THE EXPERIMENTAL REALISM OF WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

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A Dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in English

written under the direction of

Myra Jehlen

and approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2010

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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The "experimental" in my title refers to Howells's self-conscious development of a literary form that could give the most complete, deepest account of a reality characterized by the ordinary and even the banal. For the middle class, Howells's perennial subject, the norm is to aspire to transcend, and the ordinary can appear elusive, even nonexistent. Of course, in political terms, a middle class culture considers everyone basically the same, this resemblance defining the ordinary. It is assumed that everyone shares the same economic goals, and the same desire for familial and individual success. Being ordinary is therefore a moral quality. This means, paradoxically, that ordinariness can only prove itself in exceptional individuals. To strive is virtuous, to fail is shameful; either way one's ordinariness is subsumed to a greater drama. The drama at the center of middle class art is the plight of the exceptional individual demonstrating a Platonic ordinariness.

It is hard to think of characters in novels who are not exceptional financially or morally. In Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove* finance and morality go together. The novels of Eliot, Dickens, even those of the French realists

unfold stories in which ordinary characters, by some exceptional moral quality, try to transcend their economic and historical situations.

Howells called this story romantic and insisted on writing about the most mundane aspects of ordinary life. His novels were not about the exceptional who rise above the crowd but about ordinary people who do not transcend but stay on the ground.

Howells described this divide between moral ideals and actual economic circumstance as "the infernal juggle of the mind. " This contradiction at the heart of everyday life was what he wanted to depict. His design of characters and plots, even his sentences, develop continuously into further complexity as they discover the tensions and self-betrayal inherent in middle class optimism. "Discover" is the key term: Howells wrote in order to *find out* the truth about ordinary life, and the more he discovered the more his novels tended toward disjunction. In resisting the urge to reaffirm middle class morals, he was having not only a political argument with the dominant ideology of late-nineteenth century America but a formal argument with the conventional novel.

Down the critical years, Howells's trust in the novel form to do its own work has been difficult to see because his way of demonstrating it was so unusual. To the extent that his form was un-transcendent, descriptive rather than theoretical, it has been unapparent. My dissertation is an attempt to make evident and describe the working of Howells's unapparent form. I have used a method of analysis congruent with his practice. I proceed as he wrote, historically, by following the unfolding events of his style and form.

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Introduction

Style and form are concrete, objective literary events that embody the truths of the extraliterary world. They represent a mode of apprehending the historical world every bit as objective and as accurate as direct perception. In fact, literature can go further than our everyday observation. It is a way of thinking about the world, like science a mode of continuous engagement with the world through its process and thereby discovering knowledge unapparent to mundane perception. Literature is at once thinking and understanding, and the literary text is their embodiment.

In thinking of literature as a way discovering unapparent history I depart from the writers whose work has been the most influential on mine, Georg Lukács, Erich Auerbach and Richard Poirier. Each has shown the direct relation between history and literature, but each as a consequence of his peculiar method has also tended to see literature as the reflection of historical truths rather than as their discovery. Lukács thought great realism could only emerge from periods of incipient revolution, and even then, as in the instances of Balzac or Tolstoy, the novel was in his analysis limited to illustrating the Marxist historical narrative. Auerbach was attentive to literary style, from which he could infer all the truths about a writer's moment and biography, but like Lukács he saw his task as retrospective and literature as evidence of an already narrated past. Richard Poirier showed how the American romances uncovered through their

contradictory styles a corresponding contradiction between their country's political ideals and its historical realities, a reading that has been greatly influential on my approach to Howells. Yet for Poirier literature was finally a world elsewhere, a register of ideological discontinuity but also a means of transcending that discontinuity through the very effort of imagining an alternate world.

Howells shows us what it meant to *live* the contradictions of the everyday, not in fantasies of escape but in ordinary social settings, in the most mundane details of middle-class life. He writes from within the middle-class consciousness of his characters, so committed to their limited perspectives that as his sentences develop they produce a sense of the instantaneous, incoherent experience of everyday life. At one point in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the focus of my first chapter, Basil March, a magazine editor who is somewhat of a self-portrait of the author, rides the elevated train through a rapidly developing New York. He is trying to reconcile his liberal-democratic ideals with his self-conscious class distinction from the working immigrants who crowd the car, speaking their own languages, apparently indifferent to the relation between their drudging lives and the evidence all around of capitalist prosperity. March's reflections proceed, or rather they devolve, from encomia to progress ("public-spirited reveries") to a Darwinian formulation ("the fierce struggle for survival, with the stronger life persisting over the deformity") to theodicy: "The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, Godless; the absence of intelligent, comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder" suggesting not a lack of meaning but a task for humankind: "the violent struggle to subordinate the result to the greater good penetrated with its dumb appeal to the consciousness of a man who had always been too self-enwrapt to perceive the chaos to

which the individual selfishness must always lead."

Howells has discovered an increasing incongruity between the empirical evidence of the city and March's interpretation, and his narration, as in that last phrase, starts to break away from March's consciousness and posit an idea just beyond March's grasp, something like democratic socialism or even Marxism. But that is as far the narration goes. It preserves the uncompleted idea and thus gives a picture of the immediate confusion of mind and trouble of conscience that defined the moral and political impotence of the middle class. March tries other approaches as the novel progress, literary sentimentality, even religious speculation. All are unsuccessful. In narrative terms, this amounts to the unfulfillment of March's character, and this is for Howells was the realization of a truth about American life. Henry James wrote that Howells had captured the "fatal colours" of American life, "so damningly & inexplicably American." Yet the price Howells paid for his truth was to throw "the whole question of form, style & composition over board into the deep blue sea[.]" James was just beginning to see Howells's apparent acuity as historian. An unapparent form, a kind of cultural criticism, lurked in the productive disjunctions of Howells's writing.

