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## William Dean Howells

Guillaume Tanguy

► **To cite this version:**

Guillaume Tanguy. William Dean Howells. Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 308 p., 2009, Profils américains, 978-2-84269-880-5. hal-03182231

**HAL Id: hal-03182231**

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Collection « Profils américains », n° 21

# William Dean Howells

*Sous la direction de*  
GUILLAUME TANGUY



PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE

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2009

**« Profils américains »**

Collection publiée par le  
Centre de recherches et d'études nord-américaines (CRENA)  
Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier III  
PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE

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# William Dean Howells

The day had been made beautiful by human sympathy.

Hamlin GARLAND, « A Day's Pleasure »

*à Michel Bandry,*  
*co-fondateur de Profils américains*



# Profils américains    numéro 21

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

## William Dean Howells

Numéro coordonné par Guillaume TANGUY

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Guillaume Tanguy  
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## Introduction: Reassessing William Dean Howells

Howells is all out now. All literary reputation-making is unjust, but Howells is the victim of perhaps the single greatest injustice in American literary history. The period from 1880 to 1900, Henry Adams once said, was ‘our Howells-and-James epoch,’ and the two bearded grandees stood on terms as equal as the Smith Brothers on a cough-drop box. But then Howells got identified, unfairly, with a Bostonian ‘genteel’ tradition, nice and dull. Now James gets Nicole Kidman and Helena Bonham-Carter, even for his late, fuzzy-sweater novels, along with biography after biography and collection after collection, and Howells gets one brave, doomed defense every thirty years. Yet Howells, though an immeasurably less original sensibility than James, may be the better novelist, meaning that Howells on almost any subject strikes you as right, while James on almost any subject strikes you as James. Howells’s description in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* of New York, and of New York apartment-hunting, at the turn of the century, comes from so deep a knowledge of what capitalism does to the middle classes, and how it does them, that it remains uncannily contemporary. (Gopnik 563)

The specialist of American literature cannot fail to be struck by the virtual absence in France of Howells scholarship. When Howells is actually mentioned in French publications—with the exception of the rare dissertations and essays devoted to him—, it is all too often in a cursory manner, as if critical indifference was the only appropriate response and the Dean’s mediocrity a foregone conclusion. Why has William Dean Howells (1837-1920), one of the chief novelists of the Gilded Age, a close friend of Henry James and Mark Twain, been systematically and, it would seem, deliberately ignored? This oversight cannot be explained by a modest literary output. Howells had an impressively productive career and has been described as a remorselessly efficient literary machine, even as a slave to the marketplace.

Nor can the lack of interest in Howells be accounted for by a dearth of academic literature in the United States: “As Clayton Eichelberger wrote in the introduction to his research bibliography, ‘Where William Dean Howells is concerned, there is no end. Eventually one simply stops.’” (quoted in Bardon xv) The vitality of the research in America appears in its ability to reinvent itself: the critical heyday of Howells’s fiction the 1870s and 1890s was followed by the disgrace of the 1900s and 1930s, then by the revival of the 1950s, which ushered in a phase of new interpretations known as revisionism. The trend shows no sign of slowing down. Presentations or panels on Howells are regularly organized at conferences, and publications abound. Some recent books include Phillip Barrish’s *American Realism: Critical Theory and Intellectual Prestige*, which devotes one of its chapters to Howells, Paul Abeln’s *William Dean Howells and the Ends of Realism*, and the Winter 2006 issue of *American Literary Realism*.

In France, it is possibly the overpowering influence of formalist criteria which has prevented any genuine discovery of Howells by the academic community. His role as man of letters has all too often eclipsed his literary achievement, and his writing, which superficially can appear dated and unsophisticated, has generally been regarded as second-rate. That Howellsian realism needs critiquing goes without saying, but its reappraisal seems a far more urgent and challenging task.

Why read Howells today? The ongoing critical controversy indicates that rather than producing stable meanings, his novels give rise to a host of interpretations and can “speak” in different ways to different readers. Howells has been described as an urban and as an anti-urban writer; as squeamish and as sordid; as trying to control the threat of the “other” and as open to the flux of experience; as relying on stereotypes and as highly aware of social reality; as a marginal literary figure but also as the founder of American realism and as the pioneer of urban fiction. The case of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is enlightening. Critics like Eric J. Sundquist and more recently Gregg Crane have stressed the spectatorial function of Basil, for whom

the dedication to close observation [prevents any] pitch for action. When violence comes in [the] novel, he is arrested by the spectacle like some horror-struck but fascinated witness to a nasty accident.

Indeed, in its emphasis on observation, realism has been said to participate in the rise of a spectator culture [ . . . ]. (Crane 161)

Other critics see Basil March as a dynamic character able to transcend his own genteel worldview, achieving a sense of complicity (Wallace and Burroughs 1180). A complementary way of reading the novel, in my opinion, could be to see it as the dramatization of Howells's internal conflicts (something which also appears in his shorter fiction). The point about the novel is perhaps not just to choose between two contradictory impulses—slumming or voyeurism on the one hand, and connectedness on the other—but also to articulate the tension between these two urges. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* exemplifies the “aesthetic/ethic split,” a concept I shall return to later.

Any attempt to reassess Howells must start with a genuine effort on the reader's part to (re-)acquaint himself with his work for, as Ruth Bardon puts it, “many people dislike Howells on the basis of prejudice rather than knowledge.” (Bardon xxi) Most people know him as the author of *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *Indian Summer* (1886) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890). However incomplete, this list illustrates the author's thematic range and originality. These four novels are, respectively, the first significant attempts by an American author to write about divorce, business, middle age and New York. But Howells's literary output includes over thirty novels, over forty short stories,<sup>1</sup> eleven travel books, thirty odd plays, several volumes of autobiography, and a vast amount of criticism and letters. He should be remembered for his fiction *and* for literary criticism (some of his best essays are collected in *Criticism and Fiction*) as well as for the part he played in shaping American letters, which includes a crucial, albeit unsuccessful, attempt to redefine literary taste in America by imposing his conception of “realism.” Three

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1. The emphasis on the novels and the criticism in this issue should not obscure the paramount importance of Howells's short stories which, as Ruth Bardon writes, are “invaluable in revealing his development as a writer and his concern [ . . . ] with themes that permeate his entire canon: the slippery nature of perception, the variance between the ethical and the aesthetic points of view, the benefits and hazards of the creative imagination, [ . . . ] and of course the contrast between the false promises of romantic literature and the often ambiguous or incomprehensible nature of real life.” (Bardon xxvi) For an annotated list of Howells's stories, see Bardon 239-262.

preoccupations lie at the core of Howellsian realism:<sup>1</sup> the quest for an unvarnished representation of social reality; a moral/epistemological imperative, whereby the “light” of common sense must prevail over the “poison” of romantic idealism and the character’s moral worth must be ascertained; finally, a literary and nationalistic purpose seeking to define a new genre and to proclaim the superiority of American literature. As a caveat, the reader should bear in mind that Howells’s literary practice cannot be equated with the theories formulated in the *Atlantic Monthly* or *Harper’s*. Put differently, Howells’s novels often transcend the tenets of “Howellsian realism,” an expression which can be misleading for two reasons: first, the aesthetic of, say, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is very different from that of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, which means that one should speak about *realisms*; secondly, several key texts are generically hybrid.

Howells’s novels can be divided into four periods. The early fiction (1872-1881) coincides almost completely with his editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly* (1871-1881) and reveals the double-edged impact of this position on his writing: his post gave him access to the literary world and a position of cultural power, but also encouraged him to defer to the magazine’s prudish, largely feminine readership. The novels of this period draw on two genres, the travelogue and the comedy of manners. In his mature period (1882-1886) Howells “departs from the comedy of manners [ . . . ] to begin a series of realistic character studies, particularly of characters grappling with ethical problems” (Hart 349). The third phase (1886-1894) is linked to the discovery of Tolstoy and other reformers such as Henry George. These social novels are an attempt to adapt realism to the industrialization of society or, in the case of the utopian fables, to seek an alternative to it. In spite of Howells’s courageous stance in favour of the Chicago anarchists in 1887, his socialism remained largely “theoretical”<sup>2</sup> or “mushy” (Gopnik 570) and he sometimes dismissed the notion altogether. It is

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1. For a more detailed definition of Howells’s realism, its ideological and aesthetic implications, see the articles by Ickstadt and Roudeau in the present volume.

2. He wrote to his father in 1890 and to Howard Pyle in 1893 respectively: “[My wife and I] are theoretical socialists, and practical aristocrats.” (Howells, *Life in Letters*, vol. 2, 1) “I have not seen the report that I am writing a socialistic novel, and I do not believe it is true, except so far as every conscientious and enlightened fiction is of some such import; and that is the fiction I try to produce.” (Howells, *Life in Letters*, vol. 2, 40)

perhaps more accurate to talk about social realism or an awakening social consciousness, which was part of a wider tendency (Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* was published one year after *A Hazard of New Fortunes*). The fourth and last phase, the "psychic romances," starting in the early 1890s, is lesser known—the "Howells nobody knows," according to Edwin Cady—although it includes compelling novellas such as *The Shadow of a Dream*. Besides their pre-Freudian dimension, these writings experiment with point of view.

Howells's work can be tackled from various angles. One can approach it as an autonomous *œuvre* which deserves to be read for its own sake. One can adopt a comparative framework stressing the transitional status of Howells's work and its significance as hypotext for other writers. It is also rewarding to look at the way social reality is depicted and commented upon. Whatever the slant, Howells's contribution to American letters is unquestionable. By inventing Kitty Ellison, the heroine of *A Chance Acquaintance*, he created the literary type of the American girl, to which he could claim, as James put it, "an unassailable patent," and which became a recurrent figure in his early work (*A Foregone Conclusion*, *The Lady of the Aroostook*) and in American fiction. One should also stress his significant influence on language: he introduced dialect, "speech identified with a particular region or race," and vernacular, "speech that departs from standard English." (Nettels x) Or, to quote William M. Gibson, "Mark Twain created a revolution in the language of fiction; Howells was the architect of the revolution." (quoted in Nettels ix) Howells was also instrumental in exploring the international theme, pioneered by Henry James in his early stories, which is at the centre of *A Foregone Conclusion*, *The Lady of the Aroostook*, *A Fearful Responsibility* and *Indian Summer*. Another accomplishment was to have implemented in his own terms Emerson's exhortation to embrace the common by depicting the anxieties of average America and by creating a quintessentially middle-class couple, Basil and Isabel March. Although the novels can feature protagonists from other social categories, the narrative point of view itself is always that of the middle-class.<sup>1</sup> This focus goes hand in hand with a propensity to examine the theme of social, cultural and eco-

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1. "His novels centered on the social lives of middle-class families, and no American writer was better at portraying social ambitions, family tensions, decorous amusements and urbane dinnertable banter." (Levy 14)

conomic displacement: Bartley Hubbard, Silas Lapham and Theodore Colville are all uprooted individuals, even if Basil March is probably the most emblematic figure.

The marginality of Howells's work in American literature has been compounded by a hostile critical tradition. The anti-Howells tendency can be traced to two sources: the hostility of Frank Norris in his essays and Sinclair Lewis in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech and, far more damaging, that of Henry James, whose pronouncements, based on an intimate knowledge of the texts, have influenced the reception. James's attitude was complex for while he spoke condescendingly of his friend's novels he spent many years covertly appropriating and rewriting them. This ambivalence accounts for the striking asymmetry in the writers' assessment of each other. In his reviews and essays, for example "Henry James, Jr." (1882), Howells hails his fellow writer as a master of American realism, whereas James almost systematically ends up belittling his friend's talent. While the ethical and nationalistic agenda of Howellsian realism *included* James, the latter, because of his formalist approach and psychological thrust, excluded the former, putting a premium on opacity rather than legibility.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Howells is not as easy to read as most critics, including James, would have us believe, for his surface simplicity often conceals an ingenious rhetorical pose. Presenting himself as the chronicler of the common was intended to promote his status as leading American novelist. It was a way of "effectively controll[ing] the discourse," of defending "plebeian life as [a] source of literary inspiration,"<sup>2</sup> thereby imposing a supposedly democratic—but potentially hegemonic—definition of realism. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the figure of the editor, whose idiosyncratic voice can be heard throughout the essays and columns, and who claims to be at the service of literature by selflessly promoting young writers. In "The Editor and the Young Contributor" he writes: "The editor is, in fact, a sort of

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1. See Gregg Crane's section on "Degrees of transparency: Howells and James:" "[...] some of James's comments about Howells give us a revealing (if slanted) view of the degree to which Howells accepts symbolically transparent characters and events, while James wants something more elusive [...] and more representative of the experiential tangle from which we attempt to extract a sense of some meaning and worth. [...] [James] lingers in the muddle, the baffling and maze-like nature of perception and cognition." (Crane 178-185)

2. Stokes 199.

second self for the contributor, [ . . . ] able to promote his triumphs without egotism and share them without vanity.” (*Literature and Life* 66) In this statement, the mask of the self-effacing enunciator hides the authority of the editor who selects the contributors, imposes his literary standards, so that any “triumph” will help to advance the cause of *his* version of realism. Likewise, the editor’s self-proclaimed humility must not hide the considerable cultural power that he wields. The statement, in an essay entitled “American Literary Centres,” that “I am only writing literary history, on a very small scale, with a somewhat crushing sense of limits” (*Literature and Life* 174) can imply that the editor is writing his nation’s literary history, but also that he is *shaping* (or trying to) that literary history, which casts doubt on his humility: the mask of the humble chronicler conceals an ulterior motive. Simulation rather than transparency appears as the operative concept. The avuncular man of letters functions as a carefully constructed persona, a powerful ideological tool which surreptitiously transforms the contributor into a vessel and disciple of Howellsian orthodoxy. That this authority was liable to rile the “young contributors” is illustrated by the case of Mary Wilkins Freeman who in the second chapter of the collective novel *The Whole Family* refused to comply with the Dean’s guidelines and turned the old spinster into a rebellious, middle-aged flirt.

As for James, belittling Howells’s novels as merely “documentary,” as he does in “A Letter to Mr. Howells,” published in the *North American Review* in 1912, (James 510) was central to his attempt to proclaim his own individual genius and promote his own definition of literature based on the superiority of the unseen to the plainly visible. The persistent denigration of Howells’s achievement expressed not only an artistic assessment but also a hidden agenda. However, Howells’s works often constitute James’s undeclared hypotext. Indeed, James’s condescension must not obscure another element in his relationship to Howells: his envy.<sup>1</sup> He resented the swift literary ascent of his friend, who had become editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the symbol of New England culture, thereby assuming not only cultural authority, but also a public role—something James was never able to do. In a world which had been predominantly feminine, Howells’s was

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1. “The Jameses and many viewed [Howells’s] rise (à la *Silas Lapham*) with a mixture of envy and contempt.” (Anesko 15)

the first masculine voice to be heard, heralding a change of era after the “feminine fifties.” His novels were widely read and brought him critical acclaim. He was instrumental in redefining the concept of literature in post-Civil War America, transforming a feminine domain into a professional, masculine arena. He sought to define a literary taste that would make readers more discriminating and writers less amateurish, no longer dilettantes but ethically aware “makers of literature,” as he writes in his 1893 essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business.” (*Literature and Life* 33)

Henry James found in his friend’s novels several topics which interested him. He hailed Kitty Ellison, the heroine of *A Chance Acquaintance*, as the archetypal American girl and celebrated Howells as her inventor, which did not prevent him from trespassing on his intellectual property.<sup>1</sup> The best proof of James’s unavowed debt is his tireless tendency to “poach,” to use Anesko’s metaphor. Many readers may not be aware that novels like *The Europeans*, *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Bostonians* are, to some extent, a rewriting of Howells’s *Private Theatricals*, *A Chance Acquaintance* and *The Undiscovered Country*. The reason, as Anne-Claire Le Reste explains in the case of *The Bostonians*, is that “James never acknowledged his debt to Howells, carefully covering up his tracks [ . . . ].” Le Reste describes the James-Howells relationship in the following statement: “The public association of their names climaxed in the wake of Howells’s 1882 critical essay on James, in which the former praised his friend to the detriment of such ‘masters’ as Dickens or Thackeray—a stand which, to James’s dismay, enraged many reviewers, especially in England. Yet this does not account for *his long-lasting reluctance to own his source*, nor indeed explain why he should choose *such Howellsian subjects* if he was so eager to *disengage himself from the connection*.” (emphasis added)

The repression of Howells as hypotext can be further illustrated. When James does express a sense of indebtedness, as he does in “A Letter to Mr. Howells,” he only refers to Howells’s readiness to pub-

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1. “[ . . . ] Howells’s independently minded heroine arrested James’s imagination and provoked envious praise. Recognizing Kitty Ellison as a distinctively American type, James prophesied that Howells could take out an ‘unassailable patent’ on the American girl. She was a property subject to infringement, however, and in the coming years no one would encroach upon her more forcefully than James himself, whose various appropriations took the form of Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, and numerous other spirited young women.” (Anesko 25-6)



lish his first story, a favour James was never able to “repay,” except by “read[ing]”<sup>1</sup> his friend and, as he might as well have added, by rewriting him. In other words, acknowledging the practical debt is a way of glossing over the real issue of literary influence. A similar strategy of erasure is at work in the *Notebooks*. In “The Turning Point of My Life” the narrator refers periphrastically to the “distinguished friend” who helped him make sense of his life and get into print: the forced gratitude of expressions like “kindly grace” ill conceals the resentment of Howells’s success, symbolized by the impressive “editorial table” on which James’s stories are described as “boldly disposed.” (Edel 437-8) Another case in point is the famous anecdote of the “germ” of *The Ambassadors*—the remark made by Howells in Paris to the young Jonathan Sturges. In an entry dated October 31<sup>st</sup> 1895 James reports his friend’s sentence (“Live all you can: it’s a mistake not to”), using the opportunity to “amplify and improve a little” (Edel 141) before adding that the protagonist of the novel he is pondering should not be “a novelist—too like W.D.H. [ . . . ] I want him ‘intellectual,’ I want him fine, clever, literary, almost,” which is hardly a compliment to his friend. In 1915, James relates the anecdote for the second time in significantly different terms: whilst in the 1895 account the initials W. D. H. are used and the criticism is veiled, in the 1915 version Howells becomes a nameless “acquaintance,” an “alien” described in derogatory terms as a “*désorienté* elderly American.”<sup>2</sup> (Edel 542)

James tried over the years to curb Howells’s influence on American letters and to write him out of the canon through various rhetor-

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1. “My debt to you began well-nigh half a century ago [ . . . ] and then kept growing and growing with your admirable growth—but always rooted in the early intimate benefit. [ . . . ] You showed me the way and opened me the door. [ . . . ] You published me at once—and paid me, above all, with a dazzling promptitude. [ . . . ] The only drawback that I remember suffering from was that *I*, your original debtor, couldn’t print or publish or pay for you—which would have been a sort of ideal of repayment and of enhanced credit; [ . . . ] I could only read you [ . . . ].” (James 506-508)

2. “This anecdote then—to come to it—was simply in something said to him, [ . . . ] by a person who had joined the little party in this company and who was still another acquaintance of my own: an American, distinguished and mature, who had been in Europe before, but comparatively little and very ‘quietly’ [ . . . ]. This rather fatigued and alien compatriot, whose wholly, exclusively professional career had been a long, hard strain, and who could only be—given the place, people, tone, talk, circumstances—‘out of it’ all, struck my reporter as at first watching the situation in a rather brooding, depressed and uneasy way [ . . . ].”

ical strategies: condescension, circumlocution and ultimately disavowal. In order to fully appreciate Howells, the modern reader must try to remove the critical blinkers imposed by this tradition, and to approach the Dean without (always) listening to the Master. Other voices should be heeded: that of Edith Wharton, who in *A Backward Glance* expresses her admiration for *A Modern Instance* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, (Wharton 894) that of W.E.B. Du Bois, who in his 1913 article “Howells and Black Folk” celebrates the “composite picture” of America presented in *An Imperative Duty*, which tackles the issues of race and miscegenation, (Du Bois 1147)<sup>1</sup> or that of Edward Bellamy, who found in *A Traveller from Altruria* a “drastic arraignment of the way we live now.” (quoted in Kirk 35)

Ultimately, James’s ambivalence helps to grasp a central paradox. In two radically different ways, Howells embodies the social revolution which took place in America between 1860 and 1910,<sup>2</sup> creating a sense of displacement, which “was not merely a question of money but also of prestige and status.” (Levy 21) Part of Howells was frightened by this upheaval, a feeling articulated in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* by his fictional alter ego, Basil March. March feels threatened by “the plutocracy that now owns the country,” a class embodied by Jacob Dryfoos. March belongs to a culturally discerning minority which is about to lose its pre-eminence. His move from Boston to New York is the powerful trope through which Howells illustrates this displacement. But in many respects Howells occupied a similar position to that of Jacob Dryfoos himself: the self-taught Midwesterner who became an institution—the “Dean of American Letters”—bears wit-

1. “In the composite picture which William Dean Howells, as his life work, has painted of America he has not hesitated to be truthful and to include the most significant thing in the land—the black man. [ . . . ] Howells, in his ‘Imperative Duty,’ faced our national foolishness and shuffling and evasion. Here was a white girl engaged to a white man who discovers herself to be ‘black.’ The problem looms before her as tremendous, awful. The world wavers. She peers beyond the Veil and shudders and then—tells her story frankly, marries her man, and goes her way as thousands of others have done and are doing.”

It is also noteworthy that the last sketch in *Literature and Life*, “Floating Down the River on the O-hio,” ends up, however briefly, on the evocation of “black and ragged deck-hands” and their “hapless life.” (*Literature and Life* 322-4)

2. “The old family, college-educated class [ . . . ] were being overshadowed [ . . . ] by the agents of the new corporations [ . . . ]. They were expropriated, not so much economically as morally,” and their values supplanted by “crass materialism.” (Hofstadter 131-140)

ness to the status revolution which took the literary establishment by storm. He himself *was* a modern instance, and the fact that he secretly identified with Bartley Hubbard, the protagonist of his 1882 novel, speaks volumes.<sup>1</sup> In the same way as Habegger describes Howells as “painfully double,” (Habegger 63) i.e. both masculine and feminine, one must be aware of his social ubiquity, or duplicity, which can be as enlightening a concept as his theory of complicity. There is no getting away from this central ambiguity: Howells was both a victim *and* an agent of social and cultural displacement, which is also why some critics (e.g., Cady) see him as the champion of democracy and realism against a genteel literary establishment, while others (e.g., Barrish) as part of the establishment.

Howells’s influence on other writers establishes his centrality in American letters, although this impact has often gone unnoticed. *A Modern Instance* undeniably stirred the imagination of Stephen Crane. The inebriation and slurred diction of Pete in *Maggie* (“Bringsh drinksh”) for instance, are foreshadowed by those of Bartley Hubbard in *A Modern Instance* (“fyourwifelockyouout”).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as Nettels points out, one can find “foreshadowings of Edith Wharton’s fiction in Howells’s depiction of class conflict in American society” (*American Literary Realism* 166). Nettels concludes that “Howells had created a legacy, if not a masterpiece.” Another fruitful line of inquiry would be to trace the similarities between the urban writings of Howells, Crane and Dreiser, without necessarily reaching the same conclusion as Kenneth Lynn, whose criticism of the Dean may seem overstated. In his reading of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, *Maggie* and *Sister Carrie*, Lynn distinguishes two points of view, that of the outsider and of that of the insider:

For all the honesty of Crane’s art, the heroine of *Maggie* is a stereotype; like Howells [ . . . ], Crane in the Bowery was an outsider looking in. But *Sister Carrie* is the work of an insider, writing out of the heart of his own experience. (Lynn 498)

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1. In an online article, Michael Anesko writes: “[ . . . ] thirty years after writing the novel, Howells confessed to a friend that he ‘had drawn Bartley Hubbard, the false scoundrel, from myself.’ That Howells could reveal this discovery only after the death of his wife also has some bearing on the novel [ . . . ].” (Anesko, *The Literary Encyclopedia*)

2. See Tanguy, “La logique noire de Stephen Crane.”

Implicit in Lynn's criticism is the assumption that Howells's fiction was neither sufficiently mimetic nor sufficiently empathetic. Reading Howells through the mere lens of mimesis, however, conceals what in many cases lies at the core of his fiction—what Jerome Klinkowitz calls the “aesthetic/ethic split,” i.e. the tension between the urge to produce fiction, to write about “life”, and the urge to reflect on “literature” and to question the writing process. One cannot overestimate the centrality of Klinkowitz's concept, formulated some forty years ago, yet too often lost on the critics.

In the same way as Howells's “Scene” is a possible hypotext for Crane's *Maggie*, parallels can be drawn between Howells's “A Romance of Real Life,” “Worries of a Winter Walk,” “An East-Side Ramble” and “The Midnight Platoon,”<sup>1</sup> Crane's “Men in the Storm” and “An Experiment in Misery,” and Dreiser's “Curious Shifts of the Poor.” The formal differences, however, outweigh thematic continuity. Whilst in his novels Howells tries to confront social reality and arouse a sense of connectedness—what he calls “complicity” —, his shorter fiction tends to focus on a writer's quandary: far from striving for journalistic accuracy, texts like “A Romance of Real Life” and “The Midnight Platoon” are self-conscious studies in point of view. The second text in particular contrasts the smug view of poverty taken by the wealthy New Yorker in his cab—looking at the “interesting spectacle” (*Literature and Life* 155) of a breadline—with the more socially aware view of his friend. The story is by no means “documentary,” as James might have put it, but underpinned by the dilemma between the ethical and the aesthetic, and the resulting psychological tension—the depression caused in the reformist by the sight of human suffering, and the elation of the writer who has stumbled upon good material.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The interaction works both ways, since “Scene” (1871) and “A Romance of Real Life” (1871) predate Crane's short fiction, whereas “An East-Side Ramble” (1896) and “The Midnight Platoon” were written after Crane's “Men in the Storm” and “An Experiment in Misery.”

2. A similar process is at work in “A Romance of Real Life:” “So they parted [ . . . ]. [the Contributor] walked homeward, weary as to the flesh, but, in spite of his sympathy for Jonathan Tinker, very elate in spirit. The truth is,—and however disgraceful to human nature, let the truth still be told,—he had recurred to his primal satisfaction in the man as calamity capable of being used for such and such literary ends, and, while he pitied him, rejoiced in him as an episode of real life quite as striking and complete as anything in fiction. It was literature made to his hand.” (quoted in Bardon 23)

“A Romance of Real Life” and “The Midnight Platoon” should be read as self-conscious, imaginary conversations between the author and his double. In these narratives, Howells oscillates between realism, working within the framework of the canonical narrative as he does in his novels of the 1880s, and experimental fiction, in which the reflexive supplants the mimetic and the I-narrator is introduced. The very structure of *Literature and Life: Studies*, a hybrid collection of sketches and non-fiction bears witness to the elusiveness of Howells’s writings. All these remarks point to at least two conclusions. First, Howells has not only created an enduring legacy, both thematic and aesthetic, but also raised questions far beyond the scope of realism. Second, his work has many facets and cannot be reduced to *one* type of writing. It is high time therefore to reassess Howellsian realism, its variations and transmutations.

The present volume of *Profils américains* is the first book-form publication on William Dean Howells in France. Its purpose is to reassess the contribution of an author without whom any attempt to discuss literature and criticism between 1870 and 1910 is incomplete or biased. By shedding light on specific texts and issues, this collection of essays seeks to show why his work is still relevant and ought to be brought to the attention of a wider public. The first two articles focus on Howells’s fictional career as a whole, the third one on his criticism. The other essays focus on one or several texts, and follow the dates of publication of the novels, from 1885 (*The Rise of Silas Lapham*) to 1891 (*An Imperative Duty*).

Ickstadt’s article examines Howells’s late fiction, tracing the ethical and political premises of the novelist’s realism, as well as the complications inherent in his abiding belief in moral agency. Ickstadt establishes how the sweeping changes of the 1890s triggered a personal crisis which led Howells to “unstiffen” his concepts of the self and cultural order, taking on board *some* of William James’s *Principles of Psychology*. The comparison with Henry James is also used to highlight the differences between two types of realism. Ickstadt’s reading of *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* (1897) helps to explain the problematic status of Howellsian fiction at the *fin de siècle*. The dichotomy between Westover, the conservative character-focalizer and Jeff Durgin, the selfish businessman, encapsulates the conflict between “the civilized and the savage” and its outcome, “culture’s defeat by nature,”

as well as Howells's sense of failure: "Jeff Durgin is the example of an educational project that failed—Westover's as well as Howells's, since his realist project was essentially a civilizing project connecting an improvement of 'seeing' [ . . . ] with an improvement of (social) being." Nowhere does the hermeneutic challenge posed by Howells appear more clearly than in the case of *The Shadow of a Dream*, which according to Ickstadt illustrates an anti-Jamesian distrust of imagination and an attempt to keep the irrational at bay, whereas Marc Amfreville detects in it a tale fraught with psychic, narrative and generic tensions. Ultimately Ickstadt shows that in spite of his limits, Howells's writings strike a national chord, steeped as they are "in personal and collective nostalgia" for "the small town [as] the typical American locus," which is why Howells can be seen (as Edith Wharton pointed out) as a precursor of small town fiction.

Jean Rivière's "The Eurocentric Outlook of W.D. Howells," an overview of the novelist's life and fiction, explores his crucial function as cultural go-between. Because of his incomparable knowledge of European authors, Howells was in a position both to assimilate the Old World's literary tradition and pass it down to the next generation of writers. This twofold process of transmission and transformation is further evidence of American literature's debt to the Dean. However, in spite of his "Eurocentric outlook," Howells believed "in the moral and social superiority of the American way of life," and was therefore never an expatriate. Finally, Rivière explores the way in which Howells exploited his personal experience of Europe and his own travel books to write *Indian Summer*, a novel which signals the end of his "international period," and shows how the discovery of Russian fiction led him to relinquish his picaresque manner, paring down his plots to the bare essentials.

The first two parts of Roudeau's essay, entitled "The Angle(s) of Truth," are based on a representative selection of Howells's essays, most notably on the famous discussion about the real vs. the ideal grasshopper. They stress Howells's central part in the construction of a democratic fiction. Literature can only be "true" if it acknowledges the limits inherent in any angle of vision and is rooted in the local. Panoptic domination exterminates fiction, whereas partial sightedness and proximity nourish it. This assumption explains why plot, seen as an overarching pattern imposed from the outside, is distrusted

by Howells, Jewett and Garland alike and is played down in their novels: “truth is circumscribed, and circumstantial,” and sketchiness ceases to be anathema. Roudeau demonstrates that, by inflecting the definition of realism towards pragmatism, Howells opens up fiction to plurality, always allowing a “margin of error.” As the concept of truth recedes in the distance, literature becomes a “performative” rather than a “mimetic” process, and the “fiction of America” constitutes “America as fiction.” Having made these theoretical and philosophical points, the essay finally turns to the fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett which, as a close textual analysis suggests, instantiates Howells’s critical requirements. Jewett’s narratives, grounded in sympathy, acquaintance and communication, confirm the centrality of the concept of “the common.”

The three articles that follow deal mainly with *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Drawing on the works of Philippe Hamon, Ginfray starts from the premise that the realist discourse is an ideological construct, a “textualization” (Hamon) of the real. The realist genre should be seen as a process of production, rather than imitation—an idea also explored in Roudeau’s and Cochoy’s essays. Ginfray’s article analyzes the “politics of writing” both of Howells, “the democrat,” and Wharton, “the aristocrat,” i.e. the stylistic devices which transform reality into fiction. Although one chief characteristic of nineteenth-century capitalist America was the appropriation of art by the moneyed classed, artists and novelists wanted to show their ability to transform social matters into “a system of aesthetic signs.” Whereas for Howells realism means that reality, seen as a consistent whole, can be interpreted objectively—a position which confuses truth with verisimilitude—, for Wharton it refers to the transformation of reality into an object of beauty, in the classical sense of symmetry and harmony. Howells strives for transparency whereas Wharton covers reality with the robes of fiction. The treatment of speech further illustrates these differences. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* idiolect or dialect is used as a clear marker of identity, creating a quasi-scientific impression of univocity. Things are more complex in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*, since the authorial presence seeks to control the proliferation of viewpoints, but can also become problematic and elusive—a first step towards modernism. If Wharton’s trilogy questions the realist venture by pointing to the gap

between signs and referents, Howells's fiction also responds to the fault-lines in reality by turning away from epistemological certainty.

Dorey's article establishes that the matrix of the Howellsian novel is a hidden erotic drama. The basic plot revolves around the encounter of the male self with the female, usually a feline daughter (Marcia Gaylord or Christine Dryfoos), or around the tension between "transgressive fulfilment" and repression. The potentially guilty scenario is re-enacted novel after novel, featuring recurrent symbols (such as fire, cryptic letters) or metonyms (such as a missing or injured leg). Guilt is buried under the surface of the text—a process metaphorized by Howells's image of the "fainter and fainter ripples" of "a circle in water." The narratives attempt to smooth the surface of the text, to erase the ripples of desire. This smoothing process is sometimes linked to authorial comments whose function is to promote the realist discourse at the expense of other, so-called unorthodox genres. Thus Dorey detects a link between the erotic theme and an idiosyncratic narrative strategy, the explicit condemnation of sentimental novels. The Howellsian narrative persona is not monolithic but riddled with tensions expressed through imagery. The light of common day inevitably coexists with the black heart's truth. As Dorey puts it, "the house of Howells is cracked with many 'rents.' [ . . . ] Finding a house for the other in oneself, lodging the alien, such anxieties loom to prominence in many stories."

Roraback's article envisages *The Rises of Silas Lapham* through the lens of Walter Benjamin's theory of the monad, and through the concept of spectacle as defined by Guy Debord. The construction of Silas's new house on Beacon Street is a spectacle, "a public statement of self-importance and [ . . . ] social worth" (Kermit Vanderbilt). Focusing on the novel's famous dinner party sequence, the article shows how Silas succumbs to the "false forms of success" defined by a society in which life has become spectacularized and is "mediated by images." The dinner-party scene shows that excessive competition devalues language itself: words become "cheap," "devoid of any real truth content, for they are too intimately bound to representation." This "spectacle-infested world" leads to a dangerous conflation of individual identity with social position, which brings about Silas's downfall but also his redemption, since failure finally enlightens him. Silas "see[s] through the ridiculous rigged games of power, and false values, of a phony society predicated on exchange value as opposed to use value."



What is remarkable about *Indian Summer*, as Bonnet observes in her article, is the way the novel strikes a balance between “an ironic observation of the foibles and intricacies of the human heart” and “a profoundly humane [. . .] sympathy with its characters and humanity at large.” The narrator’s ability to portray the protagonists’ psyche, without unduly condoning or condemning human frailty, is one of the text’s chief features. As William James put it, the novel is “cubical, and set it up any way you please, ’t will stand.” The article illustrates James’s assertion by focusing on three aspects of the text—the charm of the characters, their shortcomings, and the relativity of human judgments. Theodore Colville, the middle-aged American abroad, is a fascinating bundle of contradictions: his delightful sense of humour cannot obscure his moral cowardice and constant evasions. The appeal of *Indian Summer* lies in this see-saw movement, this constant weighing up of pros and cons which demonstrates that realism is less a finite theory than an ongoing attempt to capture the flux of reality, symbolized by the dance scene: “The dance was ceasing; the fragments of those kaleidoscopic radiations were dispersing themselves [. . .].” (*Novels 1875-1886* 643) Bonnet’s essay is a reminder that we must not underestimate the novel’s psychological complexity, even if it is treated in the comic, not tragic mode. Specifically, Coville’s behaviour during the dance scene (the *veglione*) betrays “sexually charged fantasies,” and the whole *veglione* has a subversive potential.

Cochoy’s article makes the case that in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the protagonist’s deliberately unwritten sketches about New York exemplify Howells’s way of “reinventing urban realism.”<sup>1</sup> In *Hazard*, the point is not to contain reality through language, but to expose the

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1. Cochoy’s insights converge with those of Jason Puskar. Puskar shows that the plethora of accidents in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* undermines any attempt at closure. However, “*Hazard*’s haphazardness should not be read as a failure of craft [. . .] but as a formal expression of [Howells’s] own peculiar analysis of a burgeoning culture of indeterminacy. [. . .] The irregularity of the fictional form attests to the novel’s own mimetic fidelity [. . .]. [T]he ‘real’ becomes linked to the opposite, the irregular and the uncontrolled.” (Puskar 7-8) Another useful reference is Jonathan Freedman’s *Professions of Taste*. Freedman argues that “Basil March mimics Howells’s own move from Boston to New York and from older forms of cultural expression like the genteel organ of Boston gentry, the *Atlantic*, to the new experimental form of the illustrated mass-circulation periodical, which in this novel is represented by a journal entitled *Every Other Week*. [. . .] [*Hazard* is] an eloquent protest against what we might call the aesthetizing of American culture from within the confines of that very culture.” (Freedman 117-120)

writing process to the uncertainty of modern change, thus adopting a poietic—not merely mimetic—approach. In the chapters describing the protagonists' wanderings across New York, the narrator devises a new style of writing based on an ethical investment of lexis and language. Rather than contain the city the text should learn to “dwell” in it, which explains the valorization of fragmentary, sensory experience at the expense of totalizing social discourses. Writing about the city is not a top-down but a bottom-up, experiential process whereby the text internalizes the changing texture of the metropolis. New York cannot be appropriated but may only be encountered haphazardly: *“les déplacements des personnages à travers la ville s’accompagnent d’un abandon progressif des démarches inquisitrices ou dissimulatrices au profit d’évocations ambulatoires de rencontres et de rues.”* Hence the ironic narrative structure, which thwarts any attempt to transform the city into an aesthetically gratifying spectacle. The launching of the magazine is an opportunity for the narrator both to expose the shortcomings of social discourses on the city, and to embrace the chaos of the metropolis, highlighting its fleeting, unexpected beauty.

In my article I show that the stylistic and narrative strategies at work in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* preclude any attempt at closure, and that the aesthetic of the whole book can be compared to a circle whose outline has been erased. When the protagonists, Basil and Isabel March, move to New York, Isabel thinks that she can draw the line between poverty and gentility: she believes in “the mappability of the world.” (Dimock quoted in Ginfray) She craves for clear boundaries both in social and linguistic terms. Middle-class criteria can allegedly define the “ideal” home, and the terminology of estate agents can supposedly help her find it. But far from aiding Isabel, boundaries blind her to the reality of the modern city and lead to complacency: she and her husband run the risk of becoming “cultural philistines,” to use Nietzsche’s concept. This complacency is based on a utilitarian outlook and a parsimonious use of resources in general (money, but also time, space, and language). In order to broaden their horizons and to wake up to “complicity” (Howells’s term for solidarity), the Marches must adopt a new economic paradigm in which the “expenditure” of resources, rather than production, is the primary object (Bataille). The novel materializes this shift by erasing the lines separating one social class from another, by abolishing semantic rigidity, and by thwarting any

attempt to convert urban experience into a reified, marketable text: the lines (i.e., the stories) which Basil intended to write are never drawn.

Marc Amfreville's article examines two of Howells's psychic romances, *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890) and *An Imperative Duty* (1891), bringing to light a gothic vein whose irrational potential affects each story in different ways. The Freudian implications of *The Shadow of a Dream* go much further than a neurotic fear of adultery, for as Amfreville points out repressed homosexuality is probably the beast in the story's jungle. The interpretative task is made more challenging—and rewarding—by the presence of an unexpectedly unreliable narrator, Basil March, who unsuccessfully tries to reduce the story to a rational equation. Equally stimulating, in the study of the second novella, is the idea of a “racial delusion” breeding a neurotic obsession which is eventually contained by the narrative, making *An Imperative Duty* the obverse of the earlier, tragic tale. By situating these two novellas in a gothic tradition going back to Poe and Brown—thus revealing Howells's unexpected heart of darkness—, and by anatomizing the narrative strategies at work, the article shows the need to question Henry James's idea of a lack of “chiaroscuro”<sup>1</sup> in the Dean's writings.

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1. “[Mr. Howells] reminds us how much our native-grown imaginative effort is a matter of details, of fine shades, of pale colors, a making of small things do great service. Civilization with us is monotonous, and in the way of contrasts, of salient points, of chiaroscuro, we have to take what we can get.” (James 497)

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## “ . . . helping my people know themselves:” Late William Dean Howells

For all their obvious differences the literary careers of William Dean Howells and Henry James unfolded along surprisingly parallel lines. Although James was by seven years the younger, they nevertheless shared the values of the same generation. Of different region and of different social origin,<sup>1</sup> they were yet formed by the manners and mores of a more provincial and simpler state of society to which their imagination lovingly and yearningly returned in the memoirs of their old age.<sup>2</sup> They had committed themselves to the profession of literature at the same time, publishing their first novels almost simultaneously (Howells in 1872, James in 1871); and although they pursued their profession in transatlantic distance from each other, they were, throughout the 1880s, joint in friendly (if unacknowledged) rivalry to become “the American Balzac.”<sup>3</sup> During this decade, both produced a series of remarkable novels which, together with Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, make for the achievement of “American Realism.”<sup>4</sup> By 1890, however, the crown seemed to have gone to Howells: He had established himself as America’s foremost literary

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1. James came from an upper-class New York family, the descendent of rich merchants and the son of an amateur philosopher. Howells was a printer’s son from a small town in Ohio who, even after he had moved to Boston and received the accolade of its Brahmin elite, always felt the social unease of the upstart.

2. In Howells’s *A Boy’s Town* (1890) and *Years of my Youth* (1916) and James’s *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) and *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914). Both their fathers—Henry James Sr. and William Cooper Howells—were Swedenborgians, and although the sons disclaimed their religious heritage, they were nevertheless also formed by it.

3. This is James’s phrase. Although Howells had obviously modeled his *The Rise of Silas Lapham* on Balzac’s *Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Biotteau*, his *A Hazard of New Fortunes* owed more to its author’s discovery of Leon Tolstoy.

4. *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *Indian Summer* (1886), *Annie Kilburn* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890)—*The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Bostonians* (1886), *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), *The Tragic Muse* (1890).

critic as well as its most relevant (and financially successful)<sup>1</sup> novelist who, with *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, had written an aesthetically ambitious and politically courageous fiction that represented American society at a crucial moment of transition.

At almost the same time, James's career, in contrast, seemed to have reached a dead-end ("I have fallen upon evil days," he moaned in a discouraged letter to Howells)<sup>2</sup>: He had apparently lost whatever audience he once had; and his subsequent effort to acquire "fame and fortune" via the more immediate successes of the theater ended in personal humiliation and financial defeat. And yet, Howells's seeming triumph went hand in hand with a growing uncertainty about the hazard of his own good fortune so that the 1890s marked in fact for both a period of crisis—even though, in each case, that crisis was conceived of in different terms and coped with in different ways.

The sense of urgency that drove Howells to writing *A Hazard of New Fortunes* derived from the shock of the Haymarket executions in 1886 and his resulting awareness of how far the new America of ruthless corporate capitalism had moved away from an idea of social justice that he believed had been the essence of the Old Republic. "[A]fter fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end," he wrote to Henry James, "I now abhor it and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality." (*Life in Letters* I 417)<sup>3</sup> The growth of the Labor movement and the rise of the Populist Party convinced him that such necessary change was imminent—as did his reading of Henry George's, Laurence Gronlund's and Edward Bellamy's utopian speculations, or Leon Tolstoy's call to social action.<sup>4</sup> Although, in *A Haz-*

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1. Mark Twain's literary income was probably still higher. But he published by subscription and thus did not have to "work" the literary market (as Howells had to).

2. *The Letters of Henry James* I 237.

3. During this time of social dissatisfaction, protest, and engagement in the late 1880s his daughter Winifred died after several painful years of mysterious illness. It intensified a general sense of loss (and guilt) which he tried to compensate for by work, "the only happiness, the only refuge from one's self." (*The Selected Letters of William Dean Howells* IV 116)

4. Thus he wrote to his father in Nov. 9, 1890: "But my faith in the grand and absolute change, sooner or later, is so great that I don't grieve over their success. They [the Democrats] are sure to abuse their victory, and then they will be out of power again, and I hope that a party 'of the people, and for the people' will rise up in their place, and make this a country where no man who will work need want."



ard of *New Fortunes*, protagonists like Basil March are dispassionate observers more than active participants of change, it is nevertheless clear that Howells now perceived his aesthetic dedication to literature as legitimized only by his social consciousness. The success of realism as a literary movement seemed for a short historic moment tied to the realization of a true democracy. The question of social justice therefore became central to the “economic” novels and utopian romances he published between 1886 and 1894.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Howells saw himself caught in numerous contradictions and paradoxes from which he found relief only in irony and self-mockery: He agonized—stung by the example of Tolstoy—that mere “words” were not enough, but submitted to the notion that using them was the only action possible in his position.<sup>2</sup> Writers like he or Twain, he wrote sarcastically to his father, were “theoretical socialists, and practical aristocrats. But it is a comfort to be right theoretically, and to be ashamed of one’s self practically.” (*Life in Letters* II 1) His self-accusations increased when he decided to consolidate his income by making the most of his contemporary fame so that, as he wrote to James, “I wear a fur-lined coat, and live in all the luxury my money can by.”<sup>3</sup> As Cady and Crowley point out, at the moment James despaired over his meager literary profits during the early 1890s, Howells’s income was ten times higher

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(*Life in Letters* II 9) In his commemoration of Mark Twain (“My Mark Twain”) he mentions in passing that reading Tolstoy “made me over.”

1. *The Minister’s Charge* (1886), *Annie Kilburn* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), *The Quality of Mercy* (1892), and *The World of Chance* (1893) deal with economic issues and matters of social justice in the realistic manner, while in *A Traveller from Altruria* (1893) and *Letters from an Altrurian Traveller* (1893/94) Howells projected his vision of an alternative society based on social equality and justice as utopian romance. (He went back to the utopian genre with the publication of *Through the Eye of the Needle*, in 1907, when the utopian novel was again *en vogue*.)

2. After Howells’ had published a letter in the *New York Tribune* protesting against the unfairness of the Haymarket trial, he was for a short time viciously attacked by the genteel establishment and fervently embraced by socialists and anarchists. But, as John Crowley noted: “Ironically, if Howells’s ‘socialism’ was subject to appropriation by the anarchists, it was also open to commodification by the Harpers. While they protected their investment in Howells, his publishers meant to capitalize on the market value of his ‘radical’ reputation.” (*The Dean* 13)

3. *Life in Letters* I 417. After the failure of his Boston publisher, he signed a new contract with Harper Brothers in New York. In the early 1890s he decided to become a free agent and offer his books to several publishing houses until he committed himself once again to Harper in 1896—thus securing a stability of income in a time of economic insecurity but also in recognition of his waning creativity.

than that of his friend whose novels, at this point, found few readers and were considered financial risks by his American publisher.<sup>1</sup>

While Howells tried to encourage James by reminding him of his achievements, he nourished doubts concerning the merits of his own success. These doubts deepened with the growing suspicion that he might be exhausting his creative powers. Even though his productivity was undiminished, he began to fear that he was spreading himself thin. In his essay of 1893, “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” he had argued that although, on ideal grounds, business was the “opprobrium of literature,” under the present economic conditions the writer had no choice but to become a businessman in his own right. He should therefore know its mechanics well enough to use it in his own interest as much as in the interest of his audience and his art. His sympathies had to be with the toiling masses that neither knew nor read him, and not with the leisured classes that read him on occasion but had not much use for him. The writer was anomalous, ridiculous, *in* society yet not *of* it, a citizen of a future republic of cooperation and enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime (and since the ideal society was still a “long way off”), Howells published so much and so widely that he was often amazed, in retrospect, “at the quality as well as the quantity of my stuff, and I feel as if it must have been done by a trust named after me.” (*Life in Letters* II 231) However, it was precisely during this extended period of doubt and self-reproach that he became transformed into a literary institution: the “Dean of American Letters” (a position he embraced as much as he loathed it)—while neither his political and social nor his literary hopes had been realized. The turbulent 1890s had come and gone. American society had neither become more democratic nor, despite his efforts to shape critical opinion, the republic of letters more realistic; nor was he any longer on the cutting edge of literary innovation. An educated middle-class audience that he thought of as “my people” had turned away from him, and

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1. “For all of 1893, James earned \$2.923 for his writing, less than a tenth of the \$30,000 that Howells counted in March for serial contracts alone; for his own serial rights in 1893, James received a total of \$550.” (Crowley, *The Dean* 118, n.25)

2. “[The artist] is really of the masses, but they do not know it, and what is worse, they do not know him; as yet the common people do not hear him gladly or hear him at all.” (Howells, “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business” 445)

a new generation of writers, attracted by what he had once called “the savage world which underlies as well as environs civilization,”<sup>1</sup> now made fun of his provincial daylight world and moderate “tea-cup tragedies.” In a letter to his sister of March 1898 he wondered “if my best days for writing are not past,” and some years later, he sadly confided to Henry James that he had become a “comparatively a dead cult with my statues cast down and the grass growing over them in the pale moonlight.” (qtd. in Crowley, *The Dean* 91)

In contrast, James’s experience of crisis was at once shorter and more sharply focused. After the disappointing reception of *The Tragic Muse*, he renounced fiction as an error and a dead-end and enthusiastically shifted his energies to the theater. When that enthusiasm turned into abysmal disappointment, he felt devastated;—but then radically reversed himself again. Leaving his dreams of success behind, he returned to the novel with quasi-religious fervor and committed himself to exploring its yet untried possibilities. Accepting his alienation from a general audience, he hoped that the very expansion of the literary market would eventually allow for smaller, yet more refined publics that, “like shoals of fish rising for more delicate bait,” would accept him on his own terms.<sup>2</sup> If the dominant culture of the *fin de siècle* had turned itself more and more “outward” toward the “mass-produced,” the “public” and “commercial,” James’s work from now on would turn decidedly “inward”: to mental processes and to the private inner life. The crisis of the nineties made James reinvent himself—via a series of radically innovative fictions<sup>3</sup>—as the new “Master” of the novel. Responding to the artistic brilliance of James’s late phase, Howells saw him “rise and rise,” and it is not far-fetched to assume that his awareness of James’s “rise” was connected with the pejorative

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1. In his review of Frank Norris’ *McTeague* he writes: “[. . .] whether we shall keep to the bounds of the provincial proprieties, or shall include within the imperial territory of our fiction the passions and the motives of the savage world which underlies as well as environs civilization, are points this book sums up and puts concretely; and it is for the reader, not for the author, to make answer.” (“A Case in Point,” *Selected Literary Criticism* III 11-13) It was of course Norris who had written of “tea-cup tragedies”—without explicit reference to Howells, however.

2. Henry James, “The Question of the Opportunities” [1898]. *Literary Criticism* 653-54.

3. See Perosa, *Henry James and the Experimental Novel*, and Perosa, “The Case of Henry James.”

assessment of his own achievement: “My way is still the byway, not the highway; the minor, not the major means.” (*Life in Letters* II 181)

How far away from each other Howells and James had by then moved in their writing (while growing ever more intense in their mutual praise), may be inferred from an exchange of letters between Henry and his brother William on *The Golden Bowl*. William, for whom Howells was the most perfect of American novelists, had previously praised *The Kentons* and *Letters Home* in glowing letters of appreciation,<sup>1</sup> while he clearly indicated to his brother how much he disliked the opaqueness of his late style. Could he, for once, please write a book with “no fencing in the dialogue, or psychological contraries, and absolute straightness in style.” Henry, irritated by William’s condescension and perhaps unaware that he was confronted with an ideal of simplicity, propagated with only slightly different emphasis by Howells, answered in a manner he usually reserved for his attacks on bestselling fiction. Yes, he could write such an “uncanny thing.” “But let me say, dear William, that I shall greatly be humiliated if you do like it, and thereby lump it in your affection with things of the current age, that I heard you express admiration for and that I would sooner descend to a dishonoured grave than have written.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. Both novels had been poorly received by critics as well as by the general public. On the English and American reception of *The Kentons*, Howells wrote to Brander Mathews on Aug 3, 1902: “Here the book has been fairly killed by the stupid and stupefying cry of ‘commonplace people.’ I shall not live long enough to live this down, but possibly my books may. I confess that I am disheartened. I had hoped I was helping my people know themselves in the delicate beauty of their every day lives, and to find cause for pride in the loveliness of an apparently homely average, but they don’t want it. They bray at my flowers picked from the fruitful fields of our common life, and turn aside among the thistles with keen appetites for the false and impossible. Pazienza!” (161). The more delighted he was with William James’s appreciation of the novel to whom he wrote in response: “Your postal card did my very soul good: you praise so gloriously that I could almost wish to deserve your praise, and I cannot wholly believe that I do not. In this case I will own that I like *The Kentons* myself.” (161) On *Letters Home* William James wrote to him with even greater enthusiasm: “I’ve just read *Letters Home*, which raised me from the dead almost, and which is the most absolutely faultless piece of richness as well as veracity that ever flowed out of human pen. I bar no one and no language. It is nature itself, and the wit of it, and the humor of it, and the goodness of it! You may go—that will remain” (qtd. in Brooks 186, n.95-96)

2. See Matthiessen 338-40.

William James may thus serve as a third element in a set of triangular reflections.<sup>1</sup> Although Henry never commented on his brother's *Principles of Psychology* and made his famous statement of having unconsciously practiced pragmatism with reference to one of William's later works,<sup>2</sup> he had most certainly read it. His late novels (*The Ambassadors* and *The Golden Bowl*, especially) show an equal fascination with the “stream of thought,” with its rings and halos of suggestiveness, the elusive radiance of its vagueness. Howells, who never called himself a pragmatist, reviewed *Principles of Psychology* in 1891. Ignoring almost completely what William James had written about the instability of self and the streaming of consciousness, he concentrates on the chapters on “Habit” and on “Will” from which he extracts as a lesson to be learned that “we are creatures of our own making.” Against the ever-changing fluidity of our thoughts and “the dark underlying premises of the luminous consciousness that delights him,” Howells quotes William James as sternly demanding that “[i]nstead of all this, more zestful than ever is the work, the work; and fuller the import of common duties and of common goods.”<sup>3</sup>

In these mutual interpretations, obviously, each reads the other according to his own different needs and purposes. But it should also be clear that all three are involved in a project which one might call with William James an “unstiffening” of (pre)given ideas, or of existing forms (be they narrative or social), or of concepts of cultural order. In this project, which opens the notion of the “civilized” (without abandoning it) towards “the dark underlying premises of conscious-

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1. William himself had toyed with this idea in similar letters to his brother on August 22, 1890 (and one to Howells five days later): “I don't see how either you or Howells can keep up at such a rate. I am now just in the middle of his *Hazard of New Fortunes*, which is an extraordinary vigorous production, quite up to Dickens I should say, in humor, detail of observation and geniality, with flexible human beings on the stage instead of puppets. With that work, your Tragic Muse, and last but by no means least, my *Psychology*, all appearing in it, the year 1890s will be known as the great epochal year in American literature.” (*The Correspondence of William James*, Vol. 2, 146; Vol. 7, 87-88)

2. It was on William's *Pragmatism* (1907) that he wrote: “I simply sank down, under it. [ . . . ] I was lost in the wonder of the extent to which all my life I have [ . . . ] unconsciously pragmatized.” (*The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 3, 347)

3. Howells, *Selected Literary Criticism*, II, 176.

ness,” and where form—as William James phrased it—is worked out of the fluid stuff of experience like a sculptor “works on his block of stone,”<sup>1</sup> Henry James and William Dean Howells occupy opposite yet related positions. They are related in attempting to save a notion of order (based on “reason” and/or “manners”) by making it more fluid and flexible; and they are separated by the different degree of flexibility they each allow. While Howells confined himself to the ethical premises of his social vision, he was yet determined to explore, within the limits he imposed on it, a world of his own making. It was a world grounded in an ethics of behaviour (which would explain his affinity to William James); whereas Henry James emphasized, in his late novels, an aesthetics of behaviour that was steeped in ethic implications and refined and filtered through processes of thought and introspection.



Howells’s various definitions of literary realism—although predominantly argued in terms of mimesis—always implied an audience that shared his faith in the common (the reasonable, the communal and the commonplace) as the essence of American democracy. In an interview he gave to Stephen Crane in 1894 he argued that the novel “is a perspective made for the benefit of people who have no true use of their eyes. The novel in its real meaning, adjusts the proportion. It preserves a balance.”<sup>2</sup> Evidently, he was not conscious of any contradiction between his demands for exact mimesis, on the one hand, and for maintaining a “clear sense of proportion,” on the other. Proportion, balance—these are elements of a classicist aesthetics in which the just, the good and the beautiful were interconnected. For Howells, they were the a-priori condition of American reality itself: They

1. “The Stream of Thought,” in *The Writings of William James* 73.

2. See his interview with Stephen Crane (Pizer 54-55). In “Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading” [1899] he repeated his argument almost verbatim: “[ . . . ] the business of the novelist is to make you understand the real world through his faithful effigy of it; or [ . . . ] to arrange a perspective for you with everything in its proper relation and proportion to everything else, and this so manifest that you cannot err in it however myopic or astigmatic you may be. It is his function to help you to be kinder to your fellows, juster to yourself, truer to all.” (*Howells, Selected Literary Criticism*, III 231) This is the printed version of the paper he read on his extended lecture tour through the Midwest in the early 1890s.

made for its hidden substance, its latent inner form, the inherent beauty of democratic existence,<sup>1</sup> and implied a context of shared values and experiences. Realist representation was therefore based on a concept of consensus—even if such consensus might be temporarily lost—which gave meaning to each individual existence at the same time that it thrived on the balanced consciousness of each participant. His novels (like spectacles made to “adjust” vision) were thus instruments of a moral and social perception that mediated between a “clear sense” of (pre-given) democratic form and actual experience, between the covertly stable and the overtly unstable and fragmented. They projected a fictional world that was an “effigy” as well as a corrective of American reality, always ironically conscious of the “gap” between the textual construct of the real and the world outside the text,—at the same time that they invited the reader to step into that gap and help close it.

“Balance” and “proportion” therefore gave structure to the “inward” as well as to the “outward” life since they applied to a model of character as well as of society. As Guillaume Tanguy has shown in his illuminating dissertation on Howells, “balance” (and in correlation with it: “measure”) referred to an ideal of aesthetic, moral *and* social economy that shunned the “excessive” in its various manifestations: It thus marked the emotional excesses of late nineteenth-century neoromanticism, the economic excesses of corporate capitalism and the political excesses of imperialist politics as symptoms of a society that had lost its sense of proportion together with its democratic bearings.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Howells’s concept of realism therefore seems to me closely linked to Aristotle’s theory of mimesis as *entelechia: imitatio naturae* as an active bringing out what is already latently given in nature. “Mimesis is a capacity, or a potentiality, rooted in nature and realized by human nature,” Christopher Prendergast writes in *The Order of Mimesis*. “To ‘know’ the world is [. . .] not only to register the actual, but also to bring out or make manifest what is potential in nature” (19 and 21). Howells’s realism—as much as contemporary American movements of social reform and early theories of American sociology and pragmatism (Cooley, Mead, Dewey)—share this Aristotelian notion of *entelechia*; i.e. that the inherent form of American democracy had still to be brought out/worked out by social practice. See Ickstadt, *Faces of Fiction*.

2. See Tanguy for an in-depth analysis of the various implications of Howells’s concept of “economy.” For the connections between the various transgressions implied in the return from realism to romance, see Howells, “The New Historical Romances,” *Selected Literary Criticism*, III 25-36.

Howells explored the growing disorder of the social state in all of his economic novels of the late 1880s and early 1890s. But he did so most rigorously in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* where it has become manifest in the urban chaos of New York—in the centrifugal energy of the huge and formless city—as much as in its inner social sphere where polite and rational discourse has broken down and given way to open discord. Passion and selfishness explode in the violence of daughter against father, of father against son, and, climactically, in the street-car strike when competitive society reveals its inner state of civil war in the bloody fight of labor against capital. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is a novel saturated with the shattering experience of social and economic change—of traditions, cultural identities repressed or destroyed in the individual pursuit of money and the dynamics of an unfolding capitalist economy—and it abounds with a genuine feeling of horror at the moral and human cost involved.

Whether the collapsing order may yet contain the seeds of moral regeneration is very cautiously explored in the novel's last section. While at the beginning, Basil and Isabel March still view the city from an aesthetic distance, they progressively come to see themselves as part of it, and in discovering their own complicity become agents of social integration. By projecting themselves sympathetically into the selves of others, they create a sense of coherence that has its echo on another level as a renewed yearning for community. The novel traces the connection between economy and moral consciousness by giving account of a proliferating, socially destructive individualism; yet by symbolically enacting a growth of social sense, it plays with the idea of possible reversal. The book presents a reality in flux, suspended between possibilities: a world based on and determined by selfishness and chance, or a world coherent in its moral meaning. If such a moral universe (still) exists—this is the novel's challenge to the reader—it depends on the faith and actions of those willing to participate in it. Since Howells could not go any further without violating the tenets of his realism, he subsequently had to move from realist novel to utopian romance to outline his vision of a society built on cooperation and altruistic concern and not driven by the energies of greed and selfishness.

