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The Artist as Critic as Artist: Howells's Realism in Criticism and Fiction

In a recent essay on "Realism and the City," Amy Kaplan observes a frequent misreading of realistic fiction: "We curiously treat the seamy side of urban life as the touchstone of 'the real' itself; thus the more slums, poverty, crime, and corruption, the more realistic the novel" (69). This reading of late nineteenth-century American fiction is as old as the literature itself. Since its inception in the 1870s, realistic fiction has been associated in popular and frequently even in critical reception with the depiction of "the seamy side of life," neglecting almost everything else achieved by this particular artistic approach. The best-known example of such a reception is Henry James's essay about "that most typical realist" (Stephens, 79), William Dean Howells: "He is animated by a love of the common, the immediate, the familiar and vulgar elements of life. . . . He thinks scarcely anything too paltry to be interesting, [and] that the small and the vulgar have been terribly neglected" (394). Although most critics today agree that realistic fiction accomplished much more than the depiction of unpleasant living conditions, the fact remains that this literature seems to invite such a misreading.

An investigation into various concepts of literary realism shows that the depiction of social misery was only one of several features of the attempt to give as accurate a representation as possible of actual circumstances, regardless of their pleasantness. This investigation may also answer the question why many modern readers come to the conclusion that "with the exception of Henry James, the work of all the writers, major or minor, associated with realism, even at its best seems somehow dull" (Stephens, 72). The basis of my discussion is the work as artist and critic of William Dean Howells, who introduced European realistic fiction to the American public and as artist and crit-

ic became "the pathfinder of a new generation of American authors" (Meyn, 252).

Although there have been attempts to trace concepts of realism in literature back to Antiquity, the term itself was not used until well into the nineteenth century, when a writer stated in the *Mercure Français* of 1826 that

this literary doctrine which gains ground every day and leads to faithful imitation not of the masterworks of art but of the originals offered by nature could very well be called realism. According to some indications it will be the literature of the 19th century, the literature of the true. (Quoted in Wellek, 227.)

Very soon artists themselves began to express what they considered important for their own creations as well as for art in general. This development can be attributed to changes in the attitude of the artist toward his audience as well as toward art.

The Russian novelist Nikolai Chernishevsky, whose *The Aesthetic Relationship of Art and Reality* was published in 1853, came to conclusions paradigmatic for literary realism as a genre: "The function of all works of art without exception is the reproduction of life and nature" (63). "With its reproductions, art only reminds us of what is interesting in life and endeavors to acquaint us to some extent with those interesting phases of life which we have had no opportunity to experience or observe ourselves in reality" (79). Balzac summarized the attitude of the early realistic novelist to his craft in his introduction to the *Comédie Humaine*, stating that his intention was to write "the history which so many historians have neglected; that of Manners" (lviii). To be successful, "French society would be the real author; I should only be the secretary" (lviii).

The realistic voice came to the United States relatively late, and only indirectly. Although a realistic mode of writing was developed in the western states by authors such as Mark Twain, Edgar Watson Howe and Hamlin Garland, this literature never gained the respectability that could have made it a model for an American literature which in the 1880s was still largely dominated by the cultural community of New England.

Only two major writers from the East promoted the cause of realism, William Dean Howells and Henry James. Both were influenced strongly by European literature, especially by Balzac, and were engaged not so much in the creation of a genuinely American literary realism as in the application of European techniques to American

subjects. Both possessed the distance from the creative process typical for realistic writers and used this distance to develop a theoretical framework for their writing. Although his later novels were very different from Howells's, James's essay "The Art of Fiction" argued along the same lines as the many essays, editorials and reviews that Howells produced during the last decades of the century.

The basis for my discussion of Howells's approach to the representation of reality in literature is his essay *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), generally acknowledged to be the central critical statement of American literary realism. A comparison of Howells's aesthetic criteria and his rationale for realistic literature in the United States with contemporary European thought on the same subject will indicate his position in the international development of realism. Although an important critic, Howells was primarily known as a novelist. In the second part of this essay I will therefore analyze his two most important novels, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, in the light of Howells's own theory.