In Basil March Howells realizes the complexity of everyday middle-class life without also positing a theory about it, and thus he makes apparent literature's peculiar knowledge. In this way Howells can, I think, contribute to the study of the everyday and ordinary as later delineated by thinkers such as Lefebvre, Adorno and Stanley Cavell. The difference between Howells and these more speculative thinkers can be seen in the results of their respective procedures. Each of the philosophers affirms his humanist commitment by positing transcendence and even redemption in the reflective, aesthetic

confrontation with our alienation. Howells never arrives at a unifying statement because he is more interested in the immediate and concrete historical experience that precedes philosophy and rather derives its ethics not abstractly but from the momentary social interaction.

George Eliot represented for Howells the penchant for imposing order on the disjunctions of everyday life. In Chapter 2, I try to substantiate Howells's claim that Eliot was "unphilosophical" because of "her failure to account largely enough for motive from the social environment" in depicting moral behavior. Howells was not referring only to the visible content of Eliot's novels but also to her formal logic. Indeed, as Eliot's scenes unfold they confirm an immanent coherence in middle-class moral life. Dorothea Brooke's resolution to devote herself to ministering to other people's salvation occurs in a passage that at once depicts the religious awakening and at the same time enacts one in the reader. The passage thinks in the terms and structure of a devotional, casting Dorothea's everyday in the light of transcendent possibility, a kind of secular enchantment. Social conscience thus seems to originate in the individual instinct to universal morality. It is precisely such universals that Howells cannot affirm in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. He planned the novel to be a parable of middle-class moral responsibility: Silas's rejection of laissez-faire amorality would represent a moral victory. Yet in order to preserve instinctive, antebellum common-sense morals, Howells has to remove Silas from the very economic world the novel sets out to analyze, negating the very society in which these morals were most necessary. Silas renounces a crooked business deal that could save him and his family from financial collapse and flees Boston for the Vermont homestead where he began. Silas's final expression of his unreflective

morality—"Seems sometimes as if it was a hole opened up for me, and I crept out of it"—confirms his natural virtue but also puts morality beyond deliberation and volition. For an ending, the tone is all wrong. Silas is not the protagonist of his novel but rather has been directed by events, and his retreat into the prehistory of modern capitalism indicates Howells's difficulty imagining such uncompromised conviction in contemporary America. The novel embodies, as only literature can, contradictory impulses, moral idealism and moral realism, this tension defining its historical insight.

Howells's resistance to Eliot's view of middle-class life as immanently transcendent was a rejection of utopian history. This historical skepticism had its origins in the discoveries of *A Modern Instance*, developed through *Silas Lapham*, and arrived at a crisis in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. While Chapters 1 and 2 establish my subject and method by examining the most salient moments in Howells's work, the following four chapters are extended demonstrations of my analytical method, each taking as its subject the development of a single novel within its historical context. Here is where I build on Auerbach's acuity with style and begin to take the novel from start to finish as an intentional process of working through the problems of history.

The structure of a Howells novel is characterized by a collision of ideologies. These are typically represented by individual characters who enter into dialogue and thereby make explicit the philosophical and historical tensions that are at stake in the novel's plot. As the case of Basil March has shown, these tensions are often contained in a single consciousness. What is unusual in Howells's treatment, however, is that he does not try to reconcile these perspectives or choose from among them, but neither does he offer, like the French realists, the consolation of a philosophical despair. In fact he sees

from every point of view, never pretending to offer a perspective exempt from history. He presents the ongoing contention as history in the making, the novel in step with that development.

Howells conceived *A Modern Instance* as a cautionary tale: in an America of crumbling institutions, two idealistic youths marry, prove inept in fulfilling their conjugal responsibilities and part in divorce, illustrating the consequences of modern amorality. As the novel progresses, however, the groom Bartley Hubbard, an egoist and a sleazy yellow journalist, the very picture of the unscrupulous go-getter, reveals by his mere interaction with the more genteel characters how untenable, even laughably fastidious are their morals. Class conservatism and economic imperatives underlie their superior judgment. Apparently troubled by his sympathy with this rogue, Howells abandons the central plot by having Bartley light for the territories, leaving his wife and child behind. The burden of the novel's moral disillusionment falls on Ben Halleck, the scion of an old Boston family who has all along been in love with Bartley's wife, Marcia. Halleck himself begins to revolt against the strictures of his society, spoken by the lawyer Atherton, which declare even his love immoral. From within the Puritan mind Howells thus uncovers the impossibility of absolute moral determinacy, even questions the logic of assigning moral obligation. It turns out that degrading middle-class morals cannot be revived by a plot that develops according to an unstinting commitment to the realities of economic life.

The conflict between vestigial Puritan subjectivity and everyday life is central to *Silas Lapham*. In this novel middle-class consciousness is as internally contentious as the confrontations between characters. I have already pointed out the contradictions in Silas.

His wife Pert, on whom much of this chapter focuses, is an even finer example. One representative instance occurs just before her husband makes the decision to accept ruin in exchange for his manhood. The words of scripture "came to her mind [and Howells quotes]: 'And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. . . And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.'" The epic proportions Pert gives to husband's trials are not corroborated by the narrator's detached representation. Pert's literal invocation of scripture, set off by quotation marks, in fact delimits her understanding by containing it within her own private reality. The absence of narrative comment is parochial but not derogatory. Howells wants to do justice to her understanding. Facing the most mundane of middle-class issues, Pert reverts to a catechism, some repository of moral stricture, which allows her to organize the events that led to her family's ruin into a coherent narrative in which she will be justified. In the light from a window the mundane and obvious seem to glow in transcendental meaning. This idealism runs counter to the novel's historical vision. For while Silas is renouncing capitalism for a higher law, his daughter Penelope has married the regional manager of development for Silas's rival paint company, which is expanding its market south of the American border. The historical middle class persists despite the religious-utopian narrative it imagines itself fulfilling.