His "Altrurian romances" thus logically complement and in a sense also complete his Tolstoyan involvement in the social crisis of his



time. It left him exhausted and also somewhat tired of the subject. How seriously his faith in a “moral universe” had in fact been shaken (even while he promoted its advancement here on earth), becomes apparent in a short novel, *The Shadow of a Dream* (also published in 1890), in which he tried to cope with the loss of his daughter who had died a year earlier while he was struggling to finish *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.<sup>1</sup>

The novel tests the possibility of a world grounded in reason and moral sense by moving “inward” to its psychological foundation. Howells surrounds his three central protagonists (Faulkner, his wife Hermia and their mutual friend, the minister James Nevil) with three observing and interpreting figures on the periphery: Faulkner’s physician Dr. Wingate, Isabel March and her husband Basil who, as I-narrator, is also the novel’s predominant voice. “The two triangles become at last a vortex that sucks the outer characters, and ultimately the reader, toward the irreducible mystery of the center.” (Crowley, *Mask* 120) The mystery, already referred to in the novel’s title, is Faulkner’s obsessive dream and the fatal power it exerts over the lives of Hermia and Nevil after his death (which occurs at the end of part one).<sup>2</sup> The question whether the dream causes Faulkner’s mental illness and thus eventually kills him or whether it is only a symptom of an illness that results in death, is the topic of much debate. The Marches only *suspect* the nature of Faulkner’s dream, Dr. Wingate *knows* it. Hermia hysterically refuses to know; until, years later, when, on the verge of marrying Nevil, she finds among the notes of her dead husband further evidence of his maniac dream. Pleading with Wingate, he eventually tells her, whereupon she falls into a deep depression. Finally, Basil learns from Faulkner’s mother the horror of that dream which, like the ominous oracle in a Greek tragedy, will inexorably destroy the innocent. *If* they are innocent—this is the

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1. His letters of that period speak of a growing numbness and indifference to all “earthly things” and a willingness to passively and stoically accept everything: “Sometimes [ . . . ] the whole affair goes to pieces in my apprehension, and I feel as if I had no more authority to judge myself or try to do this or that than any other expression of the Infinite Life—say a tree, or a field of wheat, or a horse. The only proof I have that I ought to do right is that I suffer for my selfishness.” (*The Selected Letters of William Dean Howells*, III 314)

2. The book is divided into three parts: the first being focused on Faulkner, the second on Hermia, the third on Nevil.

cruel question, the poisonous doubt that possibly killed Faulkner as it will lead to Hermia's and Nevil's death. Faulkner had dreamt that his wife was in love with Nevil, that they both wanted him to die and that their wedding coincided with his funeral. Under the shadow of this dream, Hermia, in passive despair, demands of Nevil to decide their future who, then, in a highly melodramatic scene, heroically renounces the woman he loves. March appeals to reason ("in the interest of human enlightenment") and points to the complete irrationality of such a decision since, after all, the dream had no basis in "fact." Nevil appears to be convinced, but is immediately afterwards killed in an accident which is—perhaps—an act of suicide; Hermia eventually dies from grief (or a festering sense of guilt).

The Marches first raise the question whether in the deep recesses of their souls Nevil and Hermia might, indeed, have been in love with each other (even if they had resisted adultery) and whether Faulkner's dream was thus well-founded after all,—but reject it in the end with almost anxious insistence: "We have always denied, in the interest of common-sense and common justice, any controlling effect to the dream itself, except through their own morbid conscientiousness, their exaggerated sensibility;" and again: "That evil dream had power over the hapless pair who succumbed to it only because they were so wholly guiltless of the evil imputed to them." (133) And yet: how "wholly guiltless" they really were, remains unknown and undecided. Both Marches shudder when they glimpse into the abysses of the soul which were opened by fatal insistence to 'know' as much as by her "self-indulgent" introspection.<sup>1</sup> It is against the morbid pull of such self-inquiry, on the one hand, and against the blind rule of "chance," on the other, that March projects his will to believe in a world made meaningful by human solidarity and enlightened moral action. Clearly, dreams and the fantastic spell they exert over the living belong to "romance" (and the story owes in fact much to Hawthorne). March finds good reasons to reject both—and is yet

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1. Isabel argues at one point: "I can understand how such a woman would now begin to question whether she had not thought of him, and would end by bringing herself in guilty, no matter what the facts were." (*Shadow* 93)

Or, as Howells wrote to the illustrator of *The Shadow*, Howard Pyle, to passively submit to ultimate uncertainty: "It may be an illusion, as so many things are (may be all things); but I sometimes feel that the only peace is in giving up one's will." (*Life in Letters*, II 11)

aware that his answers, however reasonable they may be, do have their limits. There is indeed, as Faulkner argues at the beginning, “a whole region of experience—half the map of our life—that they tell us must always remain a wilderness, with all its extraordinary phenomena irredeemably savage and senseless [ . . . ].” (47) The moral universe implied in Howells’s fiction can neither master these savage regions of the human soul nor can it grow from there; on the contrary, it has to be constructed hypothetically *in* this knowledge and *against* it. It is not so much that Howells’s “realism turns upon itself” here (*Crowley Mask*, 119), as that it constitutes itself precisely along the limits of its “mastery.”<sup>1</sup>



In *The Shadow of a Dream* (as well as *An Imperative Duty*<sup>2</sup> which he wrote immediately afterwards), Howells acknowledges but also criticizes the escape from reason into the uncontrolled and uncontrollable whirlpool of subjective mental processes. In both novels, he asserts the powerful reality of the inward life together with his attempt to control it by a distant observer/narrator who is willing to understand yet not to follow. “All I contend for,” says Basil, “is that we should not throw away ‘the long result of time,’ and return to the bondage of the superstition that cursed the childhood of the race, that blackened every joy of its youth and spread a veil of innocent blood between it and the skies. There may be something in dreams; if there is, our thoughts, not our fears, will find out [ . . . ].” (*Shadow* 48)

In an astonishing essay (“True, I Talk of Dreams”) written at about the same time, Howells dared to talk about his own dreams whose

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1. Crowley is convinced that “Howells was recuperating Hawthorne more than he was anticipating Freud.” (128) On the other hand he points, on several occasions, to Howells’s affinity with William James and his “will to believe.” In the chapter “The Stream of Thought” of his *Principles of Psychology*, William James refers to introspection as a vice leading to a state of quasi-catatonic melancholia; and in his chapter on “Habit,” he argues: “There is no more contemptible type of human character than that of the nerveless sentimentalist and dreamer who spends his life in a weltering sea of sensibility and emotions but who never does a manly concrete deed.” (*The Writings of William James* 19)

2. Another fascinating short novel, in which Howells continues to explore his concept of enlightened “measure,” stretching it to the limits of its socially integrative power. Using racial stereotypes and questioning them at the same time, he forces the reader to face the fact of racism and the humanity of the racial Other.

almost overt sexual implications he either ignored or was unaware of. There were apparently several areas of what Howells called “the inner life”<sup>1</sup> which he touched upon but did not explicitly deal with in some of his late fictions. These were like doors that led back into phases of individual and/or collective childhood or into the dark recesses of consciousness. One could open these doors—it was good to know where they were—but they marked escape routes from civilized life which, for Howells, was the precious realm of reason and of everyday experience. The writer’s task was to extend that realm by diminishing hierarchies (by lifting up and leveling down)—and for a while this had indeed appeared to be the course of a history in which realism and democracy were conjoined (if only the “Age of Enlightenment” had skipped the egotism of the nineteenth century and continued right into the twentieth).<sup>2</sup> To reverse this evolutionary path by blurring the distinction between the savage and the civilized was thus not only to ignore history but appeared to him as being ultimately perverse. The pull of the instinctual and “primitive” that Freud was to diagnose as an increasing “discontent” within all modernizing civilizations was therefore beyond Howells’s comprehension. For him, the act of writing was most of all an act of self-denial, part of an ongoing collective endeavor to “tame the savage world which underlies as well as environs civilization” by converting the instinctual into the fully human, the civilized man. To impose on himself and on his narrative world the standards of benevolence and kindness in the name of a more altruistic and more spiritual humanity was part of an enlightened belief in Mankind that was totally (if at times uneasily) committed to an ideal of sublimation. His realism thus not only seemed linked to the forces of social and cultural repression (which he continued to criticize),<sup>3</sup> it also made its limits (and, increasingly, its limitations) more apparent

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1. In a letter to his sister Aurelia he wrote: “I am an elderly man and I ought to deal more with things of spiritual significance. This is what I have felt for some time. Outer life no longer interests me as it once did [ . . . ]. I believe I can find a new audience for my studies of the inner life. I don’t know what shape they will take.” (March 1898, qtd. in Crowley, *Mask* 47)

2. “We do not despair, however, of the day when the poor honest herd of humankind shall give universal utterance to the universal instinct, and shall hold selfish power in politics, in art, in religion, for the devil that it is . . .” (“Editor’s Study, June 1886.” *Editor’s Study by William Dean Howells* 26)

3. Cp. his attacks on cultural idealism and the excesses of Puritan conscience, in, e.g., *An Imperative Duty*.

as the new century began and infatuation with the “savage” and the “primitive” defined modernism’s new path of rebellion and subversion in the arts. His culture was moving away from him—even while it was transforming him into its representative icon.<sup>1</sup>

The limits of realism, or realism turning upon itself, is in fact the topic of *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* (1897). Although “business” is at best a marginal topic, Howells attempts to grasp the mentality of a new kind of businessman in this novel—a counter-Silas Lapham, free from moral scruples and thus beyond moral “rise” and redemption. It shows the “education” of such a man from childhood to manhood, and his mind-set is dealt with in his attitude to other people, especially to women. His betrayals give him moments of bad conscience, but moral questions have no effect on him: they drip from his selfish soul like water from an oily surface. Thus the central problem of the novel is that of “character”: The gentleman’s code of manners (implying respect for others, rectitude and dependable commitment in matters of love) is contrasted with a “new” natural man whose lack of manners denotes selfishness, recklessness, the rule of passion, and emotional instability. This conflict—ultimately between the savage and the civilized—is played out in the strained relationship between the two main characters: Jeff Durgin and Westover. Westover is an artist who “had always been a bohemian, but at heart he was philistine and bourgeois.” (455f.) He therefore also provides the measures of good taste and moral judgment. Although he is only thirty-six years old at the end of the novel,<sup>2</sup> he seems “old” from the very beginning (when he is about twenty and Jeff and Cynthia, the little girl Jeff gleefully teases and torments, are not more than nine). Westover postulates a moral universe in which all deeds have cause and consequence: “As a man sows he reaps. [ . . . ] He sowed evil and he must reap evil. He may never know it, but he will reap what he has sown. The dreadful thing is that others must share in his harvest.” (452) In contrast, Jeff believes in chance and the shaping power of rude/crude force (“rude,”

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1. This had also happened to Emerson, and it is interesting that Howells, in a letter to T.S. Perry, spoke of Emerson’s “pure Anarchism”: “It makes me sit up. You would think it Kropotkin speaking, or Herr Most. If Emerson were alive now and said such things at home, they’d deport him.” (*Life in Letters*, II 204) In references like these, Howells seems to resent and rebel against his own institutionalized status.

2. He will finally marry Cynthia who respectfully accepts his proposal at the end of the novel, together with her assurance that she will always call him “Mr. Westover.”

“strong,” “primitive” are keywords). He imposes himself on others, is compelled by desire and the spur of the moment and thus reliable only in his unreliability. Although Westover is his fatherly/brotherly adviser, he deeply resents him because he cannot reach him.<sup>1</sup> The narrator appears to be on Westover’s side, but Westover’s judgment—so the reader becomes increasingly aware—is not disinterested (as much as he likes to perceive himself that way) since, as he finally admits, he has been in love with Cynthia (whom Jeff has jilted), the pure New England girl who shares his values. His harangues against Jeff’s selfishness can therefore easily be turned against him and his superior moral stance. And yet “self” and “selflessness” are the concepts around which the novel revolves. Westover’s gentleman code takes issue not only with the narrow Yankee-materialism of the people at Lion’s Head but also with the pretentiousness and decadence of Boston’s “good society.” He feels nevertheless closer to the country than the city. He, the painter of the majestic Lion’s Head, tames the natural beauty of its mountain wilderness through art—while Jeff’s unruly and savage nature escapes his grasp. Jeff, the “landlord at Lion’s Head,” who translates “nature” into rude action, thus comes to represent a new “natural” society in his very rawness—a world that Westover abhors and yet is powerless to change.<sup>2</sup>

There is the difference between the “old” inn at Lion’s Head (once run by Jeff’s mother) and the new hotel that Jeff has built, between the “old” and “new” set of its customers. Westover always prefers the old to the new—together with the narrator whose conservative and somewhat didactic voice can be easily confused with Westover’s.<sup>3</sup>

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1. It is only when Westover is under the influence of punch “or some other influence of like force and quality,” he is able to perceive that in Jeff’s “earth-bound temperament was the potentiality of all the success it aimed at.” (281) This is the closest Westover, the “idealist,” ever comes to understanding Jeff, the uncivilized materialist.

2. Westover is consistently associated with women: they are his customers and his admirers: “Bah!” cried the painter. “Why should I want to? I’m not a woman in everything.” (281), while Jeff acts unmistakably as a man, although not as a gentleman.

3. About Westover’s liking for Lion’s Head the narrator says: “He liked finding himself in the simple and innocent American circumstance again, and he was not sorry to be confronted at once with one of the most characteristic aspects of our summer. [. . .] Such people are refined, humane, appreciative, sympathetic; and Westover, fresh from the life abroad where life is seldom so free as ours without some

Accordingly, Westover never visits Jeff’s new hotel at Lion’s Head, he only hears about its modern splendour from others. As artist he allies himself with an older, quasi-rural world of production, whereas Jeff, a new kind of producer, is clearly associated with the new world of excess: of desire, will and capitalist expansion.

Kenneth Lynn considers *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* as a new turn in Howells’s fiction—as his experiment in naturalism.<sup>1</sup> It certainly marks Howells’s effort to understand a new generation, a new concept of society as much as of the universe (based on the self and its survival in a world ruled by force and chance). In his earlier work (*A Modern Instance*, e.g.) he had conceived of figures whose potential destructiveness made them outcasts of society. Bartley Hubbard anticipates Jeff Durgin, but as a figure of social failure, whereas Jeff—to Westover’s chagrin—represents success, is the figure of a new era (anticipating Dreiser’s social adventurers who succeed by chance, will power, and ruthlessness). Although Howells never relinquishes the controlling view of such figures, he acknowledges its limits, as Westover becomes increasingly powerless and the Durgins of his time overcome their marginality to become the makers of a world from which the artist is alienated (although not excluded). In that sense Jeff Durgin is the example of an educational project that failed—Westover’s as well as Howells’s, since his realist project was essentially a civilizing project connecting an improvement of “seeing” (the novel as a corrective for astigmatic eyes) with an improvement of (social) being.

Implied in this venture is the assumption that “we are creatures of our own making” (as Howells quoted William James)—against the grim possibility that our character and fate might after all be predetermined (by God or Nature). This is the case of Jeff Durgin who cannot be changed, or is constant only in his changes, and thus the living example of culture’s defeat by nature. Howells’s realism has to

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stain, was glad to find himself in the midst of this unrestraint, which was so sweet and pure. He had seen enough of rich people to know that riches seldom bought the highest qualities, even among his fellow-countrymen who suppose that riches can do everything, and the first aspects of society at Lion’s Head seemed to him Arcadian [ . . . ].” (69-71)

1. “In *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* he had broken through the self-concern of the post-Civil War novelists to the broader outlook of 20th-century naturalism, but the achievement had largely gone unnoticed, and he forthwith returned to his old formulas.” (311)

be seen against this contrapuntal awareness of naturalist (or Calvinist) determinism. And yet, the contrasts may not be so sharply drawn after all. There is a simpler phase of culture at once closer to nature and far enough removed from it to encourage self-improvement. In *A Boy's Town*, Howells's memoir of his childhood (which he also wrote in 1890 in a context of social hope and personal despair), he looks back on a simpler social existence<sup>1</sup> that allowed boys to be freely "savage" and "selfish" in their childhood, yet also taught them the lessons that gave form to their adult lives:

The first thing you have to learn here below is that in essentials you are just like every one else, and that you are different from others only in what is not so much worth while. If you have anything in common with your fellow-creatures, it is something that God gave you; if you have anything that seems quite your own, it is from your silly self, and is a sort of perversion of what came to you from the Creator who made you out of himself, and had nothing else to make any one out of. There is not really any difference between you and your fellow-creatures; but only a seeming difference that flatters and cheats you with a sense of your strangeness, and makes you think you are a remarkable fellow. (*Selected Writings* 852)

The disregard of self that is advocated here is Christian as much as it is egalitarian and communal, and the particular self defined (and more or less effaced) in the universal of other fellow-creatures. Any "sense of your strangeness," any difference from others is a "sort of perversion," is silliness and self-deception, is selfishness, in short. Such a social definition of self has of course been characteristic of Howells's writing from early on, but it becomes especially distinctive in his late phase when it marks—sometimes aggressively<sup>2</sup>—the moral, social and stylistic limits of his realism. The small town becomes the

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1. "The town was small and the boys there were hemmed in by their inexperience and ignorance; but the simple home was large with vistas that stretched to the ends of the earth, and it was serenely bright with a father's reason and warm with a mother's love." (*A Boy's Town* 880)

2. At one point in *The Landlord at Lion's Head*, Jeff Durgin is cowhided in public by the alcoholic and brother of an upper-class Boston girl with whom Jeff, the upstart, had flirted beyond the limits of convention. That violent gesture, so unusual in the world of Howells's humane realism, is repeated six years later in *The Kentons* when one of the Kentons cowhides an obnoxious and shiftless journalist who had not only flirted with his sister but also accosted the venerable father-figure, Colonel Kenton. The violence has thus shifted from the margins to the center, indicating Howells's fury over the displacement of those figures and their values that represent his world.



preferred locus, or point of reference, in his novels of the first decade of the twentieth century,<sup>1</sup> as a place not only of nostalgic idealization but also of successful social interaction among a fairly homogeneous group of peers (of family or small community).<sup>2</sup>

It went together with an ideal of stylistic economy that concurred with its democratizing function and allowed the artist to do a “beautiful and true thing so simply and directly that the average man will not miss the meaning and the pleasure of it.”<sup>3</sup> Remember, says Colonel Kenton about his hometown in Ohio, “that wherever life is simplest and purest and kindest, that is the highest civilization.” (*The Kentons* 144) The reduction of self is played out thematically and stylistically in various ways—even, as in his last novels (*New Leaf Mills*, 1913, and *The Leatherwood God*, 1916), through the effacement of self in the act of seeing and thus in the creation of a style of pure linguistic surface.



The protagonists of his stylistically accomplished yet minor novels of the first years of the new century are restless and uprooted—torn between small town and big city, between the cultures of different regions and generations. Their focus is nevertheless domestic: *The Kentons*—a novel based on conversation throughout—is focused on a family’s delicately considerate and uncertain attempts at solving adolescent problems of the heart and of the mind (a marriageable daughter’s unhappy love for a Bartley-Hubbard-like scoundrel, a boy’s seduction by the absurdities of popular romantic fiction). In *Letters Home*, the dialogic structure so typical of Howells is created indirectly via a series of letters written by people of different age, gender, class and education who all live in exile in the big city, New York

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1. *The Kentons* (1902), *Letters Home* (1903), and *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904) which run parallel to James’s great novels of that period without coming anywhere close to matching them. It is tempting to connect Howells’s focus on the small community with a letter William James had written to him in 1901: “I am becoming more and more an individualist and anarchist and believer in small systems of things exclusively. The moment a thing gets great—a great success—its path is fatally strewn with falsity and crime.” (*The Correspondence of William James*, vol. 9, 362)

2. Howells’s fiction seems related to the social thought of early American sociologists who (like Charles Horton Cooley, e.g.) conceived of the coming social order as an extension of primary group cohesion (of the family, of “good society”) across empty written at about the same time urban space, Howells thus saw the small town as image of the past but also as model of a society of restored communication.

3. Howells, “A Novelist on Art.”

(which some enthusiastically embrace, others resentfully reject),—letters addressed to a “home” that has become part also of a collective past. What may look like a formal experiment with multiple narrative perspectives is in fact a strategy Howells uses to translate a concept of shared experience into narrative structure.<sup>1</sup> The letters tell, once again, a love story in which the conventions of the romance are gently subverted: when the conjoint common sense of the various protagonists/letter writers eventually succeeds in finding the right way out of a romantic case of emotional confusion. The novel thus implicitly suggests the need for communal collaboration in an as yet socially fragmented urban space; and, as the novel progresses, it slowly creates a dense network of interconnectedness beyond all difference of class and regional origin. If, in this novel, it is essentially the reader who has to realize the community implicit in the narrative structure, in *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904), it is the geographical place—a small town in “Mid-New-England latitude”—that allows, by a series of complex communal negotiations, for a healing of still festering wounds of the past, wounds that were inflicted by the ruthless and divisive egoism of a quasi-feudal capitalist patriarch and then repressed and sublimated in his son’s unhealthy devotion to the memory of his dead father.

There can be little doubt that the small towns and villages of Howells’s novels and autobiographical writings of the last decades of his life are steeped in personal and collective nostalgia; even though one could argue that even then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the small town was historically still the typical American locus—despite the enormous growth of cities like Chicago and New York. However, regardless of such arguments for Howells’s historical accuracy, the small town of his late work functions most of all as a model space of face-to-face communication (as did the social *interieur*—the upper-class salon or the country manor—in James’s late novels of consciousness): as a timeless utopia of communicative practice grounded in the latent sense of mutuality and the reconciliatory power of reasoned discourse.

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1. His play with multiple yet composite points of view thus enacts what was his unwavering conviction in the face of scepticism: “that human nature [. . .] is the same under all the masks and disguises that modern conditions have put upon it.” (“Concerning a Council of Perfection” 290)

This may be especially true in the case of his last novel, *The Leatherwood God* (1916), which Howells had worked on intermittently for almost twenty years and which is farthest removed in time from contemporary American history. It goes back to a bizarre and colorful episode in Ohio’s religious past—the appearance of a false Messiah in Leatherwood Creek at the beginning of the nineteenth-century. The novel is therefore closer to Howells’s memoirs of his youth (*A Boy’s Town* and *Years of my Youth*, also published in 1916) than to the novel of manners whose conventions had provided the matrix to his fictions of the preceding decade. It echoes with the style of earlier frontier literature (Mark Twain’s, for instance)—with its humor, its legends, the down-to-earth speech of simple folk. In its plot structure it is nevertheless almost archetypal of Howells’s novels in general: opposing the representatives of Reason to those of the Irrational, the cynically wise Squire Braille to the scoundrel and false Messiah Joseph Dylks who is the epitome of all selfish Howells-scoundrels from Bartley Hubbard to Angus Beaton (the ego-centric aesthete in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*), to Jeff Durgin and Bittredge, the rascal journalist in *The Kentons*. On the one hand, *The Leatherwood God* is focused on the breakdown of consensus (caused by Dylks) and its reconstruction (whose agent is Judge Braille). On the other, it enacts a rite of social exorcism: when Dylks, the seducer, the blasphemer who calls himself God but is in fact only a crook and “a handsome devil,” is forced to leave town. The false prophet first calls for “Salvation,” then for the coming of the New Jerusalem here on earth. He snorts and prances like a stallion, and is able to turn people’s minds and hearts—especially the minds and hearts of women who “trembled before him with a strange joy.” (56) He provokes the end of religious tolerance, incites turmoil, social chaos, and mob rule before order is finally restored. He keeps his enemies in check by “that air of mysterious mastery” and by blackmail. (His wife, believing him dead when he disappeared after one of his scams, has married again and believes she can now be accused of bigamy). But Dylks overreaches himself when he bolsters his claim to divinity by attempting to work miracles. When this fails he is forced to leave the village with a small flock of unperturbed believers and finally drowns on his way with them to Philadelphia.

The counter-force in a village torn between reason and the deep desire for a different, perhaps a more passionate life is Squire Braille.

As the outspoken infidel in a religious community, he is socially confined to the margins, yet acts as a wise, sarcastic and exasperated commentator of the foolish doings of the community. However, as the local representative of the law, he is central in the communal process of decision making: It his judgment that restores the rule of Reason and saves Dylks from the fury of the mob.

Like almost all of Howells's novels, *The Leatherwood God* is told by an omniscient narrator. Only in one chapter the narrator comes so close to Dylks's consciousness that his voice seems occasionally to merge with that of the false prophet in passages of free indirect discourse. (156-159) Dylks is in fact the most subjectively rendered figure in a tale otherwise told from an 'objective' position outside and above. He ignites and releases "with malign intelligence" (101) the pent-up emotions of people who are normally unable or unwilling to express their feelings and whose laconic simplicity of speech Howells masterfully renders as a short-hand of the nonexpressed/repressed:

In the dark she could not see her father's frown, but she was aware of it in his answer. "You went there against my will. Well?" "I believe." "You believe? What do you believe?" "Him. That he is sent." "Why?" "I can't tell you. He made me; he made all the people there." (61)

Dylks himself becomes most expressive and passionately self-reflective when he confesses to Squire Braile his being caught in a game he knows how to play but not how to end: that he rides on the desire of the people he deceives—on their yearning for another life, for a life beyond, "the hunger and thirst to know what's going to be after you die" and "The worst of it is, and the dreadfulest is, that you begin to believe it yourself [ . . . ]. Their faith puts faith in you." (172-173)

Although, at the end, the Squire admits to the same desire ("all along I've felt it in myself," 232), it is clear that his whole rational being is set against it, that Dylks is not an alter-go (not even a tempter) but an antagonist and public enemy—an enemy inside fought as enemy outside and finally purged from the community. It is the structure of a morality play that Howells has staged with many variations and disguises throughout his work but perhaps never as undisguised as in this, his last novel. When the Temple of tolerance (where the different nominations "gathered as one Christian people," 4) is restored—after it had been destroyed by a new faith based on passion

and desire—“balance and proportion” return to the community. It is this balance, based on the rule of Reason, precariously maintained against the always present danger of excess, which defines the aesthetic as well as the moral and social limits of Howells’s realism. Its particular “economy” is apposite as well as opposite to that of Henry James. “Manners,” James had written in a late essay on “The Manners of American Women” (1907) are above all an economy; the sacrifice of them has always in the long run to be made up, just as the break-ages and dilapidations have to be paid for at the end of the tenancy of a house carelessly occupied [ . . . ]. By an excess of misuse moreover a house is fatally disfigured—rendered, that is, unfavourable to life; in which case we become liable for the total ruin; to the infinite dismay of those members of the family [ . . . ] to whom the vision of such waste is a vision of barbarism. (James qtd. in Walker 108)

James’s “anti-dote” was to take “manners” as the outward form of an inward culture of reflective complexity in which not only the aesthetic and the ethic were blurred but where the imagination was allowed to unfold itself to a degree uncomfortable for Howells.<sup>1</sup> In protecting *his* notion of the civilized from “ruin,” Howells chose exactly the opposite path: turning monologic “inwardness” outward into dialogue or conversational interaction as much as that was possible;<sup>2</sup> redefining “manners”—within the limits of the concept—according to an ideal of straightness and sincerity of action; and pushing language away from hermetic complexity toward an ideal of simplicity that

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1. “He seems to have grown more and more inward, and to retire to his own interior to ruminate the morsels of his fellow men which he captures in his consciousness of things outside . . .” Howells wrote about James in 1904, qtd. in Michael Anesko, *Letters, Fictions, Lives* 330. Like William James, Howells was concerned with the stability of self, not with its dissolution. As Ross Posnock wrote about Henry James’s late fiction: “For all his renown as a psychological novelist, Henry James conceives of the representation of consciousness not as a descent into psychic depths in search of truth but as a dissolving of the stable oppositions—depth and surface, inside and outside—that defined selfhood as a discrete and intelligible entity.” (Posnock 103) James’s ethics of aesthetics that finally turns all protagonists of *The Golden Bowl* into “precious objects” since their “magnificent” behavior carries its own moral justification, has been well described by David Lodge in his semi-fictional account of James’s late period: the belief “that only an elegant and resourceful system of benign social lying kept civilization from being destroyed by human passions . . .” (Lodge 282) Howells would have understood but not agreed.

2. In novels like *The Golden Bowl*, James had not only reduced social interaction to a minimum of word and gesture but also replaced real by imagined conversation. See Cameron.

corresponded to his social as well as to his moral and aesthetic convictions. By grounding the meaning and social function of his “house of fiction” on self-transcending “reason” as the source of all “balance and proportion,” he tended to see “imagination” (the great liberating force for James) as a potential ally of all forms of excessive selfishness (including the aesthetic). It is this restrictive vision that makes Howells seem as locked into the nineteenth century and James’s turn to consciousness as opening a door to the artistic freedoms of the modern. But what Annie Dillard once wrote about the tradition of stylistic simplicity—although argued with reference to Mark Twain—also applies to Howells: “This prose is humble. It does not call attention to itself but to the world. It is intimate with character; it is sympathetic and may be democratic. It submits to the world. It is honest. It praises the world by seeing it.”<sup>1</sup> It is as a master of such self-erasing simplicity of style and manner of narration that Howells has been remembered, forgotten, and *re-remembered*—as an author greater than he made himself to be<sup>2</sup> and yet minor in his mastery.

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1. Dillard 120. In an illuminating speech on Howells, John Updike argues along similar lines: “Today’s fiction, the vein of modernist formal experimentation exhausted, has turned, with an informal—a minimalist—bluntness of style, and with a concern for immediate detail that has given regionalism new life, to the area of domestic morality and sexual politics that interested Howells. [. . .] Howells’s agenda remains our agenda—for the American writer to live in America and mirror it in his writing, with ‘everything brought out.’” (Updike 42)

2. As Howells wrote in calm self-assessment as a reply to Charles Eliot Norton (April 1903) who had quite maliciously sent him an earlier letter of Henry James in which the then young and ambitious author had condescendingly commented on the literary talent of his rival friend: “It was kind of you to include James’s early letters to yourself . . . , and I won’t pretend I have read them with less interest because of certain allusions to me in them. In a way I think their criticism very just; I have often thought my intellectual raiment was more than my intellectual body; and that I might finally be convicted, not of having nothing *on*, but that worse nakedness of having nothing *in*. He speaks of me with my style, and such mean application as I was making of it, as seeming to him like a poor man with a diamond which he does not know what to do with; and mostly I suppose I have cut rather inferior window glass with it. But I am not sorry for having wrought in common, crude material so much; that is the right American stuff; and perhaps hereafter, when my din is done, if any one is curious to know what that noise was it will be found to have proceeded from a small insect which was scraping about on the surface of our life and trying to get into its meaning for the sake of the other insects larger or smaller. That is, such has been my unconscious work; consciously, I was always, as I still am, trying to fashion a piece of literature out of the life next at hand.” (*Life in Letters* II, 172-173)

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## **“Go East, young man,” or the Eurocentric Outlook of W.D. Howells**

In a playful echo of the celebrated advice of Horace Greeley, editor of *The New York Tribune*, to the young people of mid-19th century America, “Go west, young man and grow with the country,” we could imagine W.D. Howells saying: “Go East, young man and grow on the pith and marrow of European culture.” Not that Howells ever gave up his plans to build a genuine American literature, but he never considered that it could be restricted to a colonial, regional or local color version of English literature. The Mecca of arts and letters was still Europe (England and the Continent): it was up to American literati to take full advantage of it.

In 1949, American literature scholars convened under the auspices of the Modern Language Association of America to select the eight major American writers of the 19th century. They chose (in alphabetical order): Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), Henry James (1843-1916), Herman Melville (1819-91), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), Henry David Thoreau (1817-62), Mark Twain (1835-1910) and Walt Whitman (1819-92). Among these, two only had never visited Europe: Thoreau and Whitman. Two only had ever seen the Pacific Ocean: Melville as a sailor and adventurer visited the Pacific islands which, at the time, were considered either the haven of the noble savage or the dens of devilish cannibals. As for Twain, who lived in California in the 1860's, he remembered jokingly that the coldest winter he had ever experienced in the United States . . . was the summer in San Francisco.

On Howells's return from Venice in 1865, three of the eight major writers were already dead: Poe, Thoreau and Hawthorne. Emerson remained the eminent “Representative Man” of Transcendentalism, 19th century America had no use for Melville, a novelist (or was he

rather a cetologist?) who in *Moby Dick* described Queequeg, the harpooner, as “a George Washington cannibalistically developed.” Howells had hesitations about Whitman’s poetry—like most writers and critics of the time—, although his views changed after 1881.<sup>1</sup>

As for the remaining two of the list, Howells did all he could to promote Mark Twain and Henry James as opposite but complementary poles representing the dual aspects of an American literature still a long way from achieving international status. For Howells, Twain was “the Lincoln of our literature” in whom humor and seriousness combined to express the pathos and absurdity of the human condition. From *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) to *What is Man?* (1906), Howells’s help to Twain was constant and unflinching. As for Henry James, his support for him was all the more remarkable as James was often a harsh critic of Howells’s own work: he compared him to a beggar holding a diamond in his hand and not knowing what to do with it. In an unfinished article that Howells prepared before his death in 1920, “the American James,” he explained that the exclusion of James from the pantheon of American authors would be a failure for himself and all Americans. In the case of Twain, Howells attempted to show Europeans that Samuel Clemens was a universal writer, in that of James, he tried to persuade Americans that this writer discovered in Europe what he could not find in the United States of his time, i.e. the quintessential and stylistic refinement to express the reality of the American psyche.

Curiously enough, in the list above mentioned, Howells was ranked ninth, with Emily Dickinson (1830-86) in the tenth position. “The one American writer that was aware of all the others,” to quote Van Wyck Brooks, was thus sadly outdistanced.

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1. See Rivière, “Howells and Whitman after 1881.” During his editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly* (1866-81), Howells despised or ignored Whitman. On the other hand, he admired Whitman’s reverence for elementary forces and his pantheism. To him, the Bard stood as a symbol of the buoyancy of American youth, but also as a siren whose spell young poets must shun. Howells wrote a 14-line poem on the fly-leaf of the 1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass* whose conclusion was:

“This then I said is the brother of ancient Anteus  
 Offspring of Ceres, and nursed on her generous bosom  
 Breathing with rhythmic peace to the throb of her full-orbed being.”

As with many American authors—Franklin, Mark Twain, Whitman and Hemingway—, the printing shop replaced Howells's formal education, as he was a child whose parents needed his contribution to raise him, but he never succeeded in being an investigating journalist. In 1857, after being offered a job as city editor at the *Cincinnati Gazette*, he quickly resigned, explaining the reason in his autobiography, *Years of my Youth*: "How could I intelligently endure the ravings of the drunken woman which I heard one night in the police station where my abhorred duties took me for the detestable news of the place?"<sup>1</sup> As an antidote against violence, Howells declared to H.H. Boyesen in 1893 that he could scarcely remember a time when books did not play a great part in his life, especially because his father introduced him to any new author he himself discovered. Bromfield Corey in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* reacts similarly, insisting that in America: "We must read or we barbarize."

The period from 1854 to 1861, when his family lived in the Western Reserve and in Columbus, Ohio, was decisive for the literary education of Howells, which was nearly as classical as that of a young Brahmin raised in the "Hub of the World" (Boston). His serious reading began with Pope both as a poet and as the translator of the *Odyssey*. After a brief period under the sway of the pseudo-Ossian, Shakespeare became his lifelong guide and master not only through the reading of his plays, but through the many performances he attended in Columbus. Later, Howells would use more Shakespearian quotations in the titles of his works than any other writer.<sup>2</sup>

He read Chaucer in an unexpurgated edition and found in him a source of earthy humor. He read most of the published works of Dickens and Thackeray and, even though he partly repudiated their methods and their influence after 1881, both opened him to the reality of social life. At each stage, he wrote imitations of his favorite author of the time, but often discarded them as mere draughts. Subsequently, George Eliot, Charles Reade and Hawthorne became his favorites.

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1. *Years of My Youth* 142.

2. *A Sea Change* (*Tempest*, I, ii, 400), *A Modern Instance* (*As You Like it*, II, vii, 156), *The Undiscovered Country* (*Hamlet*, III, I, 79), *The Shadow of a Dream* (*Hamlet*, II, ii, 265), *Fennel and Rue* (*Hamlet*, IV, v, 180), *A Foregone Conclusion* (*Othello*, III, iii, 428), *The Quality of Mercy* (*Merchant of Venice*, IV, i, 184), *A Counterfeit Presentment* (*Hamlet*, III, iv, 54), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (*King John*, II, i, 71), *Questionable Shapes* (*Hamlet* I, iv, 43).

In the offices of the *Ashtabula Sentinel*, he could read copies of the British literary periodicals (*Edinburgh Review*, *Westminster Review*, *North British Review*, *Blackwoods Magazine*) and thus he could always place his readings in context.

Two poets had a major influence on him: Tennyson, then the poet Laureate at the zenith of his fame, and Longfellow who was *the* American poet at a time when poetry was considered the major genre and well above fiction. The literary education of Howells culminated in his July-August 1860 travel to the East where he met three of the major writers of the American pantheon (Emerson, Thoreau and Hawthorne), along with James Russell Lowell and Oliver Wendell Holmes: almost an “apostolic succession” for the budding author of the *Western Reserve*. Not only was Howells an avid reader who greatly benefited from the lessons of his literary masters, but also someone recognizing that literature was not just a question of authors, but also of genres and schools, a typically European point of view.

A rarity among American authors—and especially remarkable because he never had any formal education—Howells had a good sense of the major languages of Western Europe, from his early years in Ohio. In the 1850s, he published occasional translations from the French, drawn from the *Courrier des États-Unis*, in the *Ohio State Journal*. He taught himself Spanish in order to read Cervantes and *Lazarillo de Tormes* whose rogue spirit seemed to him akin to the manners of the American West. The *picaro* was a brother of the American self-made man.<sup>1</sup> He also learnt enough Latin to be able to read Cornelius Nepos and ancient Greek in which he read Anacreon and passages from the New Testament. By 1860, he had mastered German thanks to the lessons of a German political refugee, Limbeck, who was the prototype of Lindau in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.

His study of German was important in two ways: it gave him access to a civilization in which philosophy and scholarship flourished more than in any European country of the time.<sup>2</sup> Second, it led to his discovery of Heinrich Heine who, in his eyes, was the master who united the inner vision of Sterne with the irony of Voltaire and Rabelais. He

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1. So says Howells in *My Literary Passions* 107.

2. Henry Adams declared: “Goethe was raised to the rank of Shakespeare, Kant ranked as a law-giver above Plato. All serious scholars were obliged to become German, for German thought was revolutionizing criticism.” (Adams 62)

discovered him as early as 1856 through the *Westminster Review*, but finally abandoned his imitation of his verse when he turned definitely to fiction in the 1870's.

Howells also proved to be more European in his religious outlook than the majority of his contemporaries. Through his father's influence, he was brought up in a secularized version of the doctrine of Swedenborg—just like the James brothers. Early in his life, he read *Leben Jesu* by David Strauss in a translation from the German by George Eliot and remained at most a deist all his life. For him religion was not based on a call or on a message from above. Thus Darwin's theory of natural selection never shook him to the core, as it did most learned Bible readers of mid-19th century America.<sup>1</sup>

In 1861, when Howells was appointed American consul in Venice, his knowledge of Europe was entirely bookish and his practical knowledge of foreign languages still superficial. Nevertheless, no budding American author from the Midwest had yet emerged with such a Eurocentric literary culture and with such a European approach to literature.

The European literary education of Howells, however, did not prevent him from believing in the moral and social superiority of the American way of life of the time based on some sort of social equality among whites, even though he was aware of the indelible stain of slavery. His remarks on the countries he travelled through before arriving in Venice—England, France and Germany—are mostly derogatory and only literary sites and associations—such as the Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey or the evocation of Schiller at Marbach—gave him some comfort. The contrast of Venice thus stood out all the more, for the Serenissima was to him finer than all he had expected or dreamt of. His duties as consul included writing an annual *Letter* to the State Department that detailed the social and economic conditions of the city. He felt the impact of Austrian tyranny all the more as the rest of Northern Italy had been united to the kingdom of Italy in 1860. Howells was always sympathetic to the Venetians' passive resistance to the Austrian military presence.

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1. Thomas Bailey Aldrich who succeeded Howells as editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* said that his grandfather believed everything that was written in the Bible . . . including the misprints.

From a literary point of view, the essential discovery of Howells was the importance of drama in all social classes. That was, in fact, his first experience of literary realism in a form where literacy—as in the case of the Elizabethan drama—was not necessarily a prerequisite. In no time, Howells became fluent in both written and spoken Italian and decided that the best way for him to prepare his return to the United States was to write a scholarly article on Italian drama aimed for publication in the *North American Review*, which was duly accomplished in October 1864 under the title: “Recent Italian Comedy.” As Henry Adams declared in his *Education*: “For fifty years, the *North American Review* had been the stage coach which carried literary Bostonians to such distinction as they had achieved.” (Adams 234) In his article, Howells insisted on the originality of Italian drama as a mirror of the society of the time and as a genre different from the novel of manners which could not exist in a society deprived of political freedom. Thus Howells took full advantage of his stay in Venice to refine his skills of observation for literary purposes. Venice made him readier to be a genuine writer wanting to express the reality of life in his own country, but he never was by any means an expatriate. He drew lessons from his experiences and went through an essential apprenticeship on his own conditions.

During his later visit to Europe in 1882-1883, Howells intended to find new materials for his travel narratives and his novels. He left America after having submitted to J.R. Osgood a plan to write articles on thirteen cities of Northern Italy, most of which he had already visited in the 1860’s. He wanted to combine history and contemporary life in them.

On leaving the editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1881, Howells liberated himself from a series of chores, such as book reviews (he said himself that he could not often distinguish his from those of others), correspondence with the authors of articles and the reading of manuscripts. Thus he could devote himself to the work that would be published as *Tuscan Cities*. He recognized that he had been influenced by Taine’s *Voyage aux Pyrénées* (1858) and the author’s theory of “the race, the milieu and the moment” as the prime factors motivating critics and novelists.<sup>1</sup> The book contains some humor in the vein of the Mark Twain of *The Innocents Abroad* as in his description of Pisa:

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1. Letter to Benjamin Holt Ticknor, July 29, 1885.



"the Duomo, a vast and beautiful pudding; the Baptistery a gigantic charlotte russe, the Campo Santo an exquisite structure in sugar, the Leaning Tower, a column of ice cream."<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, his artistic appreciation is centered mainly on Gothic art and the painters of the Quattrocento (Botticelli, Donatello, Mino de Fiesole) whose distance from religion he notes. He considers Italians the citizens of a free nation, not the subjects of a foreign power as in the Austrian Venice of the 1860's. For him, Florence is no longer a city for sentimentalists and dreamers, but a thoroughly contemporary city bustling in its numerous activities and daily activities. He recognizes the paganism and joie de vivre in religious expression in Italy and fulminates against the excesses of Savonarole that wanted to transform fifteenth-century Florence into a Puritan city.

Recalling his first endeavors as a poet, Howells is most precise and romantic in the description of the almond-trees in bloom in February, the cathedral of Sienna in the moonlight and the plain around Pisa where grass and wheat are just like wrinkles on a green ocean.<sup>2</sup> Feeling in full command of his art, Howells used his background studies and his new sense of the modernization of Italy to write his most famous international novel: *Indian Summer*. Here he seemed to have reached a dead end in his inspiration, as this novel was the last piece of fiction in which he exploited the resources of his travel books. A new direction drew him on his return to America: that of coping with the social and economic problems of a country experiencing dramatic change rather than personal and psychological conflicts.

The other eight visits of Howells to Europe from 1894 to 1913 reveal that the European vein was not exhausted. In 1894, visiting his son John Mead Howells in Paris who was a student at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he felt intoxicated by the manners of people that lived more intensely than Americans. He appreciated the density of life in Europe<sup>3</sup> and he advised Jonathan Sturges to live as fully as he could, a remark considered to be the "germ" of Henry James's *The Ambassadors*. His appreciation of the French increased and, just like James, he favored American intervention during the First World War, espe-

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1. *Tuscan Cities* 232.

2. *Tuscan Cities* 171, 195, 222.

3. Letter to Henry James, August 21, 1894.

cially after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. He nevertheless criticized the British when they crushed the Easter uprising in Ireland in 1916.

The founding of the American Academy of Arts and Letters—whose first meeting took place on February 11, 1899—was also a definite sign that Howells, one of its main mentors and its first president until his death, wanted American authors and artists to be able to recruit the best and brightest of their generation. In memory of its first president, the American Academy awards a Howells medal to a prominent novelist every five years. Among the laureates, the names of Willa Cather, Pearl Buck, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner and James Gould Cozzens stand out. No American institution could be more akin to the European—and especially French—tradition.

Fiction was by no means an inferior or underdeveloped genre in 19th century American literature. Two novels stood out as blockbusters: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888). The first expressed the popular sentiment in the antislavery fight (just as *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* in music). The second was a utopian piece of fiction embodying the expectations of a generation experiencing the harsh transition from rural America to the "satanic mills" of industrial life. Neither of them, however, ranks as a milestone in the development of novel-writing as a genre.

Till the 1880's in England, France and America, poetry was deemed the major genre and only in the early 1870's did Howells definitely give up his ambitions as a poet. With the death of Longfellow in 1882, Victor Hugo in 1885 and Tennyson in 1892, the reign of Bards and Prophets was over. In France Pierre Loti (1850-1923) was the first major novelist to enter the Académie Française which had ignored Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant, the Goncourts, Zola and even the innocuous Alphonse Daudet. Hugo joined the Académie in 1841 and became a life peer in 1845, but he was thus recognized as a poet, not as a novelist.

To Howells, there was only one way to create an American school of fiction able to render the background, subtleties and varieties of American life: to keep in touch with the evolution of European fiction and he was all the more able to do it thanks to his long experience as editor or contributor to the major literary or political periodicals of his time. Moreover, his reading knowledge of German, French and Spanish and his fluency in Italian gave him a definite advantage over

the majority of his contemporaries. One of the best ways to take stock of his views on the problems of fiction in American life and literature is his article "Novel-Reading and Novel-Writing: An Impersonal Explanation" based on a lecture he gave in 1899 during his tour of the East and the Midwest (published in the Norton Anthology).

Because our concern in this article is with the European outlook of Howells, I will omit mentioning the many young American writers he helped (Crane, Norris, Garland, Harold Frederic, the new lady novelists such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, to mention only some major ones). Suffice it to say that he could not have helped them as he did if he had not been in close contact with the European fiction of his time. Fidelity to real life was to Howells the first duty of a good novelist. That is the reason why he never included in his list of great masters such a monument of world fiction as Alexandre Dumas père. He also objected to the art of Balzac, Hugo and Dickens when "it revels in the extravagant, the unusual and the bizarre." (*Norton Anthology* 269) His definition of the aim of the novelist is both cogent and open-minded: "his affair is to do the best he can with the material he has chosen, to make the truest possible picture of life, and that is what we believe he always does, if he is worthy of the name of artist." (*Norton Anthology* 272) Ethics and polemics must be left out of the game and esthetics will quite naturally derive from the narrative. Howells uses a phrase close to that of John Keats in "A Thing of Beauty:" "By beauty of course I mean truth. The truth may be indecent, but it cannot be vicious, it can never corrupt or deprave; and I should say this in defence of the grossest material honestly treated in modern novels as against the painted and perfumed meretriciousness of the novels that went before them." (*Norton Anthology* 267)

The only school of novelists that Howells could not read in the original were the Russians, but many English and French translations of their works were available. I'll take the examples of Turgenev and Tolstoy to stress the difference between Howells's approach to the Russian writers and his attitude toward other European novelists. Turgenev became a model for Howells through the influence of T.S. Perry and Henry James as well as through H.H. Boyesen who had met the Russian writer in Paris in December 1873: Turgenev had *Venetian Life* on his table. Howells repeatedly praised him for his way of presenting his characters without ever interfering with the development of the plot.

One becomes Russian, according to Howells, in proportion as one reads him through a series of anecdotes and descriptions which, little by little, plunges you into the atmosphere of the plot. Under his influence, Howells left behind his picaresque, pseudo-biographical atmosphere of *Their Wedding Journey* for the portrayal and stage direction of a few characters as in *A Foregone Conclusion* or *A Modern Instance*. Howells also appreciates the way in which Turguenev without open preaching revealed what was just and fair in an environment of confident and patient agnosticism.<sup>1</sup> The Russian novelist proved to him that there could be a moral and spiritual agnosticism which was neither amoral nor gross.

In Tolstoy's novels, Howells found not just a method and a model but a new vision which could reconcile the demands of authentic artistry with the harmonious development of man via an active religiosity founded on justice and the principle of forgiveness. Tolstoy offered him the final realization of a new way of knowing oneself and forging close links to the rest of mankind. *The Cossacks*, *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* were his favorites. So close were Howells's ties with Tolstoy and so popular were his novels in the Russian upper classes that, during the peace talks between Russia and Japan in America after the 1904-05 Russian-Japanese war, the Russian diplomats, Sergius Witte and Roman Romanovitch de Rosen, asked for an interview with him and obtained it. A more rarely mentioned fact is that Howells was also an admirer of Dostoievski, particularly of *Crime and Punishment*, in which he could find, even in the darkest parts, a sense of hope, comfort and universal sympathy.<sup>2</sup>

Howells used to say that "one would rather not be a French realist if one could" . . . and he definitely could. Such statement, however, does not mean that he denied the value and fruitful influence of the French realists. For him, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was "a cry of passion, expressing the most austere morality."<sup>3</sup> As for Zola, he is indecent, but not immoral. *La Terre* is a truthful approach to the world of European peasantry, far from the myth of the benevolent rustic. It is a study in crime and sexual perversion caused by the long repression suffered by the land-hungry, pre-Revolutionary French peasants.<sup>4</sup> He thinks

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1. *My Literary Passions* 170-1.

2. "Editor's Study," September 1886, 634.

3. "Editor's Study," May 1889, 983.

4. "Editor's Study," March 1888, 641-2.

that after Tolstoy Zola is the greatest novelist alive<sup>1</sup> and his zealous championing of Zola's novels changed public opinion of the French novelist.<sup>2</sup> Howells wrote less on Balzac, as he was largely recognized as a great novelist by American critics, but there is no doubt that Howells's reading of *César Birotteau* greatly influenced *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.<sup>3</sup>

In the British pantheon, Howells replaces Dickens and Thackeray (to whom he keeps his allegiance in spite of their romantic or picaresque exaggerations) with Jane Austen, the English novelist endowed with the deepest sense of the art of the novel<sup>4</sup> and Thomas Hardy, the only English novelist he could rank among the great realists. Hardy's revelation of the essential springs of human behavior transcended all sense of morality or immorality and his heroines had only one purpose: get the man they want . . . and live happy hereafter. According to Howells, Hardy expressed at its best man's sensuality and jealousy that could eventually lead to murder. He never went as far in the defence of the work of a realist whose depiction of human nature—at its best and at its worst—always transcends questions of morality.

Thus from Howells's early youth to his death in 1920 European literature was a permanent reference not to provide a contrast to the paucity of American production compared with the cross-Atlantic wealth of talents, but as a constant encouragement to American writers to express American reality in their own terms both in matter and manner.

Was W.D. Howells an honest broker, a go-between or an in-between in the history of American literature which, by the way, was fully recognized as such only in the middle of the 20th century? Was he only an in-between between James and Twain, the romance and the novel, the local colorists and the realists most critical of American capitalism and favorable to socialism? He used to smile at the distinction saying that he and Twain were theoretical socialists and practical capitalists . . .

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1. *My Literary Passions* 180.

2. Herbert Edwards analyzed the influence of Howells on the change of public opinion toward Zola. (Edwards 114-29)

3. See Rivière *William Dean Howells, pionnier et coordinateur du mouvement réaliste américain*, and Hedges.

4. "Editor's Study," November 1889, 966.

We might also note that Howells was a novelist and a critic for whom some areas were “off limits.” Such is the case in his attitude toward Theodore Dreiser and the publication of *Sister Carrie* (1900). Dreiser’s novel was neither a pornographic work nor an appeal to a more open acceptance of the description of sex in fiction. Howells who warmly welcomed *Madame Bovary* and *Nana* could not bear the final triumph of Carrie Meeber on the stage. She, unlike both Emma Bovary and *Nana*, was not finally a victim of her own misbehavior. In Hannah Arendt’s words, we could say that Howells could not condone “the banality of evil.” With the death of Boyesen in 1895, Harold Frederic in 1898, Crane in 1900 and Norris in 1902, American literary realism suffered a setback. With Dos Passos, Dreiser, Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, it continued in other directions more critical of the American way of life.

Howells could be described as a novelist that can neither get to the forefront nor disappear into the limbo of the dead authors’ society. A good way of assessing his standing is to consider his place in the American literary canon in one of the most popular manuals of American literary history: *The Cambridge Handbook of American Literature*. A compendium of 500 American authors from Cotton Mather to Norman Mailer, it also includes the analysis of 196 separate works covering the same period. Where do the eight American writers selected above stand? Fifty-two of their works are analyzed, i.e., over twenty five percent of the total with seventeen by James and thirteen by Melville. These eight nineteenth-century American authors are still the core of classical American literature. Outside the magic circle, Howells stands out with a solid record of four works analyzed separately: *A Modern Instance*, *Indian Summer*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of new Fortunes*. Two per cent of the total is not such a bad score. But what is more important is that Howells is one of the champions of cross-references (to other authors, movements and journals) with a total of nineteen. He remains therefore an author still remembered but more as a coordinator and a secondary player than as a leading figure.

For a deeper look at Howells, we should consider three directions in which his personal values and commitment stand out. The first was his support for a “cause célèbre” of American politics: the Haymarket Affair. He was the only influential writer to defend the Chicago Anar-

chists: four of them were hanged on November 11, 1887 with no proof of any active crime on their part, except the expression of anarchist ideas. The attitude of Howells led Teddy Roosevelt to declare, after the assassination of President McKinley in 1901, that Howells had a responsibility for this deed.<sup>1</sup>

The second was his fight against American imperialism in Cuba and the Philippines at the turn of the century.<sup>2</sup> His short story "Editha", published in 1905, is the narrative of an American girl refusing to marry her boyfriend if he does not volunteer to fight in Cuba where he eventually dies: a dramatic example of a false sense of honor in which the idea of war as a "noble cause" and a test of manliness is debunked. This piece is the only work by Howells selected by the *Norton Anthology* aside from "Novel-Reading and Novel-Writing" referred to above in this essay.

The third direction is his openly agnostic outlook on religion based on the reading in his youth of *Leben Jesu* by David Strauss and later on of *La Vie de Jésus* by Ernest Renan: "Within the last generation, I can remember only one book making the impression that a dozen of novels have each made, and against Renan's Life of Jesus, I will set *Les Misérables*, *Romola* and *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, *L'Assommoir* and *Nana*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Anna Karénina* and the *Kreuzer Sonata*, *Robert Ellsmere*, *Trilby*, *Ben Hur*."<sup>3</sup> In Howells's last novel *The Leatherstocking* (1916) he attacks the false prophets of camp meeting revivals in the early 19th century American West, insisting on the sexual attraction they exerted on women.

The spirit of revolt in American fiction was raised by Howells—even though he was not necessarily its best and most efficient exponent—and it reverberated in American literature from the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th.<sup>4</sup> The same spirit was still much alive in the United States of the 1980's and 1990's when the musical comedy adapted from Hugo's *Les Misérables* had the longest run on stage in the

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1. *Selections from the Correspondence of Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge*, vol. 1, 499-502.

2. See Gibson.

3. *Norton Anthology* 277-78. Ernest Renan was appointed at the Collège de France in January 1862. In his opening lecture on February 21, he referred to Jesus as "an incomparable man" and was immediately suspended. His chair was restored to him only in 1870.

4. See Debouzy 131-178.

history of the genre. The European contribution was a major factor in the development of the protest movement with Howells playing an active part in its transmission. He declared as early as 1891: "The English who have not felt the great world-movement toward life and truth, are national; those others are universal . . . The English critics could be more profitably employed in noting how much the American fiction resembles the Continental fiction than in deploring its want of . . . peculiarity."<sup>1</sup>

In addition to his Eurocentric outlook in the world of literature and culture, Howells, through his critical views of his country and its obsession with patriotism and religion, still sounds a very modern note in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## The Angle(s) of Truth: Perspectives for an American Democratic Fiction in William Dean Howells's Critical Writing

For our own part we confess that we do not care to judge any work of the imagination without first of all applying this test to it. We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women? This truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry—this truth given, the book cannot be wicked and *cannot*<sup>1</sup> be weak . . .

(William Dean Howells, *Editor's Study*, April 1887)

Responding to a grumpy correspondent who demonized fiction and novel-writing in particular as the source of all evil, William Dean Howells, editor of *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, struck up his plea for truth as the standard and mainstay of fiction in America. Faithful to the words of Gustave Flaubert, and his famous motto that “something that is true has to be good” (“*du moment qu'une chose est vraie, elle est bonne*”),<sup>2</sup> Howells launched into the promotion of a morally and politically responsible fiction that would neither lie nor “misrepresent” human nature and the social fabric, but stick to the facts, however crude, rough and gray. William Dean Howells was well acquainted with his nation's far-reaching distrust of the art of fiction and would not ignore the sulphureous fame of an artistry akin to the fictitious, the frivolous, and the false: “It comes to us from wherever men are at work, from wherever they are *truly* living, and accuses us of unfaithfulness, of triviality, of mere stage-play; and none of us can escape conviction except he prove himself worthy of his time—a time in

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1. Howells's emphasis. Unless otherwise stated, emphases in this article are mine.

2. “*Du moment qu'une chose est vraie, elle est bonne.*” Letter to George Sand. 6 February 1876.

which the great masters have brought literature back to life, and filled its ebbing veins with the red tides of reality.” (*Editor’s Study* 75) The true, then, would save fiction from itself, and, who knew, maybe even justify the advent of an American literature cleansed from the sins of deceit and free from the reproach of indifference to the matter-of-fact, down-to-earth, shabby-looking “American” reality.

Howells’s way out, however, is more puzzling than it is definitive. Writing while traces of idealism were being supplanted by a nascent search for objectivity, Howells looked the other way and argued that the potent Nation-State coupling was not so much the warrant of truth as a challenge to true representation. For Howells, sponsor of local color literature as the only true American literature, the nation was to be represented from a particular angle, or rather, from the angle of the particular: “We for our part,” he states in his March 1912 *Harper’s Monthly* editorship, “do not believe that the novel of the United States ever will be, or ever can be written, or that it would be worth reading if it were written. In fiction, first the provincial, then the national, then the universal; but the parochial is better and more to be desired than either of the others.”<sup>1</sup> So no less than the question of truth itself was being posed: how to represent the true, when truth itself could only be seen from an angle, through a glass, obliquely? “The true does not exist, there are only ways of seeing,” Flaubert had already exclaimed, in a half-jubilant, half-frightening aphorism.<sup>2</sup> For Howells, the answer lied in a preposition (or *pre*-position): truth was not a question of “being true” but being true *to*.

## 1 A Native’s Privilege: the Angle of the Local

Howells’s rethinking of the nature of truth may be best understood as a questioning of both idealism and positivism. His December 1887 *Editor’s Study* dramatizes the dangers of representation when it turns away from the real and yields to the sirens of the ideal. The hero of the article is a budding young writer learning the tools of the trade as he listens to a dialogue between a scientific observer and the voice of “wretched pedantry.” At the center of their attention lies a grasshopper.

1. *Criticism and Fiction* 347 [hereafter *CF*].

2. “Il n’y a pas de vrai! Il n’y a que des manières de voir.” (1880)

I see that you are looking at a grasshopper there which you have found in the grass, and I suppose you intend to describe it. Now don't waste your time and sin against culture in that way. I've got a grasshopper here, which has been evolved at considerable pains and expense *out of the grasshopper in general; in fact, it's a type*. It's made up of wire and cardboard, very prettily painted in a *conventional* tint, and it's perfectly indestructible. It isn't very much *like* a real grasshopper, but it's a great deal nicer, and it's served *to represent the notion of a grasshopper* ever since man emerged from barbarism. You may say that it's artificial. Well, it is artificial; but then it's *ideal* too; and what you want to do is to cultivate the ideal. You'll find the books full of my kind of grasshopper, and scarcely a trace of yours in any of them.<sup>1</sup>

A champion of realism, Howells waged war against the tendency in American letters to “idealize” or “take the life-likeness out of [one's characters] and *put the literary-likeness into them*” and—the two go hand in hand—to “*stand apart from experience* in an attitude of imagined superiority.” (ES) For the critic, life and experience were to take over types and imitation as the standards of the artist. The living, not the dead, was the realm of literature: the imperfect, peculiar, ready-to-hop grasshopper, not the “the ideal grasshopper, the heroic grasshopper, the impassioned grasshopper, the self-devoted, adventurous, good old romantic card-board grasshopper.” (ES 112) Howells's rejection here is twofold: on the one hand, he turns down the ideal grasshopper or the *idea* of a grasshopper—the grasshopper of books, as the pedant rightly advertises—the Grasshopper with a capital G, of which all living grasshoppers are only pale, imperfect replicas; on the other hand, Howells brushes aside the grasshopper “in general”, the *typical* grasshopper built out of the multitude of grasshoppers which hop alive and well throughout the American land. These are Howells's true enemies, because they are still understood as truth when they are only its deceptive apparel. For Howells, truth does not dwell in the heavens of the Ideal nor can it be labeled and put into one of the scientist's taxonomic boxes; truth emerges from *experience*, a particular experience that is no longer to be pitted against a hypothetical essence nor to be translated into a general law. Howells's realism, if empirical, dismisses the statistical paradigm

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1. *Editor's Study*, 111-112 [hereafter ES].

that was “the reigning methodology of American science”<sup>1</sup> at the time. In an interesting, if daring, conflation, he scorns the *ideal* and the *type*. If, as has been proposed, Realism was conceived as the twin of positivism, Howells’s realism was an inflection of the genre. It did not yield to the fascination for a *scientific* monopoly on truth. Rather truth emerged from an experience at the intersection of the particular and commonplace. He rejected the heavens of the ideal and the abstract constructs of the type in favor of the little patch of earth around any willing observer of nature: “The American, no more than any other man, shall know himself from his environment, but he shall know his environment from himself. In the *measure of his self-knowledge only* shall he truthfully portray his neighbor, and he shall instinctively *keep to his neighborhood*, to his experience of it for his chance of knowledge beyond it.” (CF 346-47) Transcendent, scientific or in the service of the nation, the truth was inaccessible from above. It was grounded in the eye/I and thus located or *local*.

