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Introduction: Reassessing William Dean Howells

Guillaume Tanguy
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TEXTE INTÉGRAL

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)

¹The 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 remorseless 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*.

2In 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.

3Why 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)

4Other 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.

- **1** The emphasis on the novels and the criticism in this issue should not obscure the paramount importa (...)
- **2** For a more detailed definition of Howells’s realism, its ideological and aesthetic implications, se (...)

5Any 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 preoccupations lie at the core of Howellsian realism:² 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.

- **3** He wrote to his father in 1890 and to Howard Pyle in 1893 respectively: “[My wife and I] are there (...)

6Howells’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”³ or “mushy” (Gopnik 570) and he sometimes dismissed the notion altogether. It is 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.

- **4** “His novels centered on the social lives of middle-class families, and no American writer was better (...)”

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.⁴ This focus goes hand in hand with a propensity to examine the theme of social, cultural and economic displacement: Bartley Hubbard, Silas Lapham and Theodore Colville are all uprooted individuals, even if Basil March is probably the most emblematic figure.

- **5** See Gregg Crane's section on "Degrees of transparency: Howells and James: "[. . .] some of James' (...)

⁸The 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.⁵

- **6** Stokes 199.

⁹Yet 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,"⁶ 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 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.

- **7** "The Jameses and many viewed [Howells's] rise (à la *Silas Lapham*) with a mixture of envy and contempt (...)"

¹⁰As 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.⁷ He resented the swift literary ascent of his friend, who had become editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the symbol of New England culture, thereby assuming not only cultural authority, but also a public role something James was never able to do. In a world which had been predominantly feminine, Howells's was 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)

- **8** "[...] Howells's independently minded heroine arrested James's imagination and provoked envious p (...)"

¹¹Henry 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.⁸ 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 Thackeraya 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)

- **9** "My debt to you began well-nigh half a century ago [. . .] and then kept growing and growing with y (...) "
- **10** "This anecdote thento come to itwas simply in something said to him, [. . .] by a person who had jo (...)

¹²The 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 publish his first story, a favour James was never able to "repay," except by "read[ing]"⁹ 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 Ambassador*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 novelisttoo 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.”¹⁰ (Edel 542)

- **11** “In the composite picture which William Dean Howells, as his life work, has painted of America he h (...)

¹³James tried over the years to curb Howells’s influence on American letters and to write him out of the canon through various rhetorical 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)¹¹ 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)

- **12** “The old family, college-educated class [. . .] were being overshadowed [. . .] by the agents of th (...)
- **13** In an online article, Michael Anesko writes: “[. . .] thirty years after writing the novel, Howells (...)

¹⁴Ultimately, 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 1910,¹² 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 witness 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.¹³ 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.

- **14** See Tanguy, “La logique noire de Stephen Crane.”

¹⁵Howells’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”).¹⁴ 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)

¹⁶Implicit 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.

- **15** The interaction works both ways, since “Scene” (1871) and “A Romance of Real Life” (1871) predate C (...)

- **16** A similar process is at work in “A Romance of Real Life: ” “So they parted [. . .]. [the Contributo (...)]

¹⁷In 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,”¹⁵ 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 cablooking at the “interesting spectacle” (*Literature and Life* 155) of a breadlinewith 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 tensionthe depression caused in the reformist by the sight of human suffering, and the elation of the writer who has stumbled upon good material.¹⁶ “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.

¹⁸The 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*).

¹⁹Ickstadt'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.

²⁰Jean 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.

²¹The first two parts of Roudeau's essay, entitled "The Angle(s) of Truth," are based on a representative selection of Howells's essays, most notably on the famous discussion about the real vs. the ideal grasshopper. They stress Howells's central part in the construction of a democratic fiction. Literature can only be "true" if it acknowledges the limits inherent in any angle of vision and is rooted in the local. Panoptic domination

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

²²The three articles that follow deal mainly with *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Drawing on the works of Philippe Hamon, Ginfray starts from the premise that the realist discourse is an ideological construct, a “textualization” (Hamon) of the real. The realist genre should be seen as a process of production, rather than imitation an idea also explored in Roudeau’s and Cochoy’s essays. Ginfray’s article analyzes the “politics of writing” both of Howells, “the democrat,” and Wharton, “the aristocrat,” i.e. the stylistic devices which transform reality into fiction. Although one chief characteristic of nineteenth-century capitalist America was the appropriation of art by the moneyed classed, artists and novelists wanted to show their ability to transform social matters into “a system of aesthetic signs.” Whereas for Howells realism means that reality, seen as a consistent whole, can be interpreted objectively a position which confuses truth with verisimilitude —, for Wharton it refers to the transformation of reality into an object of beauty, in the classical sense of symmetry and harmony. Howells strives for transparency whereas Wharton covers reality with the robes of fiction. The treatment of speech further illustrates these differences. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* idiolect or dialect is used as a clear marker of identity, creating a quasi-scientific impression of univocity. Things are more complex in *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence*, since the authorial presence seeks to control the proliferation of viewpoints, but can also become problematic and elusive a first step towards modernism. If Wharton’s trilogy questions the realist venture by pointing to the gap between signs and referents, Howells’s fiction also responds to the fault-lines in reality by turning away from epistemological certainty.

²³Dorey’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."

²⁴Roraback'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."

²⁵What is remarkable about *Indian Summer*, as Bonnet observes in her article, is the way the novel strikes a balance between "an ironic observation of the foibles and intricacies of the human heart" and "a profoundly humane [. . .] sympathy with its characters and humanity at large." The narrator's ability to portray the protagonists' psyche, without unduly condoning or condemning human frailty, is one of the text's chief features. As William James put it, the novel is "cubical, and set it up any way you please, 't will stand." The article illustrates James's assertion by focusing on three aspects of the text: the charm of the characters, their shortcomings, and the relativity of human judgments. Theodore Colville, the middle-aged American abroad, is a fascinating bundle of contradictions: his delightful sense of humour cannot obscure his moral cowardice and constant evasions. The appeal of *Indian Summer* lies in this see-saw movement, this constant weighing up of pros and cons which demonstrates that realism is less a finite theory than an ongoing attempt to capture the flux of reality, symbolized by the dance scene: "The dance was ceasing; the fragments of those kaleidoscopic radiations were dispersing themselves

[. . .].” (*Novels 1875–1886* 643) Bonnet’s essay is a reminder that we must not underestimate the novel’s psychological complexity, even if it is treated in the comic, not tragic mode. Specifically, Coville’s behaviour during the dance scene (the *veglione*) betrays “sexually charged fantasies,” and the whole *veglione* has a subversive potential.

- **17** Cochoy’s insights converge with those of Jason Puskar. Puskar shows that the plethora of accidents (...)

²⁶Cochoy’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.”¹⁷ In *Hazard*, the point is not to contain reality through language, but to expose the 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 dissimultrices 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.

²⁷In 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.

- **18** “[Mr. Howells] reminds us how much our native-grown imaginative effort is a matter of details, of f (...)”

²⁸Marc 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”¹⁸ in the Dean’s writings.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

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NOTES

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.

2 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.

3 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)

4 “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)

5 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)

6 Stokes 199.

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

8 “[. . .] 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)

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

10 “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 [. . .].”

11 “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 Ohio," ends up, however briefly, on the evocation of "black and ragged deck-hands" and their "hapless life." (*Literature and Life* 322-4)

12 "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)

13 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*)

14 See Tanguy, "La logique noire de Stephen Crane."

15 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."

16 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)

17 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)

18 “[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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