A Hazard of New Fortunes stands as Howells's most thorough rejection of utopian narratives, so intent on rooting out its own transcendent urges, in fact, that it pursues middle-class ethics to its philosophical dissolution. This is not a sign of nihilism, however, but of Howells's effort to locate a practical ethics responsive to the immediate circumstance of everyday life. This pragmatism was the lesson of his impotence in the

Haymarket affair, a failure which only confirmed the skepticism about the reach of middle-class morality that was emerging in his novels. Chapter five begins with a scene from *Hazard* in which the assorted characters, including a slavery apologist, an industrial tycoon, an optimistic American businessman, and a radical socialist, are discussing a recent spate of labor strikes. The competing interests are all given fair hearing, which only makes it more difficult for Basil March to form a coherent picture of events. The most convincing appeal is made by the socialist Lindau, an intellectual who reflects the radical anti-slavery sympathies of Howells's youth. Yet it is not Lindau's social theory March (or Howells) objects to but rather its total disregard for history and so its impracticality. Unfortunately, the argument with history on its side comes from business. Forced into various moral compromises, March finds out that capitalism justifies itself simply as manifest reality.

Chapter six begins with the novel's pivotal scene, Lindau's fatal injury at a strike. Alongside him another character, a young Christian missionary, is killed. This plot twist appears necessary simply to force the novel toward some resolution of its philosophical problems, but it has other consequences. Conrad's death represents the elimination of a transcendent principle that the novel might have affirmed. His goodness might have served as the novel's immanent ideal, a goal toward which to develop. By eliminating Conrad, Howells has forced March to construct an ethical outlook from the ground up. March's helplessness is immediately apparent. In the last 50 pages of the novel he turns to religious speculation, which is so abstracted from events that neither he, nor Howells, are satisfied. March's ambivalence toward Conrad reflects the novel's internal argument with the social gospel, several of whose key proponents Howells knew. The theological-

historical view, which Howells wrote was the gist of Laurence Gronlund and Richard Ely, projected an eventual cooperative commonwealth, the realization of a promised land where all the tensions of history would be resolved. March's speculations represent in their failures Howells's discovery of the inadequacy of this transcendent historical view. It is finally not the doctrine March tries to affirm that Howells endorses. It is rather the intellectual process itself, March's continual essaying, that is the best hope for a middle-class ethics. The novel arrives formally to an unsettling conclusion, that the search for moral knowledge is ongoing, requiring the continuous engagement with the given social reality. There are no certain terms, and no reconciling form. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is Howells's most complete realization of the historical and moral philosophy that had been emerging since *A Modern Instance*.

For as long as there were novels there has been an interest in its form, and no wonder. The novel is perhaps the most peculiar of artistic forms, as various a method of understanding history as the contexts and writers that have produced it. Because the novel is a kind of direct apprehension, its richness as history lies precisely in its diversity. This is why I have proposed not a theory of the novel but rather a method that can account for variations of approach and yet still base itself in objective, empirical literary evidence. Moreover this method is itself historical and therefore flexible enough for continuing engagement with literary evidence. This evidence, as I stated earlier, is literature's style and form, qualities as obvious and as tangible as a brushstroke. Howells is the perfect instance because the problems of form were always at the center of his work.

Chapter 1

William Dean Howells and the Perplexity of Henry James

After reading *A Hazard of New Fortunes* in 1890, Henry James wrote a letter to Howells filled mostly with praise but also striking a note of ambivalence:

> I note certain things which make me wonder at your form & your fortune (e.g.—as I have told you before—the fatal colours in which they let *you*, because you live at home—is it?—paint American life; & the fact that there's a whole quarter of the heaven upon which, in the matter of composition, you seem to be consciously—*is* it consciously?—to have turned your back;) (276)

James was perplexed. His own *Bostonians* and *The Princess Casamassima* were failures, and he had begun to see the depiction of history in the novel as an unsolvable problem of form. For now he had abandoned the novel. But in America Howells enjoyed commercial success as well as a steady and prodigious output. "Your reservoir deluges me altogether," James admitted, but he wondered if Howells was himself careless of drowning. *Hazard* had captured a truth about American life in all its complexity and interest, but it had done so at the expense of form. It was careless and inartistic, even incoherent.

Yet James sensed that pressing the issue of composition was not quite right. Was there a conscious plan? Perhaps the novel's incoherence was the point? He was reconsidering his basic assumption about form, that it necessarily intends a shape. For

James composition meant the completion of the writing process in a perfect result. Art gave its subject matter a coherence it did not have in the everyday world.

It seemed that Howells was working under a completely different conception of realism. His novel unfolded according to the shapelessness of ordinary reality, and in this way it discovered an otherwise undiscoverable truth about its subject matter. "You set a measure & example of the prehensile perception," James writes later in the letter, "& the whole thing, in short, [is] so observed, so caught, so felt, so conceived & created—so damningly and inexplicably American" (277).

This was a significant change of program. James had always thought Howells's preoccupation with the American middle class to be an impediment to high art. The ordinary American had "so small a perception of evil" (254), James once wrote, an unstinting faith in the coincidence of everyday, middle-class values with the progress of history. James mistook Howells's preference for limited characters as a shared limited capacity for historical understanding. Neither Howells's material nor his aesthetic intellect seemed quite adequate to developing a novel. Still, in *Hazard* the material and the expression were aligned in some peculiar and interesting way, and the result was more important precisely because of its lapse in composition.