From 1886 on, Howells wrote "The Editor's Study" for *Harper's Monthly*, making it the most important statement of literary criticism in the United States at that time. Edwin Cady even went so far as to say that

his column became a landmark in American literary criticism. I think there has never been another to rival 'The Editor's Study' for national and international effect, for freshness and seriousness of ideas, for power in making literary reputations and educating provincial Americans to the work of great foreign authors. . . . It became a monument of American literary history. (74)

In 1891, shortly before resigning from *Harper's*, Howells took excerpts from several of his essays, wrote connecting passages, and published them under the title *Criticism and Fiction*. This procedure has often been criticized; Everett Carter called the book "a hastily contrived product of the scissors and the pastepot" (190). But even though the essay is somewhat lacking in coherence and occasionally seems spurious, Carter's demand, "to look elsewhere for the best expression of his critical opinions" (190), is misleading. Despite its shortcomings, *Criticism and Fiction* is William Dean Howells's central statement on literary realism and can very well serve as the basis for a discussion of his critical views.

Howells begins his inquiry into contemporary literature and its possible improvement by outlining the reasons why for a long time artists had not been able to produce valuable literature: "They have

been rather imitators of one another than of nature" (11), and thus had committed a basic sin against the ultimate objective in art, truth. By accepting standards out of literature and trying to imitate the writings of others, even of such accepted masters as Shakespeare, Balzac or Dickens, the author "can only produce the still-born, the academic" (12). The basic fault that Howells sees in his colleagues is that they are concerned not with the real but with the ideal. The concern with a reality that can be picked out of nature is considered by many a "sin against culture" (13), a culture which prefers the artificial because "it's a great deal nicer, . . . it's ideal, too; and what you want to do is to cultivate the ideal" (13). This practice, supported by most literary critics, is due to "the public wish to be amused rather than edified" (22).

But this is not the function that Howells perceives for the artist in society. In an interview with Stephen Crane, Howells explains what he considers that function to be:

It is the business of the novel to picture the daily life in the most exact terms possible, with an absolute and clear sense of proportion. . . . As a usual thing, I think, people have absolutely no sense of proportion. . . . The novel, in its real meaning, adjusts the proportions. (20)

The novel not only has a role to fulfil in society, its role is also very important with regard to the intellectual life of his time: "Novels are now so fully accepted by every one pretending to cultivated taste—and they really form the whole intellectual life of such immense numbers of people, without question of their influence, good or bad, upon the mind" (*Criticism and Fiction*, 46). Howells's position is clear. The author does, willingly or not, influence his readers' perceptions of the world. Because authors of nonrealistic literature insist upon glorifying an ideal and adhere to literary conventions developed under quite different circumstances, Howells accuses them of causing harm to their readers. Their novels to him are "idle lies about human nature and the social fabric" (46-47), the results "poisonous" (47).

All this is a consequence of the fact that these authors have accepted other authors before them as authorities and are thus guilty of deluding themselves and others. For Howells, "no author is an authority except in those moments when he held his ears close to nature's lips and caught her very accent" (14). Art is therefore for Howells inextricably linked to the natural appearance of the world. Consequently he can say that "good art . . . is never anything but the reflection of life" (17) and can make "fidelity to experience and probability of motive. . . essential conditions of a great imaginative literature" (15).

Reality as it presents itself to the author is therefore the only guideline, and realism for Howells "is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material" (38). This statement raises two basic questions, What is truth? and, Which material?

The question about the material is answered relatively easily. If the author is to draw his art from the trinity of nature, life, and reality as it presents itself to him in its totality, he is not allowed to select in any way. "In life he finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character; nothing that God had made is contemptible. He cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry" (15). Howells's reference to the scientist in this context is very interesting since it indicates his perception of the author as a neutral and objective observer, and leads to his discussion of the second central element in his approach to literature, the concept of truth.