For Howells, one’s field of vision was the measure of one’s access to truth. A partial view, in both senses of the term, was needed. The reader of local color stories knows only too well how meaningful a narrow window on the world can be, compared with the vast panorama offered by those in search of the “Great American Novel.” How many old women in how many local color stories hold to their own narrow angle of vision as the last bastion of their freedom, as their only grasp on life and truth? A blind spot for them is not so much cause for lament as something to be cherished. De-localizing such characters—what well-meaning members of the village community repeatedly endeavor to do in the hope of offering them a change of scenery, a wider perspective—is no more than a dead-end plot. Taking up these local color characters’ angles, Howells did not hesitate to translate “narrow” into a “thorough” non-panoptical truth of American literature:

But we do not by any means allow that this superficial narrowness is a defect, *he responds to a reader reproaching American fiction for its slen-*

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1. “Gilded Age social scientists made increasing use of statistics [. . .]. Through empirical method social scientists hoped to discover fundamental laws at work in nature and history. [William Graham] Sumner [who came to Yale in 1872 to teach the social sciences] expected his study of ‘data’ to yield ‘principles of the social order that are true.’” (Ross 59- 60)

derness, it is rather, for the present, a virtue. Indeed, we should call the present American work, North and South, *thorough rather than narrow*. In one sense it is *as broad as life*, for each man is a “microcosm,” and the writer who is able to acquaint us intimately with half a dozen people, or the conditions of a neighborhood or a class, has done something which cannot in any bad sense be called narrow. . . . (ES 96)

Aesthetically speaking, the narrowness of the focus guaranteed the truth, the scope and the range of art. Widening the focus (what Howells presents as “a horizontal expansion”) would impair the resolution of the picture or, at least, generate distortion insofar as it would ask for an abstract scale—that of “classes” or “types”; “in a civilization like ours, [ . . . ] the differences are not of classes but of types, and not of types either so much as of characters.” (ES 97) The true literature of the modern age, and especially the true literature of America, would not be the “great American novel” but an episodic narration juxtaposing a series of particular angles and small perceptions. “Our novelists are each bound by the accident of birth to this locality or that,” Howells sneeringly concluded at the end of his March 1912 study, “and we do not believe we shall ever have a truly United States novel till some genius is born all over the Union.” (CF 349) The “accident of birth” meant the marriage of place and author which guaranteed the power of literature:

If they make it true, it will be large, no matter what its superficialities are; and it would be the greatest mistake to try to make it big. A big book is necessarily a group of episodes more or less loosely connected by a thread of narrative, and there seems to be no reason why this thread must always be supplied. Each episode may be quite distinct, or it may be one of a connected group; the final effect will be from the truth of each episode, not from the size of the group. (ES 97)

Just as Howells challenged the necessary homology between the size of America and the size of its literary representation, just as he mocked bird’s-eye renderings of the nation that located its truth in a “whole” constructed from above, he shrunk back from any Ariadne’s thread that would guide the reader through the maze of particular truths. Plot, for Howells and many of the local-colorists he promoted, spelled deceit. Just as it required abstraction from the center of per-

ception, from the various down-to-earth particles of truth, it superimposed guidelines from outside, above.

Local color stories are famously plotless. Sarah Orne Jewett, one of Howells's protégées, flaunted her inability to build plots throughout her career, beginning with an oft-quoted 1873 letter to Horace Scudder, then assistant editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*: "But I don't believe I could write a long story as you and Mr. Howells advise me [ . . . ]. The story would have no plot. [ . . . ] I could write you entertaining letters perhaps, from some desirable house where I was in most charming company, but I couldn't make a story about it [ . . . ]." (*Sarah Orne Jewett Letters* 6) Why Howells had asked the budding writer for a longer story has remained unclear, but one may be sure he didn't ask for more plot. In 1877, he helped her publish her first book—*Deephaven*—out of a series of sketches without any concern for its plotlessness. As critics have long established, the alleged absence of plot in Jewett's stories was less a deficiency than a choice—to be correlated with the regionalist distrust of an overall viewpoint.<sup>1</sup> Her stories and so-called novels do not so much lack structure as hinge on a non-teleological composition of her own device. Hamlin Garland, Howells's friend and himself admirer of Jewett, stated the same suspicion about plot, and denounced the collusion between plot and deceit in his 1893 *Crumbling Idols*: "To have the action spring from the characters is to destroy the traditional plot. It means to have individuals, not situations. It means that this is the farthest present remove from the immitigable doom in Aeschylus and the fixed complications of Shakespearian comedy. It destroys romantic plots and underplots [ . . . ]." (87) Plot is never far from plotting in Garland, who revives the word's complicity with dubious entanglements, schemes and intrigues. "No complications, no external intricacies, nothing

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1. The non-linear structure of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* has long been debated among critics. In the 1980s, the feminist critique saw in Jewett's text the trace of a conflict between two gendered modes of composition. In "Going in Circles" (1980), Elizabeth Ammons proposed that *Pointed Firs* dramatized the tensions between the "aggression-based protagonist/antagonist model of conventional male plot structure" vs. a web-like structure reproducing "female relational reality." (89) Qualifying such essentialism yet working still within a gendered frame, Sandra Zagarell in her 1988 "Narrative of Community: The Identification of a Genre," read Jewett's text as the epitome of what she called a "narrative of community:" a non-linear local-based narration whose structure is based on the every-day's negotiations within female rural communities.



approaching a plot,” he explains. “The plan springs from the characters, and unrolls mysteriously, with all the unforeseen changes of life itself.” (83) Once acknowledged that truth can only be grasped from the angle of the individual, from the standpoint of the particular, it can no longer be part of a grand scheme contrived by any mastermind or Author; it is no longer predictable. For Garland, the surprise of truth never ends, truth is never “finished, rounded out and smoothed down.” Only Romance is. Truth ebbs and flows, and such cadence can only be, if not caught, at least embraced, from within.

In the fourth chapter of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Jewett’s second book-length assemblage of sketches published in 1896, the narrator, a summer resident in the coastal village of Dunnet Landing, and would-be writer, fails to catch the “lovely summer cadences” (18) of the place. “At the School-House Window” (to quote the title of the chapter), overlooking the village from the teacher’s desk, she is unable to record the ebb and flow of life and death and feels estranged from the village community assembled for a funeral *below*. From her position of superiority—she keeps “call[ing] the bees to order” (18) with the teacher’s stick—she suddenly understands that her retreat, uphill, may well give her a bird’s-eye view of the village but will never help her to catch those appealing cadences and write truly. From the overarching viewpoint of the school-house, the natives look somewhat picturesque: the old Captain Littlepage “had the same ‘cant to leeward’ (16) as the wind-bent trees on the height above;” “he might have belonged with a simple which grew in a certain slug-haunted corner of the garden.” (17) Just as it quotes the native voice, the narration maintains a prophylactic distance through the use of inverted commas and roots the villagers in their soil, plants them in their locality. A would-be botanist or zoologist, she who does not “belong” to the same soil tries to classify them into new categories: the Captain, in her observing eyes, “looked like an aged grasshopper of some strange human variety.” (17) Here comes the grasshopper again! However, the narrator’s attempt at subsuming the most particular under the category of the known, her translating the idiosyncratic into a type, is nothing but Howellsian and eventually spells failure. Something does not fit and the adjective “strange” reminds the reader of the uneasy concordance between the type and the real. The incomplete scene of writing of chapter 4 will send the narrator back to the village. Only

from inside the village will she be able to grasp the truth of its locality, only when she has made herself at home in “some desirable house where [she] was in most charming company”—to quote Jewett’s letter to Scudder once again.

For Jewett as for Garland or Howells, one cannot apprehend or comprehend the truth of a place from outside. Paradoxically enough, the attempt at a panoptic view only emphasizes what cannot be subsumed under its masterly span—a residuum, a remainder, that may also be understood as a blind spot. The truth of the place is such a remainder, which forbids any smooth translation of the particularity of the place into the concept. It is the untranslatable, the non-transferable—what cannot be extracted, abstracted from the place, de-localized and naturalized into a (universal) taxonomy. In Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Captain Littlepage stands for such resistance, for the mystery of the local as local. He blows the narrator’s mind and pen because he does not fit into her language—the unmarked, non-dialectal language of the “center,” vehicle and crafter of universals or concepts. Only a glimpse of what the truth of the local could be winks at the reader at the joint between the picturesque cliché of the land-like character and the invention of a type; it beckons us from the markers of discrepancy: the inverted commas inserted in the narration (“cant to leeward”), the modal (“he might have belonged . . .”), the conjunction *like*. However, such experimenting with viewpoints never brings forth the truth, because the truth of the place, in Jewett and the other local color writers supported by Howells, is not a matter of experiment, but of experience. The telling (and writing) of truth demands the relinquishing of one’s external authoritative position in order to let “the gift of sympathy”—the phrase is from Willa Cather’s preface to her collection of *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* (xii)—perform its office. “Trying this method and that”—Cather perceptively notes in her preface—is likely to result in a “brilliant sham”, and it is certainly not by chance that the image of the house crops up in Cather as it does in the work of Jewett: by “using his ‘imagination’” in his subject matter and “twisting it to suit his purpose”, the artist “can at best produce only a *brilliant sham*, which, like a badly built and pretentious house, looks poor and shabby in a few years.” The so-called artist who builds a narrative as one would a cardboard theater set—with exquisite light effects and stage-managing—would no

doubt befriend Howells's pedant. The "cardboard grasshopper" and the house of sham come down to the same thing: they age badly. In the end, there is no "twisting" of the subject-matter in the hope of making it fit one's ideal image, no "improvement." To be true is to fall in love, even to die of love, says Cather.<sup>1</sup> Lose grip and purchase on the world and let the story tell itself of its own accord, and, possibly, in its own words.

Truth, then, is a matter of desire, of "teasing," says Cather, quoting Jewett.<sup>2</sup> Desire, however, is not lust; it does not spell possession, appropriation, but dispossession of oneself to let the thing "get itself put down rightly on paper." Jewett knew how difficult it was to resist the appeal of appropriation and commodification in a time when things local were put on the market and offered in auctions by unscrupulous local color writers. She herself circulated her own stories of local Maine, and they sold well in the literary market orchestrated by William Dean Howells. But that is not how Willa Cather chose to advertise her prose—nor Howells, nor Jewett herself for that matter. Is it not striking that the narrator of *Pointed Firs* should introduce herself, in the first chapter, as "a lover of Dunnet Landing" (2)? "When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person. The process of falling in love at first sight is as final as it is swift in such a case, but the growth of true friendship may be a lifelong affair." (2) Love is the condition of writing truly, to write "things as they are."<sup>3</sup> But if love is swift, it takes a life-time's yearning to attain "true friendship," to experience the sense of belonging that precludes any shameful craving for appropriation. "She once laughingly told me," Cather reports in her preface, "that her head was full of dear old houses and dear old women, and that when an old house and an old woman came

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1. "If [the artist] achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material [ . . . ]. He fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again." (Cather xii)

2. "The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper—whether little or great, it belongs to Literature." (Quoted in Cather ix)

3. "My' dear father used to say to me very often, 'Tell things *just as they are!*'" (Cary, Letter 25, August 31, 1885) Jewett quoted this maxim on several occasions and in usually variant form. See a version of it in "Looking Back on Girlhood:" "Don't try to write *about* people and things, tell them just as they are!"

together in her brain with a click, she knew that a story was under way.” (xvi) “To tell things as they are,” it’s the “click” which sets the gears in motion. And then, one needs to have patience, and wait for the story to build itself, without expecting any return on investment. Cather goes on: “If a writer’s attitude toward his characters and his scene is as vulgar as a showman’s, as mercenary as an auctioneer’s, vulgar and meretricious will his product remain forever.” (xviii) The “desirable house” of the writer is a house of desire and “charming company,” a house one does not dress up or stage to sell but inhabits and shares with a loved one. From here the truth of the local may be, if not grasped, at least told, spoken, murmured.

“You must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world . . .” (Fields, letter 144, 13 December 1908), Jewett once told budding novelist Willa Cather, echoing Henry James’s advice to herself after she had erred outside her “native pastures” into the intricacies of the historical romance.<sup>1</sup> Edith Wharton had benefited from the same recommendation following her American exile in the publication of *The Valley of Decision* (1902), her novel about eighteenth-century Italy: she must “be tethered in native pastures, even if it reduce her to a back-yard in New York,” sharp-tongued Henry James had grumbled to Wharton’s sister-in-law.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, turn-of-the-century literature, and its keepers, wished to hear the local tale from the locals only. “This is, I believe, the essence of veritism,” Hamlin Garland stated in 1893. “Write of those things of which you know most, and for which you care most. By so doing you will be true to yourself, true to your locality, and true to your time.” (30) To be true is to be true *to* what you know intimately, what you care *for*, true to “the palpable present intimate” of Henry James. “The real utterance of a city or a locality can only come when a writer is born out of its intimate

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1. “Go back to the dear Country of the Pointed Firs, come back to the palpable present intimate that throbs responsive, & that wants, misses, needs you, God knows, & that suffers woefully in your absence.” Henry James’s letter to Sarah Orne Jewett, October 5, 1901. In “Sarah Orne Jewett Text Project.”

2. Cited in Lewis 126. From a letter James wrote to Mary Cadwalller Jones in August 1902. A decade later, in 1912, he insisted: “Your only drawback is not having the homeliness and the inevitability and the happy limitation and the affluent poverty of a Country of your Own.” James, who himself had been ruthlessly satirized in the American press as a “man without a country,” added parenthetically, with less irony than truth, “comme moi, par exemple!” (Waid 4)

heart. To such a one, nothing will be ‘strange’ or ‘picturesque;’ all will be familiar, and full of significance or beauty [ . . . ] It cannot be done from above nor from the outside. It must be done out of a full heart and without seeking for effect.” (Garland 59) Only a native, for Garland as for his mentor Howells, could make the text throb with truth, only by dipping one’s pen in his or her locality could the writer tell it truly. In turn-of-the century American literature, truth simultaneously bowed to relativism and essentialism: from the “native pastures” praised by Henry James to Garland’s definition of true literature as “a statement of life as indigenous as the plant-growth” (54) to Cather’s praise of Jewett’s characters as “people who grew out of the soil and the life of the country near her heart,” (xv) truth emanated from an intimate connection with the land; more specifically, it grew from a genealogical link that eschewed the tourist impostor. At the time when nativism was gaining ground in America, rooting truth in the native’s vision conjures up somber perspectives of exclusion as well as the danger of disruption and misunderstanding. Could a nation be built when truth could only be articulated in the native tongues of each of its localities? Was the miracle of a Pentecostal glossolalia the only way out? William Dean Howells took an active part in the rebuilding of the nation from the ashes of the Civil War; but he also defended the local as the only true perspective on America. Facing the practical dilemma of building a national whole out of local, idiosyncratic truths, his answer would hinge on the articulation between the particular and what he called “the common”. On his never-ending investigation of the principle of “acquaintance”, he offered a ceaseless search for a community built from a circulation of particularities.

## 2 In Search of the “Common:” the True Particulars of the Nation

When Federalist Noah Webster endeavored to build the American nation out of a plurality of localities, he unambiguously propounded to “demolish those odious distinctions of provincial dialects, which are the objects of reciprocal ridicule in the United States” (Webster 1783, 9). “Our political harmony is therefore concerned in a uniformity of language” was the motto of his 1789 *Dissertations on the English Language*. Facing a similar problem, several decades and a civil war later, William Dean Howells paradoxically proposed plural-

ity, difference and particularity as the cement of the new nation to be rebuilt out of the shambles of an internecine conflict.

I should praise rather than blame [in American short stories] their free use of our different local parlances, or 'dialects' as people call them [ . . . ] and I will own that as I turn over novels [ . . . ] every local flavor of diction gives me courage and pleasure. [ . . . ] I should like to hear them speak true American, with all the varying Tennessean, Philadelphian, Bostonian, and New York accents. (CF 64)

For Howells, "the American" speaks in tongues, and no national literature in America would ever be true, were it to deny such plurality. The beauty of a decentralized country was not so much in its "uniformity" as in its multi-vocality inseparable from the voicing of *local* differences. "True American" was not to be found in a standard language devised by the literary center of the United States, "true American" was disseminated in all the different "local parlances" that imparted color and flavor to American literature. However much Howells believed in literature as the best tool to help the nation be born again as a whole, he refused to start from any ideal "nation-ness" nor from a "general utterance": the truth of the bruised nation would emerge from its variegated voices, from its decentered and plural utterance.

It is true that no one writer, no one book, represents [American life], for that is not possible; our social and political decentralization forbids this, and may forever forbid it. But a great number of very good writers are instinctively striving to make each part of the country and each phase of our civilization known to all the other parts, and their work is not narrow in any feeble or vicious sense.

(*Editor's Study*, September 1887, ES 98)

Only a decentralized literature, a literature without a center, would be true to America, but Howells made it clear that such decentralization did not imply the nation's collapse. Literature, however devoted to a parcel of the country (it could not be otherwise, and be true), was also devoted "to mak[ing] each part of the country [ . . . ] known to all the other parts." Being true to one's locality not only meant to be true to the whole but also to participate in the making of the whole.

Howells starts from an a-priori: the basis of democratic America is likeness, not distinction. He states in his September 1887 *Editor's*

*Study:* “Men are more like than unlike one another: let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity.” (ES 96) A common ground will necessarily emerge since difference is but circumstantial in America. The condition, however, is that distinction be eradicated. Distinction, for Howells, who had not forgotten his Ohio rural background, meant difference insofar as it was manufactured by the few to set themselves apart from the vulgar. Distinction was artificial and hierarchical; it cut into common humanity—which was inherently plural, beautifully variegated—in order to secure for itself the largest share of power. Distinction went against the democratic principle; difference was its *sine qua non*, however challenging it might be. Howells no doubt saw an opening for the “vulgar many”, the “mass of men”, in a post-bellum America now vectorized toward the West, disencumbered of the New England aristocratic preemption on public life and literature. Evoking (somewhat hastily maybe) “the aristocratic spirit which is disappearing from politics and society, and is now seeking shelter in aesthetics,” Howells announced the realm of the common, which—unlike the “distinguished” that necessarily spelled fakeness—was the realm of the true: “The pride of caste is becoming the pride of taste; but as before, it is averse to the mass of men; it consents to know them only in some conventionalized and artificial guise. It seeks to *withdraw itself, to stand aloof; to be distinguished, and not to be identified.* Democracy in literature is the reverse of all this.” (ES 96) Howells’s discourse failed to theorize, yet heavily relied upon, the articulation between the “common” or the vulgar, understood as the non-extraordinary, and the common ground, which in French may be translated into *l’enncommun* (in common). Starting from the principle that democracy was the truth of America, that (class) distinction was a sham, Howells logically proceeded to state that a true representation of America would give voice to the vulgar, to the common man. Not that class distinctions did not exist in America—Howells, who long flirted with socialism, knew better than that—but he presented them as the product of artifice; they were not native to the American soil, he argued, they were not the truth of America.

Everything in England is appreciable to the literary sense, while the sense of the literary worth of things in America is still faint and weak with most people, with the vast majority who “ask for the great, the

remote, the romantic,” who cannot “embrace the common,” cannot “sit at the feet of the familiar and the low,” in the good company of Emerson. We are all, or nearly all, struggling to be distinguished from the mass, and to be set apart in select circles and upper classes like the fine people we have read about. We are really a mixture of the plebeian ingredients of the whole world; but that is not bad; our vulgarity consists in trying to ignore “the worth of the vulgar,” in believing that the superfine is better. (ES 101)

Howells did not quote Emerson by chance. He acknowledged his debt to the Concord scholar more than once in his critical essays. Howells’s own attempt to locate the truth of America in the “familiar and the low” partook of the same claim for the artistic independence of America. The novel of manners, the paragon of which, for Howells, was the “English novel,” is presented here as a mere import, a poor fit in the United States for its dishonesty and unfaithfulness. Howells resorted here to a moral critique of such literature which tried to pass for something genuinely American but in fact put the natives in a false position vis-à-vis their own country. It stirred their desire for distinction when a native literature, true to America, should praise the vulgar, that absence of distinction that was distinctive of America. What Howells derided here was not the English novel of manners as such, but its role as a *pattern* for an American literature. His praise of the familiar and the low forbid the American artist from resorting to imitation. The common, the vulgar was always original.

Taking up the logics of “The American Scholar,” Howells embraced the common as an alternative to European culture. The passage from Emerson read: “I ask not for the great, the *remote*, the romantic; what is doing in *Italy or Arabia*; what is *Greek* art, or *Provençal* minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low. Give me insight into to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds.” (68) The great, the romantic are here clearly associated with “the remote,” be it in time or in space. No wonder Howells had nothing but the harshest words for the end-of-the-century craving for historical romances<sup>1</sup> that so often combined the two exoticisms, the double subordination to the foreign and the past. In asking for the

1. In his 1900 essay “The New Historical Romances,” Howells reflected on “the recent deluge of historical romance” (935) in American literature. “The tarraddles of the historical romancers,” he argued, were nothing but an escapist move. They sought “relief from the facts of the odious present.” The champion of realism would



common in literature on the contrary, he was asking for the American. Revising Henry James's famous list of America's flaws,<sup>1</sup> of America's poverty defined—however ironically—as an absence of history and class distinctions, Howells turned the list on its back, and transformed those flaws and lacks into America's signature. In a purple-patch essay intended as a response to Matthew Arnold's very Jamesian lament on America's vulgarity, Howells turned the vulgar into the truth of America. "We are not picturesque and we are not splendid", he chanted. "Our towns, when they are *tolerably* named, are *not varied* in their characteristics, and our civilization, as a means of pleasure to polite people of *limited* means and of sympathies *narrowed* to their own class, with the historic ideals of beauty and grandeur, is very much a failure." (ES 143) But after acknowledging America's "beggarly poverty" and "horrible vulgarity," Howells shifted the gaze to find the truth of America in the very gesture of erasure: "Yet some good things we have done, some great things achieved, and among these is the *abolition* of that 'distinction' which Mr. Arnold found wanting in our life [ . . . ] it is his only stricture upon our conditions which we should gladly accept as true." (143) Resorting to a revolutionary rhetoric, Howells overturned the nation's self-definition and translated "less" into "more."

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rather have American literature face the present and the near rather than launch into the remote and the past.

1. In his *Hawthorne* Henry James launched in a virtuoso's depiction of the blankness of the American scene: "The negative side of the spectacle on which Hawthorne looked out, in his contemplative saunterings and reveries, might, indeed, with a little ingenuity, be made almost ludicrous; one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! Some such list as that might be drawn up of the absent things in American life—especially in the American life of forty years ago, the effect of which, upon an English or a French imagination, would probably as a general thing be appalling. The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such an indictment, would be that if these things are left out, everything is left out. The American knows that a good deal remains; what it is that remains—that is his secret, his joke, as one may say." (James, chapter 2)

Such reversal of the gaze implied that he should modulate his very definition of truth. Truth became a “conviction,” a “protest.” It was not so much a tangible fact as a horizon—to be pursued:

*If we have really got rid of distinction of the sort he seems to prize, we have made a great advance on the lines of our fundamental principles [ . . . ] Our own civilization, if we have a civilization of our own, is founded upon the conviction that any such distinction is unjust and deleterious, and our whole political being is a protest against it. [ . . . ]. One of the truths which Americans have always held to be self-evident was that a man, if he was honest, was not only privileged, but was in duty bound, to look other men in the face, with eyes as nearly upon the same level as congenital differences would allow. The fear with most Americans to whom this truth is precious has been that our social structure was not responsive to our political ideal [ . . . ].*

(ES 143-144)

Howells’s highly hypothetical rhetoric here does not so much spell triumph as a combination of “fear” and hope. In a rewriting of the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, he reasserted the fundamental principle of equality—if only qualified by “congenital differences”—but he also voiced his concern that such “truth” was not yet “realized” but should remain a “conviction,” a “protest” and a projection. As the hammering of the present perfect reminds the reader, democracy may well have begun its office, but work still remains to be done. The next movement of the essay sounds like “wishful writing:” “*Somehow*, the idea that we call America has realized itself *so far* that we already have identification rather than distinction as the fact which strikes the foreign critic in our greatness. Our notable men, *it seems*, are notable for their likeness to their fellow-men, and not for their unlikeness.” (144) What appeared an a-priori was in fact a projection—something to be pursued, however tentatively. Democracy is forever in progress, in the making, just as Art, literature, is the tool for such making. In other words, the truth of America, for Howells, is literature’s making.

Such beauty and such grandeur as we have is common beauty, [ . . . ] it seems to us that these conditions invite the artist to the study and the appreciation of the common, and to the portrayal in every art of those finer and higher aspects which unite rather than sever humanity, if he would thrive in our new order of things [ . . . ] The arts *must*

become democratic, and *then we shall have* the expression of America in art [ . . . ]. (145)

“Must:” the injunction leaves no choice to the American artist and is the condition for the future, for the production of the future (“then we shall have . . .”). For Howells, the true representation of America was not so much a mimetic as a performative process. Once acknowledged that democracy is not *prior* to a given incarnation but *performed* in each moment, art keeps the revolutionary democratic process alive in America, reenacting over and again the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States as the democratic land of the common. Post-Civil War literature, in Howells’s agenda, reenacts the performative constitution of “We, the people”—to be translated, in Howells’s voice, into “We, the common, the ordinary people of America.”

But to resort to the “common man” as the only mouthpiece and performer of truth in America is not so much a solution as a problem. The “common man” is no more ideal or typical than Howells’s grasshopper. His was a particular voice, and all the more so at the time when no center prevailed from which to see and to articulate the nation. “So far as I can see, we get further every day from having such a centre,” wrote Howells in *Literature and Life*. “The fault, if it is a fault, grows upon us, for the whole present tendency of American life is centrifugal, and just so far as literature is the language of our life, it shares this tendency.” (174) After the Civil War, the idea of a hegemonic center that could define Americanness held no longer. Any attempt to turn the common into a concept was an estrangement from truth. Truth was to be found in “the very material which he [the American youth] could best *handle*, which he knows most about, and which he really loves most, asserted Garland” (10), who then deplored the tendency of the artist—even the Western artist, blinded by instruction—to neglect “to see the beauty and significance of life *near at hand*.” Truth dwells in the “near at hand” (or what others would soon refer to as *zuhanden*). The artist’s abode was what he could best “handle.”

The Western youth, like the average school-bred American, [ . . . ] feels bound to *falsify* in regard to his real mind. As a creative mind, he lacks the courage to *honestly investigate his surroundings*, and then stand by his judgment. [ . . . ] Art, they think, is something *far away*,

and literary subjects must be something select and very civilized. And yet for forty years an infinite drama has been going on in those wide spaces of the West,—a drama that is thrilling, as full of heart and hope and battle, as any that ever *surrounded* any man. (Garland 13)

To be true to America, one has no choice but to be true to one's immediate surroundings—what is *around* the focal point, circumscribed by his or her gaze. To find the common—what we all have in common, what we share with the vulgar—, the artist has to stay local and trust the eye/I as far as he or she can see, and trust her hand and her pen *as far as she can reach*, and no further. Truth therefore is circumscribed, and circumstantial. Its condition of emergence is the circle of the eye, the span of the arm. For Howells too, who shared such conviction with his disciple Garland, “the I is the first circle,”<sup>1</sup> but the Howellsian circle had lost the Emersonian eccentricity. Truth lay not so much in an endless expansion from ring to ring, in a ceaseless rushing outwards that allowed the eye/I to encompass the whole, as in the multiplication of centers of perception. “One of the facts which we Americans have a difficulty in making clear to a rather inattentive world outside is that, *while we have apparently a literature of our own, we have no literary centre,*” he states at the very beginning of his essay “American Literary Centers.” (*Literature and Life*) Drawing a parallel with the political organization of the United States, Howells claims that a true American literature, a literature true to America, can only be a literature of many centers, and he enumerates the first two historical centers, Boston and Philadelphia, their successor, New York, their challenger, California, the new-comer, Chicago—only to conclude on a fruitful dissemination that is by far the best that can happen to a democratic nation. “I do not attempt to say how it will be when, in order to spread ourselves over the earth, and convincingly to preach the blessings of our deeply incorporated civilization by the mouths of our eight-inch guns, *the mind of the nation shall be politically centred at some capital,*” Howells sneeringly goes on (174). If the increasingly imperialist America of the 1890s “shall be politically centred at some capital,” democratic America, on the contrary, is centrifugal and can-

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1. “The eye is the first circle . . .” are the first words of Emerson’s essay “Circles.” This circle, as is argued further down, is “a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end.” (404)

not be expressed from one locus only. No city-capital, no city with a capital C, can represent it as its generality, nor as an incarnation of American-ness. The America of the common man, true America, must be plural like the common man, and only local fiction could give it true expression. "Local color means national character", summarized Garland (53). The truth of the nation lies in its different local colors, it emerges from non-concentric circles whose only communality resides in what Howells called "sympathy of point of view," or what we could call the desire to be true *to*.

Embracing as one the aesthetic and the political, Howells took Mary E. Wilkins's collections of local color stories as an example of a structure that held together without relying on *one* center. Even if "each sketch is like the sentences of Emerson, 'an infinitely repellent particle'" (ES 97), structural unity is not missing, Howells insists: what provides unity is community, not community of action which is another name for plot, but "unity of point of view."

It might all have been done otherwise; the lives and fortunes of these villagers might have been *interwoven in one texture of narrative*; but the work would not necessarily have gained breadth in gaining bulk. [ . . . ] *It has unity of spirit, of point of view, of sympathy*; and being what the author intended, we ask no other unity of it; many "broader" views lack this unity which is so valuable. (ES 97)

If what guides the narrative voice in each sketch is "sympathy" for her material, then each story will be true, and out of these particles of truth—however heterogeneous, non-concentric—a true whole can emerge. Difference, then, is not a problem. Provided that whatever the "I" grasps within the circumscription of the eye be handled with sympathy, difference even qualifies as an asset. "It is the difference that interests us," says Garland. "the similarities don't please, do not forever stimulate and feed as do the differences. Literature would die of dry rot if it chronicled the similarities only, or even largely." (49) The common, then, is not the result of similarities. It arises from the chronicle of differences and emerges from distinct points of view. "The charm of Horace is the *side light* he throws on the manners and customs of his time," Garland provocatively goes on. "The vital in Homer lies, after all, in his local color, not in his abstractions." (49) For once the masters of the past knew better, they did not seek the concept. They never sought more than their partial vision, they rooted

their pen in the local. The Romans and the Greeks might well be praised for their invention of universals; Garland turns the theory upside down and cites them as the paragons of the cult of the particular. He makes them the first local color artists ever.<sup>1</sup> But Horace's "side-light" and Homer's angle are not a fault or a restriction. They do not preclude truth; they are the condition of truth. "The sun of truth strikes each part of the earth at a little different angle; it is this angle which gives life and infinite variety to literature." says Garland (21) Unlike its Emersonian avatar, circumscription then is not to be feared as would be a circle of stone—immovable, impassable. It is no mortal confinement. Rather, it offers the possibility of an angle and allows each one of us to throw one's particular side light on the familiar, the common, the low. "There's a certain slant of light . . ." wrote Emily Dickinson.<sup>2</sup> For Garland and Howells, truth lies in that slant, that obliqueness, that angle. To be sure, truth is a liar, for any change of position will have an incidence on one's vision. The astronomers

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1. In nineteenth century France and America, Greek art's monopoly on the ideal, the universal, came to be questioned as ancient Greece was revisited as the best example of human genius's capability to *adapt to local conditions*. According to Paul Rabinow in *French Modern*, in the 1830s and 1840s, at the time when regionalism was gaining ground in French letters, "the absolute doctrine of art, without regard for real life, the country, the race, or the era (or) the materials used" was challenged in France by César Daly and Henri Labrouste, among others. "Labrouste suggested that the Greek architects had built the temple in response to local conditions, and not as an exemplification of the universal principles of architecture. [. . .] For Labrouste, buildings were an expression of a culture as much as the exemplification of true and eternal principles of beauty." (53-55)

Garland and Howells's critical writings, I would suggest, partake of the same reenvisioning of the definition of truth as universal. Truth no longer resides in an ideal pattern to be slavishly reproduced. For them, if something is to be revered in the Greeks, it is their way of acquainting a form, a place and an angle of vision. "[A]rt, to be vital, must be local in its subject; its universal appeal must be in its working out,—in the way it is done", Garland stated in *Crumbling Idols* (103). Such is the ideal, it dwells in the *manner* and is not to be imitated, but reinvented each time. What is left of the universal is a constant search for adequation.

2. "There's a certain Slant of light,

Winter Afternoons—

That oppresses, like the Heft

Of Cathedral Tunes—

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—

We can find no scar,

But internal difference,

Where the meanings are—" (Dickinson, poem 258)

call it “parallax.” To correct such “internal difference” within truth, Emerson suggested eccentricity—displacing the focus or purchase on the world *outside* the circle, reaching *out*. “Literature is a point *outside* of our hodiernal circle, through which a new one may be described,” he writes in “Circles.”

The use of literature is to afford us a platform whence we may command a view of our present life, a purchase by which we may move it. [ . . . ] we see literature best from the midst of wild nature, or from the din of affairs, or from a high religion. *The field cannot be well seen from within the field.* The astronomer must have his diameter of the earth’s orbit as a base to find the parallax of any star.

(Emerson 408-409)

Emerson’s solution to the bias born of circumscription is the ceaseless eccentric movement of the eye/I, its constant seeking for another “purchase” outside the first circle. For the New England scholar, the self-reliant man, the American, is he for whom the field itself is expanding with the expansion of the I’s circumscription, he for whom the inmost is the outmost. At the end of the century, however, the bias is no longer to be dispensed with. For Howells as for Garland, the relative purchase is the condition of true vision and the multiplicity of focuses, the circulation of viewpoints, their answer to parallax.

Unlike Noah Webster or Jedediah Morse, his partner geographer who drew the first maps of the United States as a whole, neither Howells nor Garland searched for *the* point from which to see the whole or *the* language in which to tell the whole and truth of the nation. In turn-of-the century America, truth contained a margin of error; it acknowledged its own obliquity; it added a particle, a remainder, to its name—“to”—as in “in relation to” but also as in “towards.” “To” both spells relation and desire, a tension “towards.” Representing true America, or truly representing America (which might be a fair definition of one of the goals of democracy) no longer relies on the transcendent and the objective. In turn-of-the century America, Democracy, as truth, emerges from desire: it is an approach towards and an approximation. Ever in the making, it is, I would argue, a fiction.

### 3 Relating America: the Democratic Fiction, or the “un-place-able common”

At the end of the century no voice, however self-reliant,<sup>1</sup> could represent/constitute America. The making of America was a “making up”. It demanded a plurality of “common men,” a multiplicity of truths understood as “truths to”—to being the meeting-point of an angle and a circumscription. But while truth was necessarily *located* for Howells or Garland, what we have “in common” cannot be. The “in common” could only be *performed* through an American *fiction*. This American fiction, I would propose, is what William Dean Howells put forward as the horizon of literature: a relation of America that would constitute America as relation. What is at stake in this fiction of America or America as fiction is the building of a democratic basis for representation.

Howells’s plan to reconstruct the nation after the Civil War was akin to a literary healing process: promoting and circulating local color literature was supposed to help (re)-create connections between the different sections or localities of the nation. As an editor of the influential *Atlantic Monthly*, he proposed to relate the different parts of the country, to make them acquainted. Sarah Orne Jewett was a young writer searching for a publisher at the time. In her 1893 preface to

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1. This is, as I understand it, the difference with Emerson. I rely here on Sandra Laugier’s analysis in “*Emerson: Penser l’ordinaire.*” How is a true representation of America possible? Such question, which Howells himself will try to answer, can be translated in Emersonian terms as: how can an individual voice become common, representative, without yielding its right to remain individual? “*La self-reliance a un enjeu public, dit Emerson: ma voix privée sera ‘universelle,’*” paraphrases Laugier. Self-reliance debunks the imperative of assent—the logics according to which, if I am part of this or that community, then I must acquiesce. Such common foundation, for Emerson, is nothing but conformism, and such conformism is the weapon of cowards, who only rely on imitation (a line Garland and Howells will take up enthusiastically). Man’s project, then, should not be to assent to some sort of “common sense” devised by a community—be it defined geographically or politically—but to atune one’s inmost and one’s outmost. For Emerson, there is no valid “convention” (in the Latin sense of “coming together and agreeing”, building an “in-common”), only a private tuning in to one’s “outmost” via the ceaseless “reaching outwards” of “Circles.” Sympathy, then, the tension towards the Other, has no role to play. Unlike Howells’s yearning for the building of some commonplace America, there is no such “in-common” for Emerson. Truth is to be found in the eccentric movement of a self-reliant *individual*: the American scholar, a scholar-to-be. His will be the true voice of America, a voice that will be both representative and constituent.



*Deephaven*—which Howells had helped her edit and publish in 1877, she recalled: “Twenty years ago, [ . . . ] crowded towns and the open country were to be brought together in new association and dependence upon each other. It appeared as if a second Harvey had discovered a new and national circulation of vitality along the fast-multiplying railroads that spun their webs to bind together men who had once lived far apart.” (31) As pendular migration from city to country created “a new and national circulation” throughout the nation, the young writer, inspired by her editor, tried to make the most of it and—through her fiction as much as in her fiction—“make the people of [her] state acquainted with one another.” Choosing as narrator a young Bostonian whose aunt owned a house in the coastal village of *Deephaven*, Jewett explored her encounter—then slow acquaintance with—the “rural Other” through a series of shifts in angles of vision. At the beginning of the tale, Helen, the narrator, saw the truth from her own place and according to a certain angle. Changing places, traveling to *Deephaven*, allows her—as well as the (urban?) reader—to try another perspective, to enter another epistemological circle. When the tale comes to an end, Helen, back in the city—or the reader, from the desk he or she might not even have left—will have experienced another “angle of truth.” Their own circumscribed vision will be completed or challenged by the natives’—or at least something approaching the natives’—point of view.

What *Deephaven* and its fiction of a migrant viewpoint allows for is the creation of an “in-common.” The passage from one circle to the other, from one epistemological system to the other, prepares for the making up of the nation as a whole. For Jewett as for Howells, the whole of the nation will not to be grasped from *one* local angle anymore than from a stable, overtopping, point of view: the whole of the nation, or the nation as a whole, is built up by such circulation or flux, such relation-making which is the privilege of local color fiction. To paraphrase Henri Bergson, himself a contemporary of Howells, Garland and Jewett, the whole (of the nation) resides in the flux of its becoming whole, not in the sum of its constituents.<sup>1</sup> Following the Howellsian principle through her deft handling of viewpoints, Jewett implements a pragmatist conception of the nation.

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1. Henri Bergson, “Le Tout n’est pas la somme de ce qui est mais le flux de ce qui devient.” (Quoted in Lapoujade 9)

In *Fictions du pragmatisme*, David Lapoujade thus encapsulates the pragmatist vision of the whole:

*Il n'y a rien dans l'univers qui soit absolument isolé, séparé. Cela ne veut pas dire que les relations forment un Tout achevé et clos sur lui-même dont il serait impossible de sortir. C'est même le contraire: il est impossible d'enfermer les relations au sein d'un Tout achevé puisque le Tout n'est rien d'autre que la relation elle-même en train de se faire, de tisser ses innombrables fils dans toutes les directions.*

(Lapoujade 9)

Such “relation in the making,” the pragmatist definition of the whole, is made possible by pendular movements, migrations—either literal (the peddler, for example, is a favorite figure of local color stories) or figurative. In that sense, the reader or implied reader’s figurative migrations partake of the same process of relation-building, of the building of the nation. What Cather called “the gift of sympathy”—that which enables the reader to stay where she is, within her own circle, and still commune with another circle—fashions the web of the story, and of the nation. Sympathy, a key agent of pragmatism, is not so much a process of becoming as a process of adjustment—tuning oneself *into*, without yielding one’s individual voice to the Other. It requires that one remain true to oneself while being true to what or who the Other is. It is a migration, not an alienation—it is “the relation in the making,” allowing for making links and creating the condition for the passage *via* the fiction of the “in common.”

“Find your own quiet center of life,” Jewett advised young Willa Cather in one of her last letters, “and write from that to the world.” Unsurprisingly enough, one of the most significant local color writers of her age advised the younger writer to be *centered* somewhere she knew, in a place she cared for. Yet, Jewett’s piece of advice goes beyond the mere suggestion of “rooting one’s gaze:” “you don’t see yet [your equipment] quite enough *from the outside*,” she goes on, “you stand right in the middle of each of them when you write, without having the standpoint of the looker-on who takes them each in their relations to letters, to the world.” Truth may well emerge from the insider’s point of view, but writing will not, insofar as writing—as both Jewett and Howells believed—is the building of an “acquaintance:” between a reader and a writer, between different worlds and different angles of truth. *Deephaven* or *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

both dramatize this tension (*to*) between an insider and an outsider's points of view, this "pang of sympathy" or ever-thwarted desire to be "one"—to make the two circles, and the two angles, coincide.

When the narrator leaves Dunnet, in the last chapter of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, she has come close to "belonging," yet her desire remains intact, never quite fulfilled. "At last I had to say good-by to all my Dunnet Landing friends, and my homelike place in the little house, and return to the world in which I feared to find myself a foreigner." (208) Dunnet is "homelike"—a suffix which simultaneously tells of the desire to belong and the grief of estrangement. I would propose that the truth of the place, and the truth in the writing of the place, lies in that tension and is conveyed in such a particle: *like*, a copula that nonetheless gestures towards a hiatus. If truth is a matter of desire in Jewett's texts—the desire to dwell, to belong—such desire is both the drive and the failure of writing. In chapter XI of *Pointed Firs*, the narrator not only experiences the click between a dear old house and a dear old woman; in sharp contrast to her first attempts at getting to the truth of the place from the schoolhouse window, she also finds *within* the place the "right" angle from which truth can "get itself put down rightly on paper." Or at least she thinks she does.

[Mrs. Blackett's] hospitality was something exquisite; she had the gift which so many women lack, of being able to make themselves and their houses belong entirely to a guest's pleasure,—that charming surrender for the moment of themselves and whatever belongs to them, so that they make a part of one's own life that can never be forgotten. Tact is after all a kind of mind-reading, and my hostess held the golden gift. Sympathy is of the mind as well as the heart, and Mrs. Blackett's world and mine were one from the moment we met. (73)

The product of "sympathy" is a common place—a place to be shared, lived in common. "Mrs. Blackett's world and mine were *one*." "One" here encapsulates the utopic place of fusion between two worlds—that of the narrator, that of the native—, the perfect coincidence between two concentric circles which makes translation superfluous. Once the narrator is allowed not merely to watch at a distance but to share the most intimate place in Mrs. Blackett's house, the narration somehow fails to stick to the genre scene typical of local color fiction: "There was a worn red Bible on the light-stand, and Mrs.

*Blackett's* heavy silver-bowed glasses; *her* thimble was on the narrow window-ledge, and folded carefully on the table was a thick striped-cotton shirt *that she was making for her son.*" (84) There no doubt remains something of the ethnographic caption in the depiction of Mrs. Blackett's bedroom as "a New England period room." Jewett's readers might have seen the likeness of it in the brand new regionalist museums where the emphasis was increasingly laid on the intimate relation between body and artifacts away from the traditional taxonomic classification. In Jewett's depiction of Mrs. Blackett's bedroom, as in other period rooms, things gain meaning not so much through their belonging to types as through their attachment to a place, a person. They make sense for the narrator insofar as they have been in *contact* with Mrs. Blackett's hands and still bear the trace of such contact with "the native". Substantives do not so much point to a category, they are all inflected, qualified, in order to express attachment. The Bible is "worn"—it has been used, touched again and again; the glasses are "Mrs. Blackett's" and the thimble itself is qualified by the possessive "her;" even the cotton shirt is marked by a restrictive relative clause ("that she was making for her son"). By contrast, the end of the paragraph can dispense with such markers of attachment. A definite article is now enough: "*the* rocking-chair," "*the* little brown bedroom," "*the* quiet outlook." This shift, I would argue, is what debunks, or at least questions, the genre scene.<sup>1</sup> It is the trace of an "in common." Unlike the prior markers of attachment that unam-

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1. In "Regional Artefacts", Bill Brown analyzes this scene in the context of the epistemic change in American museography at the end of the century from a logics of "detachment" (the traditional taxonomic classification) to a logics of "attachment". He mentions Artur Hazelius's "popular scenes" to be seen in the Scandinavian section of the Centennial in Philadelphia. In such ethnographic tableaux, things were never presented on their own, out of context. When no mannequins were used, the spectator was made to feel that somebody had just left the premises. Brown gives an example: "A Bible would be left open, a bedspread turned back, a costume left draped over a chair [. . .] anything that could have been in direct contact with a human body or hand." This depiction is strikingly reminiscent of Mrs. Blackett's bedroom in *Pointed Firs*, except for the use of the indefinite article, which forbids any identification or sympathetic movement on the part of the spectator. Brown insists that "Jewett could hardly have missed the exhibit, a hit with American fairgoers, who were entranced by the realistic effect." Unlike Brown, I would like to suggest that Jewett offers a rewriting, or at least an inflexion, of the genre, however much inspired she was by the museographic context of her time. She questions and complexifies the traditional observer-narrator's posture.

biguously assigned one thing to one person, “the,” as “one” a few lines earlier, helps build the “place in common:” its double-reference (both to Mrs Blackett and to the narrator who has now taken place in her host’s rocking-chair) blurs the boundaries between the insider and the outsider. Not only is the narrator invited to share the view, and the viewpoint—“‘Come right in, dear,’ [Mrs. Blackett] said. ‘I want you to set down in my old quilted rockin’-chair there by the window; you’ll say it’s the prettiest view in the house’” (84)—when she sits in the old rocking-chair, she is also initiated in the native’s way of seeing. “*Those* dear old fingers and their loving stitches, *that* heart which had made the most of everything that needed love! *Here* was the real home, the heart of the old house on Green Island!” Distance gradually diminishes: from “those” and “that” to the triumphant, though subdued, “here.” Sitting in Mrs. Blackett’s seat, the narrator has not so much conquered a place as nestled in a new “home.” “I had been living in the quaint little house with as much comfort and unconsciousness as if it were a larger body, or a double shell, in whose simple convolutions Mrs. Todd and I had secreted ourselves,” the narrator remarks a propos her lodger’s house in the following chapter (86). However much she is ready to defend her shell against strangers, the narrator has not yielded to the temptation of appropriation, rather, she has abandoned herself to the delights of convolution. To tell the truth of the place, to tell things as they are, the narrator has to trade the lofty authorial stance of the schoolhouse window, the exterior stance of the museum or tourist observer, for the secret organic convolutions of a “desirable house” wherefrom she can write to the world. But can she really? Doesn’t she have to leave Dunnet in order to write the book entitled *The Country of the Pointed Firs*? The narration at least suggests as much: writing is a host’s privilege, more than a native’s. Only he or she who has “come away” and longs to “come back” can find the angle—however unstable, fluctuating or migrating—from which to write. Only a host can, and to be a host—i.e. to be treated *like* a native but never really *as* a native—one has to remain a stranger somehow.

What *Pointed Firs* describes is the migrant part of the “I”/the narrator without which there is no sympathy, no writing. Without such desire of “being one,” sentences fail to crop up; but, without the unbridgeable distance constitutive of being a host, no tale can be told

that tells the truth. Whenever the text verges on fusion, distance has to be reinjected for the sake of writing and for the sake of the relation itself. The truth of a relation, *Pointed Firs* suggests, can only be in the making. If to be true is “to be true to,” then truth is never achieved, completed. Truth is not so much a matter of “contact” as of proximity and approximation. “Tact is a kind of mind-reading . . . ,” realizes the narrator when sitting in Mrs. Blackett’s rocking-chair: close yet at a distance. You cannot write from the solid ground of the coast nor from far off on the ocean, but only from the boat that approaches the harbor, endlessly wavering towards “home”. In Jewett as in Emerson, it is impossible to put your hand on the real, to grasp or “catch” the truth because the truth lies in the movement, the tension to, the desire to grasp that is ever again thwarted by what Emerson calls “the lubricity of objects” (“Experience” 473),<sup>1</sup> or what we could call “the lubricity of place” in turn-of-the-century regionalist writing. To take up Howells’s challenge of building up America out of the multitude of “angles of truth,” one has to locate oneself at the point of articulation, at the joint which in Jewett is more like a gray zone where the I/eye ebbs and flows within the space of approach or approximation. “An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with,” Emerson writes, somewhat gloomily, in “Experience” (473). It is not by chance if *Pointed Firs* begins and ends with the ebb and flow of the sea, which separates but also relates the narrator and the place that she aims at and wishes to converse with. The sea is that gray zone or joint between the insider’s and the host’s “angle of truth.” Its pulsation, its cadence, may well be where the truth of the nation lies—as far as it is the truth of a relation in the making, of America as a fiction.

“The sun of truth strikes each part of the earth at a little different angle; it is this angle which gives life and infinite variety to lit-

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1. Emerson writes: “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most *unhandsome* part of our condition. Nature does not like to be observed, and likes that we should be her fools and playmates. We may have the sphere for our cricket-ball, but not a berry for our philosopher. Direct strokes she never gave us power to make; all our blows glance, all our hits are accidents. Our relations to each other are oblique and casual.” See Stanley Cavell’s Heideggerian reverie (38) on the “relation between the clutching fingers and the hand in handsome” a propos this passage of Emerson. (Cavell 38)

erature,” said Hamlin Garland. These many angles are also what gives life to a democratic representation of the nation as a whole and from their articulation America arises as a possibility of “true to’s.” The truth of America as a whole, in the world of Howells, is the truth of a relation in the making. It is the miracle of an ever-going acquaintance—to take up a term cherished both by Howells and Sarah Orne Jewett—a way of relating particular truths or loyalties to particular angles of truth. Such a relation or relation-making, Howells reveals to us, can only be a fiction performed from within the gap that lies in between the particular circles of apprehension, or what Emily Dickinson referred to as the “internal difference where the meanings are.” Truth, the truth of the Nation, emerges from the challenging beauty of non-coincidence. As a non-coincidence, it never finds its resolution—nor should find it—but is forever kept alive by the tension called “sympathy.” Fiction, then, such fiction as advocated by Howells in his critical writings, is appointed the never-ending task of unfolding and performing democratic America from the multiplicity of its particular localities. By turning the most particular into the “common ground,” by favoring the angle of the particular as the main focus for building the democratic nation, Howells’s vision defies the logics of parallax, his perspective scoffs at the imperative of correction and locates the “un-place-able common” in the tension and relation to, not the smooth perfection of a central and stable figure.

Slavoj Žižek has recently suggested in *The Parallax View* that “truth” is located in the “trou,” the gap which takes place in the interplay between perspectives: there lies the un-place-able “common,” le “peuple introuvable,”<sup>1</sup> the only legitimate basis of democracy. Today as in turn-of-the-century America, the parallax, then, might not be a way of

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1. The tentative phrasing of “un-place-able common” gestures towards Pierre Rosanvallon’s “peuple introuvable” (the title of the second volume of his trilogy on the crisis of democratic representation). Like Rosanvallon’s “people,” the “common” as imagined or dreamt by Howells is what democracy constitutes as sovereign—a “master both imperious and ungraspable” (“un maître qui est à la fois impérieux et insaisissable”). Disallowing the Revolution’s constitution of the “common” as abstraction while sharing his century’s consciousness of an increasing atomization of the people into a multitude of individuals, Howells faced an aporia—that of the figuration of the “common.” Relying on Rosanvallon’s analysis of the democratic fiction, I would propose that Howells endeavored to find a way out via the *fiction* of “the common.” The only viable basis for a true democratic representation (be it political and literary) of America is America as fiction.

reestablishing the truth of the whole once the different angles of truth have been taken into account. The parallax, Howells is our witness, is a way of telling the truth, the truth of the whole, nothing “the truth . . . but” of the nation, from that highly unstable and movable point of perspective that is itself a relation: *to*.

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## Reality/Realities/Realism: William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton and the Robes of Fiction

But let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions; let it forbear to preach pride and revenge, folly and insanity, egotism and prejudice, but frankly own these for what they are, in whatever figures and occasions they appear; let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere—and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness, for it.

W. D. HOWELLS, *Criticism and Fiction* (51)

[ . . . ] the finest effect of the 'beautiful' will be ethical and not aesthetic merely.

W. D. HOWELLS, *Criticism and Fiction* (42)

*La sagesse serait évidemment de définir le réalisme de l'écrivain comme un problème essentiellement idéologique. Ce n'est certes pas qu'il n'y ait une responsabilité de la forme à l'égard du réel. Mais cette responsabilité ne peut se mesurer qu'en termes sémiologiques. Une forme ne peut se juger (puisque procès il y a) que comme signification, non comme expression. Le langage de l'écrivain n'a pas à charge de représenter le réel, mais de le signifier.*

Roland BARTHES, *Mythologies* (210)

In his essay entitled "Un discours contraint" published in 1982, French Structuralist Philippe Hamon explores the many facets of literary realism, its 'terms and conditions' so to speak. He draws a list of its traditional components among which one can note a deep con-

cern with verisimilitude, the metonymic ordering of the plot, “reality effects,” “readerly”<sup>1</sup> characters, descriptions, narrative closure, the colloquial, etc.

To some extent, all these ingredients are present in William Dean Howells’ and Edith Wharton’s fictional works. However, it would be misleading to contend that they comply with the constraints of realism in similar ways. Howells’ narrative discourse, suffused with the bustle of mid—and late 19th-century America, and Wharton’s prose with its modernist features, do have things in common, but they also differ immensely. Whereas Howells celebrates his faith in the linguistic sign which he values as a tool for the sake of the Truth, Wharton contemplates the inadequacy between the thing and the sign with lucidity, and, as if to stigmatize the fault-lines of the capitalist society and the lures of fictional representation, she draws the vitality of her style from the past and the classical tradition. Both novelists bear witness to the mutations imposed on the American novel by the multiplicity and circularity of the semiotic systems that record, name and try to order the chaotic profusion of reality, its images and discourses of all sorts. Both, too, feel deeply concerned with the cracks in the socio-cultural edifice that challenge their ideals of Beauty, Justice and Truth. As it was, both Howells the democrat, the champion of “social realism,” and Wharton the aristocrat, felt the need to reassess the *topoi* of their fictional modes at the very moment when the literary artefact fell into the logic of consumption, of reproducibility, and into scientific materialism.

This contribution relies on a critical reading of two novels by W.D. Howells (*The Rise of Silas Lapham*, 1885 and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 1890) on the one hand, and on Edith Wharton’s trilogy (*The House of Mirth*, 1905, *The Custom of the Country*, 1913, and *The Age of Innocence*, 1920) on the other hand. My main argument here will be that all these novels expose how, in capitalist societies, art dissolves into social life, and how the realist genre seeks to tackle the hollow structure of fictional representation when faced with the forerunners of the early twentieth-century epistemological breakdown. I will suggest that both Howells’ and Wharton’s artistic ventures are not simply a matter of aesthetics; they also testify to their deep moral commitment

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1. See Roland Barthes’ categories, namely the “readerly” and the “writerly.” (Barthes *S/Z* 10)

in an age dominated by the business ethics. As regards their modes of story-telling, my hypothesis is that they are based on a tension between the necessity of form, the world of literary semblance and rhetorical ornaments—the robes of fiction—and the desire to tell the truth about the human subject.

The structuralist approach in general and Philippe Hamon's in particular provide valuable insights into realism, for they make clear that the production of literary discourse by no means dwells on straightforward and 'innocent' stylistic choices and devices. In addition to the essay "Un discours constraint," my main reference here is to *Texte et idéologie*,<sup>1</sup> where the critic posits that the novelist's choices are always ideologically biased, either consciously or not. If we accept that text and ideology are correlated, it seems relevant to examine how the latter manages to make all discourses on the world/on the objects of the world sound 'natural.' For example, if we contend that verisimilitude<sup>2</sup> is meant to comply with social imaginary patterns, this also means that it rests on common experience and that, as a consequence, it must be easily readable, definable, recognizable, in order to appeal to the reader. Thus it becomes obvious that the text is never the result of a random selection operated by the novelist. One fine example is the reference to sociolects, idiolects, and/or vernacular English that address and define a specific social class and support "le rideau de la

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1. In his seminal work, P. Hamon associates semiotic systems (rhetorical and stylistic devices, narrative forms) with systems of institutional values. The critic suggests that they rest on a combination of two specific features: the necessity of a given standard and the process of evaluation ("la norme", "l'évaluation"). Both notions apply to four categories that articulate the interrelation of History and text, namely the modalities of seeing ("un voir"), of speaking ("un dire"), of making ("un faire"), of feeling ("un sentir"), of the narrative stance, characters and reading stance.

2. *Le vraisemblable est souvent "défini comme un code idéologique et rhétorique commun à l'émetteur et au récepteur, donc assurant la lisibilité du message par des références implicites ou explicites à un système de valeurs institutionnalisées (extra-texte) tenant lieu de 'réel'. Ce n'est jamais, en effet, le 'réel' que l'on atteint dans un texte, mais une rationalisation, une textualisation du réel, une reconstruction a posteriori encodée dans et par le texte, qui n'a pas d'ancrage, et qui est entraînée dans la circularité sans clôture des 'interprétants', des clichés, des copies ou des stéréotypes de la culture".* (Hamon, "Un discours constraint" 129)

*doxa*;<sup>1</sup> another is the use of *clichés*,<sup>2</sup> either photographic or linguistic. All of them generate verisimilitude and imaginary identifications.

This paper explores how the realist vein negotiates the problematic relationship between fiction and reality, or more precisely, the relationship between fiction and what is ideologically constructed as reality; as expected, the stylistic devices meant to transform reality into a piece of fiction are crucial here. Within this perspective, it seems relevant to focus on the dialectic between text and ideology in terms of structure, for what matters most is not symmetry *per se* but how the elements of rupture and decentring intersect and interact. What is at stake is the process described by Terry Eagleton in his *Criticism and Ideology*:

The text constitutes itself as a structure: it de-structures ideology in order to reconstitute it on its own relatively autonomous terms, in order to process and recast it in aesthetic production, at the same time as it is itself de-structured to variable degrees by the effect of ideology upon it. (Eagleton 98-99)

Many questions arise from the interplay of literary *praxis* based on codes and conventions, and ideology which is itself a set of prescrip-

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1. Milan Kundera, *Le Rideau* (quoted in Compagnon 77). The opposition is between *doxa* and conformity that shape popular experience, and the rational discourse of science that provides interpretations of the objective world.

2. A good example in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is the “standard family-group photograph, in which most Americans have figured at some time or other.” (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* 9) See what a critic writes about the art of photography, a fine pictorial arrangement: “The *camera obscura* was more than an ingenious toy. The principles behind its operation were widely known, and suggested to the thoughtful a philosophic metaphor for the way mankind draws truthful inferences about the world. The observer, trapped in a ‘dark room’ and with dutiful thoughts of Plato’s parable of the cave, recorded on paper the reversed images of the external world and sought to interpret its full nature;” “Not only did the art of photography stress the importance of detail and accuracy, it also developed public taste and provide the artist with ‘the correctness of perspective and proportion’ as the American painter Samuel F.B. Morse would suggest.” (Homberger 130-134) See also Barthes’ categories (*the studium* and the *punctum*) developed in his essay “La Chambre Claire”: “*le studium*, [ . . . ] engendrerait un type de photo très répandu (le plus répandu au monde), qu’on pourrait appeler la photographie unaire. [ . . . ] La Photographie est unaire lorsqu’elle transforme emphatiquement la ‘réalité’ sans la dédoubler, la faire vaciller”; “[L]e *punctum* d’une photo, c’est ce hasard qui, en elle, me point (mais aussi me meurtrit, me poigne)” (Barthes “La Chambre Claire” 809-21). Silas’ photograph and Ralph’s pictures of Undine in Wharton’s *The Custom of the Country* (192-193; 265-268) belong respectively to those two categories. Linguistic *clichés* are legion in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. See *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 73, 117, 118, 126, 150, 151.

tions, “an illusion that structures our social practices.” (Eagleton 40) Quite unsurprisingly, both Howells’ and Wharton’s politics of writing focus on elements designed to construct a ‘faithful’ vision of the present world. The immediacy of this vision rests largely on the treatment of scenery, characterization and emblematic places and stereotypes. It rests on a linear ordering of temporal sequences, a taste for a vantage point inherited from classical realism, the hierarchy of codes, etc. In addition, it also raises fundamental issues such as: is realism simply a distorting mirror forcing reality into the “ill-fitting vestments”<sup>1</sup> of conventional practice? Likewise, does the treatment of subjectivity and social relationships consist simply in dressing the self in a protective, isolating sheath, and in restricting it to a social construct, that is to say, to a sum of prescriptive discourses? Concerning aesthetic matters, to what extent does the social class that rules both the production and circulation of commodities also shape taste?<sup>2</sup> Last but not least, how far can Howells’ realism, so conspicuously tinged with idealism, still appeal to us, contemporary readers, in a world that seems to have lost faith in its ideals?

At first sight, there seems to be a sharp contrast between Wharton’s elitist vision and Howells’ democratic mindset. However, both novelists were well aware of the worldliness of works of art, and both would contest the *nouveaux riches* and their system of values. The crucial point concerns their respective strategies of fictional representation confronted with the diseased social and political body of the Gilded Age. Even if it is true that Howells seems to abide by the rules of the realist genre more than Wharton, both novelists chose to question conspicuous mass-consumption and new mercantile ‘values’—“les

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1. Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 6.

2. W. D. Howells confesses that he worries about “the petrification of taste” (*Criticism and Fiction* 14), and he opposes money to creativity: “The law of commercialism is on everything in a commercial society,” the Colonel explained. [. . .] “The final reward of art is money, and not the pleasure of creating.” (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 174) See also Gunter Gebauer’ and Christoph Wulf’s argument: “*La société de classes est une société de la culture, un capitalisme du goût; l’ère économique se dédouble par une apparence esthétique*” (Gebauer 349). Both critics insist on the way the realist mode manages to create a fictive world that mirrors the objective world, and, taking Balzac as an example, they suggest that the French novelist’s works “[ont] pour conséquence un échange entre monde littéraire et monde social qui transforme l’utilisation sociale de l’esthétique en utilisation esthétique du social, et confère ainsi un aspect artistique au style de vie de la classe dominante” (Gebauer 350). This is particularly true of Wharton’s fictional world where the treatment of social matters is elaborated by means of a system of aesthetic signs.

puissances du faux”, in Nietzsche’s own words. For both of them, the major focus was the place of art/of the work of art in the pagan world of human activities and in an age marked by shifting historical truths, by the falsity of meaning(s) and the reassessment of *mimesis* entailed by scientific progress and new social patterns. Yet, one may wonder if it is still relevant today to consider that the realist genre was simply a mirror held up to the multifarious reality of the time. In other words, is it not too restrictive to assert that Howells’ and Wharton’s fictional worlds are mere descriptions of “what has been sliced-off by the gilt frame of the looking-glass,”<sup>1</sup> be it the frame of aesthetic enterprise?

- 1 “The truthful treatment of material,”<sup>2</sup> or Howells’ realism in question(s)

In terms of narrative economy,<sup>3</sup> both Howells’ and Wharton’s fictional works read first and foremost like fine architectural constructions with carefully-laid foundations, discrete but efficient scaffolding, props and stays of all sorts among which the extensive use of “reality effects,” the importance devoted to plot and characterization, to a strict balance between descriptive pauses, dialogues and narrative sequences. One should not forget to mention “a reverence for the English language as spoken according to the best usage,”<sup>4</sup> for Wharton would never let the decorative be undermined by a trivial detail, be it a prosaic object or a misnomer. As for Howells, he would resent any contamination of the novelistic form by the romantic spirit or by sentimentalism.<sup>5</sup> However, things are not so simple and before we go further, it seems appropriate to examine the above quotation taken

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1. Woolf, “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection” 222. In this short story as in her major pieces of fiction Virginia Woolf questions the tangibility of the objective world, and exposes her wish to explore what lies behind the pretence life of social *decorum* and discourses.

