

Eclectic

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ECLECTIC

The journal called *Eclectic* didn't cost much. Just the leisure of its editor and publisher, listed as Harry Hoffnung on the masthead, since some people wouldn't take a Harriet seriously. Her plan for the magazine was simple. Leaving her children with her live-in maid, she traveled to professors, lawyers, politicians, union leaders, poets and artists to solicit an article on any idea they couldn't publish under their own names.

Every one of them had stumbled upon taboos. Some had avoided them, prudently, anxiously. Others had confronted them, sideways at least, and discovered just how dangerous that was. Many were eager to show that they weren't hypocrites and cowards, if only to themselves and Harriet, for she promised she would never reveal their identity, not even to her future curator, archivist, and all-around amanuensis. From the very beginning, she had imagined me and decided that I wouldn't get the whole story.

Her husband humored her because he supposed her project would last only a couple of years, like most little magazines. But she had tapped into a strong underground spring that would not be quelled. Six times a week, except for holidays, mail poured in through the slot in her front door. Manuscripts inundated her. Many people had theories which they preferred to circulate anonymously, so oversights and errors would not humiliate them later. And when their friends and colleagues confessed in confidence to some heresy, Harriet's nickname and home address were often passed on. *Eclectic* was considered the perfect place to launch a trial balloon, for if it crashed, no one could be held responsible.

Bought or borrowed, the journal got into other hands. It was leafed through by accountants acquainted with the hidden life of money. Fishermen and hikers who had seen something dumped in the dark. Would-be whistleblowers who knew the penalties for tattle-taling. I could tell this from the letters to the editor, always published without the writers' real names. One, signed An Old

Progressive, went, "Your magazine is necessary because the United States became most censorious when it attained its greatest influence, like the Catholic Church in the thirteenth century." But I suspect that articles also came in from abroad. How many I can't say, however.

"I threw out my correspondence with all authors," Harriet announced when I took the job as Keeper of the Hoffnung House Museum. "Don't bother to search for it."

Nevertheless I checked the crevices in her office rooms and living quarters thoroughly. There is no record of a storage place lent or rented to her. It is possible she told me the truth.

She did save her subscriber lists and they are international. Never long, but with a lot of eminence. When I make them public, historians will probably go wild. For some of these well-respected men and women were almost certainly not merely readers, but also her writers, cloaked as The Last Honest Man, Holy Fool, and A-B von C, to mention just a few pen names. Sooner or later, scholars will match opinions in her journal with some very famous figures. But it will take a while. Harriet, faithful to her word, made sure an author's identity would not be easy to decode.

No one was allowed to choose one disguise and stick to it, so you could get a sense of how N.N., say, differed from Prof. Dr. Dr. X. They had to flit from one cover to another. To the uninitiated, *Eclectic* must have appeared to be a magazine which no one wrote for twice. But she had her stable, as she called her regulars. No plodding workhorses but thoroughbreds. Nimble, elegant, fast on their feet. Of course, she also got aggressive animals who liked to kick and use their teeth. Pseudonyms produce plenty of those. Protected from reprisals, some people tried to settle scores. Harriet determined which vendettas had a wider significance because it was her cash and time that transformed typed and handwritten pages into print. She claimed an editor's authority and exercised it, even with contributors who were extremely prominent.

She told me, "Sure, I lost some writers while trying to rein them in. So what? They were soon replaced. For I provided opportunities to voice long-standing grievances. The young

could take on the oppressive old. The old could recall what historians omitted. Workers could criticize their bosses, servants their masters, and so on."

As for women, some say she attracted many more of them than men, but I can't confirm it. Harriet no longer remembers. She'd grown old before I came.

There was another rumor, spread by her enemies including my mother, that the entire journal was written by Harriet alone. "The lady of a million masks," they called her, sometimes to her face. But they overestimated her imagination and overlooked the expertise that went into each essay. Some people need an impressive-sounding blurb in order to appreciate an author.