In an article on Henry James, published in 1882, Howells stated, "The novelist's main business is to possess his reader with a due conception of his characters and the situations in which they find themselves" (Cady, 67). In *Criticism and Fiction* he elaborates this statement:

We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, is it true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women? This truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry—this truth given, the book cannot be wicked and cannot be weak. . . . In the whole range of fiction we know of no true picture of life—that is, of human nature—which is not also a masterpiece of literature, full of divine and natural beauty. (49)

The "we" in this statement are the contemporary readers. Only if they are able to recognize characters and incidents and acknowledge them as possible in their own environment—which is basically the same as that of the novel—is the book successful in portraying life truthfully. From this criterion follows Howells's best known and most important demand: "Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions" (51). Only in this manner can the artist create great art, and only thus will his work be acceptable to his audience, because "the simple, the natural, and the honest" comprise "the standard of the arts which we all have in our power" (14).

Howells's statement that "literature and art are . . . the expression of life, and are to be judged by . . . their fidelity to it" (11) has serious consequences for the realistic author. If he wants to present a reality that the readers themselves can experience, he must not admit his own interference with the portrayed reality. Howells's central criticism of the narrative mode of contemporary British literature is exemplified by Thackeray who "stand[s] about in his scene, talking it over with his hands in his pockets, interrupting the action" (39). Nobody perceives reality filtered through another consciousness. Consequently Howells demands the use of the dramatic method in which a transparent narrator presents a series of scenes from which he himself is as absent as the playwright is from the stage. How important this method is for the realistic novel that Howells envisions can be seen from his statement that only this method allows "the illusion in which alone the truth of art resides" (39).

Another consequence of the principle that literature should be verifiable through a reality that can be experienced is that the author has to be true to "the nature of a people" (31). This results in his demand for the preservation of a specific American language. American literary realism had begun with the school of "local colorists" such as Edward Eggleston and Mark Twain, one of whose central characteristics was the use of local dialects and vernacular even if it contradicted literary conventions. Howells's statement, "I would have our American novelists to be as American as they unconsciously can" (66), is a logical continuation of this principle.

The most important part of Howells's analysis of the shaping forces of good literature is his demand for the preservation of the right perspective with regard to the characters' motives. Not only do the motivations have to be presented in a way that the reader can accept them as though they were his or her own, they also have to be presented correctly with regard to their force for a normal human being. This becomes especially important for the treatment of sexuality in literature, one of the most controversial aspects of the debate over realism. Howells claims that "an American novelist may not write a story on the lines of *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary*" (72). First of all, public morality would not allow it, and a truthful author has to take his environment's conventions into account, not only because his readers "hold him solemnly pledged not to betray them or abuse their confidence" (73) but also because their views are an integral part of the environment from which he draws his material. The second argument against a novel like *Madame Bovary* is that in it sexuality is given too

large a place in the context of a normal human environment. Howells rejects the notion that a strong emphasis on sexual motivations contributes to a realistic depiction of life. For him it is a distortion of the true proportions, and the treatment of sexuality in American and British literature is closer to the truth than that of French novels:

It is quite false or quite mistaken to suppose that our novels have left untouched these most important realities of life. They have only not made them their stock in trade; they have kept a true perspective in regard to them; they have relegated them in their pictures of life to the space and place they occupy in life itself, as we know it in England and America. They have kept a correct proportion. (73-74)

To do anything else would be to subscribe to an "effectism . . . awaking at all cost in the reader vivid and violent emotions" (35) and to deny the author's true function as "historian of feeling and character" (74).

As a historian, the author has to be objective, as objective as any scientist, and thus attach to everyone and everything he describes the due significance. What this means in the United States is obvious to Howells: "The arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art" (74).

A truthful representation of America in American literature is of crucial importance for Howells who realizes that using "the public wish to be amused rather than edified" (22), an author can achieve both aims through the creation of good art. A truthful portrait of American life in American art becomes a social as well as an aesthetic necessity because "the vast majority of people for whom life is earnest . . . find only a distorted and misleading likeness of it in our books" (50). In the concluding section of *Criticism and Fiction* Howells expresses his hope that with the help of a realistic literature the American democracy might be able to improve the social situation of the masses. "Truth . . . paints these victims as they are, and bids the world consider them not because they are beautiful and virtuous, but because they are ugly and vicious, cruel, filthy, and only not altogether loathsome because the divine can never wholly die out of the human" (86). Howells not only asserts that everything is a possible subject for art, but he also stresses the responsibility of the artist toward society:

Democracy in literature . . . wishes to know and to tell the truth. . . . Men are more like than unlike one another; let us make them know one another better, that they may all be humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity. . . . [The arts] are all lower than the rudest crafts that feed and house and clothe, for except they do this office they are idle; and they cannot do this except from and through the truth. (87)

In an international context, *Criticism and Fiction* was not as unique and extreme a statement as many of Howells's American contemporaries thought. Some of Emile Zola's pronouncements put Howells's essay into a proper perspective.