This chapter is an attempt to make evident and describe the working of Howells's unapparent form. What Howells knew, and what James came to realize by reading Howells, was that novel writing was a mode of historical thinking. The novelist, through the design of character and plot, indeed in the development of sentences, reflected philosophically on historical evidence to discover the truths of contemporary everyday life. Down the critical years, Howells's trust in the novel form to do its own work has

been difficult to see because his way of demonstrating it was so unusual. It was not theoretical truth he sought, or the transcendent morality of the conventional novel. Literature, he thought, could come to know history more precisely and politics more realistically than any theory, so long as it remained true to its evidence, including or especially to the evidence's inconsistencies and even its inscrutability. Howells wrote in order to *find out* the truth about ordinary life, and the more he discovered the more his novels tended toward disjunction.

The everyday in a middle class culture, Howells's perennial subject, is peculiarly interesting, because where transcendental aspirations are the norm the everyday appears elusive, hardly real, even seems not to exist at all. Of course in political terms, a middle class culture considers everyone ordinary. It is assumed that everyone shares the same economic goals, and the same desire for familial and individual success. Being ordinary is therefore a moral quality. This means, paradoxically, that ordinariness can only prove itself in exceptional individuals. To strive is virtuous and to fail is shameful; either way one's ordinariness is subsumed to a greater drama. The drama at the center of middle class art is the plight of the exceptional individual demonstrating a sort of Platonic ordinariness. It is hard to think of characters in novels who are not exceptional, either financially or morally. In James's novels these tend to go together: it is their money and thus their relative freedom that allows Christopher Newman and Isabel Archer to morally transcend their circumstances, and that gives Maggie Verver an extraordinary power not only to guide her novel's plot through her machinations but also to involve the novel in her potentially immoral explorations. Maggie fashions her own drama. The novels of Eliot, Dickens, even those of the French realists all pursue a course in which ordinary

characters, by some exceptional moral quality, or according to the author's immanent moral project, transcend their economic and historical situations, or try to transcend, and the drama in that case lies in the effort. Howells called this romanticism, and in writing about the most mundane aspects of ordinary life he sought to depict the ordinary not as an ideal political condition but as the very gist of the middle class. He did not want to write about the exceptional who rise above the crowd but about the crowd, ordinary people who do not transcend but stay on the ground to become the stuff of history. By emphasizing the ordinary, Howells was having both a political and an aesthetic argument with the dominant ideology of late nineteenth-century America.

The middle class might have represented the best hope of checking the inequities of capitalism, but it was also compromised by its share in the aspirations and consequent failures of collective life, what Howells called the American plutocracy. He described that divide in middle class consciousness between moral ideals and historical circumstance as "the infernal juggle of the mind" (Kirk 64). In the years leading up to the writing of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* he was grappling with his own sense of compromise. A "theoretical socialist and a practical aristocrat" (M. Howells 1) was how he described himself in a letter to his father, with the self-irony typical of the protagonists of his novels and even at times of his narrators. To James he was more direct: America "seems to me the most grotesquely illogical thing under the sun. . . after fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality" (Anesko 272). More than the unfulfillment of ideals, he was expressing his dissatisfaction with idealism itself, the absence of solid ground on which the middle

class could build a coherent politics and confront its historical circumstance. This failure of transcendent ideas was Howells's subject as well as a philosophical problem. His novels develop continuously into further complexity as they discover the tensions and self-betrayal inherent in middle-class optimism. He resisted the common tendency to reaffirm middle class morals and thus resolve the novel into a final, comprehensible form. One could even say this pursuit of contradiction was perverse in its resistance to moral resolution in search of a politics without illusion.

James saw what Howells was doing but doubted it could be done, and with good reason. The ordinary is perhaps the least tractable subject in the ordinary world. Beyond the novel, the problem of representing the ordinary is apparent in the work of philosophers of the twentieth century who lived within a more completely developed and psychically integrated capitalism than even the one Howells described. I invoke a few who seem to me both peculiarly acute and also, no doubt for that reason, most representative of the problem of the ordinary. Wittgenstein, Adorno, Henri Lefebvre and Stanley Cavell have all taken up the ordinary as such, and as particularly resistant to description and analysis. Each has tried to find a method of analysis congruent with his subject.

In their different ways, Adorno and Lefebvre both wrote in the Marxian tradition, which means they saw everyday life as buried, or as totally pervaded by the logic of capitalism, for Adorno irredeemably so. The negative dialectic was a theory of ongoing formal investigation. According to Adorno, criticism worked from inside the given details and logic of society and yet revealed truths about society that were otherwise unapparent. Everyday life bore, as it were, a style, objective traces of history, and the

vocation of criticism, and of art, was to take up this style and interpret it, to develop it into a new form, a new understanding of society. This required a continuously reopened relation with one's subject because the evidence under investigation, in its immediate presence, only reflected back its reification. A single instance was not enough, but the critic had to show continuously the interrelation between a world of everyday objects and experiences, from movies and gift-giving to doorknobs, each of which revealed in its negative image the true nature of society. The critic poached on capitalist society, a kind of spy, never traceable by a mere proposition.

That the critic's peculiar insight was predicated on his own deep sense of alienation meant that the everyday and ordinary were by definition unattainable. The only philosophical possibility therefore lay in a transcendent idea. Given the nature of their society, both Adorno and Lefebvre saw as the necessary and logical conclusion to posit a utopia where people could be reintegrated into immediate experience. Lefebvre believed the transformation of instrumentalist capitalism into more fulfilling forms of society was already potential in the practices and desires of everyday economic life, in the ineradicable yearning for something other, even if it could not be imagined. Though not so sanguine, Adorno nevertheless worked from a moral imperative driven by the desire Lefebvre spoke of. The short essays in *Minima Moralia* are not mere descriptions but disquisitions. Everyday life could not be presented in its immediacy but only negatively, through philosophical speculation.

