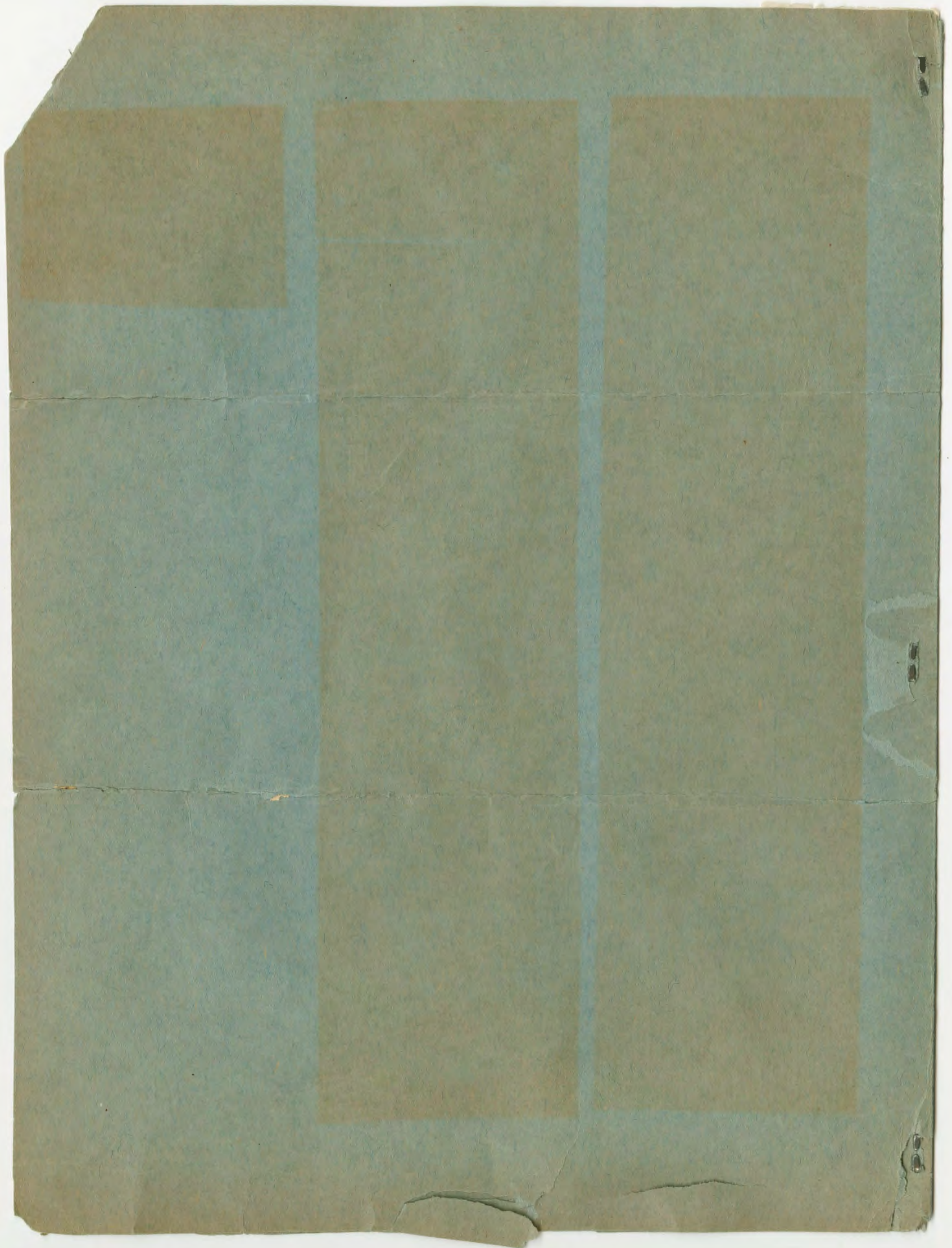
pliance like one who has come down from the mountain with the tables of stone in his hand. He is like the bust of Molière in Bunner's little lyric:

"Yet high his haughty head he heaves."

The little reader is also the humble reader, but, however gentle or humble, he does not like to be trampled in the dust. We cannot help wondering what warrant Mr. Veblen believes himself to have for his arrogant assumption of the right to look down on the rest of mankind. In fact, one reader, in spite of the gentleness of his humility, was reminded of the protest of the British barrister to the browbeating Judge before whom he was trying a case: "Your lordship seems to forget that I am after all a vertebrate animal, whereas your lordship's tone to me would be unbecoming in God Almighty to a black beetle!"

In the third place, Mr. Veblen's book is unusual in its disclosure of its author's absolute ignorance of the institution he has taken for his topic. He does not understand the organization of a university—or, if he does, he misrepresents it completely. He does not perceive the interrelation of its several parts, nor the reasons for these interrelations, nor the manifold advantages of them. He imputes motives to boards of trustees, to university presidents, and to college professors—motives which are so absurd that they can only be termed grotesque. Mr. Veblen's typical trustee,

(over)



his typical president, his typical professor, cannot even be accepted as a caricature, because a caricature, however willfully distorted, must be drawn from an actual original; and it is evident that Mr. Veblen has evolved out of his inner consciousness his idea of the trustee, the president, and the professor. His types are as unrelated to any possible originals as though Mr. Veblen had spent his life in a vacuum. His vision of the American university is not what he calls it (on Page 44) "something of a fancy sketch"; it is something altogether fantastic.

