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► **To cite this version:**

Guillaume Tanguy. William Dean Howells and the Economic Novel: Heteronomy and Autonomy. The Fictions of American Capitalism, Springer International Publishing, pp.179-193, 2020, 10.1007/978-3-030-36564-6\_9 . hal-04264597

**HAL Id: hal-04264597**

**<https://univ-montpellier3-paul-valery.hal.science/hal-04264597>**

Submitted on 30 Oct 2023

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## CHAPTER 9

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# WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS AND THE ECONOMIC NOVEL: HETERONOMY AND AUTONOMY

*Guillaume Tanguy*

In 1861, Howells was appointed consul to Venice. He lived in Italy for four years, an experience he describes in *Italian Journeys*. In this book, Howells describes his surprise when he noted the discrepancy between the costly elegance of the Genoese and their modest means. “But I [...] look at many in this crowd with the eyes of the economist, and wonder how people practicing even so great denial can contrive to make so much display on their little means, – how those clerks of public offices [...] can dress with such peerless gorgeousness” (1867, p. 35). After Venice, Howells returned to New England, becoming a successful editor and novelist, thus fulfilling the aim he had set himself: “Alas for me! I am proud, vain, and poor. I want to make money, and be rich and grand. [...] I want to succeed, yet I am of too indolent a nature to begin,” as he wrote his sister in 1857 (Howells 1928, p. 14). This statement is ambivalent, expressing both a yearning for material success and an implicit wariness about it, as if the aim he had set himself did not express a genuinely personal goal. The aim of this chapter is to show that Howells’s economic vision informs his fiction, through the study of four novels, *The Lady of the Aroostook*, *A Modern Instance*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, with especial focus on the first and third ones. The contention of this chapter is that Howells’s complex economic vision pervades his fiction. Howells’s initially optimistic discourse on capitalism led him to an impasse by alienating the realist writer from the representation of social reality. This impasse can be interpreted as the result of heteronomy – a discourse which invests an external ideology, in this case capitalism, with authority. Ultimately, Howells succeeded in redefining his vision and aesthetic, which led to *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, his most “vital” fiction. The novel illustrates a quest for autonomy, understood not in terms of disengagement from social issues, but in the sense defined by Cornelius Castoriadis, that is to say, the attempt to institute one’s own norms.

Howells’s economic vision needs to be related to a wider social discourse on American capitalism. From the origins of American history, moneymaking was presented as a religion in colonial America. It was a “duty” to become rich. In *A Christian at his Calling* (1701), Cotton Mather claimed that man had two callings, one to serve God and another to have a gainful occupation (Greenfeld 2001, p. 375). Later, with Benjamin Franklin, capitalism became secular but kept its moral justification. In the nineteenth century, when the first factories appeared, they were initially not seen as a threat. The factory system, as exemplified by the mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, promised “to resolve the social conflict between the desire for industrial progress and the fear of a debased and disorderly proletariat” (Nye 1994, p. 112). “By 1828 the [capitalist] system had achieved the status of a dominant creed in the country,” and in 1860

Emerson was writing a panegyric to “Wealth,” praising “the men of the mine, telegraph, mill, map, and survey – the monomaniacs, who talk up their project in marts, and offices, and entreat men to subscribe” (Greenfeld, pp. 420-424). The perception of industrialization changed in the 1850s when water power was replaced by steam power. “The idyllic vision of a new kind of factory [...] was fading” (Nye, p. 116). The criticism gathered momentum after the Civil War as a result of corruption and financial panic. Discontent came to a head in the 1886 Chicago Riots, indicating that the Gospel of Wealth was being challenged by a counter-discourse, the Social Gospel. The views of W. D. Howells follow a similar pattern, which makes him very representative of his age. Indeed, his questioning of capitalism was part of a transnational anxiety inspired by modernity. The year 1889, as Mark Angenot has shown in his study of the French social discourse, can be regarded as a historical landmark when a collective skepticism emerged from “the sense of demise of an old society, coupled with an agonizing uncertainty as to what the forms of the new society might prove to be” (Hughes, qtd. in Angenot 1989, p. 42).<sup>1</sup> At first Howells shared a confident view of capitalism, praising the steam engine at the 1876 Centennial Exposition. However, after 1886, he voiced his distrust of capitalism and technology, and turned towards utopian fiction. This shift is reflected in his fiction: the first two novels in this chapter, *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), illustrate Howells’s optimism, whilst the third novel, *A Modern Instance* (1882), which in fact predates *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, indicates a profound pessimism, and the fourth one, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), expresses a new outlook.