In his essay "The Experimental Novel," published in 1880, Zola equates the task of the novelist with that of the physician. Both are concerned with "finding the relations which link any phenomenon whatsoever to its proximate cause, in other words, in determining the conditions necessary for the occurrence of this phenomenon" (163). In order to do so, the realistic author has to proceed with "the rigor of scientific truth" (162). The author thus becomes a "photographer of phenomena" (165) who simply registers whichever results the situation he has created brings forth. In his essay "Naturalism in the Theater" he confirms this: "The novelist . . . must confine himself to observed data and to the scrupulous study of nature if he is to avoid straying into lying conclusions" (208). The experimental method, as Zola calls his quasi-clinical approach, is the only possible method which allows an author to arrive at an objective truth because "it recognizes no other authority than that of facts; it has freed itself of personal authority" (189).

This point demonstrates the difference between Howells's and Zola's positions most clearly. Although Howells declares that art at its best is "the reflection of life" (*Criticism and Fiction*, 17) and calls the artist the "historian of feeling and character" (74), his demand for the neutrality of observation and representation is not as strict as Zola's method. Howells is always very much concerned with the fact that the artist's observations produce works of art, whereas the artistic element is almost completely missing from Zola's critical position.

The two authors also differ in what they want to achieve with their respective novels. Although they agree that the common quest is for the truth, the reasons for their quest differ. Here Zola again goes further than Howells. While Howells wants his readers to receive an accurate representation of America, hoping this will lead to an increased awareness of the necessity for social change, Zola's objective for the novelist is basically the same as for any social scientist and reformer, "to know the determinism of phenomena and to make ourselves masters of these phenomena" (173).

These differences between Howells and Zola have obvious causes. Both men were clearly products of their respective intellectual environments, Howells of Puritanical New England, Zola of post-Darwinian France. Consequently they were concerned with different

topics and proprieties. Both did, however, share a basic belief: "We must modify a theory to adapt it to nature, and not nature in order to adapt it to a theory" (Zola, 189).

Howells's reputation as "the chief American realist" is based not only on his criticism but also on his fiction. A consideration of the critic as artist will demonstrate how well Howells's theory of realism was applied in his practice as a novelist. Among his many novels, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* most clearly show the realist at work as well as the shift in emphasis that American literature underwent in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

The Rise of Silas Lapham is the first American novel that includes a serious view of the business world. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner had published *The Gilded Age* twelve years earlier, but that book had been a social report interspersed with fictional and semi-fictional passages rather than a novel. From the first page of his novel, Howells makes clear that the man whose name gave the book its title is a product of his society and that he is defined by its values. As the journalist Bartley Hubbard tells Lapham: "Don't want your money without your life, if you come to that. But you're just one million times more interesting to the public than if you hadn't a dollar; and you know that as well as I do, Mr. Lapham. There's no use beating about the bush" (6). Through the first chapter Howells establishes his novel firmly in time, place, and social environment. His readers, having read his *A Modern Instance*, know that Hubbard wrote the "Solid Men of Boston" series around 1875. By setting his novel only ten years in the past and in the city inhabited by a large part of his audience, Howells establishes a verifiable basis for the book. His reference to actual street names and other locales in and around Boston reinforce this. Any reader who wants to do so can, for example, go to Beacon Hill and see the type of house that Lapham has under construction.