2. See W. D. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, *op. cit.*, 38: “Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material.”

3. For a comprehensive study of this notion, see Tanguy 174-200, 219-232, 247-263, 280-297, 309-315, and 353-381.

4. Wharton, *A Backward Glance* 48.

5. See what Howells writes in “New York Low life in Fiction.” (*Criticism and Fiction*, 271-275) In his essay, he praises Crane’s *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*, a novel that combines human fate with social environment, and that manages to avoid “sentimental glamour.”



from Howells' *Criticism and Fiction*, and discuss some of the features of his literary *credo*.

What first strikes the reader is his deep concern with the truth. In Howells' mind, it lies within the novelist's reach provided he relies on the positivist mind, on scientific tools, on "figures," for example, a word that belongs to the lexicon of mathematics and that, quite amazingly too, is related to the power of imagination and fictional characterization. The paradox lies in the fact that the etymology of 'fiction' is precisely  *fingere*, namely 'pretend,' 'make believe,' two verbs close to the French  *feindre*; and what is a piece of fiction if not a mere pretence, a lie, a linguistic construct? As for the truth, one is tempted to ask: what truth? where is the truth? whose truth? what does the truth refer to? how can we measure it? As is well known, what we call "the truth" is something finite and culturally determined by an  *epistémè* and by epistemological categories, and, as far as nineteenth-century literature is concerned, by a pre-Nietzschean paradigm.

Howells' conception of the realist narrative (at least in his early works) rests on a well-ordered vision of the world where meanings and values constitute literal, stable, and absolute entities rather than contextual variables. His 'confusion' between the work of art and the immediacy of the objective world is part and parcel of the realist mode that posits that reality is a consistent whole,<sup>1</sup> "un  *déjà-là*, un  *déjà-écrit*, support concret de paroles, d'inscriptions et d'écritures" (Hamon,  *Texte et idéologie* 126). For contemporary readers, familiar with Saussurean linguistics and poststructuralist theories, it would certainly be more accurate to claim that reality lies out there as an ideological construct mediated by language. It can also be argued that the 'confusion' in question is perhaps between "the truth" and verisimilitude, that is to say between the production of what is true and the reproduction of what seems to be true. On this particular point, my contention is that verisimilitude is precisely what complies 'naturally' with one's own system of values and therefore with what is unquestionable. One may also wonder if the function of fictional

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1. "The nineteenth-century concept of a 'whole,' including Marx's and perhaps most especially Marx's, was thus very much a materialist concept, in the sense that it was predicated on, anchored to, and imaged after the boundedness and integrity of a physical body. What this made possible was a new confidence about the mappability of the world, a new confidence about the inferable relation between the material and the immaterial, a relation I here call 'metonymic.'" (Dimock 60)

writing is to give the reader access to a predictable view of reality,<sup>1</sup> or rather to interpret it. For Howells, “the truth” was a social value nourished by his strong sense of equity; for him, what was true was fair and what was realistic was democratic. In the last sentence, the opposition between “usefulness” and “delightfulness” stresses the didactic dimension of the work of art inherited from the Classics: the novelist’s enterprise must serve morality, teach rather than entertain, adapt its language and style to the unrefined masses, to “the unaffected people.”

Wharton’s strategies diverge somehow from Howells’ politics of “social realism:” she considered that there was nothing above the art object, and her reverence for Old Europe’s canons was total. Quite logically, she opted for a style that praised Classicism and whose aesthetic principles are exposed in both her treaty, *The Decoration of Houses* (1898), and her later essay entitled *French Ways and Their Meanings* where she claims that “The essence of taste is suitability. [ . . . ] the word expresses the mysterious demand of eye and mind for symmetry, harmony and order.” (*French Ways* 41) Her conviction was that the creator was “the mere lover of beauty” (*French Ways* 41), and that, as such, his daunting task was to provide social harmony in a world faced with the absence of the sacred. She thought that the artist’s most valuable gift, the art object, should comply with Emerson’s ideal of grandeur, truth, integrity, and combine aesthetics with morality, perceptive insights into the emotional world with critical distance on socio-cultural issues.

To put it briefly, realism for Howells was a mode designed to transcribe the many realities of a rational, Newtonian world, whereas for Wharton it was rather a questioning of the epistemological issues characteristic of modernism. It was, indeed, a way of ‘textualizing’ reality, of transforming it into a text by means of semiotic systems that matched a selected range of ideological values. Of course, all this presupposes that I/ reality is, by essence, decipherable, nameable,

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1. In *S/Z*, Barthes discusses “le modèle de la peinture”: “Toute description littéraire est une vue. [ . . . ] Il faut que l’écrivain, par un rite initial, transforme d’abord le ‘réel’ en objet peint (encadré); après quoi il peut décrocher cet objet, le tirer de par sa peinture; en un mot: le dé-peindre (dépeindre, c’est faire dévaler le tapis des codes, c’est référer, non d’un langage à un référent, mais d’un code à un autre code). Ainsi le réalisme (bien mal nommé, en tout cas bien souvent mal interprété) consiste, non à copier le réel, mais à copier une copie (peinte) du réel” (Barthes, *S/Z* 61).

capable of transforming itself into a text, and that its modes of production operate in relation with the modes of production of ideology; 2/ it is through language that we can decipher, grasp, name it. Actually, both systems often interact within a complex pattern of reversal, and they even sometimes overlap. This is precisely what a discussion of Hamon's essay, "Un discours contraint", aims to show.

## 2 "La langue peut copier le réel" (132)<sup>1</sup>

My purpose is first to reassert that at no moment do Howells' and Wharton's modes of writing totally invalidate the referential dimension of language, or clearly depart from the long-dated tradition of literary *mimesis*. As if in response to social and moral disintegration, and to compete with the excesses of the baroque style, their fictional art deflates emphatic demeanour. Instead, they privilege verisimilitude, elegance in disposition of form and contents, refinement in thought inherited from the Genteel Tradition. For neither of them was ever taken in by social, ideological or cultural masks. The main difference lies perhaps in the fact that Howells praised the transparency of language,<sup>2</sup> whereas Wharton was convinced that there should always remain some flimsy veil to cover up the cracks imposed on the social fabric/on the self.

It is also true that Howells's pragmatism was fuelled by his origins, by his education, by his faith in science and industrialisation, as well as by the stimulus provided by America seen as a bustling arena for action and technological progress. One of his main concerns was social justice under capitalism, and his conviction was that integrity and redemption could be generated by the ordinary. Wharton's target in her major works was rather to go beyond the here and now of tangible experience in order to disclose the unknown and the hidden facets of reality.

1. 'Language can copy reality.' (Translation mine)

2. This is a major feature of the realist mode. See Hamon's argument in his essay (Hamon, "Un discours contraint" 150): "*Le discours réaliste, comme le discours pédagogique, refusera en général la référence au procès de l'énonciation pour tendre à une écriture 'transparente' monopolisée par la seule transmission d'une information. Cela aboutira à ce que l'on pourrait appeler une détonalisation du message, c'est-à-dire à l'absence de participation symétrique et de l'auteur et du lecteur. [ . . . ] Le discours réaliste se présentera comme fortement démodalisé et assertif*".

For a better understanding of their works, it is rewarding to take the socio-cultural background of their literary production into account. If we accept that literature is a *praxis* under influence, it is worth mentioning that in nineteenth-century America, literature was shaped by a plurality of discourses: of/on art, of/on science, of/on money, of/on History, of/on religion and theology. I will argue that in many places, Howells' artistic enterprise, which strives to give his readers a predictable view of reality, seems somehow trapped in the prison-house of ideology, tinged as it is with the normative discourse of the time. For his worldview was excessively influenced by science and by the positivist *ethos*: the objectivity and rationality of scientific progress based on perception and observation reinforced his faith in the possibilities of language to name, order, represent the outside world. In Howells' America, it was science that provided a model for the treatment of literary material, and one can easily note a tight connection between the referential discourse based on the adequacy of sign with referent, the modalities of the visible, knowledge, and the truth. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the visual process, whose goal is precisely to arrange the material and to bring out its significance, is so conspicuously foregrounded and relied upon in his novels. There is, indeed, a close link between the power of images and knowledge, and Howells' fictional world (like Wharton's) is full of references to the world of visual arts, painting, the theatre, and photography. In his mind, seeing was believing, and believing was telling; in other words, textual cohesion was conditioned by the cohesion of the referential world. And if realism means life gauged against a strict system of values and standards, it was certainly for Howells a matter of 'to be' or 'not to be' sincere/honest/accurate as regards his own modes of perception and representation. His novels show how, in the realist mode, dramatization rests on the ability of language to integrate visual representation and transform visual images into textual images.

Likewise, it was the world of science and the machine supported by the power of money that operated the shift from metaphysical idealism to scientific materialism. The best example is the story of Silas Lapham, a captain of industry who relies totally on progress, technological know-how, pragmatic interpretations of the world of objects, and for whom the morality of business goes with the business of morality. However, he refuses to apply the principles of science to "the human conscience" for he wants to "keep that as free from

paint as you can,” (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* 12) convinced as he is that his Puritan background will provide him with the moral and material measures of success, namely “natural nobility and business sagacity.” (7) Silas has inherited his father’s discovery and has made a fortune thanks to a paint-mine, “a gold-mine” (10) which he considers as “a blessing to the world.” (18) The paint, that was “like my own blood to me,” (17) is the product of personal commitment, unflinching energy and faith in “scientific phrases,” (11) facts and figures:

When folks come in, and kind of smell round, and ask me what I mix it with, I always say, ‘Well, in the first place, I mix it with *Faith*, and after that I grind it up with the best quality of boiled linseed oil that money will buy.’ (18)

Silas, “a fine type of the successful American,” (4) belongs to the middle class; his enterprise consists in “an alchemy,” a transmutation of mineral ore into “solid ingots of the most precious of metals,” (20) and his ‘mission’ is to export his paint and see it used “conspicuously everywhere round the world” (15) for his paint is “good:” (6, 8) it is tangible, it can protect and embellish all types of surface (even though it is also synonymous with reification), and above all, it can be labelled, branded, clearly identified by means of letters and figures, “the mystic devices:” (13)

But, any rate, every barrel of it, and every keg, and every bottle, and every package, big or little, has got to have the initials and figures N. L. f. 1835, S. L. t. 1855, on it. Father found it in 1835, and I tried it in 1855.’

“S. T.—1860—X. business,” said Bartley.

“Yes,” said Lapham.

In Howells’ novel, the scientific mood which is fuelled by a desire for exhaustiveness and homogeneity fits both the entrepreneurial mind and the collective myth of the self-made man, and success is presented as a typically American feature.<sup>1</sup> Of interest too, the collusion of sci-

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1. This ideal is contested in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*: Lindau and Fulkerson discuss the notion of Americanness in relation to money and its capacity to bring happiness. With reference to the American Constitution, Lindau contends that: “What iss Amerigan? Dere iss no Ameriga any more! You start here free and brafe, and you glaim for every man de right to life, liperty, and de bursuit of habbinness. No man that works with his hands among you hass the liberty to bursue his habbinness. He is the sife of some richer man, some gompany, some gorporation [ . . . ].” (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 318)

ence and money, for Silas' story shows how scientific progress can transform prosaic objects into valuable tokens, and how the utilitarian falls into the logic of capitalist exchange:

*The Rise of Silas Lapham* suggests that if the dematerialization of cash into a culture of a rarefied class constitutes "civilization" itself, then moral values have an economic basis and economic values have moral implications.<sup>1</sup>

The paint motif, central to *The Rise* published in 1885, serves as a structuring metaphor for Howells' design: it belongs to an aesthetic of concealment, for what must remain concealed behind the coat of paint is the world of emotions and feelings, even though the signifier "mine" refers obliquely to the world of the inner self. The end of the novel insists, not on Silas' ruin but on its redemptive quality once morality has been restored: "In the shadow of his disaster they returned to something like their old, united life; they were at least all together again." (364)

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1. Crowley, "Introduction" xxiv-xxv. See also Crowley's essay, entitled "*The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham: The Company They Kept*," where he develops two highly relevant arguments about James and Howells: First, "The principles of realism, which each writer would articulate somewhat differently, derived from their common experience as Americans abroad." Second, "The key distinction for Howells was not between realism and romance, but rather between the novel and the romance." (Crowley, "*The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*" 118) For a thorough discussion of the relation between the moral and the economic, see Dimock 67-90. See also Cox 107. Cox explores Howells' place within the realist tradition and he suggests that Howells' method (his narrative choices, the treatment of plots and their dénouements) was largely influenced by both literary history and his own social vision: "The memory of Mark Twain's violation of Boston decorum brought Howells face to face with the impossibility of certain unions except 'in novels,' and as if to demonstrate the difficulty of mounting such a union in a 'realistic' novel, he effected the dénouement of Silas Lapham by stretching the fabric of *vraisemblance* to the tearing point." As for the "transmutation process" at the origin of Silas' fortune, I will argue that it also applies to the emphatic biographical account written by Bartley. The highly reflexive dimension of this episode (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* 4-22) shows how stories are mere artefacts, and how literary fictions stem from social fictions. In a similar way, the world of Lily Bart in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, is a world of mere semblance; it is fabricated, reified in its representations, and its truths are concealed behind social appearances. In the novel, the paint motif present in *Silas Lapham* has been replaced by cosmetics, Lily Bart has ceased to be a 'natural organism' to become a cultural artefact.

Like Howells' novel, *The House of Mirth* stages the rise and fall of the main protagonist. In it, Wharton focuses on woman as purveyor of beauty in turn-of-the-century America, and she shows how she is objectified by and within the discourse of liberal trade, led to play the part of the "Beautiful Ornament," or to perform "theatrical masquerades," "*tableaux vivants* [which] remain, in spite of every enhancement of art, only a superior kind of wax-works." (*The House of Mirth* 133) The story of Lily Bart lays emphasis on an erotic of consumption which articulates gender relations to cultural representations. The female body functions as stop-gap in an economy of desire that rests on money. By the end of the novel, Lily realizes that she has been no scripter of her own story, and that even if "each fall of lace and gleam of embroidery was like a letter in the record of her past," (317) the record in question turns out to be lapidary and full of holes, and her dresses, mere artefacts meant to conceal the feminine void behind the veils of seduction. In the final episode where Lily casts the robes of the pretty fictions she had constructed for herself, Wharton displaces the thematic of corporeality linked to the feminine onto the body of the text, and she manages to speak the truth of a female aesthetics.

- 3 "*Le réel est un champ complexe et foisonnant, discontinu, 'riche' et nombrable, dénommable, dont il s'agit de faire l'inventaire*" (162)<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, both Howells' and Wharton's writings highlight the link between the scientific pragmatism, the visual consumption and the bourgeois values that prevailed in their time. One cannot but notice the heavy number of scenes, sketches, pictures, descriptions, portraits, details, anecdotes, short notes, emblematic places that compose the imaginary scene. They all seek to map the many moods as well as the picturesqueness of urban scapes and life—mainly Boston and New York—,<sup>2</sup> the fuss and gloss of social life and rituals (like the Coreys' dinner party in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* chapters 13 and 14, or

1. "The task of the novelist is to record the complexity, the wealth, the abundance of reality—its fragmentary and nameable quality." (Translation mine)

2. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* 36, 81-82, 129, 324. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 55, 56, 59, 76-77, 182-184, 186, 298-299, 301-304, 306.

the magnificent banquet given by Dryfoos to show off his wealth, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 325-327).<sup>1</sup> Like most realist novels, Howells' narratives are entirely built on fully dramatized scenes, for example Mrs Horn's *musicales* where what matters most is not the pleasure of music but the decoration, the furniture, the conversations, the speculation on the guests, as in the short sequence with Mela Vance who "was willing to take [the Marches] at their apparent social valuation." (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 269) Of course, the dress code plays an important part. (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* 188-189, 192; *A Hazard of New Fortunes* 268)

What is true of diegetic places is also true of characterization: the represented world is full of stereotypes, of "flat" characters that point to the mirage of reproducibility and faith in the reliability of the objective world. Much has been said about Howells' "social realism," about his desire to suggest and describe. The didactic dimension of his art lies perhaps in his choice of characters as technological, moral and political models, for his aim was to express his social awareness along with the social implications of his artistic commitment. Every place and/or process is described with scientific accuracy, a plethora of technical details, and a very strong ideological bias: "Silas' dim ware-room," (13) his house, in particular "the pile-driving," (45) the floors and stairways, "the clean, fresh mortar in the walls mingling with the pungent fragrance of the pine shavings," (52) the many flats visited by the Marches, "the little parlor, with its gilt paper and ebonized furniture" (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 41, 49, 50-51, 57), New York which "shrieks and yells with ugliness here and there [ . . . ] but never loses its spirits." (62), the urban flat "that abolishes the family consciousness" (68), the bourgeois' pretentious home, or Lindau's room with its "shabby and frowsy bedding, the odor of stale smoke, and the pipes and tobacco shreds mixed with the books and manuscripts strewn over the leaf of the writing desk." (188-189), Angus Beaton's studio with its "gray wall quadrangularly vaulted to a large north light; casts of feet, hands, faces, hung to nails about; prints, sketches in oil and water-color, stuck here and there lower down." (118), or the Dryfoos-

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1. The caterer in charge of Dryfoos' dinner has tried to praise the bourgeois taste and has designed "the decoration of the table with pieces of artistic confectionary" (326), like the "structure in white sugar [that] expressed Frescobaldi's conception of a derrick." (338)



es' drawing-room which exhibits the collusion of the economic and the aesthetic;<sup>1</sup> as expected, this list is not exhaustive. Similarly, the characters' descriptions are comprehensive accounts of their physical and moral features, past and present activities, habits.

4 "Le texte n'est plus qu'une répétition, toute manifestation d'idiolecte étant chargée de provoquer un effet de réel" (141)<sup>2</sup>

The thorny issue of utterance discussed by P. Hamon is a major concern of literary *praxis*. There is, indeed, a link between Howells' taste for linguistic transparency, the status of the narrative voice and his treatment of univocity, a mode copied from the discourse of science. His style is transparent in the sense that it equates one character with one modality of speech, and in doing so, leaves his reader little room for speculation. Howells' main concern seems to be less the process of utterance than the production of discourse. This is one of the many paradoxes of the realistic discourse: although it always strives to conceal the very place from where 'it' speaks, it also uses characters as vehicles for knowledge. As a result, it reads like a linguistic patchwork that tries to 'copy' reality and its diversity, a 'linguistic mosaic' that combines several modalities of speech: vernacular English, idiolects and sociolects, technical jargon (the editor's, the journalist's, the architect's, the industrialist's, the banker's, the broker's, etc.), Southern accents, to name but a few. Major examples in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* concern Lindau's 'broken' English, or the Woodburns from the defeated South:

"Yes, my name is Lindau," he said, slowly, while he scanned March's face. Then he broke into a long cry. "Ah-h-h-h, my dear poy! Mu yong friendt!-my-my-Idt is Passil Marge-not zo? Ah, ha, ha, ha! How gladt I am to zee you! Why, I am gladt! And you rememberdt me?"

(93)

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1. [It] "was delicately decorated in white and gold, and furnished with a sort of extravagant good taste; there was nothing to object to the satin furniture, the pale soft rich carpet, the pictures, and the bronze and china bric-à-brac, except that their costliness was too evident; everything in the room meant money too plainly, and too much of it." (151)

2. "Repetition turns out to be the text's *raison d'être*; the function of idiolects is to sustain reality effects." (Translation mine)

Miss Woodburn asked, "And is Mr. Dryfoos senio' anything like ouah Mr. Dryfoos?"  
 "Not the least."  
 "But he's jost as exemplary?"  
 "Yes; in his way."  
 "Well, Ah wish Ah could see all those pinks of puffection togetah, once."  
(209)

Howells' fictional style, which shows a predilection for coherence, relies heavily on commonplace experience, on literal meaning and metonymy rather than on figural meaning and metaphor.

As for Edith Wharton, her main goal was to respect "the unity of impression" by means of a "reflecting consciousness" able to weave "not more than two (or at most three) angles of vision"<sup>1</sup> into a consistent whole. In both her novels and her short stories, authorial presence is never denied, for she manages to combine shifting viewpoints so as to frame a multi-faceted vision of reality within a well-balanced, carefully-mastered perspective. It is as if she were reluctant to yield to the proliferation of narrative and discursive designs, or even to the random play of signifiers. For example, she favours binary oppositions which leave little room for in-between-ness, and she rarely departs from hypotactic sentencing whose aim is to keep control over thought, language, form, and ultimately, over the reader's perception. However, it would be unfair to restrict Wharton's style to formal strategies that might too quickly label her works "readerly" texts. It is more rewarding, I think, to consider her fiction in the light of a twofold poetics of the subject/of the voice central to the modernist venture. Insofar as the voice is the very support of an open-ended play between presence and absence, voicing the 'I' is a daring enterprise for any writer, and Wharton is no exception. In her fiction, the problematic status of the narrative voice is constantly highlighted: the main narrative instance never fully coalesces but it sometimes gets lost in the meanders of free indirect speech, more precisely in a fine blend of "narrative" and "character" able to verbalize what the character leaves unsaid, or what belongs to a non-linguistic consciousness. Or it sometimes vanishes in the intricacies of irony, with the result that "effects of voice," rather than a clearly-identified voice, (an omniscient narrator's voice, for example), break through the tightly-woven

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1. Wharton, *The Writing of Fiction*. Quoted in Vita-Finzi 64.

textual fabric and challenge the position of dominance over a world and its *épistémè* dear to the realist mode. Here are a few examples which display Wharton's taste for ambiguity and equivocity:

She [Undine] seemed as yet-poor child!—too small for New York: actually imperceptible to its heedless multitudes; and her mother trembled for the day when her invisibility should be borne in on her. Mrs Spragg did not mind the long delay for herself—she had stores of lymphatic patience. (*The Custom of the Country* 10)

She tossed her head back with the movement she had learned in “speaking” school-pieces about freedom and the British tyrant. (*The Custom of the Country* 94)

Being a well-bred man he had not (like another recent ducal visitor) come to the dinner in a shooting-jacket; but his evening clothes were so shabby and baggy, and he wore them with such an air of their being homespun, that (with his stooping way of sitting, and the vast beard spreading over his shirt-front) he hardly gave the appearance of being in dinner attire. (*The Age of Innocence* 51)

Wharton's *énoncés* are by no means smooth and straightforward: instead, they knit together different levels of utterances, many quotations and intonations which account for the ‘loquacious’ dimension of her novels. My contention is that these fictional tricks are much more than mere stylistic ornamentation: they signal the moment in Western history when meanings and beliefs vacillate. Quite symptomatically, the Whartonian text is often made opaque by the many utterances that contest each other within fictional space. Her narrative discourse is a place where meaning is blurred or deferred, put in question whenever the skilful superposition of voices criss-cross within ironical, equivocal statements or authorial comments that destabilize interpretation. Such devices ruffle the surface of the text and challenge its overall homogeneity as if in protest against the reified language of Wall Street financiers and against language as instrument, as “marketable material.” All those strategies unveil other *strata* of linguistic matter half-hidden behind the seemingly classical façade of her fictional composition. They also reveal the importance of sounds and names in her creative process, and the bliss concealed behind the very flesh of words and the lures of fiction.

## 5 The sting of doubt, or mimesis revisited

Howells' artistic venture was shaped by classical realism, but gradually shifted toward other moods and modes, new stylistic devices meant to disclose the illusory dimension of the real, that is to say its theatricality. The ironic trope and other processes of defamiliarization like self-reflexivity are parts of this rhetoric, especially in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* which Howells considered as "The most vital of my fictions." (4) In it, the reader can feel the novelist's growing awareness that the outside reality is in fact nothing but a set of illusions: the novel starts as a comedy of manners and then shifts to a social tragedy that denounces the short-comings of the materialistic venture. The turning-point is the dinner-party (337-345) where Lindau the idealist opposes old Dryfoos; its climax is the street-car strike that reactivates the historic and emblematic fault-line between the North and the South. In *A Hazard*, the process of demystification is at work: in a very pragmatic manner, Howells shows how the social world has become an empty stage overwhelmed by a tension between the materialistic and the idealistic and a sense of deep nostalgia, of disenchantment, for the world has lost its ideals: it has become "dull:"

The men's faces were shrewd and alert, and yet they looked dull; the women's were pretty and knowing, and yet dull. It was, probably, the holiday expression of the vast, prosperous, commercial class, with unlimited money, and no ideals that money could not realize; fashion and comfort were all they desired to compass, and the culture that furnishes showily, that decorates and that tells; the culture, say, of plays and operas, rather than books. (302)

Like his vision of his contemporary society, Howells' principles of literary composition evolved. In his fiction, the represented world became less monochromic and monolithic, but also more fluctuating, more ungraspable and sometimes experienced from within by means of internal focalisation. Textually speaking, Howells' style, in his later works, shows some resistance to the patterns imposed by ideology. His narrative strategies question both surface meanings and the mimetic power of language. They also disclose the superficiality of human intercourse contaminated by money. This is true of family and social links, but also of the press that sustains the collusion of the artistic and the economic: one can read that the magazine *Every Other*

*Week* operates “the long-felt want of a tie between the Arts and the Dollars.” (177)

In comparison, Wharton’s prose relies more on ambiguity and metaphor; the result is a prismatic worldview where past and present constantly mirror each other and generate new truths that will eventually blur her idealistic will-to-power over meaning. Her trilogy, which rests on a conspicuous dialectics between lack and excess, authenticity and sham, truth and illusion, is also a way of questioning the realist venture. In her novels which depart from the politics of classical realism, signs and objects abound, and yet meaning is elusive. In *The House of Mirth*, she dramatizes the gap between sign and referent whereas Howells suggests it by showing the holes in the social fabric. In the very final sequence, Selden’s search for the lost signifier (“love,” perhaps) is emblematic of the mood that prevailed at the turn of the twentieth century. As if to compensate for loss in all its forms, the enigmatic brilliancy of objects of desire (ornaments, clothes, or jewelry) is endowed with high potentialities of libidinal satisfaction. Every object, be they the seductive object of consumption central to new economic contingencies, or the art object left to speculation and profit, connects the discontent of our modern age dominated by vacuity with the delusive presence of ‘the little thing.’ Like Howells’, Wharton’s fiction offers a large selection of those “gap-fillers:” they range from socially specified objects (mainly money and commodities), to the aesthetic object in all its forms (music, painting, literature, architecture). They also include the woman involved in the sexual masquerade.<sup>1</sup>

Trapped as it is between the tradition of the *romance*, the shift toward naturalism and the emergence of modernism, American realism in W. D. Howells’ and E. Wharton’s works, questions the problematic relationship between literature and the objective reality in an age marked by the failure of moral and social codes. They all provide the critical reader with a reflection on the very nature of the American novel, and beyond, on American identity. In their *History of American Literature*, Bradbury and Ruland argue that Howells’ realism tries

to reconcile through realism two essential American traditions: the tradition of ‘rough’ democracy, represented by Emerson, Whitman

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1. For a detailed analysis, see my essay entitled *Edith Wharton. L’objet et ses fictions*.

and to some degree Twain, which looked to the self and the West to bring forth a brave New world, and the Genteel Tradition, which asserted the power of society and culture as real forces and looked eastward to the Old World. (Bradbury 208-209)

It is true that America in the 1870s and the 1880s was still confident in its social and material progress, at least until the Haymarket Riot (Chicago 1886), which put an end to optimism and demonstrated the vital necessity of ethics in society, arts, and literature. W. D. Howells' "social realism" focuses on the a-morality of the modern world; sustained by a mystic bond that unites economic life, moral responsibilities, financial liabilities and artistic commitment, it is art for humanity's sake. His 'modernity' (if any) lies perhaps in his gradual shift from epistemological concerns to ontological questionings, from the world of objects to the depths of the human subject. I will suggest that E. Wharton's enterprise is rather art for beauty's sake. Her protagonists belong to a society obsessed with its lack of origins, and a relentless quest for the aesthetic dimension of reality. Indeed, both novelists share a concern with the ethical and aesthetic frame of American society: their fictions are about the fictions promoted by the master discourses of science and politics; there are first and foremost fictions about cultural and artistic identity:

The simple structure of our society, the free play of our democracy in spite of our plutocracy, the ineradicable desire of the right in spite of the prevalence of the wrong, the generous instinct of self-sacrifice, the wish to wreak ourselves in limitless hospitality, the capacity for indefatigable toil, the will to make our achievement commensurate with our opportunity—these are the national things which the national novel might deal with, better than with Pittsburg chimneys and Chicago expresses.<sup>1</sup>

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## The Daughter Beneath the Water, or the Watermark of the Impersonal

“A Circle in the Water,” so reads the title of a short tale by Howells which raises and *dissolves* the question whether an evil deed may come to a full final erasure. In order to picture this dissolution of guilt, the narrator summons the image of a pool with ripples widening and fading out as they reach the circumference. The text opens with Basil March’s blissful contemplation of this pool at sunset and with his praise of the illustrative value of what he believes to be a scene of innocent spontaneity:

[ . . . ] I lay and watched the ever-widening circle fade out into fainter and fainter ripples toward the shore, till it weakened to nothing in the eye, and, so far as the senses were concerned, actually ceased to be. The want of visible agency in it made me feel it all the more a providential illustration; and because the thing itself was so pretty, and because it was so apt as a case in point, I pleased myself greatly with it.

Basil has not yet seen the pebble-thrower that causes the rippling. The man has just been released from jail where he served a disproportionately long sentence. Presently recognized by Basil as a townsman, he tells him of his burning longing to see his daughter. All sorts of family hurdles will stand in the way of this reunion, the better to be dissolved at the end. We are told that the pebble-thrower’s evil deed came to be whitewashed in an ocean of human love:

Love, which can alone arrest the consequences of wrong, had ended it, and in certain luminous moments it seemed to us that we had glimpsed, in our witness of this experience, an infinite compassion encompassing our whole being like a sea, where every trouble of our sins and sorrows must cease at last like a circle in the water.

At one edge of the tableau, the pool offers a soothing image of all but innocent stirrings fading out, at the other, an image of guilty turmoil smoothed out in a sea of human benignity. However, between these seemingly quiet shores and beneath the evening surface, a core scene of Howells's imaginary is being acted out or rather shunted out, the father/daughter relationship and its erotic charge. Indeed "pebble-throwing" is a motif that occurs in several stories, *Indian Summer* particularly. There, it is bound up with a snake-like river, with Colville's theory that rivers are made "to have stones thrown into them" (662) with a fear in little Effie of "spoiling" her gloves in the process, and with a sudden change of mind from Colville, who, on second thought, holds Imogene back from throwing the pebble, although the young daughter-like woman, who is "not afraid of her gloves," would love to engage in the suggested pelting of the river. As a matter of fact Imogene is so sensitive to the older man's failed love story that for most of the novel she is willing to give herself up to him in order to redeem his past as a jilted lover. The father/daughter love theme runs through the whole book in this oblique manner.

In "The Circle in the Water," a short tale, the father/daughter scenario rules supreme. Indeed, hardly set free from jail, the pebble-thrower can think of only one thing, to see his daughter. The latter, following her mother's death, has been in the care of an aunt who has vowed to keep her safely sheltered from her convict father's return. The aunt will nonetheless have to give in to the young lady's monomaniac craving to be reunited with her father: "She hasn't got anything but the one idea: that she and her father belong to each other, and that they must be together for the rest of their lives." The unremitting passion involved in the father/daughter bond is eventually defused in a plot dissolution typical of Howells's reversals and fizzling-outs.

To give an idea of how the potency of this attraction between father and daughter is conveyed let us look at the images that Basil, the I narrator, conjures up in this same tale:

It was before my own door in town. Tedham [the father] had driven up in a smart buggy behind a slim sorrel, and I came out, at a sign he made me through the bow-window with his whip, and saw the little maid on the seat there beside him. They were both very well dressed, though still in mourning for the child's mother, and the whole turnout was handsomely set up. The colour of her hair was the colour of

his fine brown beard, which had as yet no trace of grey in it; but the light in her eyes was another light, and her smile which was of the same shape as his, was another quality, as she leaned across him and gave me her pretty little gloved hand with a gay laugh. "I should think you would be afraid of such a fiery sorrel dragon as that," I said, in recognition of the colt's lifting and twitching with impatience as we talked.

"Oh, I'm not afraid with papa!" she said, and she laughed again he took her hand in one of his and covered it out of sight.

The dead mother, the close pairing of father and daughter, the fiery horse, the riding, the bow-window, the obedient other man who betrays signs of weakness, the play of hands, the signifier "handsome," all of these features occur at critical points in many of Howells's stories, as we shall see.

The "smoothing"—an ever so recurrent motif of his fiction—contrived by the fading ripples provides a very apt metaphor of the deflating process involved in his literary endeavor. The phrase "the want of visible agency" speaks volumes: it epitomizes what I see as Howells's compulsion to conceal the agency, to dilute guilt and spread sin as thin as possible. I wish to show that an anxiousness for appeasement lies at the core of his fiction, answering a need to even out the turmoil caused by the relentless return of such obsessive images as mentioned above in connection with the fiery daughter.

This smoothing generally assumes in Howells's abundant meta-fictional rhetoric the official guise of rescuing fiction from the overemphatic prose and overdramatic plots of the "novelists" and restoring it to a virtuous status, that of an unassuming effort dedicated to the commonplace. In challenging the accursed "novelists" and aiming for an art that would be the mere obverse of theirs, Howells covers his own struggle with his inner "Altruria," a struggle I want to grapple with.

One might object that Howells's fiction taps into the larger struggles of his day. However it does not take long to see that the typical plot has small groups at its center, not the least of which the family or a family-like social group, and that the family stands at the root of it all. Thematically the house/home and the sphere of origins raise the paramount anxieties driving the writing. Ideologically Howells advocates restraint and prescribes the dilution of the personal into

the impersonal. In so doing, one might say that he is undoing what he is doing, just as Silas Lapham burns down the house of his dreams through an insidious oversight. In relation to this we shall be examining the role played by Pen/elope in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the main corpus of the following analysis.

Caught up in this tension, the typical Howells fable will thicken and loosen through a number of errors whose duplicity and reversibility blur responsibilities. The etiology of the crisis baffles attempts at apportioning the blame clearly. In actual fact, the one mostly to blame, even more so than crime-inducing money, is the self, that magma from which crises erupt: love, bereavement, getting engaged, possessing the other, being dispossessed by the other, separation from and reparation of the past, the painful bond with the native home, the awkward rapport with the old European matrix. In other words, basic radical familial aches and hurtful rents. But above all, the key crisis for the self, a male self needless to say, is that triggered by the encounter with the feminine, that fateful ember liable to set aflame the highest achievements of successful men. What I mean by the “feminine” here is the inflammatory erotic potency of feline daughter figures arousing the guilt-ridden appetites of father figures, and/or the rueful sentiments of fathers dispossessed of their daughters. One apt instance of such a feline seductress, although slightly masked by the diverse population of the novel, is the “leopardess” Christine Dryfoos in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. This comes across most clearly in the scene (Part Fifth, end of Chapter 23) where the once almighty father whose son has recently died, eventually comes to Beaton’s workshop and lies down exhausted on the artist’s settee. The purpose of his call is to try to cajole the latter, whose visits to his daughters he all but prohibited, into visiting again, as the smitten Christine, furious not to see Beaton any more, is now rejecting her father. However in lying down on the artist’s couch, the old man collapses climactically inside the symbolic den of his daughter:

[Old Dryfoos] He tottered with Beaton’s help to the aesthetic couch covered with a tigerskin, on which Beaton had once thought of painting Cleopatra, but he never could get the right model. As the old man stretched himself out on it, pale and suffering, he did not look much like a Cleopatra, but Beaton was struck with his effectiveness and the likeness between him and his daughter; she would make a very good

Cleopatra in some ways. All the time, while these thoughts passed through his mind, he was afraid Dryfoos would die. The old man fetched his breath in gasps, which presently smoothed and lengthened into his normal breathing.

The father nearly lays down his life on the tiger skin which condenses the typical features of the young feline woman (c-leo-patra, leo-pardess), a potential empress. His defeat is conveyed in relation to the displaced emanation of his fiery daughter under the very eyes of the plausible suitor and weaker man. I might also have quoted the scene where the father, much in the position of a voyeur, peeps furiously at his daughters while Beaton gives them a very manual music lesson. This key triangle, as we shall see, occurs with variations in many texts. In the typology of such feline daughter figures, though they may be not so conspicuously challenging if quite as irreducible, one might include little motherless Idella, in *Annie Kilburn*, whom Reverend Peck, her phallic father, keeps forgetting about, but who, eventually placed in a host family, creeps back at night to Annie Kilburn's house much in the form of a cat "caterwauling," also Kitty Ellison who pursues the shy Arbuton in *A Chance Acquaintance*, or little fatherless Effie who won't let go of Colville in *Indian Summer*, or little Flavia, Marcia and Bartley's daughter in *A Modern Instance*, or, last but not least, Hannah Morrison thus sized up by Marcia: "You've got a sorrel top in your office that's fiery enough if she's anything like what she used to be when she went to school." (*A Modern Instance* 179) These female instances, most often "intractable," pose a castrating threat to the weaker men, usually son figures, while by contrast they kindle guilty desires in mature men.

Before tackling the analysis of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* from the perspective of this kernel scenario and its dissolution, some general observations need to be made regarding the "anatomic" structure of Howells's texts. The archaic content of the material handled in the stories assumes primary structural forms. The body and its parts or lack of them, along with such metonyms as garments or statues, including a whole range of anatomic correlatives, constitute a rigid critical architectonic.

Thus a close scrutiny of the major works reveals the critical role of the hands and of their lack: amputation, mutilation or mere weakness thereof, thus Colville whose wrist gets caught in the "curb-bit chain

of the horse” as he rescues the ladies in the carriage, a critical juncture in the plot, which then gets shunted off from its father/daughter love line, or Ferris whose injured hand saves him from proving his talent as a painter and having to finish his potential rival’s portrait, an unfinished work which secures his reunion with the loved one. This type of weakness operates in contrast with the play of the powerful hand, or of both hands, signaled among other things by correlative objects such as pianos or type-writers. Lindau actualizes perfectly the latent contrastive scenario of the hands: a former talented pianist, he lost a hand in the War Between the States and now does not earn “a handsome pittance.” (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 83) The organic nature of the material carries over contagiously into sound physicality through a whole complex of satellite signifiers such as “handsome,” a great favorite with Howells, or names of characters endowed with the powerful hand such as Mrs. **Mandel**, who keeps Dryfoos’s daughters in line, or **Manda** (Grier) who runs her best friend’s life for her, or the flamboyant **Hannah** who loves her love “with an H because he is Handsome.” (*A Modern Instance* 235)

The leg plays a similar role as a contrastive index of power or weakness, some illustrations of which may be found in the following examples: **Ben Halleck**, **Bartley Hubbard**’s weak opposite number, walks with a limp due to an injured leg, Beaton, the aptly named man of too many parts, “lags on the art leg,” (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 83) Reverend Peck has a leg cut off by a train, Lemuel is hurt at one leg by a kicking horse, or Colville again, who back in Florence after twenty years stumbles upon the same idiosyncratic figures in town, notably the ominous one-legged young man that he can’t outstrip: “[ . . . ] and the young man with one leg, whom he thought to escape by walking fast, had timed him to a second from the other side of the street” (*Novels 1875-1886* 598). The limp even contaminates the reader’s representation in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. During the calamitous dinner, Bromfield Corey accounts as follows for the success of the novelists that trade on sloppy excess: “It flatters the reader by painting the characters colossal, but with his limp and stoop, so that he feels himself of their supernatural proportions.” (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* 185) One last example, the mighty Lapham harbors in one leg a war trophy, “a ball,” which he has Bartley touch during the interview conducted

by the latter (*The Rise of Silas Lapham* 15). This sample is enough to suggest that the sensitive issues of sexual power in man and woman along with their correlative deficiency play a central role as latent motors of the writing, a fact which bears heavily on Howells's ascetic recommendations in literary esthetics.

In like fashion the house and its "organs," the veranda, the balcony, the windows, the luxuriant garden, along with a string of echoing signifiers, thus "windows," "widows," "windrows," or "bower," "mower," "flower" (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 250), form a nexus of erotically-charged loci. The "L," a glazed veranda, occurs in several texts as one such sensitive spot, most notably in *The Minister's Charge* (Chapter 12), where it is clearly associated with Miss Vane's "man-body," Lemuel, whose initial job is to see to the "furnace." It is most enlightening to correlate this "L" with such other organs as those of another great body, that of New York. There the "L road" races its insolent course grazing the lofty towers of the city, all but erasing them, and looking down on things on the ground "in wanton disregard." (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 159-60) An aloof panoramic body of windows, the L road also offers glimpses of private lives behind windows. Seen or seen from, with it the gaze rules supreme. Lastly widows and windows both convey lacunary presences and surrogate images typical of self-censored forms.

Thus the "L" spawns favorite compensatory associations. It cheers up "widows" and it satisfies jaded couples: "That widow is from the country. When she's been a year in New York she'll be as gay as an L road. [March] He celebrated a satisfaction they both had in the L roads." (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 54) The L road holds such assuaging powers that March turns to it when his wife's nerves get frayed: "He could see that she had got to the end of her nervous strength for the present and he proposed that they should take the elevated road as far as it should carry them into the country [ . . . ]." (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 54-55) Conversely the L road may disclose its nocturnal truth as a phallic monster, so it does to Mrs. March in a dream: "[ . . . ] a hideous thing with square eyes and a series of sections growing darker and then lighter, till the tail of the monstrous articulate was quite luminous again." (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 55) The dreaded thing, as we know, is also the craved thing. Further proof of this lies

in the fact that Mrs. March in her hunt for “rents” uses a “vertebrate,” a compilation of ads she has put together in articulated form to guide her quest.

Having foregrounded in quick strokes the organic and phonetic dominance in the representation, I wish now to focus in detail on the operating modes of some fragments and signifiers in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and train the torch on some structural modalities of the erotic scenario mentioned above, a scenario which I believe to underlie, with variations and evolutions, most of Howells’s texts.

One first broad observation about the figurative rule informing the obsessive scenario is that it is binary and rests upon contrasts. Things are imaged negatively around the core theme of having/having-not, power is conveyed through its opposite, possession through dispossession, a see-saw movement of opposite pairs sustains and, to a certain extent, starves the plot, the more so as the see-saw movement may also affect one and the same person, any “possession” being liable to switch into its reverse. Now, such virtual plots based on symmetry and displacement need some specific elements to carry beyond the mere contrastive depiction of characters, they require, much like children’s tales, misunderstandings and coincidences, and also symbolic bits and fragments as currency for exchange. The object at stake on this symbolic market is always more or less a person vied for, but things get transacted obliquely through metonyms, most commonly a body metonym, thanks to which human pairs are reconfigured. I shall bestow in what follows great attention upon two such fragments, a “shaving,” and a “pin,” which I believe condense much of the symbolic energy of the crisis in such a self-enclosed context as *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

In the novel the crisis arises from a collective visual misunderstanding provoked by the radiant beauty of one of Lapham’s two daughters, Irene, the epitomy of seduction to all eyes around. The other one, Pen, not half as attractive but very sharp-witted, later turns out be the elect. However, behind all this lurks shadow-like another pair, more disturbing, that which Irene and her father potentially form. Let us for a start observe how Irene is depicted, first in relation to her mild suitor, then to her sister, then to her father.

Irene does not fit the stereotype of the leopardess to a T but she does belong to the set of inflammatory young ladies. She has the



russet flamboyance of the disturbing Zerilla and her eyes hint of erotic kindling: “[Her eyes] seemed to burn on what they looked at with a soft, lambent flame.” The very first time she is glimpsed with Tom, it is within the skeleton of her father’s “other” house, and she holds on to the young man’s hand: “she clung to the young man’s hand an imperceptible moment longer than needed be, or else he detained her” (53). Familiarity with Howells’s major texts invites one to decode this typical hand gesture as one of female predation upon a weaker man—Kitty Ellison and a few others bear this out—and/or of defense against the father’s threat, as we shall see further below.

As for Tom, he fits the picture of the shy suitor, and may have clung to the young lady’s hand. Hints of a crush on Irene are unquestionably dropped. However, a meticulous scrutiny discloses the spectral presence of the stronger man behind him, i.e. the father or a father-like figure. For one thing, Tom’s first appearance as a suitor takes place during a visit at the lady’s father’s “anatomic” house and narcissistic shrine. For another, he is described in dwarfing contrast with the ithyphallic carpenter, “with his rule sticking out of his overall pocket,” who is “talking about measurements” with Mrs. Lapham (52). Another sign of woman-related weakness in him crops up when he has his hand crushed by that lady: “Mrs. Lapham gave him a stout squeeze of her comfortable hand.” (52) A gesture typically evocative of domination in Howells’s code of hands. What is more, when Tom makes a first flitting appearance among the Lapham ladies at the sea-side (24), it is on the heels of Mrs. Lapham’s saving of his own mother’s life, he is thus full of gratitude to her and he lavishes as much attention to her as to her resplendent daughter, a fact which baffles the elder woman. Tom starts out as more of a son than a seducer. Indeed, for the young man to achieve manhood, Lapham believes he needs to be taken in hand by him: “I could make a man of that fellow, if I had him in my business.” This sounds much like Dryfoos, who, according to Fulkerson, seeks to avoid his son Conrad ending up behaving “like as if he was a girl.” (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 79) The way to being a real man lies through the father. Tom’s overall portrayal gets inscribed in contrast with the erector father.

At surface level everything points to a love story between Irene and Tom. Down below though, erotic polarities thread a different line. Accordingly, let us see how a fragment, a “shaving,” creeps

up between the two apparent lovers shadowing forth the latent father/daughter crisis fuelling the tale. Let us first note that the word “shaving” is over-determined by masculine and feminine registers, active and passive ones also. It signals both virility and its erasure. Concurrently its curves give it convulsive overtones, both snake-like and feminine. The very word holds a dialectic tension. As we shall see, it is this shaving that drives the scene between Irene and Tom in chapter 9. It sets in motion a sequence of interpreting games, the various steps of which call for close attention.

The first scene “insulates” Irene and Tom in the sanctum of the father’s desire, specifically near the “bow-window”—a key erotic locus—of the young lady’s prospective bedroom. The conversation receives momentum from the novel *Middlemarch* and its awesome seductress Rosamond Vincy. The femme fatale motif comes up straight away as the *primum mobile*. Irene has only scanty and indirect knowledge of literature and small talent for conversation. Thus the talking is done obliquely, via Pen her sister and the books she reads. This quasi-removal of symbolic referentiality from Irene’s speech keeps her a mirroring force, both evocative of and responsive to the lineaments of eroticism, a correlative of the “shaving” which indeed soon engrosses her in mimetic gestural activity: “The girl was silent again. She followed the curl of a shaving on the floor with the point of her parasol.” (104) The adventitious chip spawned by the carpenter’s vigorous rubbings receives a second inscription from Irene as she duplicates its curve with the phallic object in her hand. Irene seems to absorb the “convolutions” of the shaving: “‘I don’t know,’ said Irene, still intent upon the convolutions of the shaving.” (104) The pictured activity, increasing from “curl” to “convolutions,” fascinates Irene.

Stage number two in the sequence, the young lady recoils from pleasurable engrossment in the duplication of the object and its pictured activity, and seems to throw this symbol of a doing into his court: “She gave the shaving a little toss from her, and took the parasol across her lap.” Not surprisingly this potential opening fails to elicit a chiming response from Tom. Rather, the tossing of the shaving is left to work freely its associations. It brings up a prophetic association with the fateful music-room upstairs: “‘We are going to have the back room upstairs for a music-room and library,’ she said abruptly.” (104) Let us mention in parenthesis that a place of music in Howells is most often

a locus for the hands to have free play, a surrogate figuration of sexual activity. Also the place will be one for books, and the question of “bindings” crops up presently, in other words, the theme of physical restraint and intellectual sublimation turns up quickly in conjunction with its opposite, a typical tension that receives its climax in this very spot, since it is precisely in this room that Silas (chapter 24), using “shavings” found on the floor, tries out the only untouched chimney of the house, and unwittingly, as it seems, sets ablaze his cherished but threatened edifice. In the mean time the motif of the “shaving” pursues its function as tensional vehicle, relayed in this by cognate fragments.

Thus, from its very emergence the “shaving” stands as an enigmatic sign destined for deployment and repetition. An incentive to duplication it clinches a hermeneutic and mimetic hold on the text. For further evidence of this, let us consider a second stage in its career or rather the way another one comes as a symbolic prolongation of the previous: “She found another shaving within reach of her parasol, and began poking that with it, and trying to follow it through its folds. Corey watched her awhile.” Tom, reduced to gazing and conjecturing, is pitted against the mysterious ways of woman, along with the question of a possible role for him:

“You seem to have a great passion for playing with shavings,” he said. “Is it a new one?” “New what?” “Passion.” “I don’t know,” she said keeping on with her effort. She looked shyly aslant at him. “Perhaps you don’t approve of playing with shavings?” “Oh, yes, I do. I admire it very much. But it seems rather difficult. I’ve a great ambition to put my foot on the shaving’s tail and hold it for you.” “Well,” said the girl. “Thank you,” said the young man. He did so, and now she ran her parasol point easily through it. They looked at each other and laughed. “That was wonderful. Would you like to try another?” he asked. “No, I thank you,” she replied. “I think one will do.”

(107-108)

What is adumbrated here is a consummation where the woman, ambiguously assisted by the mild young man, plays the instigating and performing part. She symbolizes sexual activity through contrast. With her phallic parasol she is able not only to follow and duplicate the curves but to penetrate them. The young man, for one, is quick to associate the convoluted “shaving” with the slippery threat of a

snake and to act as auxiliary to the woman's craving by stamping on it so that the active force inherent in it may be extinguished, a rather negative contribution. In like fashion Irene's father stamps on the embers to put out, as he believes, the fire that will devour the object of his passion behind his back. In our scene the daughter's mimetic erotic drive has its way and the son figure merely assists the lady in her performance. The erotic drama condensed in the "shaving" and in what goes on around it at the hands of the pair foreshadows the distribution of roles in the crisis to come, with the daughter as the inflammatory agent, the young man as a timorous figure of ambiguity, and the father as the inextinguishable counterpart to Irene.

What comes next in the scene confirms the figurative vocation of the "shaving." The young man lifts it to his nose, which we know to be "aquiline" (65), therefore *potentially* manly, as opposed to his father's "straight" appendage — nothing means anything unless it be through contrast. The "shaving" does partake of a male/female sexual economy, but in our scene the olfactory function of the nose eclipses its previously suggested potential phallic vigor: "It is like a flower. May I offer it to you?" Tom invests the object with a virginal aura and returns it as a chastened genteel homage to its provocative finder. Irene thereupon re-eroticizes it and supplies it with renewed hermeneutic sustenance as indeed she sports and publicizes the offered "flower." Yet, by putting it in her "belt," she places it at a switch between tightening and loosening, a spot of dual potentiality typical of this contrast-based picturing. Necessarily, the publicizing of the "shaving" entails a new reading gaze. Not surprisingly it is that of her sister Pen, the other prong, the one who has brains and through whom the dual interpretive game and dramatic enfolding — they are consubstantial — must pursue its course. Irene has turned the "shaving" into an erotic trophy. Imogene makes an homologous show of erotic victory toward the end of *Indian Summer*: "[. . .] she put it [bouquet] in her belt, and made Colville notice it when he came," (816) a prophetic exhibition for the eyes of the jaded man of her swerving from him and of her imminent conquest of the erotic man.

Pen's wit and facetiousness, her readiness for fanciful and binary interpretations resonate with the dramatic ambivalence of the "shaving" and sweep it ahead toward the center of crisis. If it is a flower, she suggests, it should be put in water, a romantic hypothesis soon

superseded by another, violent and visionary: “But there’s some sense in it. They [shavings] can be used for kindlings when they get old, and you can’t do anything with flowers. Perhaps he’ll get to sending them by the barrel.” (113) Pen gears the “shaving” toward the crucial semantic sphere of ignition via the motifs of accumulation and ageing, a sphere cognate with that of the father. She overturns the gallantly social vocation of it into that of incendiary power related to age. With old flowers nothing can be “done,” activity is ruled out, while with growth of number and years they can be made to bring about a paroxysm of doing and undoing, they are potential fire.

In Irene’s playful handling of it with Tom, the “shaving” epitomizes erotic doing, it flourishes a primary image of sexual action, a pictured event correlative of Irene, in the face of which Tom is reduced to the role of authenticator. Pen, in the reading she gives of her sister’s exhibited “shaving,” prophesies that the act-image is fraught with an explosive crescendo that reaches far beyond any victory Irene might pride herself upon. Pen’s voice becomes yet more oracular when she draws a parallel between the word “shaving” and the word “splinter:” “I hope you didn’t put on that expression when he offered you the shaving. If you did, I don’t believe he’ll ever give you another splinter.” (115) What draws the reader’s attention here is that the very same word “splinter” designates the smoldering bit of wood used by Lapham to light the cigar associated with the testing of the untried chimney and the enjoyment of a transgressive moment in the frigid house, leading up to the destruction of it: “[ . . . ] and then, lighting a cigar with a splinter from the fire, he sat down again to work the scheme out in his own mind.” (294) Through this lexical commutation, the erotic action connected with the effulgent daughter woman and pictured through the “shaving” merges with the virile fragment, here as often associated with a predatory image of the father, as we shall see further on. Laughing Pen makes out the wolf father from a long way off.

One thing should be made clear though, in no way am I saying that Irene may be perceived as a silly sexy girl who flirts flippantly with young men and crows about it. No such thing here. Irene like all the other characters is a conveyor of dual potentialities, and the issue of “doing” is as crucial and problematic for her as it is for the others, if not more as she, of all the characters, is the one most deprived of

logos. Indeed, in a crisis based upon duplicitous images and another's interpretation, to what extent is doing possible? Thus hermeneutics lie at the core of the action and vice versa. Accordingly a new question, or rather a painful anxiety, arises from her necessarily limited cognitive make-up. It occurs in the context of interpretation of the "shaving" with her sister, the brain. What can men "do," if anything, when it comes to making a seducing move toward a woman? This interrogation confirms Irene's tragic status as one confined to the imaging of a dubious act. Here again Pen's reply is prophetic in more ways than one: "Some of'em can't—especially when there's such a tearing beauty around." (115) Beyond the frozen metaphor "tearing beauty," it may be suggested that Irene's stunning beauty is liable to induce in some men castrating effects. More relevantly this "tearing" should be set against the unfixable "rent" through which guilty lust insinuates itself in the music-room and eventually conspires to set Silas's house ablaze. It is indeed the wind blowing through the rent in a window screen that sweeps the shavings together, shavings which thus heaped offer the fuel for lighting the fire from which the cigar itself. . . . A concatenation of adjacent items and signifiers bring about the climactic event for which Silas is responsible but it is made possible by a gap. An image suggesting action, Irene partakes of the rent, the unnamable gap that lies at the core of the father/daughter crisis.

Without losing sight of the critical "shaving" I wish now to explore the figure of Irene in her relation to the stronger man, her father. This new pair tells another tale, nocturnal and gloomy. The love scenario has been overturned: Eros/Irene has just heard the news of her demise, she is not the one loved, Pen is. Upon hearing this, she becomes Iron/Irene, she drags her father through a ruthless nightly routine. First she repels any placatory approach from her compassionate mother, thus establishing contrastively that it is a matter exclusively between the man/father and her: "'Don't touch me,' she said icily." (230). Then she imposes silence first on her mother: "'I don't want to talk about that. Tell him [father] to get ready.'" Then on her father: "'Don't talk, papa. I don't want any one should talk with me.'" (231) With dialogue thus ruled out, gestures and images hold full sway, the nightmarish has free rein. Iron/Irene captures her father and marches him through the night straight to the object of his lust,

the new house, and she strikes it off with one verbal stroke: “‘I shall never live in it,’ and she began to walk on.” In other words, you shall not have me, you shall not have it. “The shaving-Irene-new house-father” connection receives here further substantiation, along with the prospect of a catastrophic outcome. Indeed the scene of Irene’s refusal in front of the new house that night is revived on that later night when Lapham gazes at the sealed windows shortly before the fire (292-93) and also after the fire has been put out (297), as we shall see. The correlation is unmistakable. Irene’s refusal heralds another dismissal, much closer in time: she announces to her father that she will leave the present home and go back to the native family place, Lapham, as if to say that her old man has forfeited any claim to the family name. Quite a prophetic dispossession as indeed Silas eventually has to go back to the old country. The father/daughter erotic economy mediated by the new house has received further substantiation of the explosive threat it carries.

The next stage in the nocturnal sequence led by Irene is transacted through another mediating object, more clearly erotic and mimetic of the daughter woman, a cat. After her stark dismissal of the new house and her reiteration of her wish for silence, Irene makes a beeline for the enticing bright lights of a shop-sign shining in the dark: “She halted him once more before the red and yellow lights of an apothecary’s window.” (231) Standing on the threshold she explains that she must have some sleeping medication, a request frowned upon her father. But the latter can’t do anything about stopping her, she has him in hand, so to speak. The apothecary advises bromide that, by a mistake typical of the binary displacements recurrent in this dream-like elaboration, he believes to be intended for the father. What is more, as they enter the shop the father seems overwhelmed by a general detumescence, so to speak, the daughter looks like stone, and an insidious cat creeps up and rubs itself against the father’s leg, a member whose erotic value, as we recall, is heightened by the presence of a “ball” from the war:

[Irene] She did not show any emotion; her face was like a stone, while her father’s expressed the anguish of his sympathy. He looked as if he had not slept for a week; his fat eyelids drooped over his glassy eyes, and his cheeks and throat hung flaccid. He started as the apothecary’s

cat rubbed itself against his leg; and it was to him that the man said, "You want to take a spoonful of that as long as you are awake. I guess it won't take many to fetch you."

The scene may be read in two non-mutually exclusive ways. After an outright rejection of the father's desired object, Irene drags him to the place of utmost castigation, where castration, colliding with desire, is symbolically enforced. The father's defeat is established. Concurrently one may consider that the father's threatening erotic drive is confirmed by the apothecary's mistake, Silas does need medication to curb an incoercible urge, and the target of it is the forever irrepressible return of the cat daughter. No interpretation is ever stabilized when dealing with such obsessive figuration resting upon on repeated oscillations. However, at this juncture, what is shown contrastively is that Irene has the whip-hand, as her hand language attests: "Irene came closer up to him and took his arm. He laid his heavy paw on her gloved fingers." (232) She does the grabbing and her hands are wrapped protectively. Such gestures are by now familiar to us. The brutal closure of the scene asserts further her empowerment through dispossession: "'Give me that bottle,' she said, when he opened the door at home for her, and she ran up to her own room." (232)

Thus as soon as she receives the news of her own demise, Irene sets in motion a nightly errand that thrusts her mother, the wife, out of the way and seizes her father, the husband, to drag him to the symbolic collapse of his deep desire, the daughter/house. She consecrates negatively the father/daughter erotic tension and her vengeful triumph over her father through symbolic dispossession.

I wish now to illustrate very briefly how erotic feline imagery may permeate any area of the novel, sometimes beyond gender distinctions, which confirms yet again that the characters like their object correlatives are essentially conveyors of the basic critical values. Thus the masculine pair Rogers/Lapham falls under the operative rule of the guilty scenario between the father and the cat daughter. The unstoppable return of Rogers in Lapham's feet bears a kindred obsessional cast. At first glance, though, Rogers looks nothing like a sultry redhead and yet . . . First nudged out wrongly from their partnership by Lapham, Rogers causes the latter's final ruin by returning time and again to mew on his doorstep and profit by his former partner's



guilty feelings. Indeed he drags him into a flood of debt that provokes his financial “drowning,” following transactions involving “**wild-cat** stocks” (245), or “**wild-cat** securities” (281), and “**wild-cat** patents” (301). A feline predator lurks behind the murky figure of Rogers. He is even described as “tempter” (311) and hugging predator: “he’s got a drowning man’s grip round his neck.” (256) Insidiously it is tigris Rogers that brings about Lapham’s financial death by water. By fire and water, thus falls the House of Lapham.

Let us now leave the cat to its stealthy prowl and return to our “shaving.” It resurfaces in chapter 19, just a little before the night scene at the apothecary’s shop, in company with a “pin,” its most thought-provoking symbolic counterpart. The scene describes the handing over of power from Irene to Pen. Irene has just been officially deposed and, true to her silent ways, she turns to symbolic objects to convey her message, she lays down the public insignia of her previous conquest in her sister’s lap. She is not as violent about it as Christine Dryfoos, witness the following quote from *A Hazard of New Fortunes*: “‘Here are your presents.’ With both hands she flung the jewels—pins and rings and earrings and bracelets [ . . . ]. She stood a moment to pull the intaglio ring from the finger where Beaton put it a year ago, and dashed that at her father’s plate.” (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 361) The intaglio ring was indeed offered by her father to Christine, it was later moved to a different finger by the quasi lover Beaton, it then goes violently back to the father after Beaton’s dismissal from the Dryfoos home at the hands of the father’s employed chaperone Mrs. Mandel, to return eventually to old Dryfoos’s hand and imprint its mark on Conrad’s face seen as he lies dead from having deflected death from Lindau. Quite a long-range ring indeed.

Here is now the quote concerning Irene and Pen: “She had a pine-shaving fantastically tied up with a knot of ribbon in her hand. She held it a moment; then . . . she went up to her, and dropped it in her lap without a word.” (250) Their gestures clearly echo one another, but here Irene is dealing with her sister, not with her father, that, she does later, and we have seen that she could be as tough as Christine in punishing him. What I wish to point out here is that under the “pine” of the “pine-shaving” lies a “pin” which we must open up.

In the set of relics handed over to Pen, lies a “pin” that first appears in chapter 17. The moment and mode of its emergence shed some

light on its symbolic value. Irene has a sudden craving for it a little after, in the narrative sequence, Tom has revealed to Pen that she is the one he loves. The structural severing off of the scenes ensures the confinement of information to circumscribed binary areas, still a further form of silencing yielding primacy to the figurative language of images. And images don't lag behind, they connect across barriers metonymically. Thus, although Irene does not yet know of her demise, her craving occurs in sync with the her chronological dispossession: "I guess I shall get one of those pins that Nanny Corey had in her hair," and a few lines below we read: "I should have liked to have Pen go with me." (219) Another clue that this sudden craving is closely linked to Pen, and functions as a symbolic stop-gap for her loss. Also this "pin" echoes phonetically the name Pen and announces itself as a potential suture.