*The Lady of the Aroostook* is both an international episode and a courtship novel. The main setting is the eponymous *Aroostook*, a merchant ship sailing from Boston to Europe. On that ship, Lydia Blood, a young girl from a small town in Massachusetts, meets Staniford, a haughty Bostonian who at first despises her, but eventually marries her when he realizes she is a natural aristocrat. However, *The Lady of the Aroostook* should also be read as an economic parable expressing the author’s initial faith in capitalism. The erotic transaction which occurs on the ship symbolizes an economic conversion. Irked by his status as impoverished aristocrat, Staniford sails east to visit Europe before going west, to California, to fulfil his dream of success: “It’s a duty I owe to the general frame of things to make money. [D]o you think it altogether ridiculous that I should feel there was something sacred in the money?” (1879, p. 64). Lydia is the economic muse bringing about Staniford’s conversion from dilettante to entrepreneur. Her ability to defeat aristocratic prejudice forces Staniford to renegotiate her status and to regard her as an equal. The spirit of capitalism is conducive to democratic egalitarianism. Central to this vision is the ship, which functions as the master trope:

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© The Authors 2020  
J.-H. Coste, V. Dussol (eds.), *The Fictions of American Capitalism*,  
Palgrave Studies in Literature, Culture and Economics,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36564-6\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36564-6_9)

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) can be regarded as another illustration of this shift: “Celebrating and questioning the dream of self-fulfilment, *Sister Carrie* [...] occupies a historically pivotal position, looking back towards the success myths of Horatio Alger, and anticipating some of the modernist tropes found in the works of such writers as Richard Wright and Henry Miller (Davies 2011, p. 381).

The stately vessel stood high from the water, for Captain Jenness's cargo was light, and he was going out chiefly for a return freight. Sharp jibs and staysails cut their white outlines keenly against the afternoon blue of the summer heaven; the topsails and courses dripped, half-furled, from the yards stretching across the yellow masts that sprang so far aloft; the hull glistened black with new paint. When Lydia mounted to the deck she found it as clean as her aunt's kitchen floor. Her glance of admiration was not lost on Captain Jenness. 'Yes, Miss Blood,' said he, 'one difference between an American ship and any other sort is dirt. [...]' Everything was in perfect trim [...]. (1879, p. 18)

Named after a New England county, the *Aroostook* suggests that America embodies the spirit of capitalism. Its purity is part of a patriotic discourse praising the virtue of the young Republic. The description also eroticizes the ship, indicating that Lydia is the *Aroostook*. The rigging resembles her long hair, and the black hull her black dress. Both the ship and Lydia are vessels, containers meant to be filled with cargo or, in Lydia's case, with sexual fluid, after the final wedding in Venice (the city is mispronounced "Venus" by her grandfather). Lydia and the ship must be used in order to fructify. The *Aroostook* also illustrates the asceticism described by Max Weber in his study of Protestantism. The "scrupulous abstinence" (1879, p. 94) imposed by the Captain is targeted at Mr. Hicks, who as the name indicates is the ship's alcoholic. When Hicks breaks the rule, becomes inebriated and squanders his money, confirming his status as economic misfit, he is sent away, becoming the story's *pharmakon*.

The economic meaning is also linked to the symbolic treatment of geography. Lydia's hometown is an oppressive backwater, where exchange is inhibited by her grandparents' archaic miserliness. Her potential can only come to fruition if she is taken west, after an eastward journey to Europe, a journey of sentimental initiation for her and of economic conversion for Staniford. Lydia is the American promise according to Howells, the very antithesis of Daisy Miller.