Howells also establishes a verifiable social environment. As Donald Pizer observed, "here is no Ahab pursuing his whale with monomaniacal frenzy, no Leatherstocking matching wits and skill with red or white foes in the forest, no Chillingworth brewing potions, but Lapham going down to business every day" (5). This business, the production of paint, is commonplace; every reader might know somebody engaged in this or a similar business. As mentioned earlier, Howells was very much concerned with preserving the right proportions with respect to motives. For a businessman like Lapham, his business is a vital concern. Consequently Howells includes lengthy and detailed descriptions of Lapham's business transactions. These pas-

sages may be wearisome to the reader, but they are necessary for a full understanding of the image and the self-image of a man like Silas Lapham.

After establishing his main protagonist in a verifiable social environment, Howells proceeds to make him psychologically credible. After all, the most important demand of *Criticism and Fiction* is, "Let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are" (51). Howells attempts to do this on two levels, as artist and as critic. On the one hand, he tries to portray people in a realistic manner, on the other hand, he points out the consequences of unrealistic portraits.

In the main plot of the novel, Howells portrays a Silas Lapham who is caught between the business ethics of his time and his personal conscience. Initially he had yielded to his business sense and forced his partner Rogers out of the firm. It is a consequence of the bad conscience resulting from this action that Lapham now engages in business transactions which he otherwise would not have entered into and which contribute to his financial downfall. He is not one of those businessmen who are willing to sell their conscience to make a profit like Rogers and the English agents.

By portraying Lapham as a man with a conscience rather than as a soulless business tycoon, Howells not only enables his readers to understand and accept Lapham's motives, he is also able to comment upon the world he thus describes. Lapham's career suggests that a financial rise in the Gilded Age is possible only through a denial of one's conscience. Only his financial ruin allows Lapham to rise morally and attain inner peace: "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" (337).

Although acting as a novelist in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Howells also performs in it as literary critic. The main sub-plot of the novel, the romantic involvement of Tom Corey with the Lapham daughters, serves to illustrate Howells's criticism of contemporary nonrealistic literature. Upon discovering that Tom loves her and not Irene, Penelope insists on behaving like the heroine of the fictitious popular novel *Tears, Idle Tears*. Although she is presented as a very intelligent girl who is occasionally even reprimanded for her wit, her behavior in this situation is exactly like that of the fictitious heroine whose emotions are supposedly represented "in a monstrous disproportion to the other relations of life" (184). Aware of the power of literature to influence people's perceptions of reality, Howells comments on the discrepancies between life and contemporary art very directly: "Nanny . . . had

read a great many novels with a keen sense of their inaccuracy as representations of life, and had seen a great deal of life with a sad regret for its difference from fiction" (144). People like Nanny Corey, Howells suggests, judge the world by what they have read about it, consequently implying a demand for a realistic representation of the world in literature in order to avoid difficulties such as those of this sub-plot.

Howells is, however, not always able to live up to his own standards. As S. Foster has remarked,

the book has the form and pattern of much romance fiction: the hero, risen from obscurity and become highly successful, has to endure suffering and disappointment before finally discovering his true self in spiritual re-birth; the love affair, having passed through a series of vicissitudes and misunderstandings, ends happily with the "right" people marrying each other. (157)

The same reservations apply to some of the character portraits. Rogers and the English agents increasingly appear like Gothic villains, whereas Tom Corey is a character too good to be true.

But in his portrait of Lapham Howells is able to create a realistic character. Indeed, in spite of Foster's reservations, Silas Lapham can be called the most realistic character in American literature until 1885. Even if one grants that the portrayal is not perfect, it is markedly different from the character portraits of earlier and established American literature which can serve as the only true point of comparison. Somebody like James Fenimore Cooper or Nathaniel Hawthorne would never have admitted that "at times the [hero's] grammar failed him" (37), would never have shown him "asleep in his armchair, with a newspaper over his face" (97), or compared his gloved hands to "canvased hams" (174). Silas Lapham is shown to have the shortcomings of a normal human being, and this makes him an important step forward in the development of American literature.

The other aspect of Howells's aesthetics and their realization in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* to be discussed here is the mode of presentation. In *Criticism and Fiction* Howells demands the exclusion of the narrator from the work to achieve "the illusion in which alone the truth of art resides" (39). In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* Howells generally succeeds in excluding the narrative "I." He relies on detailed descriptions of settings and extensive use of dialogue, and the reader hardly ever learns anything that the characters themselves could not know. Chapter XIV, describing the dinner party at the Coreys, is a good example of this method. The reader can almost live under the impression of being present in the room as an invisible observer.