"Middle-brows," said Harriet. "Ignore them."

She worked for a better sort, regardless of their origins. Those willing to arrive at independent judgments. I know a movie critic like that who takes pride in making up his own mind. He goes to festivals to see films before the reviews are out and won't read the press packets handed out by publicists there. I can't say what gives him that self-confidence, because I didn't get to know him that well, although we two were lovers for a while. Somehow he escaped the fear that makes others override their own reactions, until they fail to notice them at all.

"I made my readers feel responsible," Harriet bragged and told me a parable from somewhere in the Bible about tares, a kind of weed which may be useful to the wheat in which it grows. If you try to pull it out of the ground, you can destroy a lot of needed cereal, she said, since the grasses aren't easy to distinguish. Only later, after harvesting, can the grain be separated quickly and with fewer mistakes. I'm a very urban person, and I hope I recorded this correctly. Anyhow, I tried.

Some of her readers rose to the challenge, encouraged by her confidence in their ability, and subscribed year after year. My mother and her crowd maintained that anything published in *Eclectic* was automatically suspect, otherwise it would not be there but in a well-known magazine, with a byline that's a genuine name. Harriet was exiled by them beyond the borders of respectability, although she lived not far from New York City.

"A very gentle punishment, given the alternatives," Hoffnung explained to me. "That may be why it was recommended in

Paul's epistle to Titus, chapter three, verses ten and eleven. In the King James version: 'A man that is a heretic after the first and second admonition reject,' etc. No offence, but when your mother and her friends Brian and Helen didn't return my calls, I could work with greater concentration."

Harriet refused to be insulted or injured. She continued publishing her magazine as before. It never sold well on newsstands, which was a kind of protection. No one sued her to reveal her sources because a trial might bring more guilt to light. A law suit could create a scandal, which the major media would gladly carry to the millions.

"A gadfly is too small to cause much injury and will fly away eventually," she often said with a self-satisfied smile.

"Not if you're trapped with it," her husband would reply, swatting the air.

There came a time when Harriet was almost popular. She was not the only one who felt the change. People she called "the kids"—older than I, younger than my mother—discovered her as if she had been lost and declared her a national historic treasure. Articles appeared about her as a great foremother, which made her children laugh.

To these new admirers, the secrecy of *Eclectic* was old-fashioned and unnecessary. A romance with revolutionary etiquette. In an open letter to the editor, an undergraduate advised the magazine to drop the childish pseudonyms. Harriet answered underneath, "Ridiculous!" A few years later, when this generation had entered professional schools or gotten full-time positions in America, Harriet received apologies.

"My chairman warns I mustn't waste my time contributing to magazines like yours or newspapers. I'm supposed to write only for academic presses and scholarly journals if I want to keep my job and get promoted. Panels of my so-called peers must decide what's fit for publication. Everything else is 'just journalism' to my department head," reads a letter printed in *Eclectic* and credited to Justine A. Journalist.

A doctoral candidate wrote in, "Today my dissertation advisor warned me, 'You can say what you want about me in private, but if you ever dare to criticize me publicly, I'll ruin you.'"

To which Harriet responded, "Public vs. private: who gets to draw the line? *Eclectic* is both and neither, in-between. Your call." She vowed to continue publishing as long as her journal was needed. "Only death will stop me, and even it will not finish me off completely." That is where I come in, the guardian of her memory, dedicated to reminding people that a Harriet should always exist. Her children are too busy for that role.

Here's what she instructed me to put on a placard and mount on the wall of her living room, between two armchairs:

Don't think that conversation is enough. Dialogue is marked by smiles and winks; it leaves as much unsaid as it explores. Politeness dictates how long one partner may hold forth, how many times another is allowed to contradict or question. A tape-recorded chat is not worth publishing if the parties did not permit themselves the consistency and logic of an essay. When I'm gone, a new *Eclectic* must be born!