Another symbol in this parable is colour. Because of the miserliness of her grandfather who won't pay for a cab, Lydia must walk from the centre of Boston to the harbour, which exhausts her. "Grandfather, do I look pale?" she worries. Lydia, whose surname is Blood, mustn't lose her colour, the symbol of her sexual and economic value. Captain Jenness also wears quasi-allegorical colours (blue flannel, a red handkerchief, purple tattoos on his hairy arms, and a gold watch), suggesting his prosperity, morality and virility. Also noteworthy are the ship's immaculate milk-white decks, with "some modest touches of gilding here and there" (1879, p. 19). All these symbolic strategies confirm the equation between moral character and success: Lydia and Staniford stand out as the Adamic couple in an economic fable which, to paraphrase George Bataille on Franklin's *Autobiography*, expresses "the spirit of capitalism with quasi-classical purity" (1949, p. 162, my translation). These strategies are also consistent with what Frederic Jameson calls "allegorical" realism – the urge to impose meaning on described reality, at the risk of "inauthenticity" (pp. 33-34).

Howells's best-known economic novel is undeniably *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, a text often acknowledged as the first in-depth representation of the businessman in American letters. Silas is a paint manufacturer turned self-made man. His economic rise takes place within the framework of the pre-industrial domestic economy. The paint that made him rich was invented on the ancestral "farm" by his father and himself between 1835 and 1860, thus belonging to antebellum America—"the day of small things" (1885, p. 873)—and is described by the adjective "mineral," never "industrial." Silas's rags-to-riches story precedes the *diegesis* proper,

since it is summarized in the initial interview between Silas and Bartley Hubbard. This narrative strategy enables Howells to distance himself self-consciously from the formulaic success tale—“regulation thing?” [...] “Regulation thing” (1885, p. 862). The ensuing narrative depicts Silas’s response to the forces of the market economy, thus dramatizing the dividing line between the spirit of capitalism, described by Weber as a “philosophy of avarice” (p. 51), and industrial capitalism, an “economy of desire” according to Walter Benn Michaels (1987, p. 48). The opening chapter describes how, in Lapham’s hometown, most buildings have been covered with Silas’s paint, as have the rocks themselves, which according to the manufacturer are not “so very sacred.” “I say the landscape was made for man, and not man for the landscape” (1885, p. 872). This disdain for the landscape indicates the protagonist’s shift towards industrial capitalism. It coincides with his decision to build on Beacon Street, on a plot of land described by some as “unhealthy,” which is confirmed by the simultaneous revelation of Silas’s speculative activities. Silas’s “sterling morality” has been contaminated by Gilded Age greed—“financialized,” to use Shonkwiler’s term (p. 29):

‘And how came you to have so much more money than you know what to do with, Silas Lapham?’  
[his wife] added.  
‘Oh, I’ve made a very good thing in stocks lately.’  
‘In stocks? When did you take up gambling for a living?’ (1885, p. 979)

The decision to build on Beacon Street is inseparable from conspicuous consumption and from a rhetoric reminiscent of the industrial sublime (see Nye, 1994, pp. 113-125). Silas ‘let[s] out’ his mare along a fashionable road on a busy day in order to impress both his wife and the passers-by.

Nothing in *the immutable iron of Lapham's face* betrayed his sense of triumph as the mare left everything behind her on the road. [*T*]he muscles of her back and thighs worked more and more swiftly, like some mechanism responding to an alien force, and she shot to the end of the course, grazing a hundred [...] rival sledges in her passage. (1885, p. 892, emphasis added)

In the same way as Silas looks upon the landscape as a means to self-aggrandizement, he is thrilled by the speed of his mare, which his perception reduces to a lifeless mechanism, but the critical distance implicit in the image suggests that the narrator does not subscribe to this amoral vision.