The signifier "pin" polarizes the latent scenario of erotic loss and compensation. However, with Irene sidelined, it takes the other woman sexually connected to the father to carry on the task of representing the motif of erotic betrayal. Thus Mrs. Lapham is enlisted to convey figuratively her husband's betrayal in rival collaboration with Silas's fiery mare. Very much like Irene in the next chapter, the wife targets the father, her husband. She sends word to his office that she needs him rather urgently for a "ride:" "Silas, I should like to ride with you this afternoon. Can't you come home early?" (218) The erotic tenor of the demand here again finds its confirmation contrastively. Indeed the husband does comply but, to his wife's great annoyance, he comes over, hitched, so to speak, to his favorite mare, whom — the mare is referred to as "she" — we know he loves to "let out" and whose "silent" motion and "alien force" forms a "tight fit" with him (32-34) Mrs. Lapham is not amused: "I wish you hadn't brought this fool of a horse . . . I wanted to talk." The restrictions placed by deeper forces upon interlocation to the benefit of images come up again in this "either/or" situation. The husband's reply leaves no doubt as to the fact that sexual fulfillment has priority over speech and that release is obtained thanks to a fiery and silent "alien": "Well, I can't drive this mare and talk too, I'll sell out altogether . . . She'll be quiet enough when she's has her **spin**" (220) The triangle finds a new formulation metonymically, with the mare as the desired alien. More to the point

here, is the interplay between “pin” and “spin,” where one can see the snake “s” hitch itself to the “pin,” a configuration that overcomes via this letter collage the inevitable successiveness of the oscillations punctuating the plot line, and that mirrors the tensional and paradoxical duality of the core material. Here the frictional values of release and reparation become condensed in this telling letter conflation.

The “pin” closes momentarily the scenario. Irene is by now turned into stone and marginalized. Pen’s vocation gears her toward suture and reparation. It therefore falls to a new conveying agent to materialize obliquely Silas’s adulterous passion. An opportunely fluttering scrap of paper correlated to the stunning redhead Zerilla and her boss Silas performs the task of mongering a hint of betrayal to the wife. This spontaneous leak through a “crevice”—another necessary rent—of a personal document belonging to Lapham bears a strong suggestion of the latter’s dalliance with a daughter-like woman. Could the stunning redhead Zerilla be Silas’s mistress? A true false lead all the more worthy of attention as the document carries not only a record of sums of money but a hieroglyph of what could be read as an apposition of the feminine and the masculine: “Wm. M” (267) This fluttering leak however does not elicit any immediate response in Mrs. Lapham. Here again silence or lack of response heighten the mimetic over the dramatic. Thus, hardly discovered by the wife the scrap of paper goes to sleep or rather into gestation in her work-basket. Mrs. Lapham’s role here barely exceeds that of a figurative extra.

Our scandalous drowning fragment is revived in the next chapter, (23) in blatant correlation with the fire motif. Let us observe the sequence. Lapham announces to his wife that he is in serious financial trouble: “the new house has got to go,” (271) and that he has “sent orders to shut down at the Works.” This prompts in the narration the following comment filtered through the wife’s consciousness: “The fire had never been out before since it was first kindled. She knew how he had prided himself upon that; how he had bragged of it to every listener and had always lugged the fact in as the last expression of his sense of success.” (272)

Lapham’s success and demise both trigger associations with the fire motif. Interestingly a whole metonymical network based on the hot and the cold, with redness in common, is in motion. Irene, as we

have seen, has already tumbled into the category of stone and ice. In our sequence this duality assumes a kindred tension, as we are about to see.

Hearing of the extinguishing of fires, the wife worries about the “hands:” “I don’t know what’s going to become of the hands in the middle of the winter [ . . . ].” (272) This concern of hers reverberates with what we know of the crucial role of the word in Howells’s writing and confirms yet again the high metonymical density of this very organic fiction. More to the point, it anticipates the reference to pretty Zerilla’s “red fingers,” as she plies her type-writer’s keyboard in an unheated room at work, a key scene explored ahead. (315)

Thus, our obscure scrap of paper awakens in a context of fire and it reactivates the connection between the father/husband and the young cat lady. Here too, images thrive upon minimal interlocution. Lapham merely replies, “Oh, —it’s nothing,” to his wife’s question: “Who is ‘Wm.M?’” Dialogue remains lacunary and fruitless. Under such circumstances the scrap of paper secures further range through further fragmentation. Indeed we read that “[Lapham] tore the paper into small pieces and dropped them into the fire.” One scrap escapes combustion to be stumbled upon, needless to say, by Mrs. Lapham, the next morning, a characteristic delay that, here again, offers the fragment scope for its mute figurative labor. It bears a cipher not far removed from the previous one: “Mrs. M.” The woman/man suggestion gains momentum and no dialogue will detract from its enigmatic visual presence as indeed the husband, in typical reticence, denies his opportunely patient wife any explanation. While the reader receives the needed information through the narrator’s voice, Mrs. Lapham, unenlightened as she remains, focalizes the enigmatic spectacularity of the fragment, and her dazedness nourishes the contrastive visual potency of the adulterous scenario, as we shall see.

This cryptic force releases itself in a prophetic visual explosion, when, thanks to an opportune coincidence of the subjacent scenario, the wife falls foul of the effulgent redhead at the very spot where her husband should have been. The sequence needs to be observed in detail: one morning, as he turns up at work Lapham finds the beautiful Zerilla, his typist, sitting bundled up in her outdoor jacket and typing with her fingers all red. She explains that there is “something the matter with the steam.” The lack of “steam,” a nicely ambiguous

word, has the fiery young lady constricted and numbed. This constriction within a garment belongs to what might be called the typology of the “overcoats,” these sorts of strait-jackets that all but paralyze the characters, more often than not male ones. Beaton, for instance, stifled by his “idiotic fur-coat” and simultaneously impeded by the strike-bound surface car network, a crippling fact which will force him to walk in the hot weather and “mount the stairs of the Elevated station.” (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 353) Conversely, the timorous Arbuton achieves symbolic power when he rescues the perky Kitty from the fangs of a hound and has his “overcoat” torn by this animal. He then gives up the torn “overcoat” to the “cooper,” another figure of constriction, who helped him get rid of the dog. This shedding of the overcoat marks a turning point in the plot through a relaxing of the young man’s inhibitions. In our sequence Lapham offers his typist a kindred loosening. Just as he loves to “let out” his fiery mare, so here he lets in his secretary. Indeed he releases her from her strait-jacket by having her sit at his desk to practice her two-handed skill in his office: “Well, take your writer into my room, there’s a fire in the stove there,’ said Lapham passing out.” (315) Here the focus is placed on the transfer of the “type-writer,” a correlative of the potential power involved in the use of both hands, into the place of the “fire.” Also most noteworthy is the fact that hardly has he had the young woman ascend his fire-heated throne with her two-handed scepter, when he “passes out,” an ambiguous formulation that carries overtones of self-extinction. Through this contrastive transfer of the frozen redhead into his fire-heated room with her type-writer, Lapham symbolically brings alive the potential fire in her: he implants in his personal sanctum the eroticism of the fire that will eventually put him out. His passing out is also prophetic of his leaving his “new house” to burn behind his back. The “want of visible agency” is here again nicely constructed.

The follow-up, with the wife’s coincidental arrival upon the scene shortly after her husband has left it, invites the comment that Lapham, through his displaced agency, has been involved in the preparation of an adulterous *mise-en-scène* for his wife’s eyes. Her metonymical presence as the gazer seals the transgressive character of Lapham’s introduction of the frozen fiery lady in his heated sanctum. Indeed Mrs. Lapham turns up out of the blue this very morning with the

intention of apologizing to her husband about Rogers, his other wild-cat tempter. Strikingly, the wife wears a veil, like a widow, allegedly so as not to be recognized by Tom. The veil acts as another sign of the wife's symbolic dispossession by the fiery lady. Simultaneously the veil operates as a curtain ensuring the binary closure typical of such scenes, with speech impeded by a separating agent, and information held in from neighboring presences. The third party can only turn up in a delayed and/or adventitious manner. The curtain/veil also gives the scene a clandestine and voyeuristic cast that sharpens the transgressive nature of the vision. The wife's entering the office unrecognized, therefore as both an absence and a presence, ensures that the "show" explodes in full scandalous exhibition. Sitting behind her husband's desk, a very pretty redhead who does not know who is facing her, has her two hands dancing away on the keyboard in full unconcern: "Instead, a very pretty girl sat at his desk, operating a type-writer. She seemed quite at home, and she paid Mrs. Lapham the scant attention [ . . . ]." (316) A crucial thing to remember here is that the stunning Zerrilla is indirectly another Lapham daughter since her own father deflected upon himself the bullet aimed at Lapham by a sharp-shooter during the Civil War: "I hated to look at him after it was over not so much because he'd got a ball that was meant for me by a sharp-shooter—he saw the devil take aim and he jumped to warn me [ . . . ]." (192) Zerrilla thus crystallizes the lurking presence of the daughter in the mistress. Also she blends together the erotic fire of the mistress/daughter and the debt to the savior. Quite a potent, paradoxical tension.

Death indeed stalks about in the core scenario. What follows in the sequence yields some valuable clues as to this. Thus, what bewilders the wife after her initial shock at finding the redhead instead of her husband is the sight of the girl's and Silas's garments as lingering presences:

Her hat and sack hung on a nail in one, and Lapham's office coat, looking intensely like him to his wife's familiar eye hung on a nail in the other corner; and Mrs. Lapham liked even less than the girl's good looks this domestication of her garments in her husband's office.

(316)

The arresting nature of the adulterous deed is sketched out starkly for the gazer by the simultaneous presence of the incriminating garments, a sort of still-life freezing agency in guilty fixedness. The gar-

ments exhibit for the wife's eyes a bemusing alienation of the familiar, she is exiled from "him/home" by the sight of her husband's mimetic coat in proximity with the girl's domesticated one. However the vestigial clothes are proximate but separate, a gap remains. Activity is held still. For the gazer, bereavement seems more to the point than mere dispossession by a rival. Accordingly, such obliquely transgressive scenes make the transgressor one forever gone from, and forever running after, his truly desired object, one doomed to pursue rather than to win, and to a certain extent a loser lost to his home life. Under this phantasmal regime of negative suggestion, defeat has precedence over success as things are always seen from a losing gazer's point of view. The scenario never overtakes the courted goal, it displaces paradoxical images conjoining fire and mortal petrification. Indeed hanging garments have to do with death. One example from several, the reader will remember Miss Vane desperately seeking, beneath the glazed L of her house, her indispensable furnace-man, Lemuel, who unbeknown to her has quit his job, and only finding vestiges of him: "On their accustomed nail, just inside the furnace-room, hung the blue overalls. They looked like a suicidal hanging there." (*The Minister's Charge* 121)

In a bid to substantiate further the preceding remarks upon body metonyms and mortal petrification, I will say a few words about statues, these frozen bodies so often encountered in Howells's fiction. We may start by remembering that Irene, hardly deposed, becomes a statue, she imposes a chilly order upon everyone and everything around her: "She herself seemed as steady and strong as rock." (232) Petrification is synonymous with indomitable ascendancy: "Then Irene descended upon the other rooms, which she set in order, and some of which she fiercely swept and dusted . . . with certain silences which represented the moments when she stood stock-still." (233) In the last chapter her chilling ways clearly assume the signs of a castrating force: "She had lost all her babyish dependence and pliability; she was like iron; and here and there she was like a cutting edge." (327) I described earlier Irene's impervious sovereignty during the nightly errand with her father. With loss comes absolute rigidity, an aloof presence/absence, a form of bemusing mortal petrification.

The reader will also remember the gimcrack-filled drawing-room with statues where, opportunely left alone one night, Pen has a shock upon discovering Tom sitting amid the tawdry clutter in the dimly-lit

room, ushered there through some mistake of the maid's. Another mistake, Tom has come to meet Lapham. This accidental chain leads up to a tableau with marble statues "representing allegories" brooding upon the clutter in an atmosphere of mourning:

These phantasms added their chill to that imparted by the walls, the landscapes, and the carpets, and contributed to the violence of the contrast when the chandelier was lighted up full glare, and the heat of the whole furnace welled up from the registers into the quivering atmosphere on one of the rare occasions when the Laphams invited company. Corey had not been in this room before . . . Penelope looked into this [sitting-room] first, and then she looked into the parlor, with a smile that broke into a laugh as she discovered him standing under the single burner, which the second-girl had lighted for him in the chandelier. (203)

Contrast is what matters in this description. The chill of the "phantasms" means little unless set against the few occasions when lights glare and fire flares. This is the alien place, the father's other place, the two-faced grotto. Accordingly, Tom having come to see the father but seeing the daughter instead, is first shown into the room of the frozen bodies, a place which the father may on occasions heat up violently. A switch-place where castration may be reversed into its opposite. Also to be noted, it is the "*second-girl*" who puts him there, a sort of spectral Irene. Better still, she has lighted a burner, she has the igniting power, a feature which confirms her structural symmetry with the father. However, she has lighted only one burner. Pen's humorous interpretation of the tableau, as ever, hits the bull's eye and: "I don't understand how you came to be put in there,' she said, as she led the way to the cozier place, 'unless it was because Alice thought you were only here on probation, anyway.'" (203) The young man must first be put to the test of the chilly place with potential heat, a glimmering light held out by the spectral other, before being taken into the "cozier" place. Is it any wonder then that this "probation" scene just precedes the passage into the snug sitting-room where Tom declares his flaring passion to Pen. Tom and Pen's incipient love story is beginning to break the deadlock of exclusive eitherness. The frozen duality held up for a belated gaze is thawing out into sequential activity. This time the gazer is a sharp-witted interpreter dealing face to face with a living object, or rather a subject, not a fragment, no a/tom, a full



Tom. Only speech can do that. The ominous father/daughter trail is receiving a promise of genteel conjuration thanks to the literate couple.

One last word about statues. The reader will remember that at the beginning of the last chapter, Pen, in a closed-off scene, receives her prospective parents-in-law alone, without her own parents, in the cluttered room with the statues. Here, though, it is the group of “phantasms” forming “the Emancipation group” that looms to prominence. According to the narrator, she has chosen to receive them in this crowded room because she wants to make a clean breast of the worst and relieve herself of it first thing, as an indispensable preamble: “The girl had instinctively judged best that they should know the worst at once, and she let them have the full brunt of the drawing-room while she was screwing up her courage to come down and see them.” (327) A “probation” scene for Pen, a wish to own up to the presence of an evil thing about to be overcome, an “emancipation” scene. Yet this avowal of hers will not assume its full import unless read in terms of the double threat posed on the Corey couple by the aforementioned statues:

She was afterwards—months afterwards—able to report to Corey that when she entered the room his father was sitting with his hat on his knees, a little tilted away from the Emancipation group, as if he expected the Lincoln to hit him with that lifted hand of benediction; and that Mrs. Corey looked as if she were not sure but the Eagle pecked. (327)

Corey the father, described from the beginning as an idle aesthete lacking the Roman nose, seems to be ducking away from the great emancipator’s powerful hand, as if its generous sweep were about to release not so much the slaves but rather its castrating force upon him. Here again a paradoxical figure, the binding liberator. The mother also seems under a threat, namely that of the erotic prickings of the beaked fowl. The smoldering ember in the frozen body is released through a contrastive scene of fixed agency. Irene, in her two successive avatars partakes of the father’s dual threat, burning and castration. Pen, who pertains to speech, belongs to the temperate middle-room that will survive the burned house.

After this swerve into the realm of stone figures, let us head back to the trail of fire blazed by our fragments. A third slip of paper bearing

a strong intimation of adultery between Zerrilla and Lapham reaches the wife. It comes obliquely from Rogers, as we discover belatedly. It is a poison-penned anonymous letter, a veiled letter so to speak: “Ask your husband about his lady copying-clerk. A Friend and a Well-wisher.” (310) The two “Ws” echo those in the previous fragments and they corroborate the view that Rogers reiterates his solicitations in the same wave of compelling onslaughts as the censored erotic object. Here again what strikes the observer is the prevalence of a primary mode of inscription marked by imaging letters; a language in the making, still between mimetic indexes and symbolic letters. This must be thought alongside the fragmented nature of language as symbolized by the three successive bits of fluttering paper. Language in the whole novel is shown to be in crisis, both through the fragmentation just mentioned and through Lapham’s verbal collapse during the fateful dinner. With Pen absent (“It vexed him to think she had not come; she could have talked as well as any of them”), he either cannot keep up with the various interlocutors, he is left out of the social exchange, or he tumbles into the opposite extreme, rambling away flood-like and deluging his commensals. Furthermore, when one considers the fact that the greater part of the talk is devoted to books, sentimentalism, love stories, self-sacrifice, popular novelists, one cannot fail to see how self-reflexive this novel is, a feature common to many Howells books. To connect us back with the fire motif, I wish merely to add that in the preceding chapter (13), after Pen has stated her refusal to go the dinner at the Coreys and left her mother to struggle with the writing of the acceptance in her primary school-teacher’s “round hand,”—here too language is in training—Lapham has the “furnace-man” post the letter:

Penelope had gone to her room, without waiting to be asked to advise or criticise; but Irene had decided upon the paper, and, on the whole, Mrs. Lapham’s note made a very decent appearance on the page. When the furnace-man came, the Colonel sent him out to post it in the box at the corner of the square.

The role distribution shows through unmistakably. Pen withdraws from the writing process, she opens the critical language gap, her fiery sister chooses the material, the flesh, on which the basic round hand of the mother will inscribe itself in a primary fashion and the father

puts fire to paper, so to speak, in having the furnace-man mail the letter.

It remains now for the pair “shaving/pin” to bring the trail of fire to its climactic tension. Some other fragments already touched upon will feed into our reflection through an illuminating parallel with a scene from *A Modern Instance*. The sequence opens with Lapham walking toward his glorious new house:

[ . . . ] he left his office early, and went to look at the house and try to bring himself to some conclusion there. The long procession of lamps on the beautiful street was flaring in the red sunset towards which it marched, and Lapham, with a lump in his throat, stopped in front of the house and looked at their multitude.

The thought of losing this glowing beauty brings a lump to his throat. But the fiery lady already refuses to give herself away. Indeed, when he trains his brimming eyes upon the windows, a most critical locus, he reads refusal there. The “window-spaces,” not being glazed with glass, contrary to the erotic L or veranda, are “glazed with white linen:”

He turned and looked up, as he had often done, at the window-spaces neatly glazed with white linen, and recalled the night when he had stopped with Irene before the house, and she had said she would never live there, and he had tried to coax her into courage about it.

(292-93)

The correlation between the new house and Irene declares itself openly. The virginal white linen shielding the critical gaps fly the flag of untouchability, and it brings on the memory of the punitive night errand, with Lapham remembered as the tempter coaxing the young lady into penetration. As I said before, windows are key erotic loci and signifiers in Howells’s imaginary. Women and windows seem hardly separable. Out of so many, here is just one example from chapter 2 of our novel. Lapham is riding with his wife in the dashing cutter pulled by his fiery mare: “There were women’s faces at many of the handsome windows [ . . . ].”

An almost compulsive pairing seems to establish itself bringing in its train the inevitable “handsome.” The window and the gaze have from time out of mind been associated in Western consciousness. Nevertheless, what is particularly striking here is that windows are, as often

in Howells's fiction, critically associated with the word "glaze," a gaze into which a stealthy L has crept up. Here most notably the windows have been glazed with linen. Not much of a find for sure, yet one that brings to the fore the potency of letter and sound contamination in Howells's highly self-censored creation. Eroticism encodes itself quite visibly on the flesh of language like tattoos.

The second stage of our sequence has Lapham penetrating into the frigid house:

He unlocked the temporary door with the key he always carried, so that he could let himself in and out whenever he liked, and entered the house dim and very cold with the accumulated frigidity of the winter in it, and looking as if the arrest of work upon it had taken place a thousand years ago.

The freezing of the agency through belatedness and arrest noted as a structural trait in previous scenes, here assumes climactic visibility. This account bears a typical erotic paradox at its center. Lapham carries the phallic key around all the time so that he may call on his beauty any time he pleases, yet the house does not seem to have been visited for ages. True, Lapham has been rushed off his feet with work, and lack of money has brought the construction to a stop. Still, what matters here again is contrast, specifically the contrast between the unrestricted erotic potentiality of repeated ins and outs for Lapham, and the frigidity of the arrested interior echoing the denial sported by the virginal glazing. Irene's statuary petrification reverberates with that of the house. Once inside, Lapham "explores" his house much like one breaking and entering, in this primary darkness he recognizes the smell of his own paint named after his wife, the Persis Brand that Seymour the architect had insisted that they experiment in the hope that they might use it for the decoration of Mrs. Lapham's room. Married life, adulterous intimations, conjugal smells are wafted in contrast with the smell of untouched wood. Inevitably Lapham's gaze is drawn to the windows but the "linen sashes" will only yield enough light for him to make out the wood shavings left to lie about by the powerful carpenter:

The floors were strewn with shavings and chips which the carpenter had left, and in the music-room, these had been blown into long irregular **windrows** by the draughts through a wide **rent** in the linen sash. (293)

Our “shaving” is back with its charge of fatality. The manly carpenter has deposited his inflammable chips. The rent too is back, this gap previously mentioned in the context of Irene’s “tearing beauty.” And it forms a gap in the flag of refusal, a crack in the virginal shield, another oxymoronic tension. Yet before pushing the analysis through this most revealing breach, a word is to be said about these “windrows” encountered in a key chapter of *A Modern Instance*, with its alternative spelling “winrows.”

In the passage I am setting against the fire scene in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Marcia, little inclined to wreak vengeance upon her absconding yet still pined-for husband, and Ben Halleck, her limping undeclared suitor, are on board a train that carries them on a punitive mission led by Marcia’s father. He has indeed vowed to stop Bartley getting an illegal divorce out West. Marcia with the weaker limping man at her side is gazing from the window at the landscape:

But in another breath she rose from this desolation, and was talking with impersonal cheerfulness of the sights that the car-window showed. As long as the light held they passed through the same opulent and monotonous landscape . . . , and the farmers were riding their plows, or heaping into vast **winrows** for burning the winter-worn stalks of the last year’s crop. Where they came to a stream the landscape was roughened into low hills [ . . . ]. If there was any difference between Ohio and Indiana, it was that in Indiana the spring night, whose breath softly buffeted their cheeks through the open window, had gathered over those eternal corn-fields, where the long **winrows**, burning on either hand, seemed a trail of fiery serpents writhing away from the train as it roared and clamored over the track.

(*A Modern Instance* 567)

The jilted Marcia finds reparation in the late afternoon sights offered by bountiful nature; she achieves “impersonal cheerfulness,” this dissolution of the self so crucial in Howells’s conception of existential equilibrium. Also Marcia’s regained cheerfulness comes with the still sun-lit vista of men “riding their plows.” “Windows,” “plows,” “winrows,” the sound/letter pattern gains momentum through characteristic contamination. Eroticism rears its head and darkness gathers. Indeed with reparation it soon brings along its dubious inflammatory potential. The men are “heaping” into “winrows” vegetal bits of the previous winter, stiffened things, stalks. A pattern of winter-wrought accumulation and drying very similar to that of the shavings

in the music-room emerges here too. With night “gathering,” another increasing pattern, the vision turns lurid and infernal, the winrows are becoming “fiery serpents” and the train races ruthlessly through the night much like the “L road” of New York. The soothing tableau offered by the train windows has switched to a nightmarish vision of hell.

Not surprisingly, the father has center stage in what follows on the heels of the ominous sights. Indeed the old man, who, in typical predatory fashion, chews bits of wood, has become a correlative of the indomitable train. Chewing the cud of vengeance, he can think of only one thing, to regain his daughter stolen from him by the seducer Bartley her husband who eventually ran away from her, adding insult to injury. During this chase after the dispossessor the father gains a more and more threatening ascendancy over his companions, particularly his own daughter, as the rest of the scene bears out. Indeed, toward midnight the little “posse” get off the train and make for the waiting-rooms pending the arrival of a connecting train. Marcia trembles: “Marcia clung to Halleck’s arm, and shivered convulsively. [Her father] **stalked** beside them with a demoniac vigor.” (*A Modern Instance* 569) She clings to the weaker man, the one who limps, to fend off her father’s threat or more exactly she is made to signal the threat contrastively. At the station, another opportune coincidence, some women are cleaning the ladies’ waiting-groom. Accordingly the female travelers are requested to go into the men’s tenebrous waiting room, in the middle of which the father holds sway menacingly:

There was no choice; Olive went in first and took the child on her lap, where it straight away fell asleep; the squire found a seat beside them, and sat erect, looking round on the emigrants [ . . . ]. Marcia stopped Halleck at the threshold. ‘Stay out with me,’ she whispered. I want to tell you something. ‘I am not going on! I am going back.’

(*A Modern Instance* 569)

This threshold is homologous to the one Irene vows that she will never cross during the night errand with her father. To conclude this excursion into a parallel scene let us say that, on board the train, the window brings on a dual scenery: for Marcia, as wounded wife gazer, a healing vista of earthly eroticism, for Marcia, as daughter gazer, a vision of nightly serpent-strewn hell. The blissful impersonality brought on by the vision from the window tumbles into horror

of the ghoulish nocturnal father. The window is indeed the critical focal point and threshold of the father/daughter erotic threat, it is the glazed place of a potential blazing and darkness.

Let us now return to the rent in the linen cover. It is through this gap in the virginal shield that the fire, snakelike, insinuates itself: “[ . . . ] these [shavings and chips] had been blown into long irregular windrows by the draughts through a wide rent in the linen sash.” It is through this crack in the shield that the ill wind of criminal desire has accumulated the igniting material for its kindling. It is precisely this gap which ought to be sealed. Lapham sets about it to no avail:

Lapham tried to **pin** [the rent] up but failed and stood looking out of it over the water. The ice had left the river, and the low tide lay smooth and red in the light of sunset. The Cambridge flats showed the sad, sodden yellow of meadows stripped bare after a long sleep under snow, the naked trees, the spires and roofs had a black outline, as if they were objects in a landscape of the French school. (293-94)

It is exactly when the need for sealing the gap crops up that the object and signifier “pin” resurfaces. Let us note as well that the rent also operates from inside out symmetrically to the earlier inroad of the wind. To be more precise, it functions as a peeping-tom’s key-hole; through it a winter vision offers itself to Lapham, the statuary side of the archetypal scene. Lapham is made a voyeur, a typical deviation of eroticism into watching another’s agency, but the scene peeped at bears the mark of no agency. The “French” landscape gives no suggestion of lusty reveling, it is an aftermath, the bleak sight of an after-fire.

Another attempt to seal the rent occurs, fruitlessly again, when the law creeps up on Lapham in the form of a coincidental policeman. This repressive irruption follows a sequence punctuated by three highly noteworthy stages: first Lapham lights a fire in the virginal chimney using the windrowed shavings as fuel, then, after peeping out at the bleak winter-charred landscape, he resolves not to give up his dazzling beauty of a house, thirdly he lights a cigar suiting mimetic action to his decision not to give up the joys his fiery lady house procures him. This lighting of the phallic cigar is the critical hinge upon which the scene turns to bring about destruction. This lighting is indeed fraught with an illusion of extinction that will lead

to the house burning down behind Lapham's back. Delayed action here again prevails.

The policeman's irruption inscribes graphically the alienness of Lapham; it sets off the intrusiveness of his nocturnal visit. He is caught playing with fire in his own murky alien attic by a patrolman. The latter's presence builds up the repressive contrast further when, accepting a cigar from Lapham, he says he will smoke it outside. He won't cross that threshold. The policeman's attempt then to fix the rent himself confirms further the guilty charge figured by the gap. Transgressive fulfillment is in the air, with active though fruitless repression as its companion piece. Forces and counter-forces are escalating. However the rent resists patching up, desire still outweighs repression:

The policeman looked about him with an eye of inspection. 'You want to get that linen window, there, mended up'; 'Yes, I'll speak to the builder about that. It can go for one night.' The policeman went to the window and failed to **pin** the linen together where Lapham had failed before. 'I can't fix it.'

The law attempts to fix the rent with a pin, yet with no success. Lapham claims he can fix it. But there is no fixing it. The "pin" remains a symbolic solution, a forever delayed cessation of the guilty impulse through a conquering of basic instincts and an access to the language of maturity. Is it an accident then that Pen, the pin correlative, turns up with her father once things have taken advantage of the unfixable gap? Lapham's displacing of the agency surfaces in an ironical manner when, after enjoying his cigar in the music-room and returning home hopeful of a financial "retrieval," he "**made** Penelope go to the theater with him." (294) Lapham displaced Pen to another scene of action. He blindfolded his own displaced agency. Human action is on the stage. Artistic symbolization cocks a snook at falsely unassigned doings. Pen and her father can only be witnesses. Pen's presence next to him echoes retrospectively the failed pinning of the rent and her own absence as the missing gap-sealer during the night, just as she was absent on the night of the fateful dinner. She is present on the scene the better to manifest her former absence and to act as an image of the law as indeed she receives her father's laconic confession of guilt: "I guess I done it, Pen." (295) Other than that she doesn't do or say anything, she operates as the presence of an absence. As for Lapham he only acts as spectator of the catastrophe. He focalizes the



description, but he operates as a mere receiver of the images of his dispossession. This minimal presence makes him an eye/I—"I guess I done it, Pen,"—an I reduced to an eye, and an eye that barely recognizes the I, belatedly at that. Thus, much as in a silent movie, the impact of the images reaches maximum graphic force, and contrasts thrive unhindered. The mighty fire engines, the smooth flames eluding the pursuit of the men's hoses, the erected ladders, all sketch out starkly the last convulsions of an erotic struggle instigated by one who may only behold his own exile from it, much like his wife earlier on, although, unlike her, he has only himself to blame for this deed that undoes him. Penelope thus assumes more than the role of ironic representative of the missing pin, she is also the one that, like Odysseus's wife, undoes what she does, a gap in the pin. A mad pursuit of paradoxical images that may never end.

Indeed the obsessive scenario does not stop with the ashes. A new fiery daughter figure blows on them and teases fresh fire out of them. Standing in the midst of a crowd of gapers, a pretty girl, whose appeal is not described but suggested in contrast with the presence of ladies "fantastically wrapped up," exclaims: "Isn't it perfectly magnificent!" cried a pretty girl. "I wouldn't have missed it on any account. Thank you so much Mr. Symington, for bringing us out!" Whereupon a man remarks that the owner could afford to burn a house like this every year, in other words, with this man fire may revive indefinitely. A prospect which prompts the pretty girl to blow on the verbal embers: "Oh, do you think he would, if I came again?" The question thus formulated leaves the reader in no doubt as to the reactivation of the erotic scenario. Another spectator makes a very telling remark about the lack of a coat to shield the house from the fire. This coat echoes the strait-jacket overcoats mentioned earlier as constricting forces of containment. Only, here the coat is of paint, the paint Lapham made his once prosperous business from: "He ought to have had a coat of his non-combustible paint on it." Through this merging of meanings the critical duplicity of Lapham's fortune-making product shows through clearly. The paint stands both for what splatters and what shields, for containment and release, for looseness and restraint. A pretty ember at the core of the book.

The true and final vision of aftermath occurs the next morning in a private scene that has Lapham standing, a sole spectator, in front

of the charred shell. Like the house under construction, the house under destruction crystallizes an in-between. Its lacunary structure, just like the previous, brings into schematized relief the lineaments of an anthropomorphic correlative. Although largely destroyed, the house endures as a skull with sockets, an x-ray of Irene's face. A skull of a house where mourning clings to the socket-like windows, and where ice, the echo of fire, has frozen other men's squirtings into streams of tears, quite a condensation of paradoxical elements, with bereavement and sexual release welded together, or perhaps for ever newly-wed:

Lapham on his way to business, walked up past the smoke-stained shell. The windows looked like the eye-sockets of a skull down upon the blackened and trampled snow of the street; the pavement was a sheet of ice, and the water from the engines had frozen, like streams of tears down the face of the house, and hung in icy tags from the window-sills and copings.

The fire of transgression has turned to ice much as Irene has turned to stone. The charred shell still flourishes its challenge, a maddening refusal, a forever unravished daughter bride forever beckoning. Between the skeleton of the house under construction and the charred skull, desire has somehow performed its guilty deed behind the scenes in an invisible interval, through a gap, and it has attempted to burn itself into final extinction, all to no avail. Ice has revived the provocation and fixed it in glaring ostentation. It is precisely in this arrested in-between that Howells's fiction blocks itself, doing as it undoes, thus having to rely on so many half-way houses. Caught between the urge to run free of former ways and the nostalgia for the lost country, between an impossible recovery and an accommodation to loss, its deep necessities doom it to the accidental. Wedged between fire and ice, it seeks compromises in a general doubling of functions, in so many halves and pairs. This tension between such symmetrically opposite polarities drag it into damaging compromises in the plots but produce wonderful collisions and fascinating scenes.

Read that way, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is an intriguing novel. It offers a perfect metaphor of Howells's literary quandary and invaluable insights into what lies beneath his repeated barbs at the "novelists." Between pin-Pen and I/rent, the fascinating alien peeps through the gaps with its welling of spectacular deadlocks. Irene's embers for-

ever revive and the house of Howells is cracked with many “rents.” In phonetic kinship with this, house-keeping and house-renting play a major role in this fiction. Finding a house for the other in oneself, lodging the alien, such anxieties loom to prominence in many stories. Howells stumbles repeatedly upon this dividedness and forever smooths on the page the turmoil caused by the underwater struggle between the opposite forces of Irene and Pen. Beaton, the artist of too many parts fails calamitously in his attempted suicide and the gifted Alma denies herself to him in order to wed her art just like one taking the veil. These inevitable dissolvings of artists, I feel, symbolize the call of the impersonal beckoning from the depths of an endeavor that, in seeking an effacement of the self, runs the risk of self-effacement.

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## **A Benjamin Monad of Guy Debord & W.D. Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885); or, Individual & Collective Life & Status as Spectacle**

This article will purvey William Dean Howells's middle-style novel work, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), as an exemplary text of Walter Benjamin's monad in its unlikely and yet not entirely untenable pairing of Guy Debord's theories of the spectacle society, of Benjamin himself and of Howells's key novel. Debord's relevant and topical theories of the spectacle society will thus be used to throw attention on *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. In so doing, the present contribution will essay to illuminate how the literary history that Howells makes finds its sense in work by Benjamin and by Debord, inter alia.<sup>1</sup>

First of all, it would be both strategic and useful to define what exactly a monad is for the critic-flâneur and critic-inventor, Walter

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1. The only reference of which I am aware in the always-growing canon of Howells criticism that engages our three target thinkers crops up in a text by the scholar Keith Gandal, where he writes by asking, "What relationship does a spectator have to her spectacle? [. . .] Walter Benjamin noticed that the presentation of the news in the columns of the newspaper serves 'to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader.' Guy Debord writes, '[T]he spectacle is the *affirmation* of appearance and the affirmation of all human, namely social life, as mere appearance.' William Dean Howells found the slums—their 'stenches,' their 'fouler and dreadfuller poverty-smell,' their savagery, their 'squalor,' their 'ugliness'—too overwhelming in person but he noted that 'in a picture [they could] be most pleasingly effective, for then you could be in it, and yet have the distance on it which it needs.'

A spectacle, then, provides vicarious adventure while it remains at a safe distance: when one assumes the position of a spectator, which the newspaper and the photograph encourage, the poor are banished to the world of pictures and print, the realm of mere appearance, where they no longer threaten the viewer or demand her aid." (in Gandal 70-71) The foregoing throws valuable light on the notion of the spectacularization of society, and the import of the spectacle in modern society and culture, pertinent topics for *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.

Benjamin; for this purpose I adduce the following words from the Paris-based scholar at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Michael Löwy, and his acute work that has been translated as, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History,'* in which he comments with admirable clarity on Benjamin's fertile text of thesis number XVIII that,

Against the quantitative conception of historical time as accumulation, Benjamin here outlines his qualitative, discontinuous conception of historical time. There is a striking affinity between Benjamin's ideas here and those of Charles Péguy [ . . . ] According to Péguy, in *Clio* [ . . . ] the concept of time proper to the theory of progress, is 'precisely the time of the savings bank and the great credit establishments . . . it is the time of interest accumulated by a capital . . . a truly homogeneous time, since it translates, transports into homogeneous calculations . . . [and] transposes into a homogeneous (mathematical) language the countless varieties of anxieties and fortunes'. Against this time of progress, 'made in the image and likeness of space', reduced to an 'absolute, infinite' line, he sets the time of memory, the time of 'organic remembrance' that is not homogeneous, but has full and empty moments.

It is the task of remembrance, in Benjamin's work, to build 'constellations' linking the present and the past. These constellations [ . . . ] are monads [ . . . ] concentrates of historical totality—'full moments', as Péguy would put it. The privileged moments of the past [ . . . ] are those which constitute a messianic stop to events [ . . . ].<sup>1</sup>

It is the central thesis of the present article that a monad combining Howells and Debord produces a constellation, or 'full if not empty (!) moment', for the critical intellect in thinking of cultural modernity and American society. Here is Löwy again on Benjamin's messianic conception of history and the monad

According to [Benjamin's] preparatory notes, the universal history of historicism is false [ . . . ] the way Esperanto is a false universal language. But there will one day be a true universal history, as there will be a true universal language [ . . . ] This messianic history of delivered humanity will burn like an 'eternal lamp' that includes the totality of the past in an immense *apokatastasis*.

[ . . . ] Benjamin's works on Baudelaire are a good example of the methodology proposed in this thesis: the aim is to discover in *Les*

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1. Löwy 95.

*Fleurs du mal* a monad, a crystallized ensemble of tensions that contains a historical totality. In that text, wrested from the homogeneous course of history, is preserved and gathered the whole of the poet's work, in that work the French nineteenth century, and, in this latter, the 'entire course of history'.<sup>1</sup>

In a similar way here in the current article, we seek to make *The Rise of Silas Lapham* into a composite of tensional points that highlight its cognizance of our central submission, which is that life lives on only within the Debordian spectacle and of advanced capitalist consumerism for those who would not offer up an antidote mode of reality and countervailing mode of perception to the dominant one of sheer servitude under the screen and the thumb of ultra-socialized and commoditized Debord-like spectacularization.

For a more nuanced sense of this overall conceptual framework for understanding the social and the economic, the distinguished Benjamin-scholar Löwy then goes on to say of Benjamin's thesis number XVIII, and it is worth quoting at length for its subtlety is difficult to capture in a few words:

*Jetztzeit*, 'now-time' or 'the present', is defined [ . . . ] as the 'model' or foreshadowing of messianic time, of the 'eternal lamp', of the true history of mankind. [ . . . ].

[ . . . ] the monad [ . . . ] is, in Leibniz, a reflection of the entire universe. Examining this concept in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin defines it as 'the crystal of the total event'. [ . . . ].

*Jetztzeit* comprises all the messianic moments of the past, the whole tradition of the oppressed is concentrated, as a redemptive power, in the present moment, the moment of the historian—or of the revolutionary.<sup>2</sup>

So then even more exactly, what interests us here, is how Debord and Howells co-constitute a special sort of what Benjamin terms 'crystal of the total event' of life within the power of the spectacle specifically in United States culture, both during Howells's epoch and in our own early twenty-first century. Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* would for example in this context include the narrative instants that delineate Silas Lapham's crestfallen state in a world of unremitting social evil—of which he is admittedly a part as a beneficiary of imperial Anglo-

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1. Löwy 96.

2. Löwy 99-100.

American capital (manifestly, which other critics have also noted, such as Daniel T. O'Hara, whose work on our target novel I shall engage at some length below); though, at novel's end Silas attains a kind of enlightened mode in some registers of note as never the less a kind of totemic animal for others who have suffered a similar fate in their own individual life narratives in prose fiction under hard-edged capitalism, human beings who are themselves on some level of course a certain kind of formalization of ordinary actuality, however much these two registers, the imaginary and or the narrative, may only be rough approximations at best of the extra-textual or of the real. Löwy then proceeds to give a simple historical example of 'now-time' or of *Jetztzeit*,

the Spartakist rising of January 1919 sees a unique constellation formed with the *Jetztzeit* of the ancient slave rising. But this monad [ . . . ] is an abbreviation of the whole history of mankind as the history of the struggle of the oppressed. Moreover, as a messianic interruption of events [ . . . ] this act of revolt prefigures the universal history of saved humanity.

We might, then, regard [Benjamin's] Thesis IX as a stunning example of an immense abbreviation of the history of mankind up to this point, a crystal encapsulating the totality of the catastrophic events that constitute the thread of that history. But in that image the only foreshadowing of redemption is negative: the impossibility, for the angel of history, to 'awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed'.<sup>1</sup>

So then with the foregoing in mind, we may begin to see how Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* may be seen to instance a Benjamin-monad in how in the present piece the critical function essays to map the world of Howells's work onto the theories of Benjamin and of Guy Debord in order to elucidate, by extension, our own age of the early twenty-first century, even while chiasmatically of course taking on board Howells's 1885-masterpiece as the principal object of critical focus.

The American novelist Booth Tarkington, who authored the 1918-classic tome, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which was later to find its way into the dynamic of the cinematic world of Orson Welles in

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1. Löwy 100.



Welles's 1942 directed film of the same title, once wrote of one of his key artistic mentors, Howells:

There was no softness in the gentleness of William Dean Howells. His gentleness was the human kindness of a powerful iconoclast who began the overturning of the false gods [ . . . ] He remembered that when half-gods go the gods should arrive; he had the gods with him and he brought them and enthroned them. They remain enthroned today. Fashions and sales are temporary and often lamentable.<sup>1</sup>

In the foregoing we thus see how Tarkington himself was acutely aware of false forms of success that would be part and parcel of the specific 'society of the spectacle' in advance of Debord's theoretical investigations, and the complete obtuseness of those in a culture who would endorse such hollow sorts of victory. In Howells, he observes one able to separate the wheat from the chaff, and one able to see through the ridiculous rigged games of power, and false values, of a phony society predicated on exchange value as opposed to use value, on appearances in contradistinction to reality, and so on and so forth, *ad infinitum*.

Now, as far as the content of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* goes, we read in [the] an extremely fine introduction by the New York-based critic Morris Dickstein of the Coreys and the Laphams that,

The dissonance between the two families comes through best in the celebrated dinner scene in which Lapham, unused to drinking wine with dinner, grows tipsy and begins bragging about his success, his paint, his war record [ . . . ] As a deeply inbred society, a network of cousins, Boston is a treacherous field for an outsider, as Howells himself had been—and inwardly remained.<sup>2</sup>

It was precisely that climactic dinner sequence scene that would later find its way in the pages of Tarkington's acclaimed novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and in due course in a rather celebrated way, in the filmic images of the 1942 Welles-picture, *The Magnificent Ambersons* (it bears repeating because the sequence of these images in this film are highly memorable from Welles's output of images). Dickstein also encapsulates above in a nutshell possible critical implications for the

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1. Tarkington xiv-xv.

2. Dickstein xxviii.

coda to our Howells-novel under consideration. Here is Tarkington himself as he describes the emotion, the affective being, which the dinner scene from *The Rise of Silas Lapham* produced in him:

I waited with boyhood's piggishness at the door for the postman so that I should be the first of the household to learn what happened to 'Silas Lapham' at the catastrophic dinner. Then, when I had seized upon the parcel, opened it, and, like a pig indeed, had read the precious instalment in a hidden retreat, I came forth overwhelmed but swaggering to prove that no mere writing could emotionally affect a person so adult in his teens as I. [ . . . ].

Now here is Mr. Howells's centenary, and with it [ . . . ] here is the book *Silas Lapham* [ . . . ] it survives because it is a work of art.<sup>1</sup>

The aesthetic force of high-level feeling Tarkington then endures to rather excellent effect for its capacity to pay tribute to Howells's fictional achievement. More importantly, Tarkington's admission that 'it survives because it is a work of art' enables us all the more fruitfully to use it as a launching pad for critical reflection on an ever incubating and ever intensifying spectacle-oriented global society. From the time of Howells to the time of Debord, everyday phenomena and life have become even more spectacularized and visibilized. This is the historical monad of the modern we wish our target figures to illuminate.

What is even more, to employ the force of cross-cultural juxtaposition, the artistic world of Howells is also rather like what the critic and psychoanalytic thinker Julia Kristeva has written of Howells's distinguished contemporary, Marcel Proust, when she announces that "the elegant pages of *A la recherche* come to seem like one of the very first modern visions of the society of the spectacle. In advance of television and the media, Opinion in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, as recreated by Proust, transforms its supposed protagonists into mere apparitions, into 'looks.'"<sup>2</sup> In a similar way, the book leave of the classic Howellsian page illumine how deeply entrenched is the spectacle of so called success and of public opinion when it comes to the production of self-perception and self-engenderment of the individual human person in Howells's vision of the national-cultural post-Civil War American society.

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1. Tarkington xv.

2. Kristeva 71.

To return to Dickstein's critical hand, he writes of the famed dinner event hosted by the Coreys to an unseasoned Silas, and of how thereby,

Tom's recoil from Lapham shows how much he is a creature of his class and upbringing [ . . . ] It reflects Howells's understanding as a novelist that 'social traditions' and 'habits of feeling' are installed in us at a very early age. But Howells also sees us as moral agents, potentially free beings capable of self-correction, something Tom will do here, as nearly all the Laphams and Coreys do before the end of the novel.

This ability to change [ . . . ] is what distinguishes them from the minor characters like the villainous Rogers, whom Lapham forced out of his business—his financial dealings will trigger Lapham's downfall—and the hapless Zerrilla Dewey [ . . . ] whom Lapham supports because her father saved his life during the Civil War.<sup>1</sup>

The facility to transform for the positive figures in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* must here then be underscored; for it is this attribute or quality that makes a character meritorious in the Howellsian garden. In a Niklas Luhmann understanding of the self in his pioneering social systems theory, the above extract also shows to what extent Tom simply is the "environment" of which he is a part, and is not per se the basic structure of social fact, for that in Luhmann's theory of social systems would be communication, as is well known. Indeed, for Luhmann, "There is no individuality *ab extra*, only self-referential individuality. But this means that cells and societies, maybe physical atoms, certainly immune systems and brains, are all individuals. Conscious systems have no exceptional status."<sup>2</sup>

And in a splendid dialecticization (an acknowledgment of an opposite perspective) of his own individual career successes, Dickstein writes of Howells's own self-questionings, queries that no doubt beg the question of the whole spectacle of the literary apparatus of which Howells was a part, a beneficiary, and a vitally energetic and important contributor:

But Howells's very success left him with misgivings, which influenced the shape of *Silas Lapham*. Boston may have accepted him, but he never fully accepted Boston. He grew rich but fretted in his letters

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1. Dickstein xxx-xxx1.

2. Luhmann 116.

about why he should be so comfortable when others went hungry. In waging his lonely crusade to spare the convicted anarchists in 1887, and later protesting their ‘civic murder’ [ . . . ] he attracted fierce condemnation and risked a position that had taken him so long to establish.

Thus Howells displays a not unremarked capacity of courage. And in a good point about the self-sunkenness of the vain world of capital, and of how selfish it makes people behave toward one another, there is for Luhmann for instance no individual identity distinct from social identity in a modern social world to which his social systems theory applies, Dickstein aptly notes,

when Lapham tries to save money to save his business, he discovers bitterly that he has no friends [ . . . ] he finally determines to be honorable rather than successful [ . . . ] With the young Tom and in Lapham himself, Howells had identified with the romance of business [ . . . ] But in the end, foreshadowing his later novels, he delivers a stern judgment on capitalism while retaining his faith in the moral agency of the individual.<sup>1</sup>

The foregoing could aptly serve as yet another simple example of how people as such do not exist per se *outside of* their milieux and thus are products of their social worlds of communication and capital; such a reading would accord again with Luhmann’s social systems theory, where we are given to understand that the individual belongs to an ‘environment’, above all, which has communication as its basic structural element.<sup>2</sup> *The Rise of Silas Lapham* too foretells what would

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1. Dickstein xxxiii.

2. In an excellent introduction Nico Stehr and Gotthard Bechmann for example state that “Luhmann introduces three premises into his analysis of society that have produced not only vigorous criticism but also extensive misunderstanding, to the point that accusations of anti-humanist and cynical reasoning have been raised against him: (1) Society does not consist of people. Persons belong to the environment of society. (2) Society is an autopoietic system consisting of communication and nothing else. (3) Society can be adequately understood as world society.

Banishing people to the environment of society completes the decentralization of the humanist cosmology. Having been evicted from the center of the universe in the Renaissance, deprived of its unique origin by being placed in the context of evolution by Darwin, and stripped of autonomy and self-control by Freud, that humanity should now be freed from the bonds of society by Luhmann appears to be a consistent extension of this trend.” (Stehr xv)

already be in the die for Howells's negative understandings of forms of late nineteenth-century American capitalism.

It is crucially important to note too that in writing about the corpus of texts authored by Howells, for the literary scholar Dickstein, "Though *A Modern Instance* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* are more modern novels, more unyielding in their vision, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* broke new ground with its study of social mobility and its portrait of a crucial new American type."<sup>1</sup> In this way, Howells's mid-career novel (he was forty-seven when the prose work began to appear in serial form in 1884) both continued and paved the way for other cultural embodiments of the 'type' of American businessman to be found with Christopher Newman in Henry James's *The American* (1875) with Adam Verver in *The Golden Bowl* (1904), with Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), with Charles Foster Kane in Orson Welles's inaugural feature length film *Citizen Kane* (1941), inter alia. All of these simple cultural examples illumine Luhmann's point of how, "Autopoiesis presupposes a recurring need for renewal."<sup>2</sup> For Howells's pioneering capacity to portray such a business class mode of reality is replenished later on in an autopoietically functioning art system, and concomitantly may help to explain what happened to his psychic system during the writing of the novelistic text, for as one critic writes of Howells's hard-won cultural achievement,

Some years later, a writer in *Harper's Weekly* recorded Howells's astonishing admission that he had in fact suffered some sort of emotional or psychic collapse during the writing of *Silas Lapham*: 'His affairs prospering, his work marching as well as heart could wish, suddenly, and without apparent cause, the status seemed wholly wrong. His own expression, in speaking with me about that time was, "The bottom dropped out!"'<sup>3</sup>

In another psychobiographic point, during the compositional work on the novel we read that Howells himself, after he moved into his own Beacon Street domicile, not completely unlike the Laphams who enjoyed their own domiciliation on Beacon Street, was reduced to "a welter of contradictory feelings—satisfied in his rise, aware of the

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1. Dickstein xxxiii.

2. Luhmann 8.

3. Vanderbilt viii-ix.

ironic coincidence with his hero Silas, and appalled by the frightful work and expense of social climbing in order, as he put it to one friend, that he might ‘give my daughter her chance in this despicable world.’”<sup>1</sup> The medley of internal contradictions of a capitalist system is of course what Howells rightly intuited with his aforementioned ‘contradictory feelings’. And the aforementioned house as such is of course by extension in any theoretical consideration one of the visible commodities par excellence of civilized bourgeois society, of which Greil Marcus submits, “Debord argued that the commodity—now transmuted into ‘spectacle,’ or seemingly natural, autonomous images communicated as the facts of life—had taken over the social function once fulfilled by religion and myth, and that appearances were now inseparable from the essential processes of alienation and domination in modern society.”<sup>2</sup> In this context one may argue that Howells himself experienced some kind of ‘alienation’ even while enjoying the fruits of his success in the practical world via his new house. And Marcus adds with a direct quote from Debord himself, “The spectacle is not merely advertising, or propaganda, or television. It is a world. The spectacle as we experience it, but fail to perceive it, ‘is not a collection of images, but a social relationship between people, mediated by images.’”<sup>3</sup> The mediation between the image and society then is a well-nigh seamless and fast one. And to throw again valuable focus on Howells’s own disquietudes, I cite Thomas Y. Levin, “A critique of the spectacle is all the more imperative since, as Debord reminds the viewer in a variation of Benjamin’s oft-cited formulation, the spectacle is always the spectacle of the victor.”<sup>4</sup> This would indeed be a classic experience of the Benjaminian spirit of things in ordinary day to day reality. All of these observations can be said to map onto the structure of Boston-society in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and inform Howells’s disposition during his fictional creation of our chosen novel.

Now, on to the Howells-novel itself, we read in chapter two of the Laphams material wealth that, “they did not know how to spend on society [ . . . ] Lapham’s ideas of hospitality was still to bring a heavy-buying customer home to pot-luck; neither of them imagined

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1. Vanderbilt x-xi.  
 2. Marcus 8.  
 3. Marcus 9.  
 4. Levin 362.

dinners.”<sup>1</sup> As a member of the *nouveaux riches*, the Laphams simply lack the capacity to decide with discernment on what many would consider the important things one might do with one’s money capital (as opposed to other forms of capital, hence money capital is just a nuanced way of expressing the notion of money). Theirs is a rather wasteful and extravagant way of expending their capital, for their material riches do not seem to cultivate their individual souls or minds much per se, at all, let alone their sensorial or social lives. As for the Coreys, Persis and Silas discourse with one another: “‘They didn’t seem stuck up,’ urged his wife. ‘They’d no need to—with you. I could buy him and sell him, twice over. This answer satisfied Mrs. Lapham rather with the fact than with her husband.’” (26) Whence even this early in the novel text we see how much Silas reduces everything to pure exchange value over against use value. Persis’s balanced sanity is also shown in the same chapter, when she quips to Silas, “we’re both country people, and we’ve kept our country ways, and we don’t, either of us, know what to do. You’ve had to work so hard, and your luck was so long coming, and then it came with such a rush, that we haven’t had any chance to learn what to do with it.” (28) Here Persis seems to possess the greater side of well-grounded clear headedness. Later, deep in the now classic pages of chapter two, Persis takes Silas to task for his questionable behavior toward his business partner, Milton K. Rogers, and in so doing broadcasts the moral imagination of the novel tome: “‘You crowded him out. A man that had saved you! No, you had got greedy, Silas. You had made your paint your god, and you couldn’t bear to let anybody else share in the blessings.’” (43) Here Silas is shown to be a kind of tyrannical authority figure of self-serving capitalist interest overfond of his own good fortune, and unable to divvy up the spoils in any kind of democratic way.

Howells’s deep and even sympathetic understanding of yet another crucial social configuration of the society of the spectacle as it may be generally conceived, the conjugal, meanwhile may be seen here at the beginning of chapter four, “The silken texture of the marriage tie bears a daily strain of wrong and insult to which no other human relation can be subjected without lesion [ . . . ] It is certainly a curious spectacle, and doubtless it ought to convince an observer of the divinity of the institution [ . . . ].” (45) The word ‘spectacle’ here only party

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1. Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, 23.

maps onto Debord's conceptuality, but transpose on to his edifice, it never the less does. And relatedly in this context for the already-mentioned Howells critic, Dickstein, "*A Modern Instance* was the first serious treatment of divorce in American fiction, but *Silas Lapham* is just as subtle in its portrayal of the quotidian dynamics of marriage, with its underlying tensions and unspoken understandings."<sup>1</sup> Even though, as is often the case with Howells, the textual evidence here may be interpreted in more than one way, this exegetical submission from Dickstein seems probable. It is also worth noting that the ability of the Howells-novel to delineate, or to somehow give audience to, signifying silences via its presentation of the 'underlying tensions and unspoken understandings' of the conjugal sphere also contribute to the book's aesthetic merit.

We read again of Rogers, again to be sure Lapham's former business partner in the novel work *The Rise of Silas Lapham*:

[Lapham] had been dependent at one time on his partner's capital. It was a moment of terrible trial. Happy is the man forever after who can choose the [ . . . ] unselfish part in such an exigency! Lapham could not rise to it [ . . . ].

His course did not shake Mrs. Lapham's faith in him [ . . . ] his paint was [ . . . ] a sentiment, almost a passion [ . . . ]. (46)

It may also be something like the natural greediness that gets piped into people by a cruel universe that structures Silas's behavior. Also, his capitalist egoism blinds him to his individual conduct. And more concretely and in a positive understanding, that Silas at least inches toward 'a passion' might be endorsed in a fictional (let alone extra-fictional) world too often devoid of it. It must be said too that his well-nigh 'passion' is a survival strategy, and on at least one level, an act of simple self interest in a competitive world of hard economic facts, of hegemonic capital and of big power that takes no prisoners. In a world of capitalist production, the aristocratic leisured class individual, Bromfield Corey, thus announces to his son, Tom Corey, twelve pages later in the novel

It seems to me that it is about time for you to open out as a real-estate broker. Or did you ever think of matrimony?

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1. Dickstein xxxiii.



[Tom.] 'Well [ . . . ] I shouldn't quite like to regard it as a career, you know.'  
'No, no [ . . . ] I quite agree with you. But you know I've always contended that the affections could be made to combine pleasure and profit.'  
(58)

Bromfield's attitude here may be seen as sheer cynical reason by some, or as pure and simple industrial pragmatics and acumen, by others. Soon after this conversational exchange, Bromfield critically reflects that, "Money buys position at once. I don't say that it isn't all right. The world generally knows what it's about, and knows how to drive a bargain. I dare say it makes the new rich pay too much." (59) This valorization of money capital Howells then solidifies in this late nineteenth-century literary engenderment well after similar remarks were made time and again in, for example, the prolific French novelist Honoré de Balzac's collected fiction, *La Comédie humaine*, which delineates, in instance upon instance, and with unusual acuity, the double and remarkable phenomenon of capital and power.<sup>1</sup>

And here is Bromfield after Tom refuses to live on the capital of his parents and insists on going into the line of business that would be the production and the selling of paint,

His father shook his head with an ironical sigh. 'Ah, we shall never have a real aristocracy while this plebeian reluctance to live upon a parent or a wife continues the animating spirit of our youth. It strikes at the root of the whole feudal system [ . . . ] I supposed you wished to marry the girl's money, and here you are, basely seeking to go into business with her father.'  
(62)

Bromfield's willingness to bankroll his son Tom with family capital in an economic dynamic of family capitalism in the family universe of this family novel flies in the face of the American values of self-creation and individual responsibility, but for all that his remarks have a surprise value of freshness to them amidst a totemic individual American intent on paying her or his own way; the law of self-reliance à la Ralph Waldo Emerson, that is to say, which rules the individual American consciousness. Bromfield takes Tom's attitude as disrespectful and low-class. And in a last mention from chapter five we read,

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1. For one critical interpretation of these big topic areas see Roraback, *The Dialectics of Late Capital*.

“‘Tom needn’t earn his living,’ said Mrs. Corey [ . . . ]. ‘That is what I have sometimes urged upon Tom [ . . . ] he need do nothing as long as he lives [ . . . ] It appears that he wishes [ . . . ] to do something for himself. I am afraid that Tom is selfish.’” (89) Tom is much in thrall to the acquisitive mode of being so near and dear to the perhaps straight and narrow American capitalist heart of, and as fictionalized in, the late nineteenth century. That, ‘Tom needn’t earn his living’, if true, shows how much material status the Coreys hold. Bromfield Corey, however, takes issue with Tom’s disposition, and chalks it up to a kind of individual selfishness on Tom’s part.

So, on now to chapter ten, and to Silas’s intense involvement with the industrial construction of his spectacle-informed new house on the water side of Beacon Street; vis-à-vis his architect in the foregoing regard, we read that, “His bull-headed pride was concerned in a thing which the architect made him see, and then he believed that he had seen it himself, perhaps conceived it [ . . . ]. Mrs. Lapham [ . . . ] took fright at the reckless outlay at last, and refused to let her husband pass a certain limit.” (120) The cardinal individual error of judgment of pride thus rears its ugly head with Silas, and Persis can see through the irrational and even self-congratulatory over-confident thinking that stands behind such irresponsible financial behavior from her spouse. Indeed, the literary critic Kermit Vanderbilt adds too of how Silas “embarks on the great symbolic venture of aspiring Americans with large or modest wealth: building ‘The House’ as a public statement of self-importance and family or social worth.”<sup>1</sup> This prodigious power of habitation of course goes hand in glove with a certain ideology of home ownership that is a key pillar in the goal bound American dream and American way of life.

In a moment that fictionally swings us back to the fiasco with Milton Rogers, Persis quips to Silas, “‘you owned up to him that you were in the wrong, Silas?’ ‘No, I didn’t,’ returned the Colonel, promptly; ‘for I wasn’t. And before we got through, I guess he saw it the same as I did.’” (122) Thus Silas remains incapable of self-critique, or even better, of being his own worst critic in this moment of ostensible bad faith or *mauvaise foi*. And, in the next chapter number eleven, Tom may be viewed thus in conversation with his father Bromfield, “‘I

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1. Vanderbilt xix.

don't believe Mrs. Lapham ever gave a dinner.' 'And with all that money!' sighed the father. 'I don't believe they have the habit of wine at table. I suspect that when they don't drink tea and coffee with their dinner, they drink ice-water.'" (129) This illustrates how Silas too is not a particularly good raconteur, as will be confirmed at the dinner party. In the same chapter, and in a highly suggestive narrative moment concerning the limited power of money in a spectacle society that might have one believe otherwise: "The time had been when Lapham could not have imagined any worldly splendor which his dollars could not buy if he chose to spend them for it; but his wife's half discoveries, taking form again in his ignorance of the world, filled him with helpless misgiving." (135) In this fictional extract, one gains a glimmer of the real sense of meaning and value that eludes even the grasping grip of modern nineteenth-century money, in the realm of the imaginary that would be à la Niklas Luhmann, the social sub-system of art. Put otherwise, a puzzled Silas is unable to see anything outside of this screen of representation of money in a synthetic society of appearances and of the show.

That Silas trades his valuable time for money capital may be confirmed when we read in a conversation between Irene and Persis in chapter eleven in which they bemoan the fate of Silas: "I think papa works too hard all through the summer. Why don't you make him take a rest, mamma?" asked Irene. 'Oh, take a rest! The man slaves harder every year [ . . . ] Seems as if the more money he got, the more he wanted to get.'" (139) Here thus Silas can be seen working himself to death in the specific reality and the specific power of capitalist production, a power system that requires great industry from its competitor participants; moreover, Silas's desire for money cannot be quenched and so is accordingly a bottomless well.

In the following explosive social milieu, Silas's raging ego may be discerned, an egoism clearly piped into him by a money-oriented fictionalized American social system, when in conversation with Persis

'Oh, that was different,' said Mrs. Lapham [ . . . ] 'I guess, if he cared for her, a fellow in his position wouldn't be long getting up his courage to speak to Irene.'

Lapham brought his fist down on the table between them.

