

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Randolph Bourne (1886-1918)

The Handicapped

“Life will have little meaning for me,” Bourne writes, “except as I am able to contribute toward some...ideal of social betterment...” So does he show his allegiance to the major intellectual and social movement of his time, Progressivism.

Yet Bourne is different from other progressives like Charlotte Perkins Gilman in having been handicapped. He had a hunchback which was the result of spinal tuberculosis when he was four, and a misshapen face and deformed left ear which were the result of a messy birth, as he called it. He could never participate in Theodore Roosevelt’s “robust life” or assume a confident public role in reform movements, as Gilman and so many others did. He was also about a generation younger, and he died at only thirty-two, a victim of the 1918-19 flu epidemic.

In that short life he managed to write an amazing number of essays, letters, book reviews, and sociological studies—a large part of these from a very compelling autobiographical perspective. “Youth,” an essay which appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in April, 1912, made him a spokesman for young intellectuals. After graduating from Columbia University in 1913, he spent a year in Europe on a travelling fellowship, and then became a contributing editor of the New Republic. In 1917, he moved to the Seven Arts, for which he wrote a series of powerful essays opposing American participation in the war.

This very early essay was unsigned. It was simply entitled “The Handicapped—By One of Them.” Bourne apparently wanted to direct attention away from himself as an individual and towards the common experience of all persons similarly “in the world, but not of the world.” Yet the way he gave that experience psychic reality was by talking intimately about him-self. He also, by daring to write it, fought against the lowered expectations and the silence which he says surround the handicapped. Also crucial is his emphases on friends as the keys that help him unlock himself. Readers are tacitly invited to become friends, too, whereupon he becomes more intimate, talking about his childhood, his ideals, and finally to others “who are situated as I am.”

In its daring and in its bursting of conventional genteel reticence, then, this essay does show a new kind of vigor and hope and a new concept of self. More-over, in taking on the paradoxes of how the handicapped are both similar and different from others, it looks forward to a lot of later American autobiography that took on the paradoxes of race, religion, class, and gender.

The text is from The Atlantic Monthly 108 (September 1911): 320-29. Bruce Clayton, in *Forgotten Prophet: The Life of Randolph Bourne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Univ. Press, 1984), provides the definitive biography.

Reading

Trans-National America

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/rbannis1/AIH19th/Bourne.html>