Silas eventually loses money on the stock market, but rises morally by refusing to use dishonest means in order to avoid bankruptcy. By returning to his ancestral farm in Vermont he reverts to the essence of the capitalist spirit. His is an ethical decision, based on “prudence,” “good sense” and “sincerity” (1885, p. 1190), qualities which are reminiscent of the virtues listed in Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Silas resumes his activity on a humble scale, producing only the “Persis brand,” named after his wife. This brand, whose “fine grades” his competitors cannot imitate, symbolizes the combination of domestic and economic virtue, central to the American Dream. Such a resolution confirms Cady’s remark that, though the novel criticizes modern business, it is not “a novel against business” (1956, p. 240). Though Lapham has been humbled, he hopes that his company will start “paying dividends again” (1885, p. 1085). Moreover, by stressing the importance of faith—Lapham mixes his paint with “Faith” and his moral struggle is compared to Jacob’s struggle with the Angel—the narrative illustrates the

connection between capitalism and religious ideas demonstrated by Weber (1905, p. 53). As a result, the novel belongs to a wider process of storytelling which promotes capitalism. It bolsters the American dream by casting Silas into the mythical pattern of the hero transfigured by his ordeal.<sup>2</sup>

A similar discourse informs the subplot—which involves the sentimental triangle between Tom Corey and Silas’s two daughters. Suffice it to say that the subplot is ruled by the “economy of pain,” articulated by the Reverend Sewell—and the narrator’s mouthpiece—which conflates the economic and the spiritual. Sewell’s maxim is a utilitarian transposition of business principles to the matters of the heart: it is better to let “one suffer instead of three [...]. That’s sense, and that’s justice. It’s the economy of pain which naturally suggests itself, [...] if we were not perverted by [...] the figments of the shallowest sentimentality” (1885, p. 1085). The fact that Tom loves Penelope and not Irene, as everyone thought, does not mean that Pen should sacrifice herself by giving up Tom. The subplot shows that Pen’s sentimental ideals lead to more pain than is necessary, while Irene pragmatically makes the best of a bad situation by turning her mind to business, becoming a prototype of the new woman.

Finally, the concept of economy also informs the question of genre and style. In the literary discussions of the book, Sewell decries sentimental novels which, because of their “monstrous disproportion,” produce “figments.” Sewell calls for a type of fiction representing life in its “true proportion” (1885, p. 1044). This connection between realism and proportion anticipates W. B. Michaels’s contention that the function of realism is to minimize excess (p. 38). Howells’s aesthetic is thoroughly in keeping with his subject matter. In fact, the whole plot lends itself to a metaliterary reading, making Silas’s honest paint business a trope for the good management of style. By the same token, the narrative voice seeks to imitate a technical discourse presented as the yardstick of objectivity. Just like the expert, who analyzes Silas’s paint precisely and reliably—“every word he said was gospel” (1885, p. 869)—the narrator claims to represent life “as it is.” Thus, the novel can be interpreted as a literary manifesto advocating stylistic economy.

Another sign of the stylistic economy is the dearth of metaphors, which makes Howells’s style so different from that of Henry James, where metaphors are ubiquitous. Metaphors are rare because they are regarded as a stylistic extravagance, and as such are incompatible with the aesthetic of the commonplace.<sup>3</sup> Virtually the only character using metaphors is Bromfield Corey, the idle aesthete. His sophisticated speech shows how out of place he is in a utilitarian society. In Chapter XX Corey describes his aversion for Lapham’s vulgarity:

“[Lapham’s] conversation was terrible. [When he] got me in the library, *he poured mineral paint all over me*, till I could have been safely warranted *not to crack or scale in any climate*. I suppose we shall have to see a good deal of them. They will probably come here every Sunday night to tea. *It’s a perspective without a vanishing-point.*” (1885, p. 1111, emphasis added)

As an amateur painter, Corey is familiar with the concept of vanishing-point. In the same way as he opposes the paint trade and the art of painting, he contrasts Silas’s lack of style and his own refined style, indicated by the flowery language. Thus, the narrator correlates Corey’s

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<sup>2</sup> For an alternative reading, see Shonkwiler 2007, pp. 37-45.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of the “commonplace,” see Brandt 2018, pp. 35-38.

professional deficiency with his use of metaphor. By contrast, the narrator rids his own language of tropes, aiming for what Ricœur might have called the degree zero of rhetoric. Metaphors are rare and technical descriptions frequent, a strategy designed to confer “authority” upon realist writing (Tanguy 2010, pp. 219-222).