‘Look here, Persis! Once for all, now, don’t you ever let me hear you say anything like that again! I’m worth nigh on to a million, and I’ve made it every cent myself; and my girls are the equals of anybody, I don’t care who it is.’  
(143-44)

In the foregoing, Silas shows his socialization as one with a volcanic ego in an American society within the imaginary that would be fictional art; egoistic that is to say is what society teaches him to be, and so what he becomes.

And here is Persis to the rather hyper-sensitive, when it comes to his social status, Silas, in chapter thirteen, just before the famed dinner-sequence, “I don’t know what we’re going to talk about to those people when we get there [ . . . ] Oh, I don’t say they’re any better,” [ . . . ] “You’ve got plenty of money, and you’ve made every cent of it.” (168-69) The notion that the Laphams are on an equal footing with the Coreys in virtue of the fact of the rule of money illuminates what money obtains, rules and subtends in Howells’s fictionalized post-Civil War American culture. And in another narrative instant, in a pre-dinner debate about sartorial choices and vestmental concerns, “Drops of perspiration gathered on Lapham’s forehead in the anxiety of the debate; he groaned, and he swore a little in the compromise profanity which he used.” (171) Wow: Silas is nervous! That the power of fashion should be so overwhelming well illumines another detail in the monad of a Howells-Debord spectacle society based on life as something mediated by images.

In another signature moment of the American society of the spectacle, here is Persis discoursing to Silas before the big Corey-hosted dinner party event

‘The book says it’s very impolite not to answer a dinner invitation promptly. Well, we’ve done that all right [ . . . ] but then it says if you’re not going, that it’s the height of rudeness not to let them know at once, so that they can fill your place at the table.’

The colonel was silent for a while. ‘Well, I’m dummed,’ he said finally, ‘if there seems to be any end to this thing. If it was to do over again, I’d say no for all of us.’

‘I’ve wished a hundred times they hadn’t asked us; but it’s too late to think about that *now*.’  
(171-72)

The Laphams are simply caught in the normalizing spectacle of the dinner party, and cannot now get out of it. It is too late. Also, the

etiquette book supports the policing of manners. And in predictable pre-dinner bickering between Persis and Silas, Persis declares, “And now you’re so afraid you shall do something wrong before ‘em, you don’t hardly dare to say your life’s your own.” (172) Here Silas seems afraid of his own shadow, and of his spouse’s sartorial capital, even while ensnared in the trap of the all-encompassing spectacle complete with the imaginary police to adjudicate on bad and on good manners at social functions.

Now, to set the stage for the dinner function, we read in chapter fourteen of the twenty-seven chapter-long novel under view, “The Coreys were one of the few old families who lingered in Bellingham Place [ . . . ]. The dwellings are stately and tall, and the whole place wears an air of aristocratic seclusion, which Mrs. Corey’s father might well have thought assured when he left her his house there at his death.” (175) Laws of inheritance and of family wealth stand up tall here in this new aristocratic class in America. And perhaps with not inconsiderable disquietudes (witness the young Booth Tarkington above) the empathetic reader reads that “[Silas] perspired with doubt as he climbed the stairs [ . . . ]” to the intense and to the much awaited dinner party (175) and how in terms of individual conduct Silas “felt himself safe from error if he [ . . . ] did only what the others did [ . . . ] but now he did not know just what to do about the glasses at the right side of his plate [ . . . ] he felt that every one was looking. He let the servant fill them all, and he drank out of each, not to appear odd.” (178) For the careful reader of Howells, this kind of microscopic narrative description resonates well with an easily imaginable ordinary reality predicated on visibility and on looking. For first of all, Silas activates the power of mimesis, then only to show his *savoir faire* about something of which he had very little know-how if any at all; this has pathos.

During the actual party itself, with Silas and with Anna Corey, “Their conversation naturally included his architect across the table [ . . . ] and at something Seymour said the talk spread suddenly, and the pretty house he was building for Colonel Lapham became the general theme.” (179) The all-important domicile and power of domiciliation thus comes to dominate the monad inflected spectacle of the foregoing conversation, all of which is delineated in a realistic manner. And in a moment of self-faltering failure, or of individual

inadequacy, on Silas's part in regard to conversation, "He felt that he was not holding up his end of the line [ . . . ] that he was not doing himself justice." (183-84) In the foregoing, Silas simply is not up to the standard in the spectacle-infested world of small talk.

As for the post-prandial gathering session, "They brought in cigars with coffee" (186) and poignantly Silas fails to ask for extra water while dinner is being served, and instead unleashes with the following asseveration that is as if a bolt from out of nowhere, "'Thanks, I will take some of this wine,' [ . . . and presently] He not only could not remember what he was going to say, but he could not recall what they had been talking about. They waited, looking at him, and he stared at them in return. After a while he heard the host saying, 'Shall we join the ladies?'" (191) Silas now simply does not even know his own mind, for he has submitted himself to the power of the fruit of the vine, and has in the process become a man somewhat off balance. Just after this episode during the dinner party, Silas communes with himself about his elder daughter

if Penelope had come he knew that she would have done them all credit [ . . . ] Irene was [ . . . ] not talking, and Lapham perceived that at a dinner party you ought to talk. [ . . . ] He made an elaborate acknowledgment to Bromfield Corey of his son's kindness in suggesting books for his library; he said that he had ordered them all, and that he meant to have pictures. (191-92)

That Irene was not discoursing might give us something to think about individual words in and of themselves as consumer articles for exchange in the phenomenal reality of the spectacle of capitalist society; for Debord and for his Situationist International colleagues, conversational words are cheap and do not count for much; they are merely more consumer products for commodity exchange value, and are in the main in an over socialized social context, devoid of any real truth content, for they are too intimately bound to representation. Also, that Silas is quick to point out the cultural capital that his library would add to his estate speaks volumes for the simple power (even economic) of cultural texts, including of their mere appearance or visibility; this is part and parcel then of our monadic constellation of Debord and of Howells.

A little later in the narrative text we read rather comically of a mildly ridiculous swaggering Silas who engages the local élite thus,

“He told Charles Bellingham that he liked him, and assured James Bellingham that it had always been his ambition to know him, and that if any one had said when he first came to Boston that in less than ten years he should be hobnobbing with Jim Bellingham, he should have told that person he lied.” (193) The sycophancy of the sentence I have quoted from Silas is even rather unfortunate. Further than this, in the same chapter fourteen, we observe Silas treat his preacher, the minister Mr. Sewell, condescendingly, and swaggers about again only this time concerning the interdiction he encountered with his desire to give more money than he was permitted to Mrs. Corey

‘Why, when your wife sent to mine last fall,’ he said, turning to Mr. Corey, ‘I drew my check for five hundred dollars, but my wife wouldn’t take more than one hundred [ . . . ]’.

He started toward the door of the drawing-room to take leave of the ladies; but [ . . . ] in obeying the direction [Tom] Corey gave him toward another door he forgot all about his purpose, and came away without saying good-night to his hostess. (193)

Silas’s propensity to boast inform his ‘want to be status’ in Boston society. And in what surely only exacerbates a sub-standard if not atrocious state of social affairs, Tom hales Silas away, causing the nouveau riche guest to fail to give a proper recognition to his hostess, Anna Corey. This then closes the famed dinner party sequence; the notorious evening of rather spectacular spectacularization in a Walter Benjamin monad of modernity that would be something like a Guy Debord spectacle.

As for the mode of reality of a leisured class capitalist individual, we might glean the following understandable social fact six chapters later in chapter twenty of

Bromfield Corey, that he never was much surprised at anything [ . . . ]. His standpoint [ . . . ] was that of the sympathetic humorist who would be glad to have the victim of circumstance laugh with him, but was not too much vexed when the victim could not. He laughed now when [Anna Corey], with careful preparation, got the facts of his son’s predicament fully under his eye. (250)

For it must be remembered that with respect to the deeper material conditions and concerns of life, Bromfield can afford to be so laid back when he still has notable material capital and material power

in his coffers from which to draw. In a moment of unflinching and unashamed micro-level social critique of his own life-narrative and chosen way of being, and then too of the conversational politics at the dinner event, we read from Bromfield in dialogue with Anna

‘I say to myself that I might as well have yielded to the pressure all round me, and gone to work, as Tom has.’ [ . . . ].  
 ‘I assure you, my dear,’ he continued, ‘[ . . . ] their conversation was terrible. Mrs. Lapham’s range was strictly domestic; and when the Colonel got me in the library, *he poured mineral paint all over me* [ . . . ].’  
 (emphasis added, 252)

Bromfield’s posited superior social aplomb is then brought into prominence.

There is more to mention in this classic text of artistic realism. James Bellingham says to Corey about Silas’s economic status and current true fiscal state of affairs deep in the book in chapter twenty-four, “‘It’s hard to tell just where [Silas] stands. I suspect that a hopeful temperament and fondness for round numbers have always caused him to set his figures beyond his actual worth [ . . . ] he’s reckoned his wealth on the basis of his capital, and some of his capital is borrowed.’” (282) Here Silas seems to possess a good sum of self-indulgent hopefulness, normal vanity and economic egoism that would go hand in hand with the sort of structures—in an otherwise admirable in many ways can-do-attitude society—which have socialized and ideologized him. In a vital point from chapter twenty-five that was touched on above about Silas’s dearth of friends in his period of significant and of individual need, “Lapham stood in the isolation to which adversity so often seems to bring men [ . . . ] and he thought with bitter self-contempt of the people whom he had befriended in their time of need.” (300) In the book’s very last chapter, we read that despite it all, and after all, most precisely for it all (!) “[Silas] was returning to begin life anew [ . . . ] to make what he could out of the one chance which his successful rivals had left him.” (330-31) In fine, in this new business and social configuration,

A strange, not ignoble friendship existed between Lapham and the three brothers [his former business rivals . . . ]. It was their facilities that had conquered him, not their ill-will [ . . . ]. He brought to them the flagging energies of an elderly man. He was more broken than he



knew by his failure [ . . . ]. His wife saw in him a daunted look that made her heart ache for him. (331)

In my judgment, this is immensely moving; for it is Silas's capacity to keep his cool and to remain steadfast against all the odds and the social evil with which he has had to experience, to come to terms, and to go beyond, through his own self-surmounting, which make him admirable as an agent of enlightenment.

Now, as for the book's future-oriented couple of Penelope and Tom, the latter of whom must go on to Mexico to be part of Silas's still existing if diminished business enterprise in the industrial world of paint, they constitute the other side of the unthought and so still to be invented part of the book. As for Silas's own self-critique and self-reflectiveness, about his individual shortcomings, "he owned that he had made mistakes [ . . . ]. But [ . . . ] every dollar, every cent had gone to pay his debts; he had come out with clean hands [ . . . ]." (338) This kind of virtuous capacity to pay his bills then shows the age-old capitalist adage that the good man is the man who can pay his bills, who can be solvent, and perhaps even more today, can tip a tidy sum, to boot. And last not least, the minister Sewell and his spouse spend the night at the Laphams, and the reader learns detailedly in a dialogue between Silas and the preacher that

[t]he Laphams now burned kerosene [ . . . ] and they had no furnace in the winter [ . . . ].  
[ . . . ] 'And do you ever have any regrets? [Sewell] delicately inquired [ . . . ].  
'About what I done? Well, it don't always seem as if I done it,' replied Lapham. 'Seems sometimes as if it was a hole opened for me, and I crept out of it. I don't know,' he added thoughtfully, biting the corner of his stiff mustache—'I don't know as I should always say it paid; but if I done it, and the thing was to do over again, right in the same way, I guess I should have to do it.' (339-41)

In the above, it is Silas's power of resistance to sell his company to the English business men that would have netted him a tidy sum of money capital to save everything that I propose constitutes the turning point of the book that saves his individual soul, his very individualized kind of being, over against a more egocentric and fashionable one to which he very nearly capitulated and succumbed; instead, he found a way out of his difficult predicament. Interestingly, that Silas

even imagines that he did not commit the problematic act against Rogers himself per se would be ripe for a Luhmann-style social systems approach. Yet that it was a kind of vocational avarice that got the better of Silas would too be open here to another diagnostic, be it Luhmannian, ideological-Marxian-materialist, psychoanalytic, or otherwise.

In the final accounting, the critic Vanderbilt frames for us what Howells said himself during compositional work on his novel of now classic worth,

In the summer of 1884, [Howells] was writing *Silas Lapham* in the comfort of his new home in Back Bay, but meditating to his father on ‘how unequally things are divided in this world.’ Because his privileged neighbors (and his own family) had escaped Boston in August, spacious dwellings were standing empty all along Beacon Street. Howells was keenly aware that thousands of urban poor in other neighborhoods were stifling in their wretched quarters [ . . . ] ‘I wonder,’ he continued, ‘that men are so patient with society as they are.’<sup>1</sup>

Here Howells gets it; he understands the thorny problems and preposterous powers of exploitation and class greed that he observes all around him, and that others somehow or other to his amazement tolerate, perhaps out of fear or indifference to the brutal fact.

Vanderbilt contextualizes even further for us here in our post-walking-through-the-novel, critical discussion

Howells merges the cult of self-help and success with the popular traditions of American pastoralism [ . . . ]. Here the virtuous country boy [ . . . ] confronts the greater opportunities and moral temptations of urban life [ . . . ]. He emerges scarred but essentially triumphant, and returns to the pastoral landscape of Vermont [ . . . ]. Although Silas’s final action is closer to retreat than pastoral compromise between

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1. Vanderbilt xiii. Indeed, in another rich reference to the same notable event scholar Elizabeth Stevens Prioleau writes, “*The Rise of Silas Lapham* was uniquely autobiographical. He told Henry James that he had used ‘all of his experience down to the quick,’ and the writing grew so intense that he suffered a breakdown somewhere in the middle of the book [ . . . ] It is generally believed that the novel represented a crucial juncture in his career, an ethical-sociological moment of reckoning. Having just moved to the water side of Beacon, the argument runs, Howells faced a critical, ultimately debilitating conflict between Proper Boston and his social conscience [ . . . ].” (Prioleau 84)

old and new, Howells resolves the country-city oppositions in the marriage of Penelope and Tom.<sup>1</sup>

This all seems cogent and sound for our thesis argued here about the trials and tribulations of the spectacle society. And quite vitally for Vanderbilt, Howells “also acquaints us in *Silas Lapham* with the activity and psychology of big business in the modern city [. . .] it may [. . .] be the best we have in our fiction, particularly when Lapham’s business ethics are fully assessed.”<sup>2</sup> From my perspective, this is probably true, at least as far as canonical works in U.S. literature go, and moreover Howells’s book offers an indictment of business

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1. Vanderbilt xix. As for this use of the romance plot of Penelope and Tom to dialectically interconnect a more future-focused disposition of the book, it is useful here to dialecticize and to nuance such an assertion itself by noting that for Michelle Kohler, “Leo Bersani argues that ‘[d]esire is a threat to the form of realistic fiction’ and that ‘[r]ealistic fiction admits heroes of desire in order to submit them to ceremonies of expulsion.’ Bersani’s ‘desire’ here refers to the ‘psychic discontinuities’ that cannot be absorbed into the intelligible, integral forms upon which Western ideology and social order depend. While my focus on ‘romance’ is more concerned with the representation of intersubjectivity, his widely accepted claim that the realistic novel works systematically to expel what threatens the integrity of its form is relevant to my central question about the formal instability of *Silas Lapham*. In step with Bersani, Henwood has suggested that, in the end, ‘Howells scrutinizes this [romantic] plot, lampoons the behavior it inspires, inveighs against the novels that perpetuate the heresy, but he cannot, it seems, suggest an alternative,’ implying that *The Rise of Silas Lapham* submits the forces of romance to ‘ceremonies of expulsion’ but that it does so unsuccessfully. Indeed, Howells’s final characterizations of Penelope demonstrate that he does not wholly resolve Penelope’s (or his own) struggle. But the novel’s lack of clean resolution is not because its realist struggle is against a disruptive force that it must but cannot expel. Rather, this novel struggles with its own desire to incorporate romance despite the fact that romance threatens its form. This desire ultimately presents an irreconcilable paradox that disrupts the disembodied foundation of realist representation.

The novel’s refusal to stamp out the taint of romance on Penelope’s character seems to posit a more sophisticated conceptualization of literary representation than what has often been attributed to Howells [. . .]. While many have argued alongside Bersani that Howellsian realism strives to police the excesses of sentimentality, capitalism, and ethnic profusion, this novel’s representations of Penelope Lapham suggests that Howells’s realist struggle includes a desire to incorporate the threat of material subjectivity—of both ‘inner and outer entirety’—into a mode of representation that relies on an effacement of this very materiality of the self.” (in Kohler 234-35) This line of argumentation seems indeed not to oversimplify the texture and richness of the novel in the way that a too easy use of Bersani’s terms may allow us to perform and so too to believe.

2. Vanderbilt xx.

ethics in a socio-economic reality infested with various individual self-referential egoisms. As for Silas's individual fate, Vanderbilt notes,

Despite his speculative losses, business setbacks, and uninsured new house burned to the ground, he refuses to engage in perfectly legal charades to acquire vital money from the unwary. And so [...] [w]hat follows is bankruptcy (though he later pays all his creditors 'every dollar, every cent'). Unable to allow his business transactions and private ethics to reside in tidy, separate compartments, Silas at last can only fail in the commercial climate of America.<sup>1</sup>

This does not speak well to 'the commercial climate' of the United States, of course, nor does it to Western materialism, but then Howells himself never was easy on the brutality of the power of money in the socioeconomic capitalist system. Finally, Vanderbilt argues persuasively and compellingly that, "Through the motifs of chance, will, luck, and fate, Howells weaves a pattern of deterministic irony that lightly mocks Silas's proud individualism throughout the novel."<sup>2</sup> This is a wonderful kind of inversion of things in the world of the novel, so that the reader may discern Silas's own comportment very much counterpointed by deeper subterranean structures that show how his run of good luck might only naturally if not statistically turn to a run of bad luck: and so it does in truth of fact.

More exactly, it is the basic material fact of being caught in the meshes of the net of late capital with which Silas must deal, something that also offers a textual example of what the Situationist-critic Thomas Levin communicates about Guy Debord: "Debord's rhetorical employment of the notion of spectacles qua images or representation to concretize his reading of 'spectacle' as *the* allegory of late capital."<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, we should also roll out the literary scholar Daniel T. O'Hara, who writes about the servitude of the spectacle and of representation via life under visibility and appearance in Howells's novel:

Lapham agrees to let his young West Virginia rivals in the paint business buy him out on two conditions; that he keep control of [...] the Persis brand [...] and that Corey be taken into their newly expanded business as a partner [...] the marginal utopian venture

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1. Vanderbilt xx-xxi.

2. Vanderbilt xxvii.

3. Levin 324.

of the English aristocrats that causes Lapham so much moral anguish and enables his rise in moral stature, is also intricately intertwined [ . . . ] with the torturous schemes of various entrepreneurs [ . . . ]. Experience in the novel is wholly conditioned by the imperialist economic order that is necessarily defined by the growing rationalization of the world and consequent diminishment of the sense of the infinite [ . . . ].

By sense of the infinite I mean what Kant in *The Critique of Judgment* analyzes as the sublime [ . . . ]. A sublime aesthetic, therefore, necessarily depends upon texts of self-transcending images, upon an imagination that is radically and intentionally at odds with itself. And in a world where the experience of the sublime is increasingly rationalized out of existence, just as [Walter Benn] Michaels rationalized away the sublimely conflicted nature of Howells's novel, the only place where the ascetic spirit can practice and realize the sublime imagination is such self-opposing texts, which are the sites for our modern self-opposing culture to reveal itself.<sup>1</sup>

O'Hara indeed takes Michaels to task here, not without reason for diminishing the complexity of Howells's achievement, and continues

Foucault in 'What is Enlightenment?' provides a useful gloss on what I am reaching for. He focuses there on Kant and Baudelaire as defining figures of our 'modernity,' which he finds necessarily entails an 'ironic heroicization of the present' involving an 'ascetic elaboration of the self' in the 'different place' of art [ . . . ]. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* would be the place where the emerging culture of speculative capitalism suffers an ascesis in the exemplary fate of its hero as sublimely embodied by this self-opposing text. An immanent critique, a negative transcendence, enacts itself here in an ascetic transgression of the aesthetic limits of a novel that condemns itself as sublimely as its finally antiheroic hero does himself [ . . . ].<sup>2</sup>

I have quoted this at length in order to convey that it would then be the signal accomplishment of Silas Lapham to have embodied one such way of being in a self-referential world, and so a certain kind of monad, under the thumb of the power of the spectacle; as such he would be a splendid example of a very human, yet prevailing spirit within it, who by living, and at one juncture, even embracing the conflict of the spectacle, is able to get beyond it. A totally opposite mode

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1. O'Hara 102-03.

2. O'Hara 103.

of being to his prior one more deeply embedded in the spectacle concentrates the reader's attention on the very picture of an individual life story able to metamorphose and so to grow in form and in spirit. A certain understanding of a primal reality that is essentially rich beneath the society of the spectacle then would be endorsed. Yet that Silas's opponents may well be the status quo structures that would be for Luhmann, communications themselves, is what should give the reader something to think. Also, it should be considered that how Silas manages to overcome pleonexy (greed) and his preoccupation with being à la mode combine to make him a prize example of what is most deserving of our focus of attention, and of future research, in a worldwide society of the spectacle.

In the final tally, whether *The Rise of Silas Lapham* could be said to instance a Benjaminian place or topography of historical 'remembrance' or 'true universal history', what I cited earlier as a "messianic history of delivered humanity [that] will burn like an 'eternal lamp' that includes the totality of the past in an immense *apokatastasis*" is of course not for the present writer, but instead is for the individual reader, to decide; so too would be the notion that Howells's 1885-tome constitutes, to borrow the words of Löwy, a Benjaminian monad, a "crystallized ensemble of tensions that contains a historical totality [. . .] wrested from the homogeneous course of history, [which] preserved and gathered the whole of [Howells's] work, in that work the [American] nineteenth century, and, in this latter, the 'entire course of history'"; nevertheless, it is the basic contention here that it indeed can as most precisely a Benjamin-like monad replete with *Jetztzeit*, which is again just to remind the reader from what I already quoted above: 'all the messianic moments of the past, the whole tradition of the oppressed is concentrated, as a redemptive power, in the present moment, the moment of the historian—or of the revolutionary.'

The articulation of the above cultural fact accords too by a principle of analogy with how Howells fell out of critical favor in the first half of the twentieth century for a time (and so was 'oppressed') and is now back on the critical radar screen as a source of academic and aesthetic, if not redemptive force. Further, the present study hopes to contribute to that current state of research in regard to the generality of the situation of Howells-reception, so as thereby to give audience to the main comic-tragic events of the Luhmann-like system

of Silas's individual life-narrative, a happening as the plot of a human life that ultimately services a certain kind of evolutionarily autopoietic self-referential system of the individual as once again to be clear Luhmann's systems theory would give us to think; the text of Silas's life process also embodies a spiritual accomplishment within the web-work of co-appearances that is, more and more today even than in Howells's own time, a spectacularized neo-Walter Benjaminian monad of modernity, our very time of collective belonging today amidst the regularized chaos of the spectacle as theorized by Guy Debord.

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## ***Indian Summer*: a “Cubical” Novel, or “the Narrow Line of Nature’s Truth”**

*Indian Summer* is a brilliantly clever, delightfully amusing psychological comedy which maintains all along its breathlessly brisk, “nimble” narrative<sup>1</sup> an exquisite balance between a keen, sophisticated, ironic observation of the foibles and subtlest intricacies of the human heart and a profoundly humane, benign sympathy with its characters and humanity at large, showing how far Howells’s fiction can be from the stodgy and ponderously moralizing view which is too often associated with realism. It is no wonder that the novel—one of his favorites<sup>2</sup>—should have been repeatedly described as “exquisite”<sup>3</sup> and elicited the wonderful comment by William James with which Tony Tanner concludes his chapter on the novel: “It has given me about as exquisite a kind of delight as anything I ever read in my life, in the line to which it belongs. How you tread the narrow line of nature’s truth so infallibly is more than I can understand. Then the profanity, the humor, the humanity, the morality—the everything! In short, ‘tis cubical, and set it up any way you please, ‘t will stand.”

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1. “Nimble” is a term used by John Updike in his perceptive analysis of the novel.

2. “Howells was disappointed in the critical recognition *Indian Summer* received, because he thought it one of his most mature and artistic creations [ . . . ]. Many years later William Lyon Phelps praised the novel, and Howells replied gratefully: ‘So few people know how good *Indian Summer* is, and I am glad and proud to have Mrs. Phelps and you of the little band.’” (Woodress 183) Updike mentions that “in one inscribed copy of the book, Howells called it ‘the one I like best.’”

3. It was the case with his contemporaries Taylor Bayard—“the style is exquisite”—, Henry James—“Mr. Howells is the master of certain refinements of style, of certain exquisite intentions (intentions in which humor generally plays a large part) such as are but little practiced in these days of crude and precipitate writing”—as well as William James—“it has given me [ . . . ] an exquisite kind of delight [ . . . ].” (Woodress 61; 71)

*Indian Summer*, like the rest of Howells's fiction, does not deal with the tragedy of evil. This, however, does not detract from its value. Howells focused on another and nevertheless just as real field of human experience—a more “common” one, in accordance with his literary creed: the drama, treated in the comic mode, of a middle-aged man, Theodore Colville, who is for a while tempted to indulge the fancy that he can retrieve his youth by marrying a young girl, Imogene, whose extremely romantic temper has convinced her that she can help him make up for the unhappy love affair of his early manhood.

Colville is an irresistibly charming man. Much of his bewitching power lies in his wonderful sense of humor, in the jokes that pepper and illuminate the numerous conversations of this highly “dramatic” narrative. Colville's utterly “intoxicating” banter holds us delightfully, voluptuously enthralled. Imogene voices our feelings when she declares, “it's perfectly intoxicating to be with him. I would give the world to talk as he does.” (666) Colville is also likable for more essential reasons: he is a fundamentally good-natured, genial, easy-going, delicate and generous character. He can spend hours entertaining dull old ladies, reacts “in the most delicate way” when he is jilted by Jenny Milbury (636) and is the object of little Effie's fond adoration, which is after all the best proof of his goodness, as he himself reflects when he takes stock of the whole affair: “[ . . . ] he must be a pretty good man, after all, if the little thing loved him so.” (842) Neither do we recognize any distortion in the laudatory portraits drawn of him by Imogene or Mrs. Bowen—except, perhaps, for Mrs. Bowen's choice of the adjective “irreproachable,” which is as we shall see a trifle too generous. . . . “Oh, he's a true gentleman,” the young girl laments when Colville announces his intention to leave Florence. “I shall always say it. How delicate he was, never catching you up, or if you said a foolish thing, trying to turn it against you. No, never, never, never!” (735) With her characteristic rectitude, Mrs. Bowen also commends his good qualities in the telegram she writes to Imogene's mother: “He is a very cultivated, interesting man, and though not exactly a society man, he is very agreeable and refined in his manners. I am sure his character is irreproachable [ . . . ].” (764)

Another ingredient of Colville's charm lies in his intelligence, and in particular in the critical distance that he usually maintains—even

though sometimes belatedly—with himself. This is pointed out early in the novel when he is seen emerging from the long recollection induced by his contemplation of the Arno. Though he has been looking back on the pitiful termination of his journalistic career at Des Vaches, there has been no trace of self-complacency in the exercise. The "study of his own condition of mind" has been "sarcastic" enough (600) to allow him to take the measure of his responsibility in his failure, as the previous pages testify. The same faculty for self-criticism also makes him humbly apologize to Mrs. Bowen the morning after the comic fiasco of the *veglione*. After the carnivalesque night has appropriately turned everything upside down, in particular his better common sense, he sobers down and realizes that he should never have taken her at her word when she suggested that he dance with Imogene. He knew her repugnance for this dubious form of entertainment. He "ought to have considered," he now insists to her, that she was "stretching a point," and bitterly repents his obtuseness. (699) He regrets and corrects in the same way his initially offended, self-righteous reaction when Imogene blurts out that she and Mrs. Bowen suspect that he has been "amusing himself" with the young girl. (720) His spontaneous self-protective reaction is to display a "freezing hauteur," (721) but he soon allows "a serious strain of self-question" to "mingle with his resentment" and admits to himself that there is some ground for the accusation. Finally, after the hilarious scene of the Lancers, where the clumsiness of age and an intrinsic ineptness at dancing have made him "walk [ . . . ] round like a bear in a pen" and "caper [ . . . ] to and fro with a futile absurdity," (645) he is first tempted to lay the blame on Imogene and Mrs. Bowen for making a fool of himself—"Miss Graham! What did he care for that child? Or Mrs. Bowen either, for the matter of that?" Yet his honesty once again prevails over the temptation of bad faith: "At this point Colville was aware of the brutal injustice of his mood. They were ladies, both of them, charming and good, and he had been a fool; that was all." (648)

This fundamental clear-sightedness also makes it impossible for him to believe otherwise than in fleeting moments that he is still young or can at least drink of the fountain of youth (the fountain mentioned in his visit to the Boboli gardens, 655) or bathe for the second time in the same river, as the presence of the Arno in the opening scene ironically forewarns. He cannot seriously believe in the flatter-

ing dream that he is still in the prime of youth and can consequently hold the heart of a young girl captive. In his final conversation with Mr. Waters, he frankly and contentedly admits, "I am getting grey and I am getting fat. I wouldn't get young if I could." (799) This unambiguous reflection finalizes what has been his predominant thought from the very beginning of his romance with Imogene. Except for rare moments of self-delusion, he has always had serious misgivings about the reasonableness of the affair and the nature of his and Imogene's feelings: "As a whole, the thing was grotesque and terrible to him," he reflects only a few days after they have decided to become engaged (781). He confesses to Imogene, "My dear child, I ought to have the strength to break away from this mistake," (782) and emerges from a session of guilty self-probing feeling like some "newly invented kind of scoundrel." (784) Neither does he ever seek to conceal his age from Imogene, even emphasizing and overdoing it in the facetious, self-derisive manner of which he is so fond: "Miss Effie," he jests at the Cascine, alluding to a former visit that took place much later than his joke suggests, "if I lift you up to one of those statues, will you kindly ask if it doesn't remember a young American signore who was here just before the French Revolution? I don't believe it's forgotten me." (661) When Imogene tells him that they are invited to an Egyptian fancy ball, he suggests that they impersonate Isis and Osiris, making an oblique self-deprecating allusion to very ancient gods and to the revived dead body of their son. He seizes the occasion of a question put by the girl to remind her once again of his age. When she asks him if he doesn't like to talk about the books he has read, he jocosely alleges a failing memory: "I would if I could remember the name of the characters. But I get them mixed up." (656)

Although he is an extremely likable, winning man, Colville is not, however, beyond reproach. The human psyche is too complex to make perfection possible.

Colville proves to be what Jenny Milbury, his old flame, judged him to be some fifteen years earlier, "a mixture," "too much of a mixture." (635) His "tone of persiflage" (780) is for instance unquestionably enticing, divinely pleasing; but the snag is that this clever personage cannot always refrain from taking advantage of his expertness with words, using them both as a strategic device to slip out of embarrassing situations, thus evading uncomfortable responsibilities, and as a

sexual weapon. Condensation and its stylistic manifestation, ellipsis, is a feature of humor, and Colville makes rather unscrupulous use of the blanks with which his own self-described "epigrammatic" style of talk is woven (620) to give utterance to thoughts that will be both pleasurable and elliptical, and hence vague enough, to allow him to disown if need be responsibility for their implicit meaning. His humor is in this sense "self-protective," in Tony Tanner's words:<sup>1</sup> "Do you never like to talk in earnest?" Imogene asks. "Well, not often. Because if you do, you can't say with a good conscience afterward that you were only in fun," (659) he freely and cleverly owns, simultaneously and advantageously disarming criticism, as he is apt to do, by admitting his fault. Old coquettish, satirical Mrs. Amsden (one of those women "who could manage their own skeletons winningly" [754]) admires "the orphic character" of his "pretty speeches," which "you can interpret [ . . . ] in so many different ways" and allow him, the mischievous old lady invidiously remarks, to "slip through the toils with unflinching ease." (753) With his characteristic blend of sympathy and irony, the narrator in turn emphasizes this propensity of his hero when he feigns to catch him "tak[ing] refuge as he had the power of doing from the discomfort of his own thoughts in jesting with the child." (819)

Neither can Colville resist using his brilliant linguistic skills, which make "everyone else seem insipid" (707), to please and win over other people, women in particular. The "witchery of [the] power" (693) they confer upon him is early dramatized by the unconscious physical effect his first witticisms produce on Imogene and the child Effie, who "insensibly drift [ . . . ] a little nearer to him." (620) Imogene later puts the irresistible lure of Colville's humor into words. Taking up the previously quoted remark, "It's perfectly intoxicating to be with him. I would give the world to talk as he does," (666) she declares, "the most fascinating thing about you always was that ironical way of yours [ . . . ]. You've no idea how intoxicating it is." (780) As the word suggests, there is nevertheless something dangerous in the "intoxicating" power of Colville's banter. It is partly responsible for the extravagant, romantic delusions they kindle in Imogene and for the close to fatal consequences from which the two supposed lovers (and the two indirect victims, Mrs. Bowen and Effie) escape by a hair's breadth.

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1. Tanner 152.

It is only by virtue of the comically artificial, conventional device of the carriage accident that the very serious drama of an unhappy marriage is providentially averted. This happy ending cannot exonerate Colville from having made reckless use of those words that had the enticing power of making him agreeable all round. He has behaved irresponsibly, selfishly, childish; he has been morally remiss. The reason, it is suggested, is a mixture of vanity and laziness, a certain amount of moral and intellectual laxity.

In the long analepsis that opens the narrative, much of Colville's public life as a journalist foreshadows the future actions of his private life. He does not only, among other things, fail as a newspaper editor because he is "a theorist and unpractical doctrinaire." He does not only waver—an ominous sign of the native irresolution that will plague him in Florence—between the Democrat and the Republican party, trying to strike an impossible compromise between the two (with the derisively entitled *Post-Democrat-Republican*) and ultimately betraying one of the parties. He also evinces the touch of vanity that will contribute to his errors in Florence. Though "his conscience trouble[s] him even more than his pride" when he is asked to relinquish his editorship of *Des Vaches'* thriving newspaper, his dismissal is at first "a mortification" which "his pride [cannot] brook." (594) After the failure of his romance with Jenny, he cowers for a while "under the sting of wounded vanity." (596) Vanity also entails susceptibility to flattery, a weakness to which Colville is not entirely immune. After his first soirée at Mrs. Bowen's, he falls asleep "with the flattered sense which abounds in the heart of a young man after his first successful evening in society." (629) The same feeling feeds the pleasant illusion that he may after all have been spared by the advance of time:

It was so long since Colville had been at a dancing party that Mrs. Bowen's offer to take him to Madame Uccelli's had first struck his sense of the ludicrous. Then it had begun to flatter him; it implied that he was still young enough to dance if he would, though he had stipulated that they were not to expect anything of the kind from him.

(639)

The trap soon closes upon him: when a young officer asks him to complete the set of the Lancers, "a vain and foolish ambition" prompts the fatal answer—"Yes, I can dance a little"—that ends in his discomfiture. (644-45) Intrigued by the goings-on at Palazzo Pinti and won-

dering if it is the younger or the older lady who attracts Colville there, Mrs. Amsden philosophizes in another scene, "Men of that age have such an ambition to marry young girls! I suppose that they think it proves they are not very old, after all." (683) At the *veglione*, Colville is once again lured into the trap of vanity when Mr. Waters unwittingly observes that, had he been "a young man like him," he would have stepped onto the dancing floor (691). This flattering suggestion results in yet another disaster. Colville, however, is clear-sighted and honest enough to identify at the end of his adventure the reason for his error: he was "flattered by an illusion of hers [Imogene's] that ought to have pained and alarmed him." (843)

Other forces coalesce with vanity, blurring the frontiers of human motivation and making a faultless life as good as impossible. Selfishness, against which Colville is not entirely proof, is one of them: his preoccupation with Imogene makes him neglect Mrs. Bowen at Madame Uccelli's dancing party and assume with "selfish obtuseness" (645) that she has no appetite, which leaves him free for a while to devote all his attention to the more alluring young girl. When the latter complains on another occasion that Mrs. Bowen is "cold," an amused yet mocking narratorial voice points out that Colville has not mended his ways: "the chill of the idea penetrated even through the density of [his] selfish content." (806) Yet a perhaps more typically Howellsian shortcoming combines with vanity and selfishness. It is the here again intricate mixture of moral cowardliness, laziness and consequent irresolution that result from a preference for pleasure and comfort over the more exacting demands of flawless morality.

Colville is one of those epicures and dilettantes who are familiar figures of Howells's fiction.<sup>1</sup> The most conspicuous clue is that he makes several abortive attempts at writing a "serious" book on the history of Florence but never completes the task to which he has pledged himself for the instruction of Effie. This epicurean sensibility makes him averse to effort, as expressed in the punch line of one of the narrator's amused yet incisive epigrammatic remarks: "He enjoyed a very pleasing little personal popularity which came from his interest in other people, from his good nature, and from his inertness [. . .]. He was mentally too lazy to contrive pretenses for getting away." (672) When faced with a choice between a pleasant and an unpleasant decision,

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1. Tanguy 47-76.

Colville tends to prefer the easy way out, regardless of the consequences. This is best evidenced by his affair with Imogene. Except for short-lived, feeble bouts of self-delusion, he is well aware that the whole thing is utterly unreasonable and even “grotesque,” as already mentioned. Yet he is flattered by the young girl’s devotion and dislikes the prospect of hurting her feelings if he refuses to pretend that he is in love—out of generous consideration for her and out of selfishness too, as it is unflattering to be disliked by others. Only discipline, that is to say a strong will, might help him consider things in the long term and accept immediate displeasure. But Colville is one of those “persons of weak will” who are, according to Mr. Waters, “a great curse to themselves and to everybody else.” (743) This remark is immediately dramatized by the typically comic scene that follows upon the conversation between the two men. Colville, who has pledged to leave Florence the next day precisely in order to dispel any doubt that he has been trifling with Imogene, has made his way to the gardens, where the girl happens to be taking a stroll with Effie and Mrs. Amsden. The “inertness” noted by the narrator is emphasized from the start, preparing for his absurd surrender to the girl’s proposal: he answers her first questions “passively” and walks along “without any volition of his own.” (749) It is then no wonder that when she should ask him at the end of their awkward, rambling conversation to reverse his decision and stay in Florence—with a “passionate intensity” that stands in comical sharp contrast with his own apathy—he should, after first declining her proposal and bidding her farewell, have immediate second thoughts and, in nearly the same breath, say the exact opposite: “He took her hand, and said again, ‘Good-by.’ And then he suddenly cried, ‘Imogene, do you wish me to stay?’” (751). It is not love that prompts this burlesque about-face: rather than feeling elated at the “divine fervor” elicited by his response, he sighs “in nerveless perplexity” and promptly proposes to “let it all end” when, back home, Imogene throws herself sobbing in grief on his breast after they have apprised Mrs. Bowen of the news. The paradoxical general affliction that from then on throws its pall over Palazzo Pinti (even Effie declares she is “demoralized”) is additional evidence of the dangers of a “weak will,” which makes a man the prey to impulse and deprives him of the use of reason and common sense, as the later developments of the affair confirm.



It is not easy, it is indeed impossible to behave faultlessly. Even Mrs. Bowen, who comes closest to perfection, is not wholly unimpeachable. She is all at once warm (she is characteristically seen most of the time sitting by a glowing little fire), gentle, tactful, prodigiously perceptive (she is the one who knows, even though she keeps quiet),<sup>1</sup> and on the other hand firm, capable, when her high moral standards require, of that (seemingly) "cruel rectitude" (784) which necessitates the pluck and sense of responsibility that Colville lacks. She achieves a nearly perfect balance between nature and the discipline and polish of culture. "There is a gentleness in Mrs. Bowen which seems to me the last refinement of a gracious spirit," Mr. Waters points out in what we feel to be a fair reflection of her character. "I have never met any lady who reconciled more exquisitely what is charming in society with what is lovely in nature." (714) Even her Victorianism, her occasionally prim gentility, which is most visible in her education of Effie, cannot be seriously held up against her: she has only a touch of conventionality, far outweighed by her remarkable qualities.<sup>2</sup> As Colville puts it, "She has her little worldlinesses and unrealities of manners, but she is truth and loyalty herself." (776) She is in addition all the less open to criticism regarding her sense of propriety that human action, we are made to realize, cannot abstract itself from historical circumstances, as we shall see in more detail. The necessities of the time make it impossible, for instance, to bring up an American girl with the freedom formerly enjoyed by her mother, as illustrated by the difference in education received by Mrs. Bowen and Effie, though they look strikingly alike. All in all then, Mrs. Bowen embodies to a large extent feminine virtue (among which independence of mind, particularly regarding the opposite sex).<sup>3</sup> She nevertheless falls short of perfection, or at least of her exacting moral ideal, twice—which, far from tarnishing her image, only enhances her humanity and adds to her charm. In a "stroke of liberality" (692) she makes, in the nar-

1. For an analysis of the value of silence as opposed to the unproductiveness of idle talk in *Indian Summer*, see Tanguy 263-66.

2. Tony Tanner argues otherwise. He takes up Cady's view that Mrs Bowen suffers from "an almost monstrous romantic *hubris*" and that the novel is a "fairly devastating, ironic critique of Mrs Bowen." (Tanner 157)

3. Mrs Bowen's high-minded defense of her dignity is an instance that Duffy might have added to his thesis that "There are [ . . . ] moments in *Indian Summer* [and the rest of Howells's fiction] when Victorian gender constructs break down." (Duffy 24)

rator's tongue-in-cheek remark, an "imprudent" move (as shown by the disastrous outcome of the scene) when her generous desire to please Imogene, who is dying to plunge into the whirl of the *veglione*, gets the better of her own ingrained puritan defiance of carnival and the theatre, and she suggests that she dance with Colville. She slips a second time from her fine ideal—but the suggestion is that it is a felicitous slip—when Colville finally opens his eyes and proposes to her: she only yields to his plea with much loathing for what she considers to be her disgraceful weakness in view of the intolerably gross treatment she has received from him ever since he started "amusing himself" with Imogene.

The text insists that there is no clear-cut distinction between right and wrong, good and bad. They merge into each other. A commendable intention may thus overlap and obscure a more questionable one. Colville for instance argues retrospectively, rather to explain his attitude with Imogene than to exculpate himself, "I could not say much without seeming to seek for myself the release I was offering her;" (835) "What I was willing to do was to keep my word to prevent that poor child, if possible, from ever finding out her mistake." (845) In the same way, Imogene is undoubtedly to a large extent the comic personification of the romantic girl who falls prey to the delusions of romance and its sentimental variations—its worship of all forms of passion, among which the amorous one, of heroism, of duty and self-sacrifice. This does not mean, however, that she is one of those types, of those stock characters to which Howells objected in his continued critique of earlier forms of fiction, in particular romance. Her exalted search for heroic self-sacrifice and her glorification of suffering for suffering's sake—she wants to "atone to" Colville for "all the wrong he [has] suffered" (767) and ardently yearns for a life "full of cares and anxieties" (814)—makes her voice absurdly extravagant desires: "Do you suppose that all I want is to be happy? I don't care for that—I despise it, and I always hate myself for seeking my own pleasure, if I find myself doing it." (752)<sup>1</sup> Yet Imogene is at the same time, in Colville's own words, "a generous young spirit betrayed by it

1. Howells describes the "gaudy [. . .] heroine" of romance in a famous *Harper's Monthly* article contemporaneous with *Indian Summer*, "Realism: the Moral Issue:" (1887) "More lately she has begun to idolize and illustrate Duty, and she is hardly less mischievous in this new rôle, opposing duty, as she did love, to prudence, obedience, and reason." A "still more recent" development of romantic and sentimental fiction

to ignoble and unworthy excess." (829) The telegram she sends him testifies to her "child-like simplicity and directness" and "generous courage;" (721) after relentlessly dragging Colville for a fortnight to a string of balls and parties that have left him exhausted and with an unfortunate tendency to drop off to sleep in the most embarrassing circumstances, after pestering him for making too much of Mrs. Bowen, she suddenly realizes and repents in the plainest and most honest terms her selfishness to Colville and ingratitude to Mrs. Bowen (793).

Mr. Waters himself, whose highly distanced, unprejudiced, "scientific" yet wholly benign view of man makes him the voice of wisdom and much of a mouthpiece for Howells, is not immune from criticism. Isn't the former minister, the "Emersonian" philosopher, a trifle too optimistic and ingenuous? Doesn't his Swedenborgian innocence (691) blind him to certain facts of life, like the not impossible homosexual relationship suggested by the tender clasp between the two maskers, the mock monk and nun? Besides, if his age has released him from the tumult of the passions, do we not nevertheless prefer, like Colville as he watches the old man walking away with the "scholar's far-off look," not "to come to that yet either" (653) and to be a little less reasonable and a little bit younger? Had we not rather warm ourselves not with the thick wraps with which the minister endeavors, even in the most scorching heat of the Italian summer, to forget the snows of Puritan Haddam East Village, but with the warmth of life, the warmth of Mrs. Bowen's steady and comfortable little fire and of her soft rustling silks?

Life is decidedly too complex not to admit—blessedly, we are made to feel—that perfection is not of this world—especially for men, at whom the narrator enjoys poking fun, as when he jests about Colville that Mr. Waters' opinion on young girls "flattered the man in him by its implication of the man's superiority" (677) or quips that "commonly he was man enough to notice very few things" (717) or marvels at a man's capacity to indulge in "futureless satisfaction." (682) Men, it is true, are more susceptible than women to another psychic force that sometimes plays havoc with their better judgment—fantasy, irrational impulses. Colville is repeatedly actuated by "impulse" and is

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has compounded her case by adding to her ideal the "agonies of self-sacrifice, as idle and useless as the moral experiences of the insane asylums." (99-100)

seen performing wholly unpremeditated actions, or even actions that nullify his conscious intention, as in the above-quoted scene when Imogene asks him to stay in Florence. He surrenders to these impulses because of the lure of immediate gratification, of vanity, as already mentioned, or also of sexual pleasure, for the novel shows that Howells was not, at least at that point in life, the prude that he is often made out to be.<sup>1</sup> He indeed plays with, in other terms actualizes in imagination and thus masters and distances himself from (as Freud explains with his grandson's *fort-da* game) sexually charged fantasies (as also hinted in the brief pantomime of the two maskers). The note of—humorous—sexual license is struck in the first pages of the novel, when Colville is seen “stooping down before the stove” of the hotel's chilly dining-room and, in his aptly upside-down position, which prepares him for a subversive experience, staring at the grotesque, pagan, Dionysian vine-entangled “figures of the woman-headed, woman-breasted hounds developing into vines and foliage that covered the frescoed trellising of the quadrangularly vaulted ceiling.” (609) The “cold,” as his name suggests, or at least the not-any-longer so very ardent bachelor, as the feeble fire of his room intimates, is still haunted by half-pleasant, half-repulsive or threatening sexual fancies, a fact which is both recognized, even though in an allusive fashion, and made good-natured fun of. Fancy, licentious fancy, occasionally forces the barrier of propriety and reason, at least with “our brutal sex,” as the narrator indulgently jests (645), causing “a confusion of desires that every man but no woman will understand. After 1800 years, the man is still imperfectly monogamous.” (711)<sup>2</sup>

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1. Tony Tanner still shared in 2000 the traditional opinion that Howells “is fastidious to the point of prudishness about sexual matters.” (Tanner 153) John Updike holds on the contrary that “in spite of the prudery that led him to deplore Chaucer and disdain Dreiser, [he] is fascinated and truthful.” His interpretation of the above-quoted narratorial comment is that Colville “passively wallows in polymorphous sexuality.” A particularly interesting study of the sexual question (even though it does not include *Indian Summer*) is to be found in Elizabeth Prioleau's *The Circle of Eros*, where she analyzes the erotic content of Howells's fiction as well as the way writing fiction helped him work out his difficulties in this field.

2. As with other comments concerning the sexual question, Tony Tanner misses the irony of the text. The remark about monogamy is to him “a mark of his [Howells's] somewhat ponderous gentility.” (Tanner 155) Duffy on the contrary sees it more appropriately as “a risqué passage, one that speaks the unspeakable.” (Duffy 24)

A final potential impediment to sound reasoning and impeccable behavior is that thoughts, values, philosophies are historically determined, and therefore mutable. There is no such thing as absolute truths. This is first suggested on the personal, psychological level with the question of ageing. To the definitely old Mr. Waters, who is in his eighties, middle-aged Colville and Mrs. Bowen are little more than striplings. He speaks repeatedly of Colville's youth, and cannot understand why he denies himself the pleasure of dancing at the *veglione*: "If I were a young man like you!" he then sighs regretfully (691), reiterating his remark a few days later (712). To him, Mrs. Bowen is in the prime of youth, and Imogene a mere child, as comically illustrated by the misunderstanding between the two men when it turns out that the "young person" whom Mr. Waters has been talking about is not Imogene, as Colville thought, but her guardian. Mrs. Bowen herself corrects Imogene when the girl evokes the time "when he [Colville] was young:" "He is old compared with you, Imogene, but you'll find as you live along that your contemporaries are always young." (635) As for Effie, who adores Colville, she presumes, no doubt generously, that he must be about seventy-five (762).

The theme of truth's variability in time is also broached on a more impersonal, general level, echoing a point developed in *Criticism and Fiction*: the realistic fiction of his time is superior, Howells argues, to its earlier, cruder forms, romance or "effete classicism." He goes on explaining that it would nevertheless have been impossible for such predecessors as Dickens or Balzac to do any better than they did because ideas are historical constructs; they are the natural product of their time.<sup>1</sup> *Indian Summer* also suggests that "the same thing may be admirable at one time and deplorable at another" (*Criticism and Fiction* 12). This view accounts for the considerations on Effie's education that were mentioned earlier: if the narrator repeatedly stresses the "perfect" (603) or "bewitching" resemblance (613) between Mrs. Bowen and her daughter, it is to better emphasize the difference in the education they have received, a difference called for, indeed neces-

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1. "Such a critic [the objective one] will not respect Balzac's good work the less for contemning his bad work. He will easily account for the bad work historically [. . .]. This [Balzac's flaws, that is to say the 'exaggeration that typifies' and 'the excesses of analysis'] is simply primitive and inevitable, and he is not to be judged by it [. . .]. To Balzac it may be forgiven because he wrote at a time when fiction was just beginning to verify the externals of life." (*Criticism and Fiction* 7; 10)

sitated and legitimated by changing cultural conditions: while Mrs. Bowen enjoyed an “untrammelled girlhood [. . .] in her Western city” and was “free and unchaperoned as the casing air,” (604) she keeps a very close watch upon her daughter, who is taught strict politeness and above all discipline and submissiveness—more precisely submission to her mother’s authority. Mrs. Bowen and Colville look back nostalgically upon the golden age when “that wild, sweet liberty [. . .] once made American girlhood a long rapture.” (604) They nevertheless both agree that it can no longer be so. Resolute and clear-headed Mrs. Bowen has of course no qualms about the matter, as exemplified by a little scene showing one of her intimate evenings with Colville and the two girls. She has been playing a song that used to be in fashion in Florence fifteen years earlier, when she was first there with Jenny and Colville. This gives rise to a revealing exchange between Mrs. Bowen and Imogene. Imogene for a start is shocked that Mrs. Bowen should know and sing such songs: “Dear me, Mrs. Bowen! Did you sing such songs? You wouldn’t let Effie!” (681) The narrator, however, has just observed that it was “one of those negro songs, such as very pretty young ladies used to sing without harm to themselves or offense to others.” This is then the first indication that times have changed: what used to be considered as “harmless” fifteen years earlier is now considered as risqué, even by an American girl from Buffalo, who in addition is no prig. Though younger and less conventional than Mrs. Bowen, she then shares the latter’s view that some things may be good at one time and bad at another. It actually confirms what is intimated by her reply to Colville in another conversation when he asks for her opinion about “the European plan of bringing up girls.” (625) Her “evasive” tone betrays a slight embarrassment; but her answer indicates that she approves of the new type of education: “I don’t think it’s quite the same now as it used to be.” As for Mrs. Bowen herself, her reply to Imogene about the negro song is clear enough: “The times are changed. I wouldn’t let Effie go to the theatre alone with a young gentleman.” (681) And when Imogene muses about what would have happened if Colville had met Jenny “now,” she retorts emphatically, “Oh, it *couldn’t* happen now.” (637)

This is not the only way in which the novel suggests that man changes with time, and that his truths and values are historical. Such is also the thrust of two reflections on architecture, the first of which

is quite explicit and sheds light on the second: "No people had ever more distinctly left the impress of their whole temper in their architecture, or more sharply distinguished their varying moods from period to period in their palaces and temples" (650); he had "taken up the notion of studying the architectural expression of Florentine *character at the different periods.*" (670, italics mine) Local or national character is shaped by its historical context or culture.

In one of his discussions of Savonarola, the monk who fascinates him and to whom he devotes much of his studious time, Mr. Waters makes a similar point. The Italian Puritan—"I find my ancestral puritanism particularly appealed to by the puritanism of Savonarola" (652)—inspires the admiring yet unbiased former minister from the Connecticut Valley (Haddam East Village) with numerous metaphysical, political and moral reflections. One of them touches upon the question in hand: when Colville wonders at Mr. Waters' tolerance of the Carnival, which his hero Savonarola held to be a devilish invention, the minister explains that "By this time he knows that his puritanism was all a mistake, unless a thing for the moment only." (676)

If so many forces converge to make up man's inner life and prompt him to action, the logical conclusion can only be the one offered by Mr. Waters and taken up by the narrator, a lesson in tolerance and moderation. In spite of his puritan heritage, Mr. Waters does not object to the Carnival, to dancing (he urges Colville to waltz at the *veglione*) or to suicide. He does not object to marrying a much older person either, provided the older one be a woman—(798). He also takes human weakness and finiteness for granted. "I meet here [in Italy] the characters I read of and commune with them before their errors were committed." (741) For "men" necessarily fail, even if "man succeeds," as Howells's faith in progress makes him add. It is then legitimate that the old man should conclude, "I don't know that I blame people for things. There are times when it seems as if we were puppets without control of our movements. We are a long time learning to act with common sense, or common sanity in what we call matters of the affections." (845) Though elegantly unobtrusive, the narrator's voice echoes the old man's views: "In the noblest human purpose there is always some admixture, however slight, of less noble motive." (722) He indulgently notes and excuses his hero's foibles, especially his propensity for equivocation and irresolution, as being part and parcel

of human nature. He thus benevolently reflects about “that impulse to temporize which is natural to the human soul in questions of right and interest” (812) or “those psychological juggles which we all practice with ourselves at times.” (693)

“Enjoy life,” the novel seems to say. Forget the dark vision of the nation’s ancestors: when Colville beats his breast for what he deems to have been his inexcusable behavior to Imogene and Mrs. Bowen, Mr. Waters soothingly replies that his self-abasement is “the hysterical excess of Puritanism, in all times and places. In the moral world we are responsible only for the wrong that we intend. It can’t be otherwise.” (843) Evil, in addition, does not exist in the absolute; it only lies in “excess;” it is a matter of proportion, a matter of “degree,” as Mr. Waters says about the theatre and Savonarola: “I have been looking about [ . . . ] at the theatres lately [ . . . ] with a view to determining the degree of harmless amusement that may be derived from them”—the Church was wrong in “condemning [it] in toto;” (711) “Savonarola perished because he was excessive. I am studying him in this aspect; it is fresh ground. It is very interesting to inquire just at what point a man’s virtues become mischievous and intolerable.” (653)

The moral life is a matter of fine-tuning, of discrimination, a term which also appropriately describes Howells’s sophisticated treatment of character in *Indian Summer*. This is perhaps why he was so fond of the novel: he wrote it as a moralist, not as a moralizer, and as a master of psychological realism, showing that he could measure up with the champion of fine “discrimination,” his admired friend Henry James. The general tone, however, is different—and this also is part of the enticing charm of the novel. Like another favorite writer, Jane Austen, he never leaves the field of comedy, delighting us with his sense of humor and his critical yet good-natured vision of life, which he makes us embrace with unmitigated delight.

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## New York dans *The Hazard of New Fortunes*, de William Dean Howells : le sceau du silence

*The snow lay lightly on the golden globes that tremble like peacock-crests above the vast domes, and plumed them with softest white ; it robed the saints in ermine ; and it danced over all its work, as if exulting in its beauty—beauty which filled me with subtle, selfish yearning to keep such evanescent loveliness for the little-while-longer of my whole life, and with despair to think that even the poor lifeless shadow of it could never be fairly reflected in picture or poem. [...] [T]he gondolas stole in and out of the opaque distance more noiselessly and dreamily than ever ; and a silence, almost palpable, lay upon the mutest city in the world.*

William Dean HOWELLS, *Venetian Life*.

*There was a sort of inner quiet in the sound, and when I chose I slept off to it, and woke to it in the morning refreshed and strengthened to explore the literary situation in the metropolis.*

William Dean HOWELLS, « First Impressions of Literary New York ».

Lorsqu'en 1889, Howells déménagea de Boston à New York, il avait conscience de quitter une ville conservatrice, rassurée par ses valeurs puritaines et son « raffinement intellectuel » (*A Hazard of New Fortunes*, p. 265) pour aller s'installer dans une métropole moderne, soumise à un soudain bouleversement architectural, économique et social. Mais si ses lettres et ses essais manifestent une incertitude à l'abord d'une métropole informe, insaisissable et incommensurable<sup>1</sup>, ils montrent aussi son désir de s'orienter vers un contact plus vrai

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1. Howells avoua ainsi à un ami : « *I have been trying to catch on to the bigger life of the place. It's immensely interesting, but I don't know whether I shall manage it ; I'm fifty-one, you know. There are lots of interesting young painting and writing fellows, and the place is lordly free, with foreign touches of all kinds all through its abounding Americanism : Boston seems of another planet* » (cité dans O'Connell, p. 42).

avec la concrétude et la complexité de la vie — « *[Boston was] true to an ideal of life rather than to life itself*<sup>1</sup> ». Présentant simultanément la réticence de l'écriture face aux mutations « indicibles » et « insensées » de New York<sup>2</sup> et la nécessité d'un investissement responsable de l'art dans l'historicité<sup>3</sup>, ils témoignent de la maturité d'un auteur désormais conscient des limites et des pouvoirs des mots.

Dans son roman new-yorkais, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells donne aussi à voir l'inquiétude étonnamment créatrice de son écriture au contact de la métropole. En relatant l'installation de Basil March à Manhattan, puis son attachement et son renoncement successifs à décrire des « scènes » new-yorkaises, l'auteur semble réinventer le réalisme urbain. C'est en effet en manifestant la réflexion de son écriture sur ses propres manquements qu'il confère à la matière de ses mots la sensibilité nécessaire à sa recreation des « forces » destructrices et salutaires qui animent la ville. Comme Basil March qui, délaissant simultanément les hauteurs du tramway aérien et les voiles du pittoresque, cesse de vouloir tracer, classer ou cadastrer les mouvements urbains et se met à marcher à travers la diversité des quartiers, l'écriture descend dans la rue : elle abandonne ses velléités de saisie totalisante, de maîtrise surplombante, de classement conquérant afin de s'accorder aux dérives aléatoires du transitoire et du trivial. En montrant ses détours et ses raccourcis, ses béances et ses coïncidences, en exposant ses distances ironiques et ses variations de perspective, en brisant la continuité de la trame pour saisir les sursauts de l'instant, l'écriture donne à « ressentir<sup>4</sup> » les variations indéterminées de la métropole — la nouveauté informe et ineffable des immeubles (« *those heights and masses of many-storied brickwork for which architecture has yet no proper form and aesthetics no name* » *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, p. 263) et les indices de souffrance ou d'endurance qui, ensevelis sous les mornes couleurs de la banalité, demeurent silencieux dans la ville.

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1. Cité dans O'Connell, p. 43.

2. Les expressions sont respectivement de Henry James (*The American Scene*) et de Henry Adams (*The Education of Henry Adams*).

3. En 1886, Howells s'engagea ainsi en faveur des anarchistes condamnés à mort lors de l'affaire de Haymarket Square, à Chicago.

4. Dans un essai de 1886, James saluait la manière dont Howells décrit moins la vie américaine qu'il n'en « éprouve » la réalité : « *Other persons have considered and discoursed upon American life, but no one, surely, has felt it so completely as he* » (Eble, p. 44).

Comme une peau soumise au sceau d'une bague à intaille (p. 365), l'écriture de Howells s'expose aux vibrations violentes et aux virtualités de reconnaissance qui animent la ville. Loin de vouloir contenir les mutations « terrifiantes » de la modernité, loin de vouloir cantonner la misère de l'« autre moitié<sup>1</sup> » dans une réconfortante « irréalité<sup>2</sup> », elle se livre aux mouvements invisibles de la vie ordinaire. Proclamant moins son intérêt pour le bas, le familier et le vulgaire<sup>3</sup> qu'elle ne le met en œuvre, elle se présente simultanément comme une évocation des bouleversements de Manhattan au tournant du siècle et comme une incarnation des liens de « complicité » qui s'esquissent entre les mots et les choses. Dans *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells ne cesse de rappeler que « la "littérature exposante" [...] ne fut pas seulement une *mimesis*, mais aussi une *poiesis*, c'est-à-dire un faire transformateur et créateur » (Mitterand, p. 7). En inscrivant au cœur même du fonctionnement narratif et de la substance verbale les tensions, les attentes et les transmutations de la ville, il donne à ressentir l'investissement éthique des mots — leur *déménagement* — dans le monde sensible :

*The main difference was that they saw [New York] more now as a life, and then they only regarded it a spectacle ; and March could not release himself from a sense of complicity with it, no matter what whimsical, or alien, or critical attitude he took. A sense of the striving and the suffering deeply possessed him, and this grew the more intense as he gained some knowledge of the forces at work — forces of pity, of destruction, of perdition, of salvation.* (p. 265)

1. L'expression fait référence à l'ouvrage de Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*.

2. Alan Trachtenberg écrit ainsi : « *Howells's terror is hardly enjoyable ; it arises from the sudden fear that moral choice, the acts of good people of sound character, might not prevail against the "accidents" of mechanized life* » (p. 47). Amy Kaplan suggère à son tour : « To realize the city as a subject for representation means to combat its otherness and to fix its protean changes within a coherent narrative form » (p. 44). Or, comme le souligne Carrie Tirado Bramen, les considérations sur la « frayeur » du romancier face à l'industrialisation urbaine, ou sur sa volonté de « domestiquer » ou de « bannir » la « menace » de l'altérité semblent méconnaître son désir d'amener son esthétique, certes éprouvée par les variations new-yorkaises, à s'investir dans la diversité urbaine : « *Howells's urban sketches reveal not an escape from the realities of the city but a commitment to radicalizing the aesthetic* » (p. 99).