—Harry Hoffnung

I'm implicated in that mission somehow. Not that I can continue her editorial work. I've told her often that my talents are visual, so close imitation of her has never been required of me. Harriet is much too clever to see the reincarnation of herself in me. My task is much more difficult, because ambiguous.

"What exactly do you want?" I once asked her straight out, perhaps untactfully, but I don't think it's an unreasonable question of an employer.

"Who of us knows what he wants?" she asked me back.

That's when I understood why this job is not as doable as it first appeared.

I can cope with outside operations. Supervise the maintenance of her house and garden, though this is the first time I've tended either, having always lived in an apartment. You simply find some books with basic definitions and then start talking with the neighbors, who gladly demonstrate how rich they are in old suburban lore.

Designing a museum is just as mechanical. Choices in glass cases, poster backing, and movable walls are limited. Most

decisions can be quickly made. Liability for injury and other accidents is now covered by a reputable insurance company. State-of-the-art smoke detectors installed. A new security system. The floors and staircases were coated to keep scuff marks at a minimum. As for color brochures, they're done, and my relations with the local print shop are cordial, because they keep to deadlines and I pay them promptly.

What it took to change a mostly-private space into a mostly-public one was a series of small acts. The first and most important one happened decades ago, when Harriet put *Eclectic* right next to her family. That's when strangers began to see her address as a home for their ideas. Her husband felt crowded out and moved away after their children were grown.

All I've done is carry through a process which she started. Something which a trained curator would have accomplished with less effort, but I'm not ashamed of the results. Now comes the hard part, however. Maybe I'm wrong, but "a new *Eclectic* must be born!" sounds like a command to resurrect her magazine. I am not sure exactly what she has in mind, if anything. Should I discover the next editor, using her museum as the bait to lure in likely candidates? It will be a slow method at the rate that visitors are trickling in.

Here's my plan. To attract her successor requires a theatrical move. Something almost as surprising and strange as the magazine itself. Which is why I've asked permission from the museum's board of directors to announce

An Opening Picnic!
Date: To Be Decided.
Please check the media
for further details.

It will be an unmasked ball. The opposite of those aristocratic evenings where the rich dressed up as peasants and dominos. All her former authors can come as they are, without their pseudonyms. Show themselves before the world in daylight. Won't that be a coup? Think of who I'll get from the most diverse occupations. Most must be retired, and so no longer risk their jobs or reputations for what they published in *Eclectic*.

And many of their ideas are now respectable, so they can show up proud at once having been daring, avant-garde. Reporters can look for a scoop, and the curious are also welcome, for our openness should extend to all. I will ask that film critic, but he'll be at some distant festival, most likely.

"You'll get a baker's dozen, no more," predicted the neighbor who is worried my museum will give the town a lousy image. "Most of her authors are probably as old as she, so dead or barely sentient. And those who aren't will be terrified of who they're bound to meet at Harriet's house. My dear girl, you forget that her journal was *Eclectic* and contained very opposing views. The lion will not lie down with the lamb just because you want to hold a garden party."

I hadn't considered potential fights, but when she mentioned them, I decided that they should be advertised. Some people in and around New York might find them entertaining.

"Why are you still incredibly naive?" asked my mother, whom I never told about my plan, so I don't know how she heard of it. "You seem to think ideas are in demand, when there's such an oversupply that they're sold dirt cheap. With what most writers get for an article these days, they can't buy a suit unless it's in a final clearance sale. Just tell me, who among your friends would celebrate a magazine that's both obscure and defunct?"

So I'll target the next generation, with their quirky and defiant zines. Like the one that's by and for the slackers. In resisting work, they're up against a really big taboo as they must know, since in order to get unemployment checks they're forced to apply for jobs or at least pretend to. I think they might respect *Eclectic* for having taken on the sacrosanct long ago.

I learned from Harriet to use hostility to my advantage.