Wittgenstein tried to obviate theory by demonstrating that everyday experience is obvious if we attend carefully to our use of language and consequent behavior. His descriptive approach is the closest to Howells's. But Stanley Cavell, like James in his

letter to Howells, pointed out the inherent problem of mere description. The implicit assumption, and the whole justification for Wittgenstein's unorthodox style, Cavell has pointed out, was that the obvious was anything but. In order to prove that life is always present to us, Wittgenstein had to suggest our very detachment from the everyday. For Cavell this elusiveness is philosophy's central problem, so that the philosopher is always "writing out of a sense of intimacy of words with the world, or of intimacy lost" (170). Like Adorno and Lefebvre, Cavell sees philosophy as a way to retrieve this lost experience, or to at least posit retrieval as a possibility just beyond our grasp. In making this philosophy's aim, Cavell enables, even necessitates, continuous discovery and renewed thinking through the materials of the ordinary, making the ordinary endlessly interesting and revealing. He in fact shares Howells' formal method. Yet he comes to the opposite conclusion. When he says, for example, that Wittgenstein "takes the drift toward skepticism as the *discovery* of the everyday, a discovery of exactly *what* it is that skepticism would deny" (170), he characterizes everyday experience as a paradox very much like the one Adorno conceives. The attentive observer has all the objects and practices of the everyday before him and yet he cannot gain purchase on the immediate moment, on reality, because there is a whole culture and an attendant way of thinking in the way: as another of Cavell's models Emerson put it, "I know that the world I converse with in the city and in the farms, is not the world I *think*" (261). Writing from a skeptical tradition, Cavell sees experience just slightly out of focus, a reality almost perceivable along the edges of the apparent.

The problems these philosophers invoke are the same ones the realistic novelist faced. This is why Adorno especially had no faith in the perceptive power of middle-

class art. But where Howells differed from his contemporaries and from the philosophers was in his confronting these problems, not as the absence of the possibilities of knowledge, but as a concrete condition of knowing. Howells was therefore not a skeptic about aesthetic perception. When in *Criticism and Fiction* he examines the ordinary grasshopper, he is not estranged from his world. He quite seriously means to realize the actual grasshopper. Not its ideal nor its merely "photographic" image: the depicted grasshopper is true because it is realized in its perfect description. Aesthetics could know the immediate. And it did so on a premise shared by the thinkers I mentioned above, namely, as Howells wrote, that "reality is bound to no thesis. You cannot say where it begins and where it leaves off; and it will not allow you to say precisely what its meaning or argument is" ("Emile Zola" 65). Therefore the everyday had to be described in its salient features and not according to a thesis. Adorno knew that depiction could be a mode of understanding; Howells provides the concrete instance. The novelist, he wrote, seizes "every suggestion and experience of observation, turning it to the utmost account, piecing it out by his invention, building it up into a structure of fiction, where its origin [is] lost to all but himself, and often even to himself" (70). "Invention" here means the discovery of an object that has its own life in the world simultaneous with its exact realization in writing.

In keeping faith with this thinking, I present a method of analysis congruent with Howells's practice, a method of reading as he wrote, historically, following the unfolding events of his style and form. By "form" I do not mean a technique of structuring scenes or plots in order to make a moral or ethical argument, but rather a literary mode of apprehending the world, by which Howells arrived at his understanding inductively, not

deductively from a particular ethical program. Ideological contradictions unapparent in mundane life emerge as problems of writing.

The plot of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* develops by successive failures. Basil March resigns his insurance job in Boston to pursue a long-time dream and assume the editorship of a New York literary magazine. The rapidly developing city is on the verge of a major labor strike upon his arrival, and March finds himself thrown amid a collection of characters variously engaged or detached from these events, including the tycoon who owns the magazine, an unscrupulous publisher, Christian missionaries, artists, a Southern slavery apologist and a socialist agitator. At first March hears them all out (this is, as James once complained about Howells's work in general, a novel told in the main through conversations) but he soon realizes these interests cannot be reconciled, that in fact their competing claims make a comprehensive moral response to the city's social conflict impossible to conceive. This is particularly evident to March when the magazine's owner, Dryfoos, orders him to fire Lindau, the German socialist translator who has made some offensive anti-capitalist remarks referring to the suppression of a workers union on Dryfoos's oil field. March agrees Lindau's comments were distasteful and even extreme, but he refuses to fire the socialist for his ideas and threatens to resign. As it turns out, the gesture is moot. Lending his support to striking streetcar workers, Lindau is fatally wounded by rioting policemen. Dryfoos's son Conrad, also on hand to lend his Christian charity, is shot dead on the spot, and a contrite Dryfoos, realizing there's more to life than riches and meaning to retreat with his remaining family to Europe, offers March ownership of the magazine on any terms. With a family of his own to support, not to mention his salvaged ambition, March cannot refuse. He searches

through religion for a moral but does not find one. Perversely the novel's happy ending is reserved for the magazine's morally unconscious publisher Fulkerson, now March's partner, who marries the Southern slave apologist's daughter and takes to pronouncing the joys of middle-class bliss.