3. Je me réfère ici aux essais d'Emerson, et en particulier à « The American Scholar » : « *I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low* » (p. 69).

Howells considérait *A Hazard of New Fortunes* comme la plus « vitale » de ses œuvres fictionnelles. Dans ce roman en effet, il inscrit dans la structure et la substance de ses mots son renoncement à comprendre la totalité des variations urbaines afin d'en interpréter les silencieuses vibrations<sup>1</sup>. Dans un premier temps, nous verrons comment les déplacements des personnages à travers la ville s'accompagnent d'un abandon progressif des démarches inquisitrices ou dissimulatrices au profit d'évocations ambulatoires de rencontres et de rues. Ceci nous amènera à considérer la manière dont la création d'un nouveau magazine fonctionne comme un prisme dans le roman, révélant simultanément les artifices des conventions sociales et les audaces de la construction littéraire. Mais nous envisagerons aussi comment, au-delà de toute dénonciation, l'auteur réussit à aborder l'insolite beauté des machines, des immeubles et des moments de vie qui irisent la ville comme des promesses d'humanité.

## 1 Une initiation au renoncement

Au début du roman, les interminables chapitres consacrés à la « chasse » d'un meublé à Manhattan *ne servent à rien*. La vanité de la quête et des inventaires qui la décrivent se trouve d'ailleurs clairement signifiée au moment où Basil et Isabel March s'installent dans l'un des premiers appartements visités — celui de Mrs Grosvenor Green. Mais si l'évocation de la recherche d'une location n'a aucun sens au niveau du récit, elle demeure révélatrice, ou même initiatrice, au niveau du discours. Elle manifeste l'investissement esthétique et éthique des mots dans le monde sensible. Ainsi, lorsqu'au moment où ils emménagent dans leur appartement, les locataires vident les lieux de leurs tapis et de leurs peaux, de leurs éventails et de leurs paravents, de leurs chinoiseries et de leurs bibelots afin de *créer de l'espace*, ils illustrent la démarche poétique que l'écrivain instaure dans les scènes liminaires comme dans l'ensemble du roman. Dans *A Hazard*

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1. Antoine Compagnon établit la distinction suivante entre « comprendre » et « interpréter » : « Comprendre est un geste totalisant, englobant, qui prend ensemble, entoure, cerne et serre le sens, qui donne *consistance* au discours ; tandis qu'interpréter, c'est s'exposer entre deux, donner prise, enlacer et toujours rater, car quelque chose toujours résiste — “ex-siste”, d'après l'orthographe introduite par Heidegger — à l'interprétation, qu'elle ne récupère que pour laisser derrière elle autre chose, sans jamais pouvoir prendre ensemble, et en renonçant à cette illusion » (p. 73).

of *New Fortunes*, l'auteur montre en effet comment le soulèvement des voiles de la vraisemblance ou du sentimentalisme n'abstrait pas l'écriture du monde mais concourt au contraire à accorder les mots aux mouvements urbains — à amener le texte à *habiter* une ville qui, refusant de se laisser approprier, se laisse néanmoins, transitoirement, approcher : « [e]verybody belongs more or less in New York ; nobody has to belong here altogether » (p. 186).

En ce sens, l'assemblage de petites annonces que Mrs March a réalisé pour orienter ses recherches à Manhattan revêt une valeur emblématique dans le roman. Présenté comme une créature monstrueuse — « *some glittering nondescript vertebrate* » (p. 37) —, il est simultanément associé à un « serpent » sans bouche et à un appartement new-yorkais (« *seven rooms and a bath* » p. 55). À la fois abstrait et concret, il annonce une coïncidence entre la réflexion du discours sur son propre mutisme et les variations indicibles de la ville. D'un côté, le montage de Mrs March donne à voir l'écart entre les « descriptions » journalistiques, saturées de précisions techniques ou de détails esthétiques, et la réalité des immeubles visités. Il montre la méfiance de l'auteur envers les effets de vraisemblance et les voiles du pittoresque. Mais d'un autre côté, le mobile « articulé » de Mrs March s'apparente aux enfilades de pièces, aux successions d'immeubles ou aux lignes de tramway. Il manifeste l'harmonisation de la structure narrative et de la substance verbale aux transformations de la cité.

Comme le collage de Mrs March, le roman expose d'abord les limites des cadres et des écrans réalistes. Pour mieux se retrouver dans une ville aussi immense et sauvage que les étendues de l'Ouest (p. 38), Isabel a réduit Manhattan à un territoire bien déterminé, situé entre Washington Square et la Vingtième Rue, entre le rez-de-chaussée et le troisième étage. Or, l'intérêt de son balisage consiste moins à déterminer des frontières géographiques ou sociales qu'à éclairer ces zones indistinctes où le vacillement des certitudes restaure le frisson d'une aventure. Ainsi, Washington Square apparaît comme un chronotope où s'esquisse une « ligne » de démarcation entre la « respectabilité » des maisons cossues en briques rouges, au Nord, abritant une aristocratie retranchée derrière la vacuité de ses décors et de ses mœurs, et la « pauvreté » des immeubles et des échoppes, au Sud, fourmillant de vie et de visages aux traits européens (p. 51). Mais Washington Square est aussi l'intervalle où Isa-

bel et Basil éprouvent la relativité de leurs perceptions. S'ils savent déceler des signes d'opulence ou des symptômes de déchéance sur les seuils des immeubles à visiter — ils énumèrent les sonnettes, estiment le lustre des poignées, mesurent la proximité des écuries ou des ateliers de couture —, ils sont aussi soumis aussi à une évaluation souvent humiliante de la part des portiers. Le renversement des points de vue instaure alors un doute au cœur des descriptions : il montre simultanément les limites des saisies immobilières ou des inventaires hiérarchisés et les vertus des évocations incertaines et mouvantes.

Dans l'ensemble du roman en effet, l'auteur s'attache moins à souligner le luxe des maisons de Park Avenue ou le délabrement des taudis de la Bowery qu'à éclairer ces zones intermédiaires où l'assurance de la richesse touche au dénuement, où l'évidence de la misère se trouve d'indices de rémission — où le connu revêt une indicible étrangeté. Il note sans insistance le faste décadent, les dorures écaillées et les parquets usés des demeures scindées en plusieurs logements (p. 40-41) ou « l'air » de renouveau des maisons restaurées au milieu des ordures, des escaliers de secours et des rues mal pavées (p. 51-52). Comme au moment où les époux se hasardent à perdre leurs repères et à s'aventurer dans des lieux interlopes afin de recouvrer l'ivresse d'une première découverte, il montre l'émotion associée au passage du temps sur un espace en mouvement.

Au niveau du discours, l'auteur instaure aussi un écart entre la voix du narrateur et la vision des personnages afin de suggérer le désarroi de la conscience face aux bouleversements urbains. Mais les commentaires de la voix narrative et les réflexions de Basil, au style indirect libre, se rejoignent peu à peu et expriment leurs doutes sur la nécessité de classer, contenir ou discriminer la multitude d'impressions qui assaillent le sujet à Manhattan. Ainsi, le glissement du métaphorique au sensoriel qui s'esquisse au niveau du discours coïncide avec le renoncement du personnage aux voiles du « pittoresque » et avec son ouverture aux aléas de la rue.

Dans les descriptions liminaires, les fenêtres de l'hôtel, les vitres du fiacre ou les hauteurs du tramway illustrent les écrans nostalgiques ou esthétiques que les nouveaux venus interposent entre leur regard et la métropole new-yorkaise. Retranchés derrière les rideaux de leur chambre d'hôtel, Isabel et Basil n'abordent la ville qu'à travers le filtre de leurs souvenirs visuels et sonores :



*They recalled the Broadway of five, of ten, of twenty years ago, swelling and roaring with a tide of gaily painted omnibuses of picturesque traffic that the horsecars have now banished from it. The grind of their wheels and clash of their harsh bells imperfectly fill the silence that the omnibuses have left, and the eye misses the tumultuous perspective of former times.* (p. 47)

Ils recourent aussi à leurs connaissances artistiques, et en particulier au « pittoresque », afin de s'aventurer au cœur de la complexité new-yorkaise tout en se rassurant sur leur capacité à en maîtriser et à en ordonner l'extraordinaire diversité — ou la scandaleuse misère : « *[p]erfectly atrocious, of course, but incomparably picturesque<sup>1</sup>!* » (p. 54).

Or, les métaphores théâtrales qui investissent les descriptions montrent à la fois le détachement du narrateur et l'incertitude croissante du personnage focalisateur envers ses projections esthétiques. Au cours de leurs premières traversées de Manhattan, Basil et Isabel observent la ville depuis les hauteurs du métro aérien et voient les vitres se muer en une succession de scènes à valeur doublement exemplaire et universelle. Mais l'imagerie théâtrale dénonce aussi « l'illusion » consistant à métamorphoser les lieux « communs » et les hommes « ordinaires » en spectacle esthétique (p. 48) :

*He said it was better than the theater, of which it reminded him, to see those people through their windows : a family party of workfolk at a late tea, some of the men in their shirt-sleeves ; a woman sewing by a lamp ; a mother laying her child in its cradle ; a man with his head fallen on his hands upon a table ; a girl and her lover leaning over the windowsill together. What suggestion ! What drama ! What infinite interest !*

(p. 66)

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1. Carrie Tirado Bramen souligne combien le « pittoresque », originellement associé à l'esthétique paysagère du dix-huitième siècle, en Angleterre, se distingue des catégories du « sublime » ou du « beau » définies par Burke : « *Not requiring the classically trained eye necessary to detect beauty and not inspiring the awe that was the province of the sublime, the picturesque offered the more domesticated satisfaction of mild surprise. Lacking the vastness of the sublime and the silkiness of the beautiful, the picturesque conveys a sense of "roughness", "sudden variation", and "untouched varieties" within small and often crowded spaces. Signs of roughness and contrast were found in the swarthy "others" of the English countryside, namely gypsies and peasants.* » (p. 85-86)

Se défiant de tout commentaire moralisateur, le narrateur recourt ainsi à la métaphore afin de manifester la réticence du regard face à l'altérité. Mais c'est surtout au moment où les nouveaux venus s'égarer au cœur de la multitude qu'il souligne l'inanité de leurs compositions artistiques. Ainsi, dans la scène marginale où les March traversent en voiture un quartier d'immigrants, leurs écrans « pittoresques » ne sauraient contenir la multiplicité des visages incrustés dans les murs ou le mélange d'ordures et de denrées qui s'accumulent sur les trottoirs. Ironiquement, le narrateur note combien la vanité des considérations esthétiques tient moins au caractère insoutenable de la misère qui court comme une lèpre d'un habitant à l'autre qu'à l'afflux des odeurs interdisant l'extase (p. 56). Mais au-delà de l'ironie, il annonce combien l'essor d'une prise de conscience est nécessairement lié à une expérience immédiate et sensorielle de la ville.

La démarche de Basil March à travers la métropole illustre cette évolution de l'écriture urbaine. Au début du roman, Basil avoue chercher au cœur des églises ou des salles de théâtre la distance indispensable à une transformation rassurante de l'étrangeté new-yorkaise en spectacle esthétique — « to gratify an aesthetic sense, to renew the faded pleasure of travel for a moment » (p. 47). Ses traversées de la ville s'apparentent à des visites touristiques de contrées lointaines, européennes ou exotiques. Mais son désir d'acclimatation cède peu à peu à la tentation d'estimer les différences de coutumes et de mœurs. Si l'ironie s'immisce dans la condescendance qui accompagne les excursions gastronomiques des nouveaux venus — au restaurant italien, la variété des clients est comparée à un cake aux fruits (p. 71) ; au restaurant français, on apprécie autant la diversité des mets que celle des cuisiniers : « *the chief pleasure of their life in New York was from its quality of foreignness* » (p. 255) —, l'évolution du culturel au sensoriel suggère néanmoins la nécessité d'un contact plus étroit avec la réalité urbaine.

De manière significative, ce glissement de l'esthétique au synesthésique survient au moment où les March retournent en pèlerinage à Battery Park. S'ils s'adonnent d'abord à une contemplation des paysages sublimes, où des « forêts de mâts » recouvrent les collines<sup>1</sup>, et à des considérations naïvement patriotiques sur l'accueil réservé aux immigrants, ils constatent bientôt leur désenchantement. Refusant de

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1. Comment ne pas songer ici aux rivages whitmaniens . . .

transformer ses notes en article sensationnaliste, Basil sait désormais respecter les silences de la ville :

*He made note of the looks of the licensed runners and touters waiting for the immigrants outside the government premises ; he intended to work them up into a dramatic effect in some sketch, but they remained mere material in his memorandum book, together with some quaint old houses on the Sixth Avenue road, which he had noticed on the way down.*  
(p. 263-64)

C'est ainsi au moment où il cesse de vouloir décrire des décors urbains et se met à déambuler à travers les rues des bas quartiers que Basil découvre les vertus d'une ouverture aux événements qui surviennent et s'évanouissent dans la ville. En ce sens, la scène où il descend des hauteurs du tramway aérien et se met à marcher en direction des *tenements* annonce une transformation de l'écriture urbaine : celle-ci délaisse les panoramas surplombants et s'oriente vers une coïncidence entre la mouvance du texte et la succession d'instantanés new-yorkais. En se détournant des « défilés » de l'élégance et de l'ennui, sur Madison Avenue, afin d'aborder la « cruauté » de la misère et de la vie, sur les trottoirs de la Bowery, Basil évolue d'une vision « amusée » ou « intéressée » à une sensibilité intense (« *awareness* »). Au cœur des *tenements*, il tente d'abord de superposer ses souvenirs journalistiques (« *he had read that [the Neapolitans] are worked and fed and housed like beasts* » p. 158) ou littéraires (« *Dickensy* » p. 158) au tournoiement des voitures, des tramways et des passants. Mais comme le note le narrateur, sa volonté de revenir sur les lieux avec un illustrateur trahit son impuissance à maîtriser le déferlement de détails chaotiques et concrets : « *[h]e decided simultaneously that [...] he must come with the artist and show him just which bits to do, not knowing that the two arts can never approach the same material from the same point.* » (p. 160). Semblables aux catégories littéraires, les inventaires pittoresques et les classements physionomistes échouent à contenir la diversité des hommes et des choses (p. 159). Car les Allemands, les Russes, les Polonais, les Tchèques, les Scandinaves ou les Chinois se distinguent moins par la diversité de leurs traits que par l'étrangeté qu'ils confèrent à leurs environs (p. 161). Partant, c'est seulement au moment où Basil s'immisce au cœur de l'immeuble de Lindau qu'il cesse de « voir » la ville avec les yeux d'autrui afin d'en « ressentir » l'indicible et intense présence — « Hier ! » (p. 163).

La démarche de Basil à Manhattan annonce le renouvellement de l'écriture urbaine que l'auteur met en œuvre dans le roman. Or, l'engagement esthétique et éthique des mots au sein des mutations new-yorkaises se trouve aussi réfracté et concrétisé par la création du nouveau magazine, *Every Other Week*.

## 2 Le prisme du magazine

Dans sa nature hybride et transitionnelle, *Every Other Week* présente simultanément la vacuité des milieux artistiques ou philanthropes et la nécessité d'un investissement des mots dans l'historicité. Moins élitiste qu'un mensuel, moins commun qu'un hebdomadaire, le nouveau magazine rassemble dans son nom le repli singulier et l'ouverture altruiste. Il annonce l'alliance de réflexivité et d'engagement qui caractérise l'écriture de Howells à l'abord de la modernité new-yorkaise.

Réunissant artificiellement autour d'un même dessein un milliardaire déraciné, un entrepreneur avide, un écrivain esthète, un artiste velléitaire, un philanthrope chrétien, un radical socialiste, *Every Other Week* révèle la vacuité qui hante tous les milieux sociaux et les discours urbains<sup>1</sup>. Ainsi, la réserve désincarnée des salons de Miss Horn<sup>2</sup> fait ironiquement écho au dénuement extrême des immeubles et des corps dans les *tenements* de Lindau. De même, la verve sensationnaliste de Fulkerton se trouve réfractée dans les théories formelles de Beaton, retranché derrière ses tableaux, ses collections exotiques ou son manteau de fourrure, et les déclarations vertueuses de Miss Vance, retirée derrière ses voiles, ses « poses » affectées (p. 393) et ses « airs » religieux (p. 431).

Mais au-delà de la satire sociale, le prisme du magazine illustre l'orientation de l'écriture urbaine vers un contact immédiat avec la

1. « *I don't believe there's another publication in New York that could bring together, in honor of itself, a fraternity and equality crank like poor old Lindau, and a belated sociological crank like Woodburn, and a truculent speculator like old Dryfoos, and a humanitarian dreamer like young Dryfoos, and a sentimentalist like me, and a nondescript like Beaton, and a pure advertising essence like Fulkerson, and a society spirit like Kendricks* » (p. 281).

2. Notons le caractère comique de l'intrusion des filles Dryfoos, exubérantes et vulgaires, dans les salons feutrés de Mrs Horn. Associées à des métaphores animales, Christine et Mela éclairent l'inanité exsangue des mœurs dans les maisons des aristocrates new-yorkais.

complexité du vivant. Dans l'ensemble du roman, le narrateur décrit moins le contenu du magazine que la nature éminemment sensible de ses éléments formels — la variété de ses articles et de ses illustrations, le tracé de ses lettres, l'éclat de ses couleurs, la sensualité de son grain (p. 121, p. 169). Tout en exposant les stratégies commerciales de l'éditeur, il annonce comment l'écriture romanesque se soustrait à toute représentation convenue de la ville afin de se livrer à une expérience véritablement sensorielle de sa concrétude et de sa contingence.

Cette orientation des mots vers le monde sensible se donne d'abord à voir au niveau de la trame. Le romancier instaure une tension entre les considérations esthétiques de Basil (« *I believe I can get something quite attractive out of it. [...] [T]hose phases of low life are immensely picturesque.* » p. 128) et les convictions éthiques de Conrad (« *If you can make the comfortable people understand how the uncomfortable people live, it will be a very good thing.* » p. 128). Mais il montre aussi comment un renoncement aux conventions artistiques ou charitables se révèle nécessaire à la découverte des zones inconnues de la ville. De manière significative, c'est au moment où il délaisse simultanément ses contraintes journalistiques et ses rites religieux afin de déambuler en solitaire, le dimanche matin, à travers les régions inexplorées de Manhattan, que Basil March éprouve les limites et les extraordinaires virtualités de la ville<sup>1</sup>. Son évasion loin des conventions domestiques ou sociales s'accompagne d'un déferlement de notations synesthésiques :

*He found a lingering quality of pure Americanism in the region [...]. He liked the streets of small brick houses, with here and there one painted red, and then a fine wooden portal of fluted pillars and a bowed transom. [...] In fact, foreign faces and foreign tongues prevailed in Greenwich Village [...]. [I]n some places, the stench was mixed with the more savory smell of cooking. One Sunday morning, before the winter was quite gone, the sight of the frozen refuse melting in heaps, and particularly the loathsome edges of the rotting ice near the gutters, with the strata of wastepaper and straw litter, and eggshells and orange peel, potato skins, and cigar stumps, made him unhappy.* (p. 259-60)

1. Henri Mitterand rappelle : « Le corps se dessine dans ses déplacements, et, complémentirement, le texte crée la sensation de l'espace par les parcours du corps » (p. 121).

De même, c'est au moment où, comme par accident, la trame se déchire et donne lieu à des évocations d'instantanés urbains que le romancier instaure une coïncidence entre une écriture aussi substantielle que les immeubles ou les machines environnantes et les choses urbaines qui, se soustrayant à leur valeur d'usage, revêtent la fulgurante ou latente beauté d'œuvres d'art.

3 « [T]his touch-and-go quality » (p. 257)

« Proximité du lointain, éloignement du proche : telle pourrait être la formule structurale sous le signe de laquelle est placée toute expérience de la ville », écrit Karlheinz Stierle (Stierle, p. 23). Mais dans *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, cette alliance d'intimité et de détachement s'esquisse au moment où l'écriture se laisse transitoirement impressionner par l'évidence des choses ordinaires ou le lancinant silence des hommes<sup>1</sup>.

Comme Basil March, heurté par un cheval au milieu d'une marée de véhicules sur la Cinquième Avenue (p. 386), l'auteur interrompt souvent ses dialogues afin d'évoquer le spectacle de rues en mutation ou de machines en mouvement. Arrachées à leur valeur d'usage, les choses urbaines revêtent soudain l'infini rayonnement d'œuvres d'art :

L'objet n'annonce jamais qu'il est, mais ce à quoi il sert. Il n'apparaît pas. Pour qu'il apparaisse [...], il faut qu'une rupture dans le circuit de l'usage, une brèche, une anomalie le fasse sortir du monde, sortir de ses gonds, et il semble alors que, n'étant plus, il devienne son apparence, son image, ce qu'il était avant d'être chose utile ou valeur signifiante. (Blanchot, p. 295)

L'auteur note ainsi l'entrelacs de faisceaux lumineux et de traces obscures qui se tisse « miraculeusement » sous les yeux des personnages, au Central Depot, ou la vibration de trains en attente qui, semblables à des créatures fabuleuses, vont bientôt s'élancer vers des terres lointaines<sup>2</sup> :

1. On songe ici aux tableaux des membres de l'Ashcan School — et surtout à John Sloan, Everett Shinn ou William Glackens.

2. Comment ne pas songer ici aux tableaux des membres de l'Ashcan School — et surtout à John Sloan, Everett Shinn ou William Glackens.

*At the Forty-second Street station they stopped a minute on the bridge that crosses the track to the branch road for the Central Depot, and looked up and down the long stretch of the elevated to north and south. The track that found and lost itself a thousand times in the flare and tremor of the innumerable lights ; the moony sheen of the electrics mixing with the reddish points and blots of gas far and near ; the architectural shapes of houses and churches and towers, rescued by the obscurity from all that was ignoble in them ; and the coming and going of the trains marking the stations with vividder of fainter plumes of flame-shot steam — formed an incomparable perspective. They often talked afterwards of the superb spectacle [...] but for the present they were mostly inarticulate before it. They had another moment of rich silence when [...] they looked down upon the great night trains lying on the tracks dim under the rain of gaslights that starred without dispersing the vast darkness of the place. [...] Now they waited there like fabled monsters of Arab story ready for the magician's touch, tractable, reckless, will-less — organized lifelessness full of a strange semblance of life.* (p. 66-67)

Mais la splendeur saisissante de la modernité new-yorkaise n'apparaît jamais aussi nettement qu'au moment où la machine se soustrait à la toile idéale où l'œil veut la maintenir et donne à ressentir son irréductible altérité :

*They leaned over the track and looked up at the next station, where the train, just starting, throbbbed out the flame-shot steam into the white moonlight.*

*« The most beautiful thing in New York — the one always and certainly beautiful thing here, » said March. And his wife sighed, « Yes, yes. » She clung to him and remained rapt by the sight till the train drew near, and then pulled him back in a panic.* (p. 143)

La machine vient ainsi rappeler que le sentiment du beau ne saurait être envisagé sans considérations éthiques. Dans l'ensemble du roman, l'auteur inscrit dans les variations du rythme, les changements de perspectives ou les déchirements de premiers plans les signes de souffrance qui demeurent invisibles dans l'uniformité des bas quartiers — « *the gay ugliness — the shapeless, graceless picturesqueness of the Bowery* » (p. 159). Au cours de leur traversée de la ville, les March sont soudain fascinés par un passant qui, déceimment habillé, ramasse des détritrus dans la rue (« *the man lapsed back into the mystery of misery out of which he had emerged* » p. 61). De même, ils sont sidérés au moment où le rire strident d'une prostituée vient soudain

anéantir leurs commentaires sur les manières savamment innocentes et raffinées de Miss Vance (« *A woman's figure rushed stumbling across the way and into the shadow of the houses, pursued by a burly policeman*<sup>1</sup> » p. 216).

Or, les silences et les stridences qui déchirent la trame narrative se trouvent amplifiés dans les dernières pages du roman, consacrées à la grève des conducteurs. Au moment où Basil March, sourd aux conseils de prudence de sa femme, marche à travers une ville inanimée mais vibrante de violence, le romancier traduit simultanément l'imminence du chaos et l'alliance de crainte et de courage qui rassemble les hommes — « *there seems to be some solvent in New York life that reduces all men to a common level, that touches everybody with its potent magic and brings to the surface the deeply underlying nobody*<sup>2</sup>. » p. 210). Le dénuement syntaxique et la récurrence des gérondifs confèrent aux descriptions une lenteur insolite. De même, le tournoiement kaléidoscopique des points de vue, juxtaposant sans transition l'intolérance de Beaton, l'opportunisme de Fulkerson, l'incompréhension de Dryfoos, la commisération de Conrad, l'intransigeance de Lindau ou la curiosité de March donne à l'événement une mystérieuse et insaisissable intensité. Enfin, la cassure narrative instaurant une continuité entre l'intimité de la scène familiale (la dispute du père et du fils Dryfoos) et l'universalité de la scène historique (l'affrontement des policiers et des grévistes) permet de mesurer la commune humanité des acteurs. À l'instant où Conrad s'effondre sous les coups de feu d'un policier, le ralentissement de l'action concourt à révéler leur semblable vulnérabilité :

*The policeman stood there ; he saw his face ; it was not bad, not cruel ; it was like the face of a statue, fixed, perdurable, a mere image of irresponsible and involuntary authority.* (p. 368)

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1. Comme le rappelle Carrie Tirado Bramen, Howells associait New York à une femme ambivalente, alliant l'innocence et l'expérience. Il écrivait à James : « *[my affection for New York is] a sort of strong, feminine fascination. It is like a girl, sometimes a young girl and sometimes an old girl, but wild and sly and womanly sweet, always with a sort of Unitarian optimism in its air* » (p. 83).

2. Donald Pizer écrit : « *All is to be true and honest in fiction, Howells states, within a realistic aesthetic in which the writer, like a scientist with democratic values, discards the old heroic and ideal, and therefore false, cardboard model of a grasshopper and depicts the commonplace activities of a commonplace grasshopper.* » (p. 7).



Dans *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells transmue la réflexion de l'écriture sur les limites du « pittoresque » ou du « vraisemblable » en mode d'appréhension des virtualités de violence mais aussi de reconnaissance qui s'esquissent entre les hommes. Tout en montrant que « [l']espace visible atteste à la fois ma puissance de découvrir et mon impuissance d'atteindre » (Starobinski, p. 13), il transcrit les moments de silence où la coïncidence entre les variations du discours et les vibrations de la ville annonce une promesse de sens : « *he found its negative expressions as significant as its more violent phases* » (p. 358). Car dans les silences communs au texte et à la ville, l'écriture, comme son personnage, se hasarde à délaisser un instant ses postures intellectuelles afin de rencontrer l'altérité : « *he began to feel like populace, but he struggled with himself and regained his character of philosophical observer* » (p. 360).

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## “Suiting the pattern to the author’s mood:” Erasing the line in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*<sup>1</sup>

In the face of the sweeping changes that were tearing apart the fabric of American society in the 1890s, William Dean Howells knew that the linguistic premises underpinning his realism in the 1880s had become obsolete. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), “the first novel to present a fully rendered portrait of [New York],”<sup>2</sup> is nothing less than an author’s attempt to reinvent his craft. If books can be summed up by “pictorial images” or “geometrical similes,” as E.M. Forster has suggested (*James’s The Ambassadors* evokes an hour-glass, and Anatole France’s *Thais* a chain),<sup>3</sup> the image that comes to mind in the case of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is that of a circle whose outline has been erased, substituting tentative openness for prescriptive closure—which means that the portrait of the city is perhaps not so fully rendered after all. My contention is that in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* Howells attempts to suit the novel’s overall pattern to his mood (to paraphrase E.M. Forster), but also to the social climate of the time.

Much has been written about Howells’s relocation from Boston to New York in 1888, a move which encapsulates a wider historical shift and, from a literary vantage point, a stylistic metamorphosis.<sup>4</sup> The relocation to New York, however, does not herald a new form of stability for the novelist, but the beginning of a nomadic existence. His close friend, Henry James, describes him in 1894 as “the most addressless man I know.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as the writer’s correspondence indicates, Howells has an ambivalent attitude towards the metropolis,

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1. This article is based on a chapter of my PhD, “Vers une écriture insensée” (Tanguy 358-81).

2. Burrows and Wallace 1179.

3. E.M. Forster, Chapter VIII 137-155.

4. Trachtenberg 186.

5. Quoted in *Selected Letters* 3.

presented sometimes as noisy and ugly, sometimes as exhilarating. His well-known remark, in a letter to James, that “At the bottom of our wicked hearts we all like New York,” summarizes this ambivalence. However fascinating, “Philistia” (as he called the city in December 1897 in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton) could never become the Altruria of his utopian novels.

Interestingly, Howells decided to de-centre himself shortly before being made an institution, “the Dean of American letters,” thus preempting a canonization which he probably saw as ossifying. His decision to move to New York made him part of a wider “centrifugal” or “decentralized”<sup>1</sup> tendency characteristic of American life, which can be seen as a first step towards solidarity with his fellow citizens. New York, therefore, should not be seen as a new centre but as the site of indeterminacy and interaction.

Openness and uncertainty are at the core of *Hazard*. In the same way as the modern subject needs to give himself up to the vagaries of experience and accept its risks, the narrating subject must relinquish the smug certainties of his Bostonian period. Howells’s relocation is a matter of leaving not just one house for another, but more importantly one house of fiction, and language, for another. The new edifice, endowed with more doors and windows, must not become another “conceptual cage” (Ickstadt *Faces of Fiction* 96). While the characters seek their fortunes in the new capital of literature, the narrator embarks on an equally bold adventure, that of representing the metropolis. Howells’s 1890 novel deals with this twofold undertaking and should be read accordingly as the narrative of a *double hazard*,<sup>2</sup> implying an ethical *and* aesthetic “uprooting and transplanting.” (*Hazard* 37)

I would argue that, unlike the novels of the 1880s, both the narrative pattern and stylistic economy at work in *Hazard* are loose, repetitive, based not on efficient production but on the dilapidation of

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1. “American Literary Centres,” *Literature and Life* 174, 177.

2. In an article published in 2006, Jason Puskar traces the shift from Howells’s realism of the 1880s, epitomized by Silas Lapham’s mineral paint whose (illusory) aim is to “prevent material loss,” to the realism of the 1890s where March’s initial job, insurance, symbolizes the attempt not to eliminate risks but to assess them, “redistribute” them and spread the losses over the community. (Puskar 15-9)

energy. It is this evolution, touched upon by Edwin Cady,<sup>1</sup> that we propose to analyze in detail. The squandering of textual energy is a far cry from Thorstein Veblen's invidious conspicuous consumption, as it seeks to bring about a new social awareness or, in Howellsian terms, complicity. Complicit consumption, then, is the new paradigm. Howells's description of his characters' house-hunting, a time- and text-consuming activity, in the opening chapters of the novel, redefines literary practice and the relationship to others. These chapters enable him to transcend his own realism and replace the teleology of accretion of the 1880s by an aesthetic of "sliding," to cite Bataille and Derrida.

## 1 A diatribe against cultural philistines

*A Hazard of New Fortunes* has a strong autobiographical basis. The protagonists' initial dislike of New York mirrors Howells's own mixed feelings. However, both the author and the protagonists eventually comprehend the metropolis—though they do not assign any stable meaning to it, an instability reflected in the Marches' choice to remain in rented accommodation rather than becoming house owners again. Paradoxically, the nickname "Philistia" seems more appropriate to describe the capital of New England than New York, and the term "cultural philistine" used by Nietzsche in *Untimely Meditations* would appear to fit the Boston-based protagonists, Basil and Isabel March, whose initial immobility is an index of their intellectual paralysis.<sup>2</sup>

Basil and Isabel are cultural philistines insofar as they pride themselves on their aesthetic discernment and abhor stylistic cacophony. They "regar[d] as culture precisely that which negates culture" and "finally acquir[e] a coherent collection of such negations, a system of un-culture:" (Nietzsche 8) a tastefully furnished townhouse, a few paintings and some cultural references (see Part Fourth, Chap-

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1. "[In *Hazard*, Howells] used about 200 pages before he really got into the main action of the novel. But the sharp economy which had brought *Annie Kilburn* nearly to its climax in the same space was not entirely fitted to this novel. He needed *leisure* in which to introduce a complex panel of characters [. . .]. More important still, he needed *space* to introduce New York." (Cady 100, emphasis added)

2. In his introduction to Nietzsche's *Œuvres*, Peter Pütz shows that the attitude of the cultural philistine precludes the notion of quest, since the philistine assumes that his knowledge is sufficient. (Nietzsche, *Œuvres* 136)

ter One). Basil defines as respectable “the [American] culture’ he has patented.” He is “a negative being” lacking in “self-knowledge.” (Nietzsche 8) Finally, the thought of moving terrifies the couple, as is suggested by the recurrence of the terms “despair” and “anguish” in Chapter VI, which once again seems to illustrate Nietzsche’s remark: “For ‘All seeking must end’ is the motto of the philistines.”<sup>1</sup>

The house hunting episode does not seem to bode well for the future: the search for a permanent dwelling within a perimeter of gentility delineated by Isabel indicates an attempt to shut out their unfamiliar surroundings. The obsession with real estate reflects the Marches’ urge to resume their sedentary existence as cultural philistines. Their search is devoid of any genuine “seeking” and amounts to a non-search, the very negation of a quest, which lessens the likelihood of their ever “widening” their “horizons” “indefinitely,” to paraphrase one of Howells’s oft-quoted letters.<sup>2</sup> The *line* which Isabel is desperately seeking to draw between respectability and shabbiness<sup>3</sup> suggests a narrow outlook, the very opposite of the concept of complicity, based on an indefinite broadening of the circle of sympathy, which Howells articulated after defending the so-called Chicago Anarchists; it is a search devoid of “seeking” and “feeling” alike. However, a close reading of the episode shows that things are not so simple, and that the utilitarian house-hunt becomes a genuine investigation.

Although the lengthy opening chapters have often baffled critics, it is difficult to claim that they are “really just a house hunt,” (Trilling 215) for they also have symbolic and linguistic implications. Insofar as the Marches’s house hunt involves a whole cast of characters whose

1. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* 8-10.

2. “You’ll easily believe that I did not bring myself to the point of openly befriending those men who were civically murdered in Chicago for their opinions without thinking and feeling much, and my horizons have been indefinitely widened by the process.” (*Life in Letters* 407)

3. “They came to excel in the sad knowledge of the line at which respectability distinguishes itself from shabbiness. [ . . . ] Mrs March refused to stop at any door where there were more than six bell ratchets and speaking tubes on either hand. Before the end of the afternoon she decided against ratchets altogether and confined herself to knobs neatly set in the door trim. Her husband was still sunk in the superstition that you can live anywhere you like in New York, and he would have paused at some places where her quicker eye caught the fatal sign of ‘Modes’ in the ground-floor windows. She found that there was an east and a west line beyond which they could not go if they wished to keep their self respect, and that within that region to which they restricted themselves there was a choice of streets.” (*Hazard* 58-59)

actions are necessarily inscribed in time and space, it can be regarded as a metaphor for the act of writing. One of the topics under discussion in these chapters is the jargon of estate agents and advertisements, a deceptive language which needs to be deciphered.

[The house agents are] a very *illusory* generation. There seems to be something in the human habitation that corrupts the natures who deal in it, to buy or sell it, to hire or let it. You go to an agent and tell him what kind of house you want. He has no such house, and he sends you to look at something altogether *different* [ . . . ].

(*Hazard* 51, emphasis added)

Mrs. March [ . . . ] *read* the advertisements aloud with ardor, and with faith to *believe* that the apartments *described* in them were every one *truthfully represented*, and that any one of them was richly responsive to their needs. “Elegant, light, large, single, and outside flats” were offered with “all improvements—bath, ice-box, etc.”—for \$25 and \$35 a month. The cheapness was amazing. The Wagram, the Esmeralda, the Jacinth advertised them for \$40 and \$60, “with steam and elevator,” rent free till November. Others, attractive from their *air* of conscientious scruple, *announced* “first-class flats; good order; reasonable rents.” The Helena asked the *reader* if she had seen the “cabinet finish, hardwood floors, and frescoed ceilings” of its \$50 flats [ . . . ]. There was a sameness in the *jargon* which tended to confusion.

(*Hazard* 53, emphasis added)

The agents and their advertisements raise the question of representation, which in this case is a far cry from Howellsian orthodoxy defined as “truthful treatment of material.”<sup>1</sup> Their distorting language is analogous to that of romantic literature, the arch-enemy of realism inveighed against in earlier novels. The advantage of *Hazard*, however, is that it avoids the *ficelle* of the literary discussion between the characters. Instead, the novelist uses the symbol of the Marches’ relocation to articulate his own literary quandaries. For that reason, Chapters III to XII are all but superfluous, and need to be read closely.

## 2 The sea serpent

In order to find the ideal flat, Isabel March cuts out ads as she finds them and assembles them into a “nondescript vertebrate:”

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1. *Criticism and Fiction* 229.

She took a long strip of paper out of her handbag with minute advertisements pinned transversely upon it, and forming the effect of some glittering nondescript vertebrate. “Looks something like the sea serpent,” said March, drying his hands on the towel, while he glanced up and down the list. (Hazard 42)

The unpredictable pattern of the sea serpent symbolizes the novel’s haphazard aesthetic—it suits the author’s mood. It refers literally to the material object in Isabel’s hands and metaphorically to the textual object beheld by the reader. This “monstrous” object sets the tone for the whole novel, anticipating the modernist techniques of Dos Passos and of post-1913 painters, intent on expressing the epic scale of America. Howells is trying, rather like the American painter John Marin, “to express graphically what a great city is doing.”<sup>1</sup> The teleological structure of his earlier novels is supplanted by a loose narrative economy suggested by the image of the sea serpent: the vertebrate can sustain indefinite growth but can also be amputated without any apparent damage to its integrity:

Mrs. March got several flats on her list which promised neither steam heat nor elevators; she forgot herself so far as to include two or three as remote from the down-town region of her choice as Harlem. But after she had rejected these the nondescript vertebrate was still voluminous enough to sustain her buoyant hopes. (Hazard 53)

The absence of closure helps to understand the novel’s open end, and characterizes what Sāmi Ludwig calls “pragmatist realism,” an awareness of one’s own “gaps and limitations,” the very opposite of “a totalizing view of things.” (Ludwig III) *Hazard’s* accidental form is the only way of rendering the plurality of modern urban experience.

Giving a stable meaning to existence is as impossible as finding a permanent or ideal dwelling in the metropolis. Estate agents can give no guarantee against the risks of modern life, nor is language a reliable guide. Isabel March’s assertion, after reading a few deceptive ads—“Well, I consider ourselves settled!” (Hazard 44)—is naïve,

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1. “In 1913, the year of the Armory Show, [John Marin] proclaimed: ‘[ . . . ] if these buildings move me, they too must have life. Thus the whole city if alive; buildings, people, all are alive; and the more they move me the more I feel them to be alive [ . . . ]. And so I try to express graphically what a great city is doing. Within the frames there must be a balance, a controlling of these warring, pushing, pulling forces.’” (Quoted in Coppel 68)



anti-modern and typical of a cultural philistine. By the same token, her unrealistic expectations about what the ideal New York apartment ought to be are amusing:

"The *sine qua nons* are an elevator and steam heat, not above the third floor, to begin with. Then we must each have a room, and you must have your study, and I must have my parlor; and the two girls must each have a room." (Hazard 44)

Isabel can also be narrow-minded and mean. She is panic-stricken when she thinks she has lost her purse with its tightly packed banknotes ("each note crushed into a round wad," Hazard 368) a detail suggesting avarice. All these remarks point to a linkage between utilitarianism, predicated on the belief in absolute guarantees against the hazard of existence, and a restrictive conception of language regarded as a tool of semantic and social control. In the first part of the novel, Isabel still feels the need for reassurance and "insurance" (Basil's former profession).

*Hazard* comically deconstructs Bostonian expectations by showing that nothing is written in stone, and by erasing the "line" of respectability. The dichotomy between Isabel's rigidity and the flexibility of the sea serpent creates a tension foreshadowing the protagonists' metamorphosis, which is linked to a new economic paradigm. The yearning for a rational economy, based on control and possession, is replaced by lavish expenditure, to use Bataille's terminology:<sup>1</sup> the paradigm of production is superseded by the logic of consumption. This shift also accounts for a change in tone: one is struck by the contrast between the seriousness of the novels of the 1880s and *Hazard*, where the author amuses himself with language, as if to forget the loss of his beloved daughter Winifred. In the manuscript of his preface to the novel, he writes:

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1. "[...] energy, which constitutes wealth, must ultimately be spent lavishly (without return), and [...] a series of profitable operations has absolutely no other effect than the squandering of profits. To affirm that it is necessary to dissipate a substantial portion of energy produced, sending it up in smoke, is to go against judgments that form the basis of a rational economy. [Man is destined] to that glorious operation, to useless consumption. [...] I insist on the fact that there is no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energies in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance [...]." (Bataille 22-33)

The stress of it [the death of Winifred] cannot be told; what may be told is that it had its effect in the formlessness of the passages following the opening [of the novel], or rather their disproportionate length. The story had to be placed, and it was not possible in the circumstances to give it the compression [ . . . ] which I aimed at everywhere. [T]here is nothing in this book with which I amused myself more than the flat-hunting of the Marches.

(*Hazard*, “Autobiographical” 509-10)

This jocular tone, foregrounded by March’s seminal joke and Fulker-son’s constant puns, confirms the comic dimension of the novel. Thus, the relocation to New York clearly coincides with a stylistic renewal. The metropolis becomes a site of defamiliarization and enables March to break with the routine of habit.<sup>1</sup>

### 3 From domestic *inquest* to infinite excursion

If, as I have suggested, the protagonists’ house-hunt stands for the novelist’s stylistic quest, the modalities of this search are of paramount importance. One would expect a “normal” house-hunt to be methodical and time-efficient—a means to an end. In an earlier novel, *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879), the male protagonist is extremely efficient, both from an erotic viewpoint (he goes east and gets married) and from an economic viewpoint (he goes west and starts earning money).

By contrast, the Marches’ domestic expedition is never-ending. It takes up no less than seven chapters (VI to XII) and sixty-five pages. The list of the flats they visit is so long that at the end of the day Isabel exclaims: “Mrs Grosvenor Green! [ . . . ] Which of the ten thousand flats is it, Basil?” (*Hazard* 72) Some of these places themselves are described in minute detail, like the Xenophon, belonging to a Mrs Grosvenor Green. In a deliberately rambling paragraph the narrator satirizes the pretentious style of the apartment, a caricature of the

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1. According to John Dewey, social consciousness requires the destruction of habits, which blind the subject to the flux of experience: “The routiner’s road is a ditch out of which he cannot get, whose ideas enclose him, directing his course so thoroughly that he no longer thinks of his path or his destination. [ . . . ] All habit-forming involves the beginning of an intellectual specialization which if unchecked ends in thoughtless action.” (Dewey 173)

Victorian interior (see Miles Orvell.)<sup>1</sup> The pomposity of the names and the references to Europe only reinforce the caricature. The Xenophon is "a junk-shop," an image of the incipient consumer culture. The novel reads:

Everything had been done by the architect to save space, and everything to waste it by Mrs. Grosvenor Green. She had conformed to a law for the necessity of turning round in each room, and had folding-beds in the chambers; but there her subordination had ended, and wherever you might have turned round she had put a gimcrack so that you would knock it over if you did turn. [ . . . ] March, when he had recovered his self-command a little in the presence of this agglomeration, comforted himself by calling the bric-à-brac Jamescracks, as if this was their proper name. (Hazard 49)

For all its junk, Basil ignores his wife's demands and rents the Xenophon. As it turns out, this choice constitutes an initiation into waste and excess—not in the competitive sense of conspicuous consumption, but in the sense of giving oneself up to "the general movement of exudation (of waste)," to "that glorious operation, [ . . . ] useless consumption" (Bataille 23). The new economic paradigm requires a non-productive expenditure: domestic space must be squandered lavishly. Which is why, besides the length of the house-hunt and the excess of *bric-à-brac*, the Marches' domestic epic is structurally repetitive, as they unwittingly visit the same flats twice.

They went to several places twice without intending: once to that old-fashioned house with the pleasant colored janitor, and wandered all

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1. "So dense is the system of decorative signs in the [Victorian] period that one might easily think that the most characteristic expression of the Victorian mind was *matter* in all its shapes and sizes, textures, surfaces and substances. [ . . . ] These [Victorian] interiors are visible in the many photographic records of the time, and they are reflected as well in the literature of the period, as in this concentrated and detailed description from William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, a *locus classicus* for the type. Howells's main characters, the Marches, have been looking for a furnished apartment, and they come upon this specimen, done up by Mrs. Grosvenor Green. [ . . . ] Mrs. Green has the appropriate mix of objets d'art and mass-produced objects, the whole adding up to a case study of material fetishism no less interesting for being a furnished apartment designed for renting; for Howells has evidently strived to express a kind of typical ideal of the period's taste for excess. [ . . . ] Howells's satire captures what is most characteristic in the material culture of the period—its love of abundance, of numberless bibelots [ . . . ]—along with its love of artifice, of replication." (Orvell 40-49)

over the apartment again with a haunting sense of familiarity, and then recognized the janitor and laughed; and to that house with the pathetic widow and the pretty daughter who wished to take them to board. (Hazard 60-1)

From the vantage point of the protestant ethic which informed the novels of the 1880s, such a waste of energy is scandalous. Why visit “ten thousand flats” in order finally to choose the second one? Measured against the yardstick of utilitarianism, Chapter VIII serves no use whatsoever: Isabel dismisses estate agents as unreliable, starts using ads instead, then goes back on her decision and works with agents again: “[T]hey varied their day by taking a coupé, by renouncing advertisements, and by reverting to agents.” (Hazard 64) Evidently, acquisitiveness has given way to a mode of existence based on risk and waste considered the *sine qua nons* of complicity.

The novel deals with the launching of a new magazine (“a thing,” as Fulkerson calls it) and with the search for a new home. Yet, *Hazard* does not eulogize those “things” which, according to Emerson in “The American Scholar,” are the bane of America, or those appurtenances worshipped by Madame Merle in *The Portrait of a Lady*. It celebrates the “multitudinous and tangled world of experience to which the street belongs,”<sup>1</sup> to quote William James in *Pragmatism*. The “heterogeneous” community involved in the magazine can be compared to a “menagerie.” (Hazard 195, 149) The shift from Silas Lapham’s paint factory to *Hazard*’s magazine, compared to a living organism, is that from the reign of *techne* to that of *phusis*, and Basil March succeeds gradually in distancing himself from the world of objects: “He experienced remorse in the presence of inanimate things he was going to leave as if they had sensibly reproached him.” (Hazard 37) If we remember the example of the Chicago anarchists, it was the process of trying to save them which widened Howells’s horizons, not the result, which, as we know, was tragic. Dewey’s remark seems applicable here:

For a man usually builds a house for the sake of comfort and security, the “control,” thereby afforded to future living rather just for the fun—or the trouble—of building. [ . . . ] We must not confuse the act of building with the house built. The latter is a means, not a fulfilment. [ . . . ] Activity should be productive. This is to say it should

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1. Quoted in Crane 158.

have a bearing on the future, should effect control of it. But so far as a productive action is intrinsically creative, it has its own intrinsic value. Reference to future products and future enjoyments is but a way of enhancing perception of an immanent meaning. A skilled artisan who enjoys his work is aware that what he is making is made for future use. Externally his action is one technically labeled "production." It seems to illustrate the subjection of present activity to remote ends. But actually, morally, psychologically, the sense of the utility of the article produced is a factor in the present significance of action due to present utilization of abilities, giving play to taste and skill, accomplishing something now. The moment of production is severed from immediate satisfaction, it becomes "labor," drudgery, a task reluctantly performed.<sup>1</sup>

In *Hazard*, the act of launching the magazine is intrinsically creative, and the intrinsic value is complicity—the sense of belonging induced when one erases the line of respectability, when one jettisons the demands of utilitarianism. Once again, the novel seems to foreshadow pragmatism. The shift from the compulsive *in*-quest to erratic *ex*-cursions corresponds to Dewey's notion that "[altruism] suggests a generosity of out-going action, a liberation of power as against the close, pent-in, protected atmosphere of a ready-made ego." (Dewey 139) Basil March wakes up to sympathy by going out of his home and by exploring the city as far as the Elevated takes him.

The narrative structure exchanges the middle-class logic of control, symbolized by Isabel's *line* of respectability, for a more humane logic of sympathy symbolized by the tram *line*, which by carrying Basil from one end of Manhattan to another enables him to familiarize himself with the entire social spectrum. This spatial exploration goes hand in hand with a blurring of the line, since complicity implies an experience accessible to the "deeply underlying nobody."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Basil's forays into the great city are never put into words—his intended New York sketches remain virtual—, suggesting that urban experience is best left unwritten, open to infinite (re-)interpretations. Basil March

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1. Dewey 268-271.

2. "[ . . . ] there seems to be some solvent in New York life that reduces all men to a common level, that touches everybody with its potent magic and brings to the surface the deeply underlying nobody. [ . . . ] It is the spirit of the street transferred to the drawing-room; indiscriminating, levelling but doubtless finally wholesome [ . . . ]." (*Hazard* 243-4) See also Donald Pease's concept of a "social glue for a shared public world." (Pease 13)

simply will not commodify his experience by converting it into marketable articles as his wife and Fulkerson urge him to. The irony with which he ridicules their commercialism indicates his philosophical posture:

His wife brushed some crumbs from her lap before rising.  
 “Yes. You mustn’t waste any of these ideas now.”  
 “Oh no; it would be money out of Fulkerson’s pocket.”

(*Hazard* 40)

New York eschews closure, cannot be written in stone. Somewhat like Melville’s *Bartleby*, Basil prefers not to comply with the law, especially the law of language.

#### 4 The language of chance. From meaning to non-meaning

In *Hazard*, the shift from a constraining to an open paradigm is made tangible by the use of a different language. The magazine launched by Fulkerson and March is linked to the notion of plasticity. Just as they do not depend on an external publisher, the editors do not want *Every Other Week* to be subservient to the tyranny of words, which all too often reflects that of the market. Why would March trust the style of advertising, when his experience has taught him the pitfalls of meretricious language? The markers of subjectivity, such as adjectives when they misrepresent instead of describing, come under fire:

“Elegant, light, large, single, and outside flats” were offered with “all improvements—bath, ice-box, etc.”—for \$25 and \$35 a month. [Others,] announced “first-class flats; good order; reasonable rents.”

(*Hazard* 53)

After visiting the flats in question, March realizes the deceptive potential of language, as none of the lodgings tallies with their description. The semantics of estate agents is not objective, but purely *evaluative*. Their evaluative component, to cite research in sociolinguistics, increases “vis-à-vis their descriptive component, along a path of subjectification.” As a result, these evaluative items are “bleached of descriptive content, marking merely evaluation,” and playing an “ostentatious” function; they become “pure evaluatives.” (Zwicky)

When language is not deceptive, it is deficient: what word(s) can describe Isabel's monstrous collage? How is one to designate the new high-rise buildings, when the word sky-scraper still remains to be coined? Only a periphrasis or a generic term like "thing" can express the subject's thoughts:

Now the paupers were gone, and where the old mansions that had fallen to their use once stood, there towered aloft and abroad those heights and masses of many-storied brickwork for which architecture has yet no proper form and aesthetics no name. (Hazard 302-3)

This passage is reminiscent of another description of New York by an aspiring writer. Ray, the protagonist of *A World of Chance*, senses the great forces at work but is at a loss for words:

Ray looked at [the New York shore] too, with a sense of the beauty struggling through the grotesqueness of the huge panorama, and evoking itself somehow from the grossest details. The ferry-boats coming and going; the great barges with freight trains in sections on them; [ . . . ] the mean, ugly fronts and roofs of the buildings beyond, and hulking high overhead in the further distance in vast bulks and clumsy towers, the masses of those ten-storied edifices which are the necessity of commerce and the despair of art, all helped to compose the brutal and squalid body of the thing, whose soul was collectively expressed in an incredible picturesqueness. Ray saw nothing amiss in it. This agglomeration of warring forms, feebly typifying the ugliness of the warring interests within them, did not repulse him.

(*The World of Chance* 12-13)

In order to palliate the deficiency of words one must devise new linguistic strategies. What makes them "realistic" is either their pluralistic dimension—their ability to envisage one aspect of reality (beauty) and the opposite (ugliness), or their semantic openness ("thing" denotes without connoting). Which is why the occurrences of "thing" in order to designate the new magazine are so numerous (at least sixteen in the first four chapters). As Basil points out, "Fulkerson always calls it 'this thing [ . . . ]'" (Hazard 29) and the word gradually disseminates:

"But let's examine this thing. (This thing! I believe Fulkerson is characterizing my whole parlance, as well as your morals.)"

(Hazard 479)

“Mr. March, how would you like to take this thing off my hands? [ . . . ] If you want to take this thing off my hands, I reckon I can let you have it in 'most any shape you say. [ . . . ] I've been thinkin' whether you wouldn't like to take the thing.”

The word, which Dryfoos had now used three times, made March at last think of Fulkerson [ . . . ]. (Hazard 481)

What exactly is *Every Other Week*, since it is neither a low-brow weekly nor a high-brow monthly like *Atlantic Monthly*, but a hybrid creature whose instability disturbs the very Bostonian Isabel March?

“[ . . . ] I wish Mr. Fulkerson hadn't called it that! It always makes one think of 'jam yesterday and jam tomorrow, but never jam to-day,' in *Through the Looking-Glass*.” (Hazard 37)

The magazine's novelty is contained in its very title, chosen after much deliberation. Initially, Fulkerson wanted an attractive title, which might “pique curiosity” and be “a first-rate ad.” (Hazard 10) Thanks to the influence of March, who suggests extravagant titles (*The Lone Hand*, *From Sea to Sea*, *The Fifth Wheel*, etc.) precisely in order to undermine Fulkerson's advertising rhetoric, the two men finally agree on *Every Other Week*. Compared to the other suggestions, this title strikes by its absence of connotations: unlike *The Lone Hand*, a melodramatic allusion to the solitude of frontier existence, or *From Sea to Sea*, a demagogic appeal to the American readership at large, it is purely denotative: *Every Other Week* is the name of a magazine published every other week, no more no less. Besides its comic and diegetic function, the naming of the magazine enables Howells to redefine his linguistic economy by neutralising excess and by positing literal or generic designation as his yardstick. The episode is also a lesson in democracy, as it suggests that realism is not a ready-made theory but the expression of a dialogic, contractual process—the outcome of human interaction. Along the same lines, other terms suggesting shapelessness—“inchoately” (Hazard 11, 305), “shapeless” (Hazard 309), “formlessly” (Hazard 467), or “formlessness” and “disproportionate” (Hazard, “Autobiographical” 510)—are noteworthy, as is the substantive “line,” whose ambivalence symbolizes the novel's general instability of meaning. A “line” can separate, like Isabel's line distinguishing respectability from shabbiness; it can join together, as in the case of the tram line, and can even symbolize the writer's craft.



But among all these linguistic strategies, "thing" is probably the most iconic: on the one hand "thing" refers to what has not been named, to a real-in-progress, and on the other it posits a new conception of language as relative and provisional, a blurred line, unable—and reluctant—to contain the plurality of experience. "Thing," the hyperonym<sup>1</sup> *par excellence*, the word which contains multitudes and can be used by the multitude, is particularly fitting to express New York, the "city that belongs to the whole country," where one "may do anything." (*Hazard* 12, 494) Language must not seek to promote and/or to connote but merely to denote in order to foster social cohesion.

This semantics serves no ostentatious purpose, does not embellish reality, but strives to articulate and communicate a complex experience. It is marked internally by a see-saw movement (the oscillation between the positive and the negative) and externally by a conative function (the wish to get through to somebody). It resists semantic fixity—what Marie-Laurence Desclos calls definitional closure.<sup>2</sup> Meaning is not contained within the perimeter of a word, but is disseminated thanks to an open, tentative designation—a figurative expression ("sea serpent"), a periphrasis, or a generic term ("thing," "line"). After widening the moral and intellectual horizons of the subject, *Hazard* erases the circle of the word, thus transcending the "line" which circumscribes language.

Ultimately, if *Hazard* is Howells's "most vital" work, it is because it redefines realism as what Ludwig calls an experiential mode of representation. Basil March explores the great city *aimlessly*, without seeking to appropriate it—to use it as material—which is precisely what the unscrupulous journalist in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Bartley Hubbard, could not refrain from doing. "[Lapham assented] to Bartley's use of him as material." (*Novels 1875-1886* 876) March does not trans-

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1. "L'hyperonymie [est une] relation d'inclusion générique. C'est une notion relative. 'Fleur' est en effet l'hyperonyme de 'tulipe', qui est son hyponyme, mais est aussi l'hyponyme de 'plante' ou de 'végétal'" (Herschberg Pierrot 178).

2. "Le nom [...] est une borne-frontière dressée par le langage, lequel peut de cette manière [...] séparer par une limite tout ce qui doit l'être. [...] le tracé des frontières ne s'effectue pas seulement en acte [...], mais également au moyen du langage [...] et des discours. Ce que l'on borne, en effet, c'est aussi bien des lieux que du temps, des actes, des pratiques, des comportements, des conduites, des notions ou des valeurs. [...] Définition, délimitation et dénomination sont par conséquent intimement liés" (Desclos 146-159).

mute the modern city, an “agglomeration of warring forms [ . . . ] and warring interests” (*The World of Chance* 13), into a literary object—a written text. He does *not* write his New York sketches.<sup>1</sup> Howells’s new approach to language contrasts with that of his earlier novels. In *The Lady of the Aroostook* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, teleology reigned supreme—nothing was left to chance; in *A Modern Instance*, the inability to interpret the world, to put things into words, filled the protagonist with dismay: “Atherton flung the letter upon the table, and drew a troubled sigh. ‘Ah, I don’t know, I don’t know!’” (*Novels 1875-1886* 589) By contrast, the ending of *Hazard* is left deliberately open. Will *Every Other Week* be a successful magazine on the long term? What is the meaning of the smile of Margaret Vance, which concludes the novel? There only answer is “Well, we must trust that look of hers.” (*Hazard* 496) A few lines before, March said to his wife: “I don’t know. I don’t care. In any event, it would be right.”

This stylistic shift calls to mind the “two forms of writing” defined by Derrida, which correspond to two opposed economic paradigms. According to Derrida, there is a *restrictive* form of writing—one which seeks to conserve meaning, and which is a slave to meaning, for “The servant is the man who does not put his life at stake, the man who wants to conserve his life, wants to be conserved”—, and a *sovereign* one which is willing “to risk the absolute loss of meaning.” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 254-5) This type of writing “exceeds the logos” and is based on a loose linguistic economy in which words “make us slide” or consume meaning. (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 261-7) Put differently, the stable meaning of definite intention (*l’intenté*, in Ricoeur’s words) gives way to what Derrida calls un-knowledge or non-meaning, i.e. *l’insensé*.<sup>2</sup> Which brings us back to *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Having left their Bostonian dwelling the Marches must accept that language is not a reliable epistemological tool but is itself a fiction, a site of indeterminacy. Their spatial and verbal condition, like everybody else’s, is necessarily nomadic. This blurring process, in the last analysis, summarizes the trajectory of Howellsian realism

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1. “[March’s] ‘failure’ to record his vision becomes a kind of triumph for him and his creator. Vague, contradictory, incomplete, the most suggestive parts of Howells’s picture of America are the ones he never let March finish.” (Parrish 114)

2. “C’est cette perte inutile, insensée, qu’est la souveraineté” (Derrida, *L’écriture et la Différence* 397).

from a rational economy of language to an extravagant economy that consumes words meaninglessly. The raw materials of reality and language are not converted into signifying products but deliberately squandered and left to chance. Howells’s fiction is characterized by this fundamental duality between a productive, utilitarian semantics and an unproductive, open-ended style.

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## La part de l'ombre

### *The Shadow of a Dream* et *An Imperative Duty*<sup>1</sup>

Mis à part la presque concomitance des dates de leur première parution (respectivement 1890 et 1891), et leur juxtaposition dans un volume édité en 1962 par Edwin H. Cady, il semble qu'un lien aussi puissant qu'impalpable unit les textes de *The Shadow of a Dream* et de *An Imperative Duty*. Il apparaît dès la première lecture que ces deux « novelettes » — comme la préface nous apprend que l'auteur aimait à les appeler —, contribuent avec force à ébranler l'image d'écrivain réaliste un peu univoque que l'histoire littéraire attache à la figure de William Dean Howells. On serait même tenté de dire d'emblée que, renouant avec une certaine tradition romantique qui, en Amérique particulièrement, avait su s'intéresser depuis Brown, Poe et Hawthorne, aux mécanismes les plus sombres de la psyché, elles s'inscrivent en faux contre les partis-pris de théories esthétiques, soigneusement exposées par l'auteur alors qu'il était rédacteur en chef de l'*Atlantic Monthly*, qui constataient — en contribuant à le prôner — l'existence d'un réalisme américain tout entier fait de sobriété et de mesure. Que la mort récente de sa fille Winifred à l'issue d'une longue maladie organique, malencontreusement interprétée par les médecins comme d'origine psycho-névrotique, ait contribué à replacer l'écrivain devant les souvenirs d'une enfance et d'une adolescence hantées par la dépression et de graves phobies, il ne nous appartient pas d'en décider<sup>2</sup>. Tout au plus peut-on suggérer qu'une telle expé-

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1. Ces deux textes sont lus dans l'édition préparée et présentée par Edwin H. Cady : Albany, NY, Twayne Publisher, 1962.

2. On lira avec intérêt pour tout ce qui concerne les liens entre le biographique et le fictif l'ouvrage de John W. Crowley, intitulé *Black Heart's Truth*, et notamment les chapitres 2 (« The Blackness of Insanity ») et 7 (« Miracles of the Inner World »). En marge des épisodes dépressifs et phobiques, on y apprend combien W. D. Howells s'est littéralement passionné pour les avancées de la psychologie et notamment, la science des rêves.

rience de la perte était de nature à provoquer l'ébranlement de toutes les certitudes, et qu'elle favorisa l'éclosion d'une écriture penchée sur les méandres irrationnels de l'esprit humain et des illusions qui l'assaillent, voire le gouvernement.