Undeniably, *The Lady of the Aroostook* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* are momentous texts in the Howells canon. They show how the author’s imagination drew on the theme of business, but gradually became constrained by it. Defining reality primarily in economic terms within an optimistic framework was bound to raise problems in terms of realism. Jameson’s remark is enlightening here:

Certainly the attacks on realism [...] are based on the idea that the literature of realism has the ideological function of adapting its readers to bourgeois society as it currently exists, with its premium on comfort and inwardness, on individualism, on the acceptance of money as an ultimate reality [...]. I myself argue [...] that the realistic novelist has a vested interest, an ontological stake, in the solidity of reality in that sense [...]. (p. 5)

One is struck by the extent to which both novels gloss over a difficult social context, overshadowed by economic tensions, such as the railroad strike of 1877. Compared to the growing body of literature which criticized business, both fiction and non-fiction (*Life in the Iron Mills*, *The Silent Partner*, *The Gilded Age*, *Poverty and Progress*, to cite but a few), the two novels seem highly idealized. The *Aroostook* and its passengers seem to exist in a social vacuum, and the hills of Vermont to which Silas returns seem decidedly *un-real*. In other words, the “equation” (Zimmerman 2011, pp. 419-420) between capitalism and moral character which Howells was trying to posit was becoming increasingly untenable.

The self-divisions at the core of Howells’s realism between 1879 and 1885 can be attributed to what Cornelius Castoriadis calls heteronomy. Howells’s realist discourse in the early 1880s was located within a wider capitalist discourse whose norms it did not question. In *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (published in France in 1975 under the title *L’institution imaginaire de la société*), Castoriadis criticizes Marx’s theory of history, which reduces history to economic forces: materialist determinism postulates that man’s motivations are essentially utilitarian, and productive work is regarded as the touchstone of reality. According to Castoriadis, to claim that reality can be explained away by economics is misleading, just as it is misleading to rely on any external dogmas, such as religious ones. It produces heteronomy, a form of alienation in which the subject is defined by “the discourse of the Other.” The individual is not autonomous but is dominated by “a principle of de-reality,” by an ideological construction invested with imaginary authority.<sup>4</sup> What is particularly enlightening here is the

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<sup>4</sup> “Nothing allows us to assert that the framework of gestures comprising productive labor in the narrow sense is ‘truer’ or ‘more real’ than the ensemble of meanings in which these gestures have been interwoven by those who perform them. [...] [E]conomic determinism [...] is just as unacceptable in that it is pure and simple *determinism*, that is to say inasmuch as it claims that one can reduce history to the effects of a system of forces [...]” (Castoriadis 1975, p. 28).

“If, to autonomy, that is to self-legislation or self-regulation, one opposes heteronomy, that is legislation or regulation by another, then autonomy is my law opposed to the regulation by [...] another law, the law of another, other than myself. [...] The essential characteristic of the discourse of the Other, from the point of view that interests us here, is its relation to the *imaginary*. It has to do with the fact that, ruled by this discourse, the subject takes himself or herself to be something he or she is not (or is not necessarily) and that for him or her, others and the entire world undergo a corresponding misrepresentation. [...] The subject is ruled by an imaginary, lived as

idea that relying on a discourse which magnifies the power of the economic produces an alienated fiction. The two novels I have focused on illustrate this phenomenon: they are vehicles for an external ideology, a capitalist doxa, a “discourse of the Other.” Their logic is more ideological than mimetic: it is governed by “an autonomized imaginary which has assumed the function of defining for the subject both reality and desire (p. 103).

*A Modern Instance* is a crucial text insofar as it brings these self-divisions to the surface. In the mid-1880s, Howells was facing an aporia. He was writing after the Civil War, but relied on a pre-Civil War paradigm—“the day of small things”—from which neither he nor his protagonists could extricate himself or themselves. Silas’s decision to sacrifice his fortune may be a moral victory, but it was highly unrepresentative of the Gilded Age. This contradiction explains the psychic agony which beset the author in the 1880s, during which he suffered two major breakdowns. His optimism had led to what he himself described as a sense of “unreality” against which he was trying to “revolt” (qtd. in Moddelmog 2000, p. 31). In an oft-quoted letter to James written in 1888, he declared that “[...] after fifty years of optimistic content with ‘civilization’ and its ability to come out right in the end, I now abhor it and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end [...]” (Howells 1928, p. 417). This self-division corresponds to Castoriadis’s analysis of heteronomy.