Our sympathy with March is at best ambivalent, for the story neither affirms his understanding of events nor offers any transcendent alternative. March is to Howells what Lambert Strether would be to James in *The Ambassadors*, a viewpoint akin to the author's own sociologically and aesthetically, through which he thinks through his material in his own idiom and to the extent of his own intelligence. But Howells is more parochial than James, and less contented with his viewpoint character's limitations, which were those of an entire class, that is to say, they were historical and therefore inherent in the realistic novelist's material. The continuous discovery of complexity that is so satisfying for James and Strether within the limited society of *The Ambassadors* is a real problem for Howells and March, because their failure to evince from their material a coherent politics was literally a matter of life and death. March's impotent response to the deaths of Lindau and Conrad reflected Howells's own as a defender of the executed Haymarket anarchists. March is a vehicle for Howells to explore a fatal ideological failure that turns out to be unsolvable.

An episode early in the novel illustrates the peculiar tension in Howells's uneasy sympathy with his main character. March teases his puritanical wife Isabel (she is native to New England, he a Mid-westerner) that nothing short of his salvation would be incentive enough for her to follow him to New York. The city is too big, too "hideous," she says. In short, it is sinful: "I don't approve of it" (20). Evidently, March is in the

habit of deferring to his wife's sensibilities, but he has his rebellions. His joke is meant to cut: he exaggerates the providential implications of their decision in order to emphasize the pettiness of his actual constraints. At the moment, it is his children's admission to an exclusive dance academy that would be forfeited if they leave Boston. He makes another cutting remark to his children. Howells writes:

> March's irony fell harmless from the children's preoccupation with their own affairs, but he knew that his wife felt it, and this added to the bitterness which prompted it. He blamed her for letting her provincial narrowness prevent his accepting Fulkerson's offer [to edit the New York magazine] quite as much as if he otherwise entirely wished to accept it. His world, like most worlds, had been superficially a disappointment. He was no richer than at the beginning, though in marrying he had given up some tastes, some preferences, some aspirations, in the hope of indulging them later, with larger means and larger leisure. His wife had not urged him to do it; in fact, her pride, as she said, was in his fitness for the life he had renounced; but she had acquiesced, and they had been very happy together. That is to say, they made up their quarrels or ignored them. (22)

We might paraphrase the narrator's statement this way: March uses an offhand comment to his children to provoke his wife; he blames her limited imagination for not following through on what he, in fact, cannot bring himself to do, to seize the opportunity he has always wanted; he is simply too accustomed to compromise, and now he resents his marriage as the impediment to his fantasized future; though, as March knows, his wife is not entirely to blame, even as she has passively facilitated his apathy; what we call happiness in marriage may be just willed ignorance of our discontent.

It is hard to tell whether Howells means to satirize or sympathize, and this is just the point. The narration thinks through the conventional limitations of middle-class boredom, even shares it, and it discovers by way of that boredom a latent self-consciousness in March, an embedded irony that makes his resignation to irresolution

bearable and even justifiable: sociological criticism and character consciousness emerge simultaneously. "His world, *like most worlds*, had been superficially a disappointment"; "they had been very happy together. *That is to say*, they made up their quarrels or ignored them."

The phrases I have italicized barely register in the reading, but they do suggest another consciousness in the passage, not quite detached from March's but still exterior to his capacity for understanding. However conclusive they appear, these interjections do not read as typical narrative omniscience. Howells makes no attempt, as George Eliot might, to establish analytical distance from his characters by stating propositionally the supporting behavioral theory. In fact, Howells's sympathy with his characters is closer to troubled self-reflection than to a rationalized ethics, and the result is a continual tension between the character's and the narrator's knowledge. One could imagine March coming to the same understanding encapsulated in those declarative statements, but only just barely: if skepticism seems inevitable under the circumstances, it is yet just beyond his capacity to conceive. But neither is the narrator's superior knowledge given transcendent authority. March is inadequate to examining the social and economic institutions that define his situation, but the narration remains firmly within the opaqueness of this historical present. The narrator is himself middle class, and his own restive effort to understand his subject produces something like an unconscious in March, just disposition enough to accept the limitations of middle-class life as a simple conundrum rather than full-fledged discontentment.

Howells recognized that the subtext of the Marches' domestic badinage would have to be spelled out, lest we miss the point, but his commitment to their limited self-

understanding, even in is own narrative summation, makes it difficult to detect the external view. James did not see the point immediately. In an essay on Howells a few years earlier, predicting the Marches, he wrote that Americans were too facetious, too droll, and exhibited "so small a perception of evil." Howells gave these people a voice, too much so: "He has the increasing tendency to tell his story altogether in conversations," James wrote, "so that the critical reader sometimes wishes, not that the dialogue might be suppressed (it is too good for that), but that it might be distributed, interspaced with narrative and pictorial matter" (255). James finds these characters convincing enough, but he wishes he did not have to hear them at such length. His proposed remedy is for Howells to venture into more conventional modes of narration and composition, "*à la Daudet*." By this recommendation Howells might have achieved an understanding superior to that of his characters by structuring their lives. It was, after all, the artist's privilege and calling to give theoretical order to reality.

Indeed, the commonplace, both as subject and as form, assumes such outsized, almost caricatural importance at the beginning of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* that one wonders if James was right. The Marches go apartment hunting in New York, spend considerable time discussing furniture, measuring their expenses and reflecting on middle age. The city has developed since they last visited as a young, childless couple. One new feature is the elevated train, from whose height they ponder the landscape and occasionally descend into the neighborhoods below. As a device this seems a cheat whereby Howells raises the problem of middle-class social consciousness as though organically from the Marches' peregrinations. They discuss everything in what reads like staged social commentary: "Oh, it's easy to have humane sentiments and to satirize

ourselves for wanting eight rooms and a bath in a good neighborhood," Isabel says after visiting a slum. "But if we shared all we have with [the poor] and settled down among them, what good would it do?" "Not the least in the world," March replies, leaving us wondering if this solves the problem or evades it (57). This was the kind of writing James wanted to see integrated into a more comprehensive structure.