Par ailleurs, en cette fin de siècle où Freud est en passe de théoriser ses intuitions sur l'inconscient tandis qu'en Amérique, William James élabore le concept de « *stream of consciousness* » que son frère Henry — ami personnel de William Dean Howells — adaptera à la littérature avec le bonheur que l'on sait, il n'est guère étonnant qu'un créateur aussi minutieusement penché sur son art et ses enjeux que celui qui nous occupe ait choisi de placer au centre de sa fiction des ressorts psychologiques secrets.

Comme souvent dans le commentaire de ce genre de texte aux effets soigneusement calculés, le critique est menacé par le danger de la paraphrase. Ainsi, en écrivant :

*In the one [novelette], a dream of sexual betrayal casts its murderous shadow over the lives of three people trapped in an ambiguous triangle. Tragically, the power of the dream — perhaps mad, perhaps delusive — destroys them all. Ironically, its ability to do so perhaps springs from its being unconsciously true. In the other novelette, a lovely « white girl » is struck down by the « conscientious » revelation that ancient acts of miscegenation have made her « really » a Negro.*

(Introduction, p. 7)

qu'ajoute Edwin H. Cady au texte ? Rien n'est faux, et pourtant rien n'est tout à fait vrai. Plus exactement, le lecteur risque fort de ne pas reconnaître dans ces lignes le malaise indubitablement provoqué en lui par la découverte de ces deux textes énigmatiques. C'est peut-être néanmoins du côté des adverbess, et de leur étonnante proximité dans le paragraphe, qu'il est possible de repérer la trace d'une expérience de lecture déconcertante : « *tragically* », « *ironically* » et « *really* ». Ils témoignent, de par leur caractère sinon antithétique du moins contradictoire, d'une hésitation que dissimule tant bien que mal la volonté de produire un résumé clair et ordonné.

Nous nous pencherons donc successivement sur ces deux textes, moins pour en dégager une nouvelle illusion de cohérence que pour mettre au jour précisément leur caractère lacunaire et irrésolu, et tenter, en dernière instance, de dégager une commune ligne de force dans l'affirmation et la négation simultanées du pouvoir du Verbe.



D'entrée de jeu, parler de « triangle » pour résumer l'intrigue — et donc convoquer l'archétype américain de cette situation fictionnelle prototypiquement incarnée dans *The Scarlet Letter* — risque de mener le lecteur sur une fausse piste même si — et peut-être parce que — le nom de Hawthorne apparaît dans la liste des écrivains favoris du narrateur. Rappelons en effet que dans la célèbre *romance* de 1850, l'adultère est avéré, doublement matérialisé par l'insigne écarlate de la faute et l'enfant elle-même qui en est le produit, alors que dans *The Shadow of a Dream*, rien de coupable ne se produit entre Hermia, la femme, et Nevil, l'ami du mari, Douglas Faulkner. Ce n'est qu'après la mort de son époux que Hermia apprendra de la bouche du médecin et confident de Douglas que ce dernier avait rêvé d'une liaison adultère entre son ami et elle-même, qu'il en avait conçu pour elle une véritable détestation, et qu'il était mort rongé par la haine et par une maladie cardiaque clairement présentée comme d'origine psychosomatique. C'est également après le décès de son mari, alors qu'elle ne sait rien encore de ce rêve, qu'elle et Nevil entament une relation amoureuse et envisagent de se marier. Oscillant ainsi entre prémonition psychologique et funeste prophétie, le rêve dont l'ombre romantique — le titre est emprunté à *Hamlet* (II, 2), repris par Keats dans *l'Endymion* — s'étend sur les personnages et préside à l'issue tragique, déréalise le roman et place un mirage onirique au cœur même de l'intrigue.

Mais revenons au triangle. Contestable, nous venons de le voir, parce qu'aucune relation adultère ne se produit dans le roman, il est également réducteur parce qu'en installant le mari, la femme, l'amant au centre de la scène, il amène à sous-estimer le rôle essentiel joué par le narrateur. Ce dernier, fraîchement débarqué de l'Ouest pour devenir écrivain, présente Douglas Faulkner comme un amoureux des livres et un créateur potentiel, ce qui, même si le narrateur est loin de se (ou de nous) l'avouer, fait de lui un rival. Lors de la première scène qui met en présence les trois hommes — le révérend Nevil, Faulkner, et le narrateur, March — cette rivalité se complique de l'amitié au tour résolument passionnel qui unit les deux premiers, et donc, exclut potentiellement, le tiers :

*He [Nevil] did not talk much, and I perceived that he was the matter-of-fact partner in a friendship that was very romantic on Faulkner's side, and which appeared to date back to their college days. That was a very*

*good while ago, but they seemed to be in the habit of meeting often, and to have kept up their friendship in all its first fervor. Mr. Nevil was very handsome, with a regular face, and a bloom on it quite girlishly peachy, and very pure, still, earnest blue eyes.* (The Shadow 20)

On peut bien sûr se demander si la féminité constatée n'est pas à mettre au compte d'une agressivité de compétition qui influencerait l'esprit du narrateur, mais il n'en reste pas moins que Nevil et Faulkner sont d'emblée présentés comme un presque couple.

Le rêve est le sujet de leur première — et déjà très intime — conversation, et on relève tout particulièrement, à la seconde lecture, une phrase qui en dit long sur les tourments internes de Faulkner, mais surtout sur la façon dont le texte suggère d'emblée la zone de frai entre réalité et illusion dans laquelle l'intrigue entière va pouvoir se développer :

*Then we began to tell our own dreams, the ghastlier ones ; and Faulkner said he sometimes had dreams, humiliating, disgraceful, loathsome, that followed him far into the next day with a sense of actual occurrence. [...] He said that sometimes he did not see why we should not attribute such dreams to the Evil One, who might have easier access to a man in the helplessness of sleep.* (21 ; je souligne)

Est-ce trop solliciter le texte que de voir dans cette paranomase (Evil/Nevil) l'aveu implicite de l'identité du démon personnel de Faulkner ? Ce dernier confie d'ailleurs un peu plus loin, alors qu'il a familièrement passé son bras autour des épaules du narrateur : « *I can't tell you how much this fellow has been to me, March !* » (22). Les relations s'estompent néanmoins ; quand le narrateur entend à nouveau parler de Faulkner, quelques années plus tard, ils sont tous les deux mariés, et le premier triangle, uniquement masculin, est remplacé par celui qui rassemble Faulkner, sa femme Hermia, et Nevil qui les a religieusement unis, et par un second, que configurent le narrateur, sa femme, et une troisième pointe occupée par l'objet tournant de leurs observations, choisi successivement parmi les trois autres personnages. Il faut encore patienter sept ou huit ans pour que le Dr Wingate, neurologue réputé dont le nom réapparaît dans *An Imperative Duty*, ami de March et médecin de Faulkner, contribue à provoquer une rencontre entre les amis. Le portrait de Faulkner que brosse le narrateur n'est pas sans rappeler celui que peint de son hôte l'anonyme visiteur de la Maison Usher, et cette présence fantomatique de

la célèbre nouvelle de Poe fait peser non seulement une menace sur les personnages mais surtout un nouveau soupçon d'irréalité sur l'intrigue. On relève l'insistance toute poétique sur les yeux, le teint et la nervosité malade, et on constate la même dialectique à l'œuvre qui fait jouer la reconnaissance de l'identique et le constat de métamorphose annonciatrice de mort :

*I noticed that his eyes, once so beautiful, had a dull and suffering look, and the smokiness of his complexion had a kind of living stain in it. His hair straggled from under his soft felt hat with the unkempt effect I remembered, and his dress had a sort of characteristic slovenliness. He carried a stick, and his expressive hands seemed longer and languider, as if relaxed from a nervous tension borne beyond the strength.* (29)

Nevil est toujours présent ; il a accompagné le jeune couple en Europe et vit désormais avec eux dans cette maison de la côte Est au bord de la mer (« *You know I can't get along without Jim* » 29), et March parseme son récit de signes qui pourraient laisser penser qu'effectivement, Hermia et Nevil entretiennent une liaison coupable. L'allusion intertextuelle à la nouvelle de Poe — confirmée par l'état d'abandon dans lequel est laissé le jardin aux serres en ruines (« *a melancholy, a desolation, a crazy charm, a dead and dying beauty like this* » 44) — nous invite toutefois à ne pas nous laisser abuser. S'il est une caractéristique du narrateur imaginé par l'écrivain gothique américain, c'est bien son *unreliability*, c'est-à-dire l'impossibilité pour le lecteur d'accorder foi à ses propos. À l'évidence, la perception de March est aveuglée par une jalousie inconsciente, dissimulée à lui-même par l'amitié soudaine et inexplicable dont il se prend pour Nevil et qui trouve un pendant dans l'affection immédiate qu'éprouve Mrs March pour Mrs Faulkner. L'instinct de la femme de March cependant ne s'y trompe pas, et elle ressent une violente détestation pour Faulkner, tout à fait étonnante chez cette femme d'ordinaire si distante et ironique. « *Could you ever thought there was anything to that man ?* » (35). Elle a également perçu la nature pour le moins ambiguë des relations qui unissent Faulkner à Nevil : « *It's quite like such a man as Faulkner to want a three-cornered household. I think the man who can't give up his intimate friends after he is married, is always a kind of weakling* » (35), et elle souligne avec perfidie l'étonnante absence d'enfants du couple. Enfin, elle est la première à deviner l'aversion que Faulkner éprouve pour sa femme. Nous y reviendrons plus tard,

mais si le narrateur semble épouser le point de vue de son ami en attribuant cette haine au rêve qui lui aurait révélé l'infidélité de son épouse, rien n'interdit au lecteur de se forger une autre interprétation, plus rationnelle et davantage fondée sur le patient travail d'élaboration textuelle du soupçon de passion homosexuelle inconsciente de Faulkner pour Nevil. On conçoit sans peine que la construction du personnage de March du point de vue de la vraisemblance psychologique lui interdise pareille interprétation, ce qui confirme le diagnostic d'*unreliability* évoqué plus haut.

Après la mort de Faulkner, nous l'avons déjà entrevu, le rêve se révèle rétroactivement prémonitoire puisque Hermia et Nevil s'apprêtent à se marier. Malgré toutes les timidités scientifiques du Dr Wingate qui s'oppose à la théorie selon laquelle que le rêve en question serait directement responsable de la maladie et donc du décès de Faulkner, le lecteur est à tout le moins invité à établir un lien entre la folle obsession du cardiaque et la dégradation de sa santé. Notons surtout qu'il est tout à fait possible de réconcilier le savoir partiel du narrateur et l'interprétation que les failles et les emphases de son récit nous ont amené à avancer. Faulkner peut en effet avoir souffert jusqu'à en mourir de son soupçon d'infidélité parce que pareille liaison l'éloignait non pas d'Hermia mais de Nevil, ce qui expliquerait mieux sa passivité devant l'omniprésence de l'amant supposé et la répulsion qu'il éprouve pour sa femme.

Une lecture freudienne plus poussée pourrait même conduire à avancer l'idée que Faulkner s'était projeté en rêve dans le rôle de sa femme, amoureuse de Nevil, et qu'il en avait conçu au réveil une immense détestation pour elle — c'est-à-dire pour la part féminine de lui-même. Pareille union fantasmée puis confrontée à la réalité n'a pu que produire une véritable obsession, qui à son tour a généré un surplus de tension dans le désir d'autodestruction et abouti à la crise cardiaque. On relève d'ailleurs que le contenu précis du rêve associe inexorablement les funérailles de Faulkner et le mariage de Hermia et James Nevil (112), comme si les acteurs en étaient brouillés — comme si, présent aux deux cérémonies, Faulkner se projetait simultanément dans le rôle de l'épousée et du mort. En une formulation remarquable d'ambiguïté, Mrs March n'hésite pas à accuser les deux hommes pour la souffrance que vient d'infliger à Hermia la révélation du détail du rêve par le médecin : « *It's his fault for having him there to*

*dream about ; and it's HIS fault for being there to be dreamt about.* » (91)  
 Le lecteur reste libre d'attribuer le référent du sujet des deux occurrences du verbe « *dream* », même si Mrs March ne pense peut-être qu'à Hermia. L'ambiguïté cependant tend à se réduire quand la jeune femme reprend le courant de reproches déjà formulés : « *It was his folly, his silly, romantic clinging to a sentiment he ought to have flung away the instant he was married, which did all the harm. A husband shouldn't have any friend but his wife.* » (92).

Toutefois, le texte donne un tour d'écrou supplémentaire à l'intrigue psychologique, quand Nevil, juste avant de renoncer à sa promesse, exprime ses propres doutes sur la possibilité que de sa part, ait existé une passion inconsciente pour Hermia : « *But — how do I know — how do I know — that I was not in love with her then, that I have not always been in love with her through all his life and death ?* » (127), et qu'elle ait, elle aussi, secrètement abrité un sentiment réciproque. March déploie une énergie terrible pour le convaincre de leur innocence. Ils ne sont coupables de rien puisqu'ils ne s'étaient rien avoué, et surtout, prêter au rêve cette force irrationnelle reviendrait à reconnaître la puissance superstitieuse de tous les obscurantismes.

Tout serait donc bien qui finirait bien puisque Nevil se laisse convaincre, mais restant un instant de trop sur le marchepied du train qui emporte March de l'ouest vers Boston, il est écrasé contre la paroi d'un tunnel. Hermia n'y résiste pas et meurt à son tour un an plus tard. Même si la logique du personnage impose au narrateur d'énoncer une conclusion rationnelle (« *The evil dream had power upon the hapless pair who succumbed to it only because they were so wholly guiltless of the evil imputed to them* » 133), la dissolution du « couple » vient affirmer, paradoxalement, le triomphe de ces puissances occultes que March avait pris soin de dénoncer comme une fiction. On est tenté de conclure, provisoirement au moins, à l'existence, dans les soubassements de l'inspiration howellsienne, d'une veine qu'on pourrait — au prix d'une légère provocation générique — appeler « gothique », au sens large où cette étiquette désigne en Amérique tout un sombre pan de la littérature où l'irrationnel fait loi.

Cette hypothèse doit désormais être vérifiée à l'aune du second texte considéré : *An Imperative Duty*. La résolution comique — au sens aristotélien — rend sans doute plus hasardeuse encore l'attribution de l'étiquette gothique. Rappelons en effet qu'au contraire de

la clôture tragique de *The Shadow of a Dream*, qui voit la disparition successive des trois protagonistes en un véritable acharnement d'un destin funeste signifié par le rêve « prémonitoire », cette deuxième « novelette » met en scène le triomphe de l'amour et l'union, un temps différée par une « catastrophe », des deux personnages principaux. L'intrigue se résume facilement : alors qu'elle s'apprête à accepter un mariage auquel elle ne semble guère accorder d'importance, la jeune et pétillante Rhoda apprend de la bouche de sa tante, qui le lui avait toujours caché, qu'elle a, malgré sa peau blanche, un huitième de sang noir. Bouleversée par la nouvelle et bien que se réfugiant dans l'idée qu'elle aurait su l'accepter si on ne lui avait pas caché cette information une vie durant, Rhoda laisse seule sa tante, Mrs Meredith, à la fois éperdue de culpabilité et soulagée d'avoir enfin obéi au devoir impératif éponyme qui lui interdisait de laisser la jeune femme convoler en justes noces sans qu'elle connaisse la vérité. Mrs Meredith, en un geste qui oscille entre refuge dans le sommeil et suicide, avale un flacon de somnifères et trouve la mort. Dans l'intervalle, errant dans les rues, Rhoda part à la rencontre de « sa » communauté qui lui inspire un violent dégoût. Après avoir brutalement rompu ses fiançailles, elle est arrachée à la haine de soi et à la tentation d'une abnégation masochiste et puérile au service des Noirs du Sud, par le Dr Olney, spécialiste des maladies nerveuses, rencontré hors texte en Italie et clandestinement amoureux d'elle. Il la convainc sans trop de peine de continuer à vivre pour elle-même et accepte de garder le secret de cette naissance honteuse aux yeux de l'intéressée, à la condition expresse qu'elle comprenne que lui serait capable de clamer une vérité dont il est fier pour deux. En une pirouette finale, la nouvelle se clôt sur une représentation du racisme américain, et même universel, comme émanant d'un mépris de classe pour tout travail manuel. Le texte revient ainsi sur les considérations presque naturalistes (« *looking at them scientifically* » 138) de la première page où la narration à la troisième personne<sup>1</sup> épousait les observations d'Olney sur le gommage des particularités nationales au profit d'une identité internationale du monde « prolétaire ». Ce repli sur une vision

1. On relève tout de même que le narrateur hétérodiégétique et impersonnel parle de « *our race* » à plusieurs reprises pour désigner les Blancs, ce qui, bien sûr, favorise le glissement vers les passages clairement focalisés sur le point de vue d'Olney. (exemple p. 141)

politique militante permet sans doute à Howells d'élargir son sujet, mais on peut regretter qu'il renonce ainsi à l'originalité d'une inspiration qui apparente ce texte à la nouvelle précédente pour « retomber » dans un discours, certes généreux, mais empreint de naïveté généralisante. Les premières pages laissaient pourtant espérer une prise de position plus spécifique sur la question du racisme en cette fin de siècle aux États-Unis :

*In fact, the one aspect of our mixed humanity here which struck Olney as altogether agreeable in getting home was that of the race which vexes our social question with its servile past, and promises to keep it uncomfortable with its civic future. He had not forgotten that, so far as society in the society sense is concerned, we have always frankly simplified the matter, and no more consort with the Negroes than we do with the lower animals, so that one would be quite as likely to meet a cow or a horse in an American drawing-room as a person of color.*

(*An Imperative Duty*, 139-40)

Revenons donc à ce qui, selon nous, constitue l'essence de la nouvelle, définie plus haut comme son souffle « gothique ». Dès la première apparition de Rhoda, la description physique de la jeune femme recèle la possibilité d'une composante noire (« *a rich complexion of olive* », « *the inky blackness of her eyes and hair* », « *full lower lip* », « *sharp wing-like curve in the sides of the sensitive nostrils* » 147), sans doute indécélable à première lecture, à moins d'avoir lu la définition du texte en quatrième de couverture qui le présente comme « *a drama of miscegenation* ». Plus étonnante est la réflexion que ce visage suscite chez le jeune médecin : « *Olney recalled it as a mask and he recalled his sense of her wearing this family face, with its somewhat tragic beauty, over a personality that was at once gentle and gay* » (147). On ne peut manquer d'être frappé, à seconde lecture au moins, par cette présentation qui associe donc la composante noire sous-jacente — mais évidente dans le jeu des signifiants juxtaposant des stéréotypes raciaux aux termes « *inky blackness* » — à un masque, c'est-à-dire à un ornement visant à dissimuler la réalité d'un visage et qui, par définition, peut être retiré. La leçon est claire : la vérité de Rhoda n'est pas à chercher du côté de ce presque déguisement, mais au fond d'elle-même, dans l'identité qu'elle a su se forger en marge de son héritage, réel ou supposé. « *The mask, he felt, was inherited* » (147), et cette phrase trouve un écho dans l'expression, page suivante, qui la consacre :

« *a tragic family mask* ». Toute la question que se pose Mrs Meredith — celle de révéler ou non à la jeune fille ou même à son promis le secret de ses ancêtres — se trouve par conséquent décalée, voire totalement minée de l'intérieur. Il ne s'agit plus en effet de mettre au jour une « vérité », mais au contraire, de faire peser sur le destin de la jeune femme le poids d'une chimère pseudo-scientifique. Si la biologie contemporaine n'a plus aucun doute sur l'absurdité scientifique des concepts de races, tant celles-ci ont été incessamment brassées et mêlées au cours des millénaires, elle réduirait assurément au statut de vue de l'esprit l'idée d'une marque indélébile liée à un huitième de « sang » noir<sup>1</sup>. Il est donc tout particulièrement intéressant de constater l'avancée implicite des vues de l'auteur sur son temps. Certes, le concept de race est maintenu — qui songerait à l'évacuer complètement à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle ? — mais sa validité est largement remise en question par son attribution à des personnages au raisonnement pour le moins discutable. Il est ainsi remarquable que la si vertueuse Mrs Meredith, qui a su sauver sa nièce de la détresse de l'orphelinat après la disparition prématurée de ses parents, en n'ignorant rien des origines mêlées de la mère de l'enfant, ne s'interroge jamais sur ce qui l'a conduite à dissimuler la vérité à sa nièce. C'est d'ailleurs précisément en termes de vérité que se pose pour elle le débat moral : « *Do you believe that anyone can rightfully live a lie ?* » (150), et on notera que cette exigence surgit précisément au moment du mariage projeté. En d'autres termes, c'est bien la menace de la transmission d'une hérédité noire qui lui fait s'imposer l'aveu qu'elle redoute et a si longtemps retardé. Le racisme inexprimé de la dame n'est jamais dénoncé en tant que tel, mais il s'oppose de façon implicite à l'indignation réitérée d'Olney devant les injustices de la société américaine : « *they [Black people] all look hopeful and happy, even in the rejection from their fellowmen, which strikes me as one of the most preposterous, the*

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1. On ne peut s'empêcher de rapprocher ces questions de l'étonnante façon dont la presse internationale félicite aujourd'hui le candidat à la présidence américaine d'avoir su ne pas se faire le champion de « son » peuple, alors qu'il est rigoureusement métis, c'est-à-dire noir et blanc à parts égales. À l'évidence, les critères racistes ont la vie dure qui présentent comme « noire » une personne ayant un ancêtre noir, même lointain, alors qu'évidemment l'inverse n'est pas vrai. Nous sommes bien toujours gouvernés, consciemment ou non, par une représentation du « sang noir » dont la moindre goutte suffit à déterminer une identité entière, *a fortiori*, bien sûr, s'il s'agit de la moitié des gènes comme dans le cas de Barak Obama.



*most monstrous things in the world, now that I've got back to it here* » (153). Notons tout de même que le souci d'égalité sociale d'Olney ne va pas jusqu'à accepter l'idée de « mariage interracial », du moins au début de la nouvelle, ce qui fait de lui un personnage capable d'évolution, et donc, plus complexe qu'il n'y paraît d'abord. En tout état de cause, il considère d'emblée les théories ataviques de résurgence d'un trait ethnique enfoui, noir par exemple, après plusieurs générations de mariages « blancs », comme hautement improbable et fantaisiste. Malgré les hésitations de Mrs Meredith, il devine plus ou moins le secret avant qu'il ne lui soit révélé, et apparaît ainsi pour la première fois le terme de tache (« *stain* ») qui va conférer toute sa force poétique à la thématique de la nouvelle. Olney commence par éprouver de la répulsion pour la jeune femme — et ce mot, dans toute sa force, crée un lien mystérieux avec la nouvelle précédente, où Hermia était pareillement victime d'un rejet irrationnel :

*His disgust was profound and pervasive, and it did not fail, first of all, to involve the poor child herself. He found himself personally disliking the notion of her having Negro blood in her veins ; before he felt pity, he felt repulsion ; his own race instinct expressed itself in a merciless rejection of her beauty, her innocence, her helplessness because of her race. The impulse had to have its course ; then he mastered it, with an abiding compassion, and a sort of tender indignation.* (165)

Au-delà de ce fin travail de vraisemblance psychologique, le texte va ensuite mettre en place, de façon plus intéressante encore, l'intériorisation par l'intéressée de l'opprobre qui s'attache à la découverte de ses origines enfouies. Alors qu'elle a elle-même défendu les Noirs contre les positions racistes de sa future belle-famille — en un jeu de mots astucieux, l'auteur lui fait dire : « *I had to take the negroes' part* » (177) qui préfigure la troublante description de la p. 184 : « *With her head defined against the open window, her face showed quite black towards her aunt* » —, son indignation ne peut complètement être attribuée à la surprise de la découverte. « *I must be dreaming. It's as if — as if you were to come to a perfectly well person, and tell them that they were going to die in half an hour !* » (185). Outre le fait que cette association à la maladie et à la mort concourt à rapprocher cette nouvelle de la précédente, on ne peut manquer d'y lire l'exploitation de la veine gothique que nous avons décelée. À partir de la chimère biologique d'une tache qui marquerait son sang, telle la

marque biblique de la malédiction qui s'attache à la principauté usurpée d'Otrante dans le roman de Walpole<sup>1</sup>, ou la mélancolie congénitale qui entache la famille Wieland dans celui de Brown, Rhoda va s'inventer une souillure, et partant, une aliénation, qui traverse la conscience des grands protagonistes du Gothique, anglais ou américain. Il suffit d'ailleurs de se pencher sur un quelconque des paragraphes qui suivent la révélation pour retrouver, loin du froid détachement du réalisme, tous les accents mélodramatiques du « romanisme noir », un presque synonyme du Gothique qui s'accorde sans doute mieux au type d'illusion que la version américaine du genre s'est attachée à utiliser comme ressort :

*The proud, pure girl who had been told that her mother was slave-born and sin-born, had lived as carefully sheltered from the guilt and shame that are in the world as tender love and pitying fear could keep her ; but so much of the sad fact of evil had somehow reached her that she stood in the sudden glare of the reality. She understood, and she felt all scathed within by the intelligence, by whatever the cruellest foe could have told her with the most unsparing fullness, whatever the fondest friend could have wished her not to know. The swiftness of these mental processes no words can suggest ; we can portray life, not living.* (187)

Du champ lexical qui oppose la jeune vierge à un tyran acharné à sa perte, en passant par la représentation centrale d'un « mal » qui contamine toute réalité, jusqu'à l'aveu d'impuissance convenu d'un narrateur pour donner la mesure d'une détresse : tout concourt à rappeler les épreuves endurées par les héroïnes gothiques, et plus particulièrement, celles que traversent les protagonistes américaines de Charles Brockden Brown, comme Clara dans *Wieland ; or, the Transformation* (1798) ou Constantia dans *Ormond ; or, the Secret Witness* (1799). Tout se passe comme si William Dean Howells avait éprouvé le besoin de puiser dans le fonds littéraire national pour donner ses lettres de noblesse à une entreprise d'introspection psychologique, jusqu'alors bien peu dans sa manière.

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1. Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), est désigné dans le sous-titre dès la seconde édition (1765), c'est-à-dire dès que l'auteur en reconnaît la paternité après l'avoir fait paraître anonymement, comme « *a Gothic Story* ». C'est de ce sous-titre que naît la désignation « gothique » pour la littérature de terreur qui fait florès en Angleterre, mais aussi dans toute l'Europe et même les États-Unis à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et au début du XIX<sup>e</sup>.

La mort de Mrs Meredith, qui fait écho de celle de Douglas Faulkner, vient parachever une atmosphère sombre, en une juxtaposition des tonalités qui n'est pas sans rappeler la fin de *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), où malgré le mariage heureux des héritiers des deux lignées, planait sur l'avenir l'intangible menace de l'hérédité de la haine. Le narrateur ne nous confie-t-il pas qu'au fond, la passion amoureuse éprouvée par Olney pour la jeune femme trouve son origine dans la même illusion raciale qui donne naissance à sa toute première répulsion ?

[...] *the remote taint of her servile and savage origin gave her a kind of fascination which refuses to let itself be put into words : it was like the grace of a limp, the occult, undefinable loveableness of a deformity, but transcending these by its allurements in infinite degree, and going for the reason of its effect deep into the mysterious places of being where the spirit and the animal meet and part in us.* (223 ; je souligne)

Serait-ce le destin de tous les personnages que de se laisser gagner par la même et meurtrière illusion ?

En marge de cette note inquiétante pour l'avenir hors texte des deux tourtereaux, il faut relever, qui pourtant risquent de se noyer dans l'emphase toute mélodramatique de la prose, quelques mots essentiels : « for the reason of its effect » parce qu'ils donnent la clé de l'entreprise entière de Howells dans ces deux nouvelles. Qu'il s'agisse d'un rêve ou d'une chimère raciale, le ressort est le même. On assiste à la déclinaison d'illusions qui ne tirent leur force que du degré de croyance que leur attachent les protagonistes aveugles. En cela sans doute, William Dean Howells se montre tout particulièrement gothique : « *Evils that derived their forces from the illusions of the sufferers*<sup>1</sup> », disait déjà Brown dans sa préface à *Wieland*.

Il est tout particulièrement central à notre étude que l'auteur ait choisi d'inscrire cette tragédie de croisement de races (« miscegenation ») sous le signe du rêve. La description la plus révélatrice à cet égard, après de longs paragraphes où la narration épouse le point de vue raciste insoutenable de la jeune protagoniste choquée par la révélation, est la suivante :

1. Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland ; or, the Transformation, The Novels and Related Works of CBB*, Vol.1, Kent, Ohio : Kent UP, 1977, 3.

*The emotions, densely pressing upon each other, the dramatizations that took place as simultaneously and unsuccessfully as the events of a dream, gave her a new measure of time ; she compassed the experience of years in the seconds these sensations outnumbered.* (193)

Pareille inscription suffirait à justifier le rapprochement des deux nouvelles opéré dans l'édition utilisée et dans le présent article. Il nous faut toutefois nous tourner vers Freud pour en mesurer toute l'importance, tant il est possible d'y lire en résumé toute la théorie de la condensation du rêve. Commençons peut-être par avouer que c'est un retour à la lettre de *l'Interprétation des rêves* qui nous a conduit à refuser de nous contenter de l'évidence pour tenter de comprendre *The Shadow of a Dream*. La théorie freudienne est en effet on ne peut plus claire sur un point sur lequel l'inventeur de la psychanalyse ne cesse de revenir : l'opposition entre le contenu manifeste et les pensées latentes du rêve<sup>1</sup>. En d'autres termes, c'est le travail de l'élaboration du rêve — dont la condensation est une des stratégies — qui rend si passionnantes ses tentatives de décodage. Au iv<sup>e</sup> siècle de notre ère, Platon écrivait déjà dans *La République*, qu'en rêve, l'homme ne craint pas de s'unir à son semblable, à sa mère ou à la bête. Homosexualité, inceste et zoophilie sont présents dans les songes sans qu'aucun déchiffrage ne soit nécessaire, et Platon ne fait là que relever une évidence, malgré l'audace transgressive apparente du propos :

Mais de quels désirs parles-tu ?

De ceux, répondis-je, qui s'éveillent pendant le sommeil lorsque repose cette partie de l'âme qui est raisonnable, douce, et faite pour commander à l'autre, et que la partie bestiale et sauvage, gorgée de nourriture ou de vin, tressaille, et après avoir secoué le sommeil part en quête de satisfactions à donner à ses appétits. Tu sais qu'en pareil cas, elle ose tout, comme si elle était délivrée et affranchie de toute honte et de toute prudence. Elle ne craint point d'essayer, en imagination, de s'unir à sa mère, ou à qui que ce soit, homme, dieu ou bête, de se souiller de n'importe quel meurtre, et de ne s'abstenir d'aucune sorte de nourriture ; en un mot, il n'est point de folie, point d'impudence dont elle ne soit capable<sup>2</sup>.

1. On consultera avec profit sur ce point en particulier les pages 241-42 de *L'Interprétation des rêves*. (Paris : PUF, 1999)

2. Platon, *La République*, Livre IX (Paris : GF Flammarion, 1966) 333.

Le sens même de la découverte freudienne est que son auteur ne s'est pas contenté de ce constat. Il nous invite à déchiffrer le mystère que constitue le rêve, à la manière dont il faut comparer une traduction et son original, à la façon dont un rébus tout à la fois dissimule le sens et en permet le décodage. Soulignons, comme Freud le dit lui-même<sup>1</sup>, que les écrivains ont souvent une longueur d'avance sur les scientifiques : *Wieland* mettait déjà en scène un rêve où Clara imaginait son frère l'attirer vers lui alors qu'un précipice insoupçonné les séparait. Dans ce roman déjà, le caractère prophétique du rêve — *Wieland*, sombrant dans la folie maniaque, allait bientôt attenter aux jours de sa sœur — se confondait avec l'intuition psychologique. Mais surtout, au-delà de cette évidence, le rêve venait révéler la passion inconsciente et incestueuse éprouvée par Clara dont toute la suite de l'intrigue manifesterait la réalité.

Dès lors, comment prendre le rêve de Douglas Faulkner dans la littéralité de son soupçon d'adultère ? S'il rêvait de façon obsessionnelle de cette liaison, c'est que son inconscient, nous l'avons vu, signifiait autre chose. Mais dépassons maintenant cette analyse du personnage, malgré toute la finesse du travail de l'écrivain qu'elle suppose. Faulkner commet l'erreur funeste de croire à son rêve, de même que Rhoda se laisse gagner par le leurre scientifique qui la condamne. Ces deux nouvelles partagent donc bien le même ressort secret : la conscience du pouvoir des mots.

Il n'est qu'à relire *The Shadow of a Dream* pour s'en convaincre. La fin tragique est précipitée non pas par le rêve lui-même, mais par la révélation de son contenu manifeste. Quand le médecin dévoile à Hermia la nature du signifiant qui composait le rêve de son mari, s'amorce le tourbillon spectral qui aboutit à l'échec de l'amour et à la mort des deux protagonistes. De même, sur un mode beaucoup moins tragique, ce n'est pas la réalité d'une hérédité qui crée ce qui aurait pu devenir un drame sans le réconfort octroyé par Olney : c'est bel et bien, ici encore, la force mortifère des mots de la révélation provoquée par un « devoir impératif ». Que dans le premier cas Howells traite son sujet sur le mode réellement gothique de la hantise, ou qu'il n'en retienne dans le second qu'un ton et une menace suspendue, importe finalement moins que la vérité auto-réflexive à laquelle il

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1. Voir *Le Délire et les rêves dans la Gradiva de Jensen*. (Paris : Folio Gallimard, 1992)

touche ainsi par deux fois. Ce caractère métafictionnel avant la lettre est confirmé par la présence en filigrane de multiples références intertextuelles, ainsi que par les réflexions que mènent constamment les narrateurs sur leur activité d'écrivain : toute œuvre de fiction — rêves et chimères confondus — est porteuse de davantage de véracité que l'écrivain était conscient d'y inscrire. Les mots sont le principe du mensonge qui informe par définition toute fiction, mais ils lui confèrent par là même son pouvoir de suggestion. C'est parce que les signifiants vibrent à l'unisson d'un encodage créatif et d'un décodage qui ne l'est pas moins, que la littérature la plus irrationnelle accède à un degré de réalité qui déborde les clivages schématiques entre *romance* et *novel*. Au creuset où se fondent le travail de l'écriture et l'élaboration de la lecture jaillit une vérité alchimique qui excède tout projet réaliste, à moins que mystérieusement, il n'en constitue le principe même de résonance, l'ombre portée par celui qui se laisse hanter :

*All the same I pitied Faulkner, pitied him even for his baleful dream, whose shadow had clouded his own life, and seemed destined to follow that of others as relentlessly.* (The Shadow of a Dream, p. 115)

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## Abstracts/Résumés

ICKSTADT Heinz

### “ . . . helping my people know themselves:” Late William Dean Howells

The essay compares the late phase of William Dean Howells’s writing career with that of Henry James and relates both to the pragmatic theories of Henry James’s brother William. While Howells, during the 1890s, became a literary institution, Henry James—after his disastrous attempt to achieve “fame and fortune” via the theater—reinvented himself as a novelist absolutely dedicated to his craft. Although Henry seems close to the pragmatist ideas of his brother when he explores an inner world of consciousness in his late fiction, William preferred the stylistic and ethical clarity of Howells’s work to the convolutions of his brother’s novels. For his part, Howells, in his review of *Principles of Psychology*, ignored William James’s discussion of the “stream of thought” and instead emphasized his notion of building character by habit and self-discipline. All three aimed at “unstiffening” (and thus saving) an order of civilization threatened by the social and cultural changes of the late 19th century. In this project, Henry James and Howells can be said to occupy related yet opposite positions. Howells placed the realism of his late work on the borderline separating “civilized” life from the “savage world” beneath it. For him, writing was therefore a civilizing act of self-denial; and by grounding the social function of his fiction on self-transcending and communicative Reason as the basis of all “balance and proportion,” he tended to distrust the “imagination” (for Henry James a liberating force) since he saw it as allied to all forms of excessive (and socially destructive) selfishness.

*Cet essai se propose de comparer l'œuvre tardive de William Dean Howells et celle d'Henry James, les mettant en regard avec les théories pragmatiques de William James. Dans les années 1890s, Howells devient une institution littéraire, tandis qu'Henry James, après l'échec traumatisant de son expérience théâtrale, se consacre tout entier à sa vocation de romancier. Bien que le traitement de l'introspection dans les derniers romans de James soit souvent très proche des théories de son frère, ce dernier ne cachait pas sa préférence pour les romans de Howells dont il louait la clarté, tant sur le plan stylistique que psychologique. Dans sa critique des Principes de psychologie, Howells, pour sa part, passe sur l'analyse du « flux de conscience », mettant plutôt l'accent sur le rôle joué par l'habitude et la discipline personnelle dans la formation du caractère. Ces trois hommes se rejoignent dans une même volonté de décloisonner — tout en le préservant — un ordre social mis à mal par les transformations socioculturelles de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Dans cette entreprise, Howells et James occupent des positions à la fois comparables et opposées. Le réalisme howellsien des derniers romans se situe à la frontière séparant l'expérience « civilisée » des tendances « sauvages » ; il repose sur le contrôle des pulsions et la volonté de produire un être policé. En donnant à la raison et à la maîtrise de soi la haute main sur le récit, l'auteur affirme sa méfiance de l'imagination, responsable selon lui de tous les comportements égoïstes et excessifs qui détruisent le consensus social, alors que James, lui, tenait l'imagination pour libératrice.*

RIVIÈRE Jean

**“Go East, young man,” or the Eurocentric Outlook of W.D. Howells**

Born and brought up in the antebellum Midwest (Ohio), William Dean Howells hardly had any formal education but, working in his father's printing office, he was able to read and proofread the articles published in local newspapers. He studied great English literature (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Thackeray) and romantic German literature (Heinrich Heine) and was able to read French, German and Spanish. He spent the Civil War as an American consul in Venice and on his return became editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* in which he supported both Mark Twain and Henry James, while writing novels on everyday life in the America of his time and on US travellers in Europe. In the 1880s and 1890s, he introduced American readers to the works of Flaubert, Tolstoy, Zola, Balzac

and Turgenev among others. A self-committed writer, he defended the Chicago Anarchists in the Haymarket Affair and was a strong opponent of Yankee imperialism at the turn of the century. He was one of the founders of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and its first president till his death in 1920. Howells's work and influence stand out as a bridge between Europe and the United States and an incentive to give American letters a well-deserved place in world literature.

*Né et élevé dans le Middle West (Ohio) d'avant la Guerre de Sécession, William Dean Howells alla très peu à l'école, mais, en travaillant dans l'imprimerie de son père, il put lire et corriger les articles destinés aux journaux locaux. Il étudia la grande littérature anglaise (Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Thackeray) et la poésie romantique allemande (Heinrich Heine). Il passa les années de la Guerre de Sécession comme consul américain à Venise et, à son retour, devint directeur de l'Atlantic Monthly dans lequel il soutint les œuvres de Mark Twain et Henry James, tout en écrivant des romans traitant de la vie de tous les jours aux États-Unis de son époque et des voyageurs américains en Europe. Dans les années 1880 et 1890, il initia ses compatriotes à la lecture de Balzac, Flaubert, Tourgueniev, Zola et Tolstoï entre autres. Écrivain engagé, il défendit les anarchistes de Chicago dans l'Affaire de Haymarket et fut un opposant déterminé à l'impérialisme yankee au tournant du siècle. Il fut l'un des fondateurs de l'American Academy of Arts and Letters et demeura son président jusqu'à sa mort en 1920. L'œuvre et l'influence de Howells constituent un pont entre l'Europe et les États-Unis et un encouragement pour donner aux lettres américaines une place méritée dans la littérature mondiale.*

ROUDEAU Cécile

### **The Angle(s) of Truth: Perspectives for an American Democratic Fiction in William Dean Howells's Critical Writing**

William Dean Howells was well acquainted with his nation's distrust of fiction. Intent on cleansing literature from the alleged sins of deceit, he launched the promotion of truth as the standard of American fiction. Truth, as it were, would save fiction from itself. American literature would proudly stick to the matter-of-fact, down-to-earth "American" reality. Howells however did not ask for a bird's-eye view of the nation-continent. An influential sponsor of local color literature and unrelenting critic of the "great

American novel,” he believed that the *truth* of a variegated, decentralized nation could only be represented from a particular angle, or rather, from the angle of the particular. But once acknowledged that one’s field of vision was the measure of one’s access to truth, the question remained: How shall the nation become one out of these local, idiosyncratic truths? For Howells as for Emerson, the condition of revealing truth was “the circle of the eye,” the span of the arm, but whereas Emerson’s solution to the bias born of circumscription was the ceaseless eccentric movement of the eye/I, its constant expansion, the bias, for Howells, was no cause for lament. The *relative* purchase was the condition of true vision and Howells’s answer to parallax lay in the multiplicity of focuses, the *circulation* of viewpoints that built the *in common* of a democratic nation. At the end of the century, no voice, however self-reliant, could represent America. The making of America was a “making up.” For Howells as for the local color writers he promoted, building an “in common” as the foundation of a true representation of America demanded a multiplicity of truths understood as “truths to”. As such, they could be performed through an *American* fiction. This American fiction, this paper argues, is what William Dean Howells put forward as the horizon of literature: to relate an America that would constitute the nation as more than the sum of its relations, the ongoing miracle of an acquaintance between “truths to”. By turning the most particular into the “common ground,” by favoring the angle of the particular as the main focus for building the democratic nation, Howells’s vision defied the logics of parallax and located the “un-place-able common” in the “relation to” that is the privilege of a *true* fiction.

*L’Amérique de William Dean Howells se méfie de la fiction, l’éditeur et romancier ne le sait que trop bien. Décidé à laver la littérature de sa compromission avec le faux, le factice, le fictif, Howells veut faire du vrai l’étalon d’une fiction qui viendrait coller au plus près à la « réalité américaine », si fade, si maigre, si inconsistante soit-elle. Pour autant, Howells ne prône pas une vision panoramique ou panoptique du continent-nation. Pour ce champion de la littérature de la couleur locale, critique opiniâtre du « grand roman américain », la vérité d’une nation disparate, décentralisée, ne saurait s’écrire*

qu'à l'oblique, depuis l'angle du particulier. Mais si le vrai ne peut advenir que dans les limites d'un champ de vision particulier, comment répondre à l'exigence d'une représentation nationale ? comment écrire la nation à partir de cette pluralité de vérités locales ? Pour Howells comme pour Emerson, la vérité est circonscrite dans le cercle premier, celui de l'œil : elle est ce que je vois, ce que je peux saisir. Mais alors qu'Emerson trouvait dans le mouvement ex-centrique du moi, dans l'expansion incessante du premier cercle, la réponse aux limites de la circonscription, pour Howells, l'obliquité, la partialité de la vision particulière, n'est plus à déplorer : elle est la condition de la vision vraie. S'il est donc une réponse à la parallaxe, elle réside dans la multiplication des foyers, la circulation des points de vue sans laquelle il n'est plus d'en commun possible. Dans l'Amérique de la fin du siècle, nulle voix ne peut plus représenter le tout de la nation ; l'Amérique est un artefact construit à la croisée de points de vue divers, à l'entrecroisement de voix particulières. Pour Howells comme pour les écrivains de la couleur locale qu'il aime à promouvoir, l'en commun au principe d'une représentation vraie de l'Amérique naît de la rencontre de ces vérités transitives ou relatives (vérités de, vérités pour)—rencontre qui n'advient que dans et par la fiction. Cette fiction de l'Amérique, ainsi que le montre cet article, est l'horizon que Howells entend donner à la littérature : elle est relation de l'Amérique au sens où elle constitue l'Amérique comme (mise en) relation. En fondant l'en commun de la nation démocratique sur une pluralité de vérités particulières, celles qui tiennent à une particule, Howells permet à cette « Amérique du commun », l'Amérique vraie et introuvable, d'émerger en tant qu'articulation, une articulation qui est le privilège et la vérité de la fiction telle qu'il l'entend.

GINFRAY Denise

**Reality/Realities/Realism: William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton and the robes of fiction**

Among other contributions to Realist literature, William Dean Howells' and Edith Wharton's novels revisit the major *topoi* of fictional narratives with a special emphasis on the problematic relationship between truth and illusion, failed ideals and scientific knowledge, lost certainties and overwhelming doubts in late nineteenth-century America. This paper examines the dialectic

between the ideological constructs of western culture sustained by the realist venture and the aesthetic principles inherited from the Classics in an age adrift where “the spirit of commercialism” left holes in the social fabric. This critical reading of Howells’ *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) on the one hand, of Wharton’s trilogy (*The House of Mirth*, 1905; *The Custom of the Country*, 1912; *The Age of Innocence*, 1920) on the other hand, focuses on language in relation to the meaning, truth and ethics of literary utterance.

*Parmi d'autres contributions à la littérature réaliste, les romans de William Howells et Edith Wharton revisitent les topoi des récits narratifs avec un soin tout particulier apporté à la relation problématique entre illusion et vérité, chute des idéaux et savoir scientifique, certitudes enfuies et doutes accablants qui marque l'Amérique de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. L'objet de cette contribution est la dialectique entre les constructions idéologiques de la culture occidentale entretenues par l'entreprise réaliste, et les principes esthétiques hérités du Classicisme, au moment où 'l'esprit mercantile' a déchiré le tissu social. Cette lecture critique de deux romans de Howells (*The Rise of Silas Lapham*, 1885, et *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, 1890), ainsi que de la trilogie de Wharton (*The House of Mirth*, 1905 ; *The Custom of the Country*, 1913 ; *The Age of Innocence*, 1920), s'intéresse particulièrement à la question du langage dans ses rapports au sens, à la vérité et à l'éthique de l'énonciation littéraire.*

DOREY Claude

### **The Daughter Beneath the Water, or the Watermark of the Impersonal**

The aim of this paper is to show that in swearing by a temperate mode of writing committed to the ordinary and to the eschewing of the excesses he reprovved in the novels of his day, Howells was striving to stem the tide of some relentlessly returning demons. My claim is that a scare scenario underlies in varying forms some of his major works. At the core of this scenario simmer the paradoxical demands attached by the imaginary to wild cat daughters in relation to father figures and rather weak son figures. A fine case in point I suggest is to be found in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, where



I claim Irene and the new house symbolize one and the same lustful temptation for the father, and bear the lurking threat of a fire outbreak for him, and where Pen, a metaphor of reclamation and temperate writing, eventually carries the plot beyond the core crisis into the safety of chastened passions. Grounding my analysis in a meticulous reading of some of Howells's major works I strive to bring to the fore some key structural traits, thematic *topoi* and motifs of his fiction, alongside a number of recurring signifiers whose contamination feeds into a contrastive figuration, the workings of which I approach in some detail.

*Cet article se donne pour visée de montrer qu'alors même que Howells revendique la nécessité d'une écriture tempérée se consacrant à l'ordinaire et s'opposant aux abus commis par les « novelists » de son temps, il s'efforce d'apaiser quelques violents démons intérieurs. L'idée maîtresse de ce travail est qu'un scénario coupable hante les textes, avec pour foyer obsédant la tentation que brandissent certaines jeunes femmes flamboyantes, le plus souvent assimilables à des figures de filles, pour les pères. The Rise of Silas Lapham me sert de principal corpus. Je tente d'établir qu'Irene et la nouvelle maison symbolisent une seule et même tentation pour le père et recèlent un risque d'incandescence, tandis que Pen, métaphore d'une écriture de réparation, entraîne la machine coupable de ce scénario sur une voie d'apaisement et de normalisation. Fondant mon analyse sur une lecture serrée des principaux textes de Howells je m'efforce de mettre en évidence certains des rouages de ce que j'appelle la figuration contrastive de cette fiction qui procède par images et structures binaires, avec une récurrence de motifs et de signifiants formant un code accessible à une lecture systématique.*

RORABAK Erik

**A Benjamin Monad of Guy Debord & W.D. Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*; or, Individual & Collective Life & Status as Spectacle**

The present piece actualizes Walter Benjamin's theory of the monad where the past and the present create concentrates of history beyond any kind of artistic intentionality; in so doing, Guy Debord's radical-left theories about 'The Society of the Spectacle' will in this article be mapped on to William Dean Howell's mid-

style 1885 novel work, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, to cross-illuminate both Debord and Howells; Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory will also play a role in the present critical apparatus.

*Cet article met en œuvre la théorie de la monade de Walter Benjamin, dans laquelle le passé et le présent créent un condensé d'histoire dépassant toute forme d'intentionnalité artistique. Les théories radicales de Guy Debord sur la « Société du spectacle » serviront à analyser le roman de William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham, tandis que la théorie des systèmes sociaux de Niklas Luhman complètera le corpus critique.*

BONNET Michèle

***Indian Summer: a “cubical” novel, or “the narrow line of nature’s truth”***

*Indian Summer* has often been overlooked by critics, although it was one of Howells's favorite novel. Much of its irresistible charm lies in the exquisite balance it maintains between comedy and deep psychological insight on the one hand, and on the other between ironic distance and indulgent sympathy towards its characters' shortcomings. Its subtle and complex explorations make it a fine example of psychological realism. Writing as a moralist, not as a moralizer, Howells proposes a qualified and tolerant view of life, highlighting human imperfection as well as the relativity of moral values. Ethics, he insists, in opposition to the nation's Manichean puritan legacy, is a matter of proportions and “degree.” Which is why the novel refrains from formulating any rigid certainties. It is, in William James's phrase, analogous to a cube delicately poised on its edge alone, whose multiple surfaces offer the image of a fundamentally complex, evolutionary and pragmatic truth ultimately ruled by the principle of the equilibrium of forces.

*Relativement négligé par la critique, Indian Summer était pourtant un des romans préférés de Howells. Son charme irrésistible tient sans doute à l'équilibre savant qu'il ménage entre d'une part comédie et profondeur psychologique, et de l'autre distance ironique tout autant que bienveillante sympathie vis-à-vis des travers de ses personnages. Subtilité et complexité caractérisent son exploration de la vie psychique, faisant de cette fiction un remarquable exemple de réalisme*

*psychologique. Aussi comprend-on pourquoi, écrivant en moraliste et non en moralisateur, Howells propose une éthique de la nuance et de la tolérance, mettant en avant la fondamentale imperfection humaine en même temps que la relativité des valeurs morales, dont il suggère aussi que, contrairement à ce que veut la culture nationale imprégnée de puritanisme, elles n'opposent pas le bien et le mal mais sont affaire de dosage, affaire dit-il de « degré ». D'où le sentiment que le roman ne se fige jamais en certitudes. Il est, pour reprendre l'expression de William James, pareil à un cube qui n'aurait de contact avec la réalité que par ses arêtes et dont les surfaces multiples offriraient l'image d'une vérité foncièrement complexe, évolutive, pragmatique, fondée au bout du compte sur le principe de l'équilibre des forces.*

COCHOY Nathalie

**New York dans *The Hazard of New Fortunes*, de William Dean Howells: le sceau du silence**

In *The Hazard of New Fortunes*, William Dean Howells seems to reinvent urban realism. It is by revealing the uncertainty of his words at the onset of the shapeless, nameless modernity of New York that he endows the structure and the substance of his writing with a susceptibility that ultimately proves necessary to the recreation of the silent marks of suffering or endurance that rule the city. The movement of the characters through Manhattan illustrates the author's renunciation of an understanding of the urban transformations and the engagement of his words in the concreteness and the complexity of the world. Like Basil March, who progressively relinquishes the remoteness of elevated trains and the aesthetic screens of the "picturesque" in order to roam the streets of the city, Howells's writing abandons all forms of total domination or artistic reconstruction in order to harmonize its words with the violent variations and the infinite promises that animate the city. In this respect, the first chapters of the novel, dedicated to the vain "hunt" for a furnished flat in Manhattan, reveal the inadequacy of realistic discourses or metaphoric screens. Indeed, the author ceaselessly unveils his distrust of realistic frames and inventories and focuses on the uncertain, intermediary zones where the familiar is endowed with a strange, unspeakable quality. He also resorts to theatrical images in order to disclose the limits of

aesthetic projections. Quite significantly, the metaphors soon give way to an influx of synaesthetic notations, thus underlining the way in which the appraisal of the endless renewal of the city is necessarily linked to an immediate, sensory experience of its most ordinary components. In this sense, the creation of a new magazine functions as a prism in the novel and simultaneously refracts the artificiality of social conventions and the audacities of literary constructions. However, overriding all forms of satiric denunciation or artistic reflection, the magazine also announces the way in which the novel succeeds in recreating those moments of disruption when machines suddenly acquire the beauty of works of art or those protracted moments when the inhabitants of the metropolis discover their common humanity.

*Dans The Hazard of New Fortunes, William Dean Howells semble renouveler le réalisme urbain. C'est en donnant à voir l'inquiétude de son écriture à l'abord de la modernité informe et ineffable de la métropole new-yorkaise qu'il confère à la structure et à la substance de ses mots la sensibilité nécessaire à sa recreation des indices de souffrance ou d'endurance qui demeurent silencieux dans la ville. L'évolution des personnages à travers Manhattan illustre tout d'abord le renoncement de l'auteur à comprendre les mutations urbaines et l'investissement de ses mots dans le monde sensible. Comme Basil March, qui délaisse progressivement les hauteurs du tramway aérien et les voiles du pittoresque et se met à marcher à travers la diversité des quartiers, l'écriture abandonne ses velléités de saisie totalisante, de maîtrise conquérante, et s'accorde aux variations violentes ou aux virtualités de reconnaissance qui animent la ville. En ce sens, la création d'un nouveau magazine fonctionne comme un prisme dans le roman et reflète simultanément les artifices des conventions sociales et les audaces de la construction littéraire. Mais au-delà de toute dénonciation satirique et de toute réflexion artistique, il annonce comment l'écriture recrée les instants de stridence ou de latence où les machines revêtent l'insolite beauté d'œuvres d'art et où les citoyens entrevoient leur commune humanité.*

TANGUY Guillaume

**“Suiting the pattern to the author’s mood:” Erasing the line in *A Hazard of New Fortunes***

In this essay I wish to argue that William Dean Howells’s decision to move to New York goes hand in hand with a new approach to style and fiction illustrated by his 1890 novel, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. The novels of the previous period usually strived for efficiency and managed their raw material—language (symbolized in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* by the the “paint-ore”)—economically. Their genteel plots were underpinned by rational, utilitarian economics. By contrast, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* uses a looser style in which language ceases to draw a dividing line between social classes but opens up an uncircumscribed arena of human interaction. Waste and wandering are the prerequisites for a wider social awareness. The hero is no longer a single individual working in his factory or working out his moral dilemma once and for all (as was the case with Silas Lapham) but a community of people who come and go, wander aimlessly about the streets, are objects and subjects of focalization, and ask questions to which they do not necessarily have an answer. In the same way as the individual ceases to spend his time between four walls—those of the bourgeois home—, meaning escapes the walls of language.

*Le propos de cet essai est de montrer que la décision de s’installer à New York coïncide chez William Dean Howells avec une redéfinition de l’art romanesque, comme en témoigne son roman de 1890, A Hazard of New Fortunes. Les récits de la période précédente visaient l’efficacité narrative en soumettant leur matière première — le langage (symbolisé par le minerai extrait par Silas Lapham) — à une gestion rigoureuse ; leur intrigue conventionnelle obéissait à une économie rationnelle et utilitaire. Bien au contraire, A Hazard of New Fortunes est de facture lâche, et le langage, cessant de tracer des lignes de partage séparant les classes sociales, ouvre un champ propice aux relations interpersonnelles. Le héros n’est plus l’individu solitaire s’adonnant à une production méthodique dans son usine, ou résolvant une fois pour toutes son dilemme moral (cf. Silas Lapham), mais une communauté de personnes qui vont et viennent, errent dans les*

*rues sans but précis, sont tour à tour sujet et objet de focalisation, et posent des questions auxquelles ils n'ont pas forcément de réponse. De même que l'individu renonce à passer son existence entre quatre murs — ceux du foyer bourgeois —, le sens ne se laisse plus enfermer par les murs du langage.*

AMFREVILLE Marc

**La part de l'ombre. *The Shadow of a Dream* et *An Imperative Duty***

The present article sets itself the task of analysing two little known texts by William Dean Howells, *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890) and *An Imperative Duty* (1891). While obviously—albeit surprisingly—“gothic” in tone and content, these two “novelettes” will no doubt complete the somewhat hackneyed vision of the author as one of the leading American Realists, grounded as they are in a manifest fascination for secret psychological mechanisms, and particularly for the dramatic potentialities of dreams and miscegenation. Whether tragic in the first novella or comic in the second, they both structure their plot on the illusion of perception: the mark left by a dream in the former, the alleged “stain” imprinted by one eighth of Black blood in the latter. Resorting to unreliable narrators who take for granted the materiality of these shadows, Howells subtly exposes the lie and makes fiction self-conscious. He thus inscribes his work in the lineage of American romance writers such as Brown, Hawthorne and James, who harrowingly expressed their ambivalence for an art that thrived upon the awakening of chimeras that one should perhaps have best left dormant. Isn't it however the key inner contradiction of literature itself never to be closer to reality than when it probes into and questions its own fictional power? Would not William Dean Howells then be more than ever giving us a realistic picture at the precise moment when he seems to undermine the very foundations of reality?

*Cet article se donne pour tâche l'analyse de deux textes peu connus de William Dean Howells, *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890) et *An Imperative Duty* (1891). Par delà l'évidence d'un contenu et d'un mode qu'on pourrait qualifier de « gothique » et qui donc présenterait en soi un intérêt pour compléter le portrait inlassablement véhiculé de l'auteur en écrivain réaliste, ces deux « novelettes » témoignent d'une véritable fascination pour les mécanismes secrets de la psyché,*

*et surtout, pour leur potentiel dramatique. Qu'on assiste à une résolution tragique dans la première, ou comique dans la seconde (malgré quelques signes annonciateurs inquiétants d'un drame qui pourrait se jouer hors texte), ces deux longues nouvelles ont un commun de fonder leur intrigue sur une illusion : l'empreinte d'un rêve dans un cas, la « tache » indélébile laissée par un huitième de sang noir dans l'autre. Par l'introduction de narrateurs non fiables, Howells, aux antipodes de toute intention réaliste, met la fiction en abyme et s'inscrit ce faisant dans une lignée d'écrivains américains qui de Brown à James en passant par Hawthorne, n'ont jamais cessé d'exprimer leur ambivalence profonde pour un art qui consiste à réveiller des chimères qu'on gagnerait peut-être à laisser dormir. Toutefois, n'est-ce pas l'ultime paradoxe de toute littérature que de s'approcher au plus près de la réalité quand elle sonde au plus profond son propre pouvoir d'illusion ? Ainsi, William Dean Howells ne ferait-il pas ici œuvre plus réaliste que jamais ?*





*Profils américains*  
ISSN 1157-1373  
Directeur de la publication : Michel Bandry

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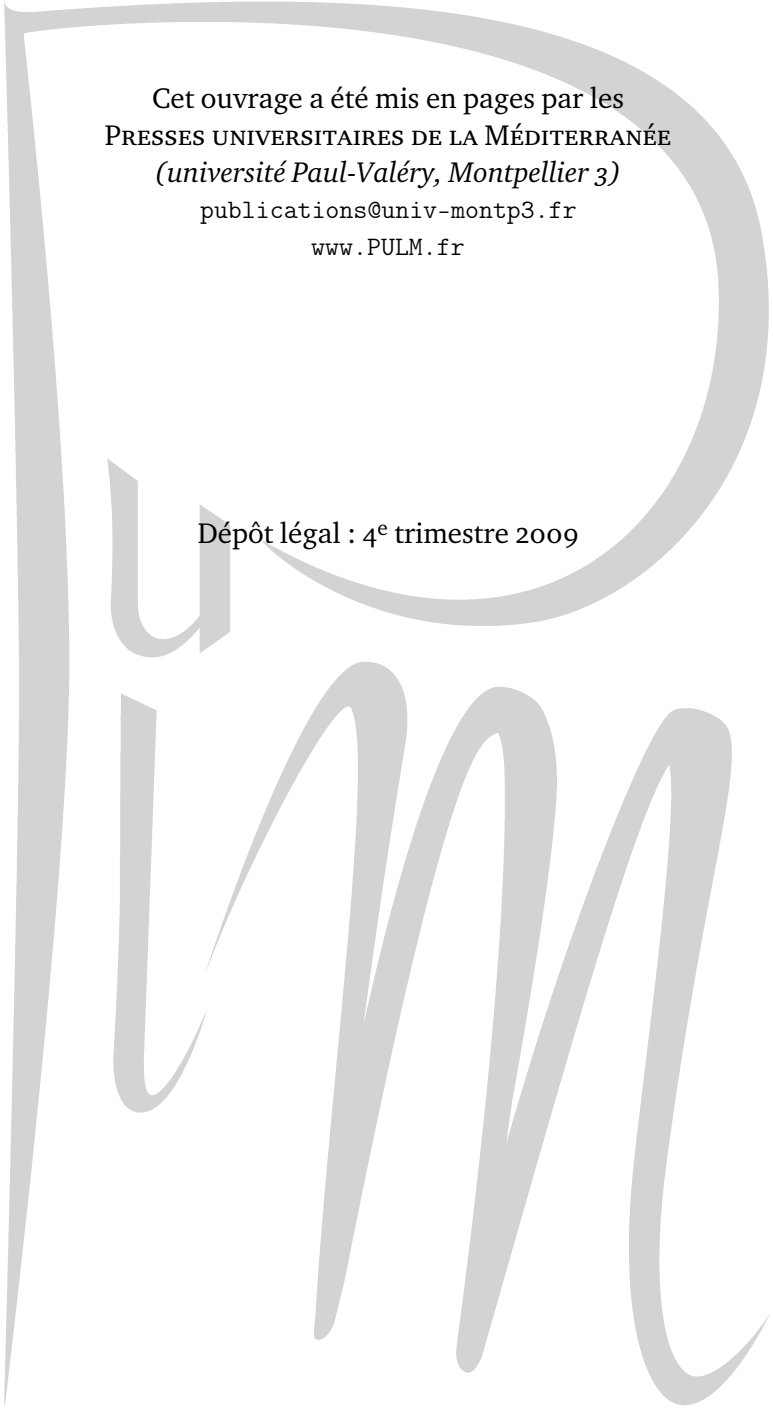
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Cet ouvrage a été mis en pages par les  
PRESSES UNIVERSITAIRES DE LA MÉDITERRANÉE  
(*université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3*)  
publications@univ-montp3.fr  
www.PULM.fr

Dépôt légal : 4<sup>e</sup> trimestre 2009