Profils américains 21

William Dean Howells

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William Dean Howells

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GUILLAUME TANGUY

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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
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Numéro coordonné par Guillaume TANGUY

Sommaire

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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,[1] 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

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:[1] 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"[2] or "mushy" (Gopnik 570) and he sometimes dismissed the notion altogether. It is

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)

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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.[1] This focus goes hand in hand with a propensity to examine the theme of social, cultural and eco-

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)

nomic 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.[1]

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,"[2] 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

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.[1] 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 rôle—something James was never able to do. In a world which had been predominantly feminine, Howells's was

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.[1] 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-

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)

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lish his first story, a favour James was never able to "repay," except by "read[ing]"[1] 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 31st 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."[2] (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-

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 *re*payment 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)[1] 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,[2] 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)

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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.[1] 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").[2] 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)

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,"[1] 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.[2]

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

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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 money-eyed 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 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."[1] In *Hazard*, the point is not to contain reality through language, but to expose the

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"[1] 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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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.[1]

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

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 [. . .].[1]

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*

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'.[1]

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:

> *Jeztzeit*, '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'. [. . .].
> *Jeztzeit* 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.[2]

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 *Jeztzeit* 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-

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 *Jeztzeit*,

> 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'.[1]

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

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.[1]

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.[2]

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

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.[1]

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.'"[2] 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.

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.[1]

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."[2]

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

1. Dickstein xxx-xxxi.
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.[1]

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.[2] *The Rise of Silas Lapham* too foretells what would

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."[1] 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."[2] 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!'[3]

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

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.'"[1] 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."[2] 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.'"[3] 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."[4] 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

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

dinners."[1] 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

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."[1] 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?

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.[1]

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,

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."[1] 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

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 subsystem 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.'[1]

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

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.[1]

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."[2] 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

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.[1]

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."[2] 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."[3] 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

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 Judgement* 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.[1]

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 [. . .].[2]

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

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 webwork of co-appearances that is, more and more today even than in Howells's own time, a spectacularized neo-Walter Benjamian 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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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*