The absence of visible form visibly has real purpose when Howells brings March's full intellectual resources to bear on the evidence. On one of his solo rides on the elevated train, March is packed in with every kind of working-class immigrant, who, he reflects, are "worked and fed and housed like beasts" (158) in an economic system that is, practically speaking, not so different from those of the feudal societies from which they descend. His sympathy is only theoretical. March has been to Italy, but unlike his well-traveled author he retains the tourist's chauvinism. For now these immigrants provide him with material for his encomia to progress, "public-spirited reveries in which he dealt with the future economy of our heterogeneous commonwealth" (159). Their real lives, the narrator tells us, are abstractions, "matters of his waking dreams."

But the narration's more apparent criticism of March emerges from its own internal tension. As March listens to the various foreign dialects on the train, "he had occasion for pensive question within himself as to what notion these poor animals formed of a free republic from their experience of life under its conditions; and whether they found them practically different from those of the immemorial brigandage and enforced complicity with rapine under which they had been born" (158). March's liberal sociology proceeds from a scientific sense of biological superiority to the immigrants, and yet it self-consciously pretends as well to assume an enlightened self-criticism, in

effect to question the basis of its own superiority. As a true beneficiary of the free republic March is aware of the irony in reflecting that these people are not quite free, but he does not intend to take seriously the irony's full implications. His axiomatic liberalism remains intact, perhaps all the more because of his gesture toward self-examination.

The passage occurs within a longer meditation in which the narrator occasionally switches to the present tense (e.g. "New York is still popularly supposed to be in the control of the Irish, but March noticed. . ."), and so March's reflections appear to dovetail with the narrator's. Thus the narration appears to endorse this middle-class notion of a free republic, and along with it the historical narrative that March posits, the progress from "immemorial brigandage" to rational republicanism, which supports his unreflective natural superiority.

The fact of the irony nevertheless remains, and it is not until the end of the long paragraph that the narrator, as though realizing that the irony amounts to a contradiction in March's liberalism, detaches from March and admits, "It must be owned that he did not take much trouble about [what] these poor people were thinking, hoping, fearing, enjoying, suffering" (159). Then, in the following paragraph, the narration persistently contradicts March's reaction to the scenery outside the train windows, and once again March seems to develop a nascent understanding of his philosophical problem, this time with wider historical implications.

He observes in the New York skyline "certain signs, certain facades, certain audacities of the prevailing hideousness that always amused him in that uproar to the eye which the strident forms and colors made" (159). The narration abates March's full

recognition: he is merely "interested" in the apparent disorder of the city, which developed "in wanton disregard of the life that dwelt, and bought and sold, and rejoiced or sorrowed, and clattered or crawled, around, below, above—[these] were features of the frantic panorama that perpetually touched his sense of humor and moved his sympathy" (160).

Sympathy and humor do not in themselves constitute understanding, and intent on dispelling such a trite reaction the narration directs March from feeling to thinking.

> Accident and then exigency seemed the forces at work to this extraordinary effect; the play of energies as free and planless as those that force the forest from the soil to the sky; and then the fierce struggle for survival, with the stronger life persisting over the deformity, the mutilation, the destruction, the decay, of the weaker. The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, Godless; the absence of intelligent, comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder and the violent struggle to subordinate the result to the greater good penetrated with its dumb appeal to the consciousness of a man who had always been too self-enwrapt to perceive the chaos to which the individual selfishness must always lead. (160)

The "prevailing hideousness" and "uproar," we are told, elicit mere amusement. The effect of overwhelming multiplicity invoked rhetorically, "certain signs, certain facades, certain audacities," is lost on March, merely of "interest." The narrator's consciousness is impartial and therefore more aware of these contradictions, resisting March's self-satisfied impression of the city in the very depiction of his taking it in. This is done through a series of oppositions: "the life that dwelt, and bought and sold, and rejoiced or sorrowed, and clattered or crawled, around, below, above." The narrator is suggesting a fuller truth about these immigrant's lives than March can grasp.

But while the narration instantiates the incongruity between empirical evidence and March's interpretation, it refrains itself from interpreting beyond the evidence. The

difficulty of interpretation emerges as the problem in the passage, and it turns out to be Howells's problem as well. March cannot assimilate the empirical evidence to a theory about the republic, which, true to his optimism, is ethically conceived. "Accident and then exigency seemed the forces at work to this extraordinary effect," he decides, "the play of energies as free and planless as those that force the forest from the soil to the sky; and then the fierce struggle for survival, with the stronger life persisting over the deformity, the mutilation, the destruction, the decay, of the weaker." He does not rest with this Darwinian[1] formulation, whatever purchase it allows him on the city's randomness. His theoretical need requires more order, a theodicy: "The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, Godless; the absence of intelligent, comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder" suggests not a lack of meaning but a task for humankind: "the violent struggle to subordinate the result to the greater good penetrated with its dumb appeal to the consciousness of a man who had always been too self-enwrapt to perceive the chaos to which the individual selfishness must always lead."

March nearly grasps a comprehensive social theory, something like Marxism or democratic socialism, that can stand in the place of an absent God. I say "nearly grasps," because the narration once again moves away from March's consciousness and states an idea March has yet no access to, namely that he has been "too self-enwrapt to perceive the chaos to which the individual selfishness must always lead." That's Howells speaking. The moral admonition is directed beyond March and at the reader.