Howells cannot always keep the narrator out of the narrative completely, but when he does comment directly, it is normally to point out the universal truth in a particular event he has just described, thus maintaining a sense of objectivity. However, for somebody like Howells, whose intention is to entertain *and* edify his audience, a judgmental selection of his material is unavoidable.

The Rise of Silas Lapham illustrates Howells's principles as well as the problems of their realization. Silas Lapham is an admirably realistic character. Howells is also able to develop a realistic and verifiable plot and setting. The novel has, however, several shortcomings when measured against all of Howells's criteria. The illusion of reality through auctorial absence is only partially upheld, and not all characters are as successfully created as Silas Lapham. Perhaps the gravest shortcoming is the absence of a social dimension. In *Criticism and Fiction* Howells demands the inclusion of all levels of society. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is, however, set almost exclusively among the very rich. References to the necessity of earning money and Lapham's "descent" into the world of Zerrilla Millon make the lack of the larger social milieu even more pronounced. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is a good point of departure for the development of a realistic American literature, but it does not live up completely to Howells's standards. With *A Hazard of New Fortunes* Howells attempted to come closer to fulfilling his own expectations.

In 1888, Howells moved to New York City. The Boston he had lived in before was the one he had described in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, an ordered society where problems could be dealt with in a comedy of manners. The situation in New York was the very opposite. Here the social differences were much stronger and far more visible. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* demonstrates Howells's attempt to come to terms with this new reality and to convey its significance to a larger audience.

Howells could expect most of his readers to be in a situation similar to that of the Marches at the beginning of the novel. They do not live in New York, know little about it, and have little interest in learning more. March's decision to go to New York after all points out a basic message of the book. His ambition forces March to go where there are opportunities. The economic necessities have become so important that they weigh more than even Mrs. March's aesthetic prejudices:

I could go West with you, or to a new country—anywhere; but New York terrifies me. I don't like New York; I never did; it disheartens and distracts me; I can't find myself in it; I shouldn't know how to shop. . . . I

couldn't live in the spirit there. . . . I couldn't make my sympathies go round two million people. (28)

Because of the importance he attaches to the new city of economic endeavor, Howells has to provide his readers, who would readily have agreed with Mrs. March, with a sense of New York as a place. Consequently he devotes four chapters to what may be the longest house-hunting in American literature. Although the very detailed descriptions of the apartments halt the plot considerably and distract the reader looking for an action-filled story, they nevertheless provide the novel with a verifiable physical background.

The descriptions of the Marches' and the Dryfooses' houses are parallel to those of the Laphams and the Coreys in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, but Basil March depends on the public transit system and is thus forced to acknowledge the existence of another social milieu:

It must be owned that he did not take much trouble about this; what these poor people were thinking, hoping, fearing, enjoying, suffering; just where and how they lived; who and what they individually were — those were the matters of his waking dreams as he stared at them, while the train raced further into the gay ugliness — the shapeless, graceless, reckless picturesqueness of the Bowery. (183)

A truthful literary representation of the United States in the late 19th century, especially one of New York, cannot exclude the large number of paupers and immigrants. March's visit to Lindau gives Howells the opportunity to describe not only the immigrants themselves but also their living conditions which contrast sharply with those of the Marches and the Dryfooses: "He found himself in a kitchen where a meagre breakfast was scattered in stale fragments on the table before the stove. The place was bare and cold; a half-empty beer bottle scarcely gave it a convivial air" (187).

The conflict between Lindau and Dryfoos, which becomes the most important plot line of the novel, illustrates the social situation in the Gilded Age. Forty years later, John Dos Passos—aroused by the Sacco and Vanzetti case—would write, "alright, we are two nations" (462). Howells does not go quite that far, but Lindau's statement, "What gountry hass a poor man got, Mr. Marge" [*sic*] (96) expresses a similar idea. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* Howells demonstrates that his observation in *Criticism and Fiction*, that the social situation "is changing for the worse" (62), can no longer be ignored.