Howells voiced his doubts about the Gospel of Wealth as early as 1882, in *A Modern Instance*, a novel which shows how an unscrupulous journalist is destroyed by a commercial society: his marriage breaks down, he becomes an alcoholic and dies. If the goal of realism is to minimize excess, the novel departs from that agenda, portraying the shift towards a culture of desire. In order to do so, Howells uses techniques that foreshadow naturalist texts such as Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*: in Chapter XXVIII, the inebriety of the protagonist affects both his behaviour and the narrator’s technique, that is, speech representation (Bartley’s slurred diction questions the representability of speech), point of view and style, producing an aesthetic of fragmentation (see Tanguy 2005). Drunkenness is the trope for economic excess, seen as a new cultural paradigm. What should be borne in mind is that the novel was written three years before *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Bartley Hubbard reappears at the beginning of the 1885 novel, but is only given a minor part, which de-emphasizes the plot of degeneration. Thus *The Rise of Silas Lapham* can be seen as a last-ditch attempt to articulate a beleaguered vision of virtuous capitalism. It is as though the paint symbolism betrayed Howells’s unconscious motivation, which instead of representing it sought to idealize it and to cover it with “allegorical” meaning. Seen from the vantage point of *A Modern Instance* therefore, the realism of *The Aroostook* and *Silas Lapham* appears to be heteronomous—rooted in unreality.

Howells’s internal conflicts and growing sense of unreality triggered a nervous breakdown. Fortunately, between 1885 and 1888, a combination of factors—his discovery of Tolstoy, his defense of the Chicago Anarchists, and his relocation to New York—enabled him to overcome his anxiety. This rupture with his previous existence widened his horizons and led to an aesthetic renewal which culminated in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. The novel bears witness

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even more real than the real, yet not known as such, precisely *because* it is not known as such. What is essential to heteronomy—or to alienation in the general sense of the term—on the level of the individual, is the domination of an autonomized imaginary which has assumed the function of defining for the subject both reality and desire. The ‘repression of drives’ as such, the conflict between the ‘pleasure principle’ and the ‘reality principle’ do not constitute individual alienation, which is finally the almost unlimited reign of a principle of *de-reality*” (Castoriadis 1975, pp. 102-103).

both to Howells's resilience as an individual, and to his ability to reinvent himself as a writer, a liberating process which in several respects is consistent with Castoriadis's analysis of autonomy. Castoriadis defines autonomy—"self-legislation or self-regulation" (p. 102)—as the result of a two-fold process, one of rupture with heteronomy, and one of construction. The former consists in questioning pre-established norms, the latter in defining new, self-created norms. "Philosophy must be able, [Castoriadis] argued, to break through institutional and collective closure of society and individuals in order to make possible a deliberative attitude concerning the very goals, ends, and capacities of society and individuals themselves. [...] The creativity of the human means that humans cannot not posit norms" (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/castoria/>).

*A Hazard of New Fortunes* breaks with the equation between success and virtue, ushering in critical realism, which exposes "the economic chance-world in which we live" (1890, p. 436). However, it does not abandon the theme of business altogether, which is consistent with Castoriadis, for whom autonomy does not consist in erasing the discourse of the Other, but in attempting to establish a new rapport with it (Castoriadis 1975, p. 104). The attempt to define "humaner economics" lies in the author's concept of "complicity" (1890, p. 4, p. 306), which means social involvement. Complicity refers to Howells's synthesis of socialist ideas, which he largely depoliticizes, producing an "innocuous altruism" (Crowley 1999, p. 13). Complicity is not a pre-established given—an external authority—but a self-created concept, developed by the protagonist, Basil March, as a result of his discovery of social reality. Basil March embodies the quest for autonomy. He stands half-way between Dryfoos, the Midwestern millionaire, and Lindau, the German socialist. He refuses to bow to Dryfoos's "pecuniary interests" (1890, p. 356) and chooses to stand up for Lindau, whose radical ideas he nevertheless objects to. He occupies the complex position of the man of letters, who is "in a transition state" (Cheyfitz 1982, p. 45), neither a man of business nor a working-man. Basil March struggles to define a new relationship with business. He is caught between the need for financial security—a "basis"—and his growing social awareness—"complicity." *Every Other Week*, the magazine he is the editor of, is the institution, in the sense defined by Castoriadis, which enables him and his partner, Fulkerson to assert their independence from Dryfoos.

