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Charles Eliot Norton: The Art of Reform in Nineteenth-Century America (Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies)

Linda Dowling

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Author, translator, social critic and Harvard professor of art, Charles Eliot Norton was widely regarded in his own day as the most cultivated man in America. In modern times, by contrast, he has been condemned as the supercilious representative of an embattled patrician caste. This revisionary study argues that Norton's genuine significance for American culture and politics today can only be grasped by recovering the vanished contexts in which his life and work took shape. In a wide-ranging analysis, Linda Dowling demonstrates the effects upon Norton's thought of the great transatlantic humanitarian reform movement of the 1840s, the Pre-Raphaelite and Ruskinian revolution in art and architecture of the 1850s and the surging liberal optimism that emerged from the Civil War. Drawing on numerous deleted passages from Norton's manuscript journals, Dowling probes beneath the imperturbable mask of the public Norton, bringing to light the elusive private man.

Returning from Europe in 1873, bereft of his wife and stripped of his religious belief, Norton was compelled to confront the painful contradictions within his own liberal political faith. In a land given to celebrating freedom of speech, Norton would become a speaker subjected to physical threats for opposing the Spanish-American War. Among a people given to glorying in its superiority to other civilizations, he would become a social critic reviled for arguing that the nation was failing to live up to its own most cherished ideals. It would be Norton's misfortune, shared with others of his generation, to watch the golden promise of a victorious war for the Union fade into the unrepentant cynicism of the Gilded Age. Yet Norton's militant idealism and heroic citizenship, Dowling argues, survive now as a vital parable for American civic liberalism in the present day.

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