Howells comments on the role of the artist in such a society through the character of the painter Angus Beaton. He embodies the aesthete's

outlook on life which prevents him from ever getting involved in anything. How far this outlook has removed him from real life becomes evident through some of his architectural concepts. "He sometimes designed elevations of buildings, very striking, very original, very *chic*, very everything but habitable" (119). Throughout the novel Beaton never gets emotionally involved in anything, however significant it may be, and is thus unable to arrive at the right proportions. Howells demands that "the [artist] should study humanity" (*Criticism and Fiction*, 37). In Angus Beaton he portrays an artist who goes "not to humanity, but the humanities for the proof of his excellence" (37) and is thus unable to master real life, not to mention to represent it truthfully in his art.

In its organization, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is far superior to *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The novel is not organized along a central plot line but rather follows the fates of several characters who are connected only by their economic activity of working for a magazine. The organizing hand of the author is not discernible.

Howells's narrative position as neutral observer and recorder of events is even better executed in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* than in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. His direct interferences in the text are rare and unobtrusive; in this novel he has almost reached the neutral position of the scientist that Zola demanded. The only qualification is that Howells is not able to achieve the emotional distance from his subject essential for Zola. Howells's urge to convey the social reality is inseparable from his desire to bring about changes. This didactic intention interferes seriously with his characterizations and thus undermines his otherwise well-executed principles. For most of the novel Jacob Dryfoos is a thoroughly evil man without any feelings. He only becomes human after the death of his son, when Howells finally allows him to show emotion. The opposite can be said of Conrad Dryfoos, who is of an almost supernatural goodness and seems so ill-adjusted to the realities of life as to be virtually unbelievable.

With *A Hazard of New Fortunes* William Dean Howells reached a critical point in his career. He was aware of the fact that a realistic portrait of America in literature was possible only through a frank social realism which he himself was not able to achieve. He was confined to realistic portraits of the genteel upper class of which he was a member himself. His work as critic rather than artist became his most important contribution to literary realism in the United States after 1890.

Howells's artistic work shows the difficulty he had in combining theory and practice. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* are clearly written with realistic intentions. They are set in a verifiable physical environment, most characters though not all are normal human beings with understandable motives, the principle of the transparent narrator is upheld most of the time, and, as Patrick O'Donnell has pointed out, "things do not occur in a nicely plotted manner, but unfold in a seemingly unstructured way" (144).

All this is positive according to Howells's theory and should therefore result in good art which through its inherent truth receives continual appreciation. Why then are the works of American literary realism with few exceptions generally poorly received? An explanation can perhaps be found in the timing of these works. Howells's literary realism belongs to the last two decades of the 19th century. Balzac's *Grandeur et Decadence de César Birotteau*, in many respects very similar to *Silas Lapham*, was published as early as 1839. Howells's first major novel, *A Modern Instance*, came two years after Zola's manifesto proclaiming the "experimental novel," and the genteel realism of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* coincided with the more thorough naturalism of Zola's *Germinal*.

The temporal circumstances are also the explanation for the fairly negative response to Howells's work today. His stated intention was to give as accurate a portrayal of reality as possible in order to work toward an improvement of the social situation. However, as Lionel Trilling has pointed out, "for Howells the center of reality was the family life of the middle class" (525). This is no longer "the center of reality" for modern readers; a depiction of it is of little appeal to an audience that cannot relate to it because of its very different experience of life.

The Rise of Silas Lapham and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* are very respectable books. They represent a considerable improvement over the American literature of earlier times. But the social realism that Howells demanded was not to be reconciled with the limitations of the genteel morality to which he himself subscribed, and his frequently tedious descriptions could not compete with the less restricted naturalist literature that appealed to the market which still insisted on exciting plots rather than serious art. American literary realism was already an anachronistic form for readers aware of the achievements of European authors. The social realism demanded by the age and the plots demanded by the readers favored a naturalistic literature of which the

United States produced masterpieces such as *Maggie, McTeague*, and *Sister Carrie*.

Respectable as Howells's concept of realism is, it came too late.

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