Because Basil is the connecting link between capital and labor, he also occupies the unstable position of the liberal, who as Lionel Trilling has shown is always in between.<sup>5</sup> March's struggle to establish a dialogue between capital and labour leads to irony, which is directed sometimes at others (Lindau, or the cab driver who takes Basil and Isabel across New York), sometimes at himself. This self-irony, as Barrish argues, results from the conflict between March's bourgeois yearning for financial security and his social conscience (see Barrish 2001, pp. 32-34). The project of autonomy is inseparable from this instability, which is the hallmark of Howells's critical realism in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Thus Howells's new outlook also affects his stylistic economy, as the novel embraces the modernist notions of openness, uncertainty and plurality. For example, the unreliability of language—the parlance of estate agents—is pointed out during the flat hunt. Another instance is the motif of the collage, which is introduced during the episode of the house hunt, in which Isabel March cuts up ads for places to rent and makes a collage which is described as a sea serpent, as a "monstrous articulate" (1890, p. 62). Howells's style no longer defines itself in terms of efficiency, as in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, but of non-productive expenditure. The endless flat hunt of the

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<sup>5</sup> "Between is the only honest place to be" (Rodden 1999, p. 19).

opening chapters takes up an inordinate amount of time. The Marches visit “ten thousand” flats, as Isabel hyperbolically puts it, but eventually choose the first one they had visited—clearly a non-utilitarian use of textual space.

As the analysis of these novels has shown, the evolution of Howells’s economic fiction can be seen as an effort to negotiate the rise of capitalist values. This evolution culminates in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, an admonition against the excess of what Shonkwiler calls the “financialization” of late-nineteenth-century America. Shonkwiler’s enlightening term, “financialization,” refers to capitalism’s impact on the individual and society at large, while the concept of “totality” stresses its ability to “reproduce itself incessantly [...] in the different enclaves of the social totality” (Zayani 1999, qtd. in Shonkwiler 2007, p. 12). Indeed, one may argue that the specificity of the phenomenon can be captured in the following equation: *financialization* plus *totality* equals *American capitalism*, which can be regarded as “a total social fact,” to paraphrase Marcel Mauss’s definition of the gift in archaic societies (Mauss 1954, p. 30, p. 102).

By initially allowing his imagination to articulate “the discourse of the Other,” i.e. to become almost totally “financialized,” W. D. Howells in the 1870s and 1880s produced a brand of realism which became increasingly heteronomous—divorced from reality. However, by resisting the hegemony of this discourse in the next decade, he successfully redefined his craft in a more autonomous fashion. Clearly then, one needs to take a broad, diachronic view of Howellsian realism in order to appreciate its complexity. To a great extent, its internal tensions can be accounted for by the “antinomies of realism” theorized by Frederic Jameson. The shift from heteronomy to autonomy may be construed as a transition from what Jameson calls “allegorical” realism, in which the storytelling impulse imposes meaning in a sometimes inauthentic way, to an emphasis on the contingency of experience in an eternal present leading to a “dissolution of genre” and to “a more modernist impulse” (Jameson 2013, pp. 33-42; pp. 150-161; pp. 4-5): *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is characterized by a distancing of the formulaic plot (the success story), of its ideologemes (the self-made man), and by a fragmentation of point of view. Howells’s effort to redefine his themes and techniques and to adjust them to the changing face of capitalism is one of his most notable achievements.

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