It would be fatiguing to catalogue all the stark misstatements of fact made by Mr. Veblen; but a few of them must be set down here. He says (Page 23) that the graduate school and the college "are still commonly coupled together as subdivisions of a complex whole; but this holding together of the two disparate schools is at best a freak of aimless survival." The fact is that this coupling is advantageous to both partners, and especially—as I can testify from nearly thirty years' experience—to the professor who is fortunate enough to teach both in the college and the graduate school. He says (Page 30) that "the technologist and the professional man are, like other men of affairs, necessarily and habitually impatient of any scientific and scholarly work that does not obviously lend itself to some practical use." The fact is that nearly all the leaders in the professions, like many leaders among the men of affairs, have a very high regard for "work that does not lend itself to some practical use."

He says (Page 40) that the professional and technical schools are now "autonomous and academically self-sufficient," (whatever that may mean,) and that "their connection with the university is superficial and formal at the best, so far as regards any substantial control of their affairs and policy by the university authorities at large." The fact is exactly the contrary; medical and law schools which used to be autonomous and even proprietary are now integrally connected with the university, to which they often owe the enlargement of their aims and the reinvigoration of their teaching. He says (Page 64) that "poor men and men without large experience in business affairs are felt to have no place" on Boards of Trustees. The fact is that such men are frequently elected as Trustees and are often among the most useful members of their boards.

He says (Page 117) that "under the stress of businesslike management in the universities the drift of things sets toward letting the work of science and scholarship to the lowest bidder, on a roughly applicable piece-wage plan." The fact is—well, the fact is that this assertion is simply silly. But it is not sillier than a host of other assertions which companion it in Mr. Veblen's volume. Indeed, I cannot now recall that I have ever read any book on any subject in which there is amassed such a mess of miscellaneous misinformation.

Fourthly and finally—for this Catalogue of the Slips must not be allowed to become as fatiguing as its text—this book is unusual in its bad manners and perhaps, I should say, in its bad morals. There is a discourtesy very close to dishonesty in slandering by insinuation. The man who comes straight at us with a bowie knife in his hand may be dangerous, but he is not despicable, like the creature who creeps up

stealthily with a stiletto to deal a stab in the back. On Page 67 and on Page 70 Mr. Veblen seems to suggest that there are Boards of Trustees whose members make a personal profit out of the funds intrusted to them; the insinuation is hedged about with weasel words—i. e., "instances of the kind are not wholly unknown, though presumably (!) exceptional." Mr. Veblen is ready to believe the worst about all college Trustees, since they are likely to be business men, and he holds that "the spirit of American business is a spirit of quietism, caution, compromise, collusion, and chicanery," (Page 70,) and that "success in business affairs . . . comes only by getting something for nothing." (Page 71.)

We all know that the university President is an important figure in American public life and without exact parallel in European public life. No one would decry the high ability and the lofty character of Elliot of Harvard, Gilman of Johns Hopkins, White of Cornell; and every one recognizes the scholarly equipment of Butler of Columbia, Hadley of Yale, and Lowell of Harvard. But Mr. Veblen does not hesitate to declare (Page 83) it "a safe generalization that in point of fact the average of university Presidents fall short of the average of their academic staff in scholarly or scientific attainments." He asserts also that "as to the requirements of scholarly or scientific competency, a plausible speaker with a large gift of assurance, a businesslike educator or clergyman, some urbane pillar of society, some astute veteran of the scientific *demi-monde* will meet all reasonable requirements." On Page 269, but more or less diminished in prominence by the finer type of a foot note, may be found what we must regard as Mr. Veblen's most characteristic utterance:

"A person widely conversant with current opinion and its expression among the personnel of the staff . . . might unguardedly come to the persuasion that the typical academic head, under these latter-day conditions, will be a *feeble-minded rogue*."

The President of Mr. Veblen's vision is naturally uncomfortable in the presence of a real scholar, and he is swift to oust any such person who has obtruded himself into the Faculty. On Pages 172-3 we are warned that "it is not an easy or a graceful matter for a businesslike executive to get rid of any undecorative or indecorous scientist whose only fault is an unduly pertinacious pursuit of the work for which alone the university claims to exist." But on Pages 178-9 we are informed how the scientist whose only fault is that he is truly

a scientist may be crowded out: "By a judicious course of vexation and equivocation, an obnoxious scientist may be manoeuvred into such a position that his pride will force a voluntary resignation. Failing this, it may become necessary, however distasteful, delicately to defame his domestic life."

These quotations must suffice to prove how truly unusual Mr. Veblen's book is; indeed, I like to hope that it is not only unusual, but actually unique, in the exact sense of that abused word. "None but itself can be its parallel."