Howells, impatient to point out the entrenched self-interest that confounds the middle class, draws a conclusion March does not draw. The author is resisting his own discovery. The passage has not only uncovered, but has embodied the problems of the

historical reality it depicts. As Howells takes up the evidence of history and presents them to the limited consciousness of an intelligent middle class, he discovers the impossibility of realizing a coherent political theory. The progress of everyday life is itself incoherent and intractable to any neat formulations. Therefore, while the charge of self-interest against March has moral force, it has no historical purchase. Although imperative, it finally depends on ignoring the disjunction between evidence and idea that the passage has already recognized. March finally does not bring together the various pieces of evidence with his theory. Detailed observation is one way of knowing the city; theoretical speculation is another way of knowing it, perhaps less precise. The instability of the writing suggests that observation and theory are working independently.

An ethical imperative seems to drive this novel, and yet ethics prove to be inherently imprecise and inadequate as a basis for drawing comprehensive conclusions about social reality. Moral resolution is, in this novel, literally unimaginable. It cannot be found in the depiction of historical reality, and therefore there is no implicit moral certainty that structures scenes and directs the plot.

Even when the opportunity arises for March to make the moral gesture or to arrive at a conviction, Howells withdraws it, as though he suspects by such plotting he would make a fraudulent claim about moral life. When ordered to fire Lindau, March heroically dismisses Dyfoos from his office, performing what he calls "my duty—in a matter of principle" (305); Dryfoos only wants to punish Lindau "for his opinions. Well, I can't consent to that, directly or indirectly" (313). The problem is that while Howells can make the point that ethical principles apply in the immediate social situation—one simply does not, as March puts it, "discharge a sensitive and cultivated man like Lindau as if he

were a drunken mechanic" (305)—they are inadequate to the more complex historical problems that encompass his characters' lives. March's decision does not address the underlying problem that interests Howells and which is the central issue of the novel: "He realized, as every hireling must, no matter how skillfully or gracefully the tie is contrived for his wearing, that he belongs to another, whose will is his law" (306). This is the middle-class version of what Lindau calls slavery, and though Howells deprecates such radicalism he nevertheless sees middle class autonomy as constrained, in fact a complete fantasy when considered in the broader context of a political economy. March is no slave but in terms of plotting he is half the way there, capable of moral action but not of self-development. And without a character who can transcend his circumstances, a novel cannot begin to do what it is uniquely designed to do, to conceive hypothetical moral responses to larger social and historical issues.

The depiction of Conrad's death is particularly striking because here Howells eliminates what has been the novel's metaphysical need, its appeal to an implicit concept of goodness on which the novel might have based its resolutions in the remaining fifty pages. Conrad has been a cipher in the novel, hovering silently at the edges of scenes and, when addressed, uttering Christian homilies. His spirituality has made him the negative image of the mundane economic concerns of the other characters. Not until this final appearance are we given access to his interiority. He has been an ideal, not a fully realized character, his vagueness the very power of the longing he has embodied.

Conrad is in love with Margaret Vance, who worries aloud that the strikers will bring violence on themselves. Conrad takes this as a cue and wanders over to the West side, where the trouble is just starting,

> aimlessly at first, and then at times with the longing to do something to save those men from themselves, forming itself into a purpose. Was not that what [Ms. Vance] meant, when she bewailed her woman's helplessness? She must have wished him to try if he, being a man, could not do something; or if she did not, still he would try; and if she heard of it, she would recall what she had said and would be glad he had understood her so. Thinking of her pleasure in what he was going to do, he forgot almost what it was; but when he came to a streetcar track he remembered it and looked up and down to see if there were any turbulent gathering of men, whom he might mingle with and help to keep from violence. He saw none anywhere; and then suddenly, as if at the same moment, for in his exalted mood all events had a dreamlike simultaneity, he stood at the corner of an avenue, and in the middle of it, a little way off, was a streetcar, and around the car a tumult of shouting, cursing, struggling men. The driver was lashing his horses forward, and a policeman was at their heads, with the conductor, pulling them; stones, clubs, brickbats hailed upon the car, the horses, the men trying to move them. The mob closed upon them in a body, and then a patrol wagon whirled up from the other side, and a squad of policemen leaped out and began to club the rioters. Conrad could see how they struck them under the rims of their hats; the blows on their skulls sounded as if they had fallen on stone; the rioters ran in all directions.
>
> [A protesting Lindau suddenly appears, drawing a policeman to Conrad's corner.]
>
> The officer whirled his club, and the old man threw his left arm up to shield his head. Conrad recognized Lindau, and now he saw the empty sleeve dangle in the air, over the stump of his wrist. He heard a shot in that turmoil beside the car, and something seemed to strike him in the breast. He was going to say to the policeman, "Don't strike him! He's an old soldier! You see he has no hand!" but he could not speak; he could not move his tongue. The policeman stood there; he saw his face; it was not bad, not cruel; it was like the face of a statue, fixed, perdurable, a mere image of irresponsible and involuntary authority. Then Conrad fell forward, pierced through the heart by that shot fired from the car.
> (367-68)

The narration begins in a familiar mode. Conrad experienced a "longing to do something to save those men from themselves, forming itself into a purpose." He thinks, "Was not that what [Ms. Vance] meant, when she bewailed her woman's helplessness? She must have wished him to try if he, being a man, could not do something; or if she did not, still he would try; and if she heard of it, she would recall what she had said and

would be glad he had understood her so." Here, the narration knows its subject intimately, presenting Conrad's thoughts in his own idiom. The subjunctive mood, the parenthesis ("if he, being a man") and the successive conditional clauses ("if she did not," "if she heard of it"), each referring back to its previous clause, serve to enclose the passage in self-reference. We are fully sympathetic with Conrad.

The narration shifts ground. Once Conrad notices the commotion on the street, the sentences unfold linearly, efficiently, suggesting not so much sight or consciousness as disinterested description: "he stood at the corner of an avenue, and in the middle of it, a little way off, was a streetcar, and around the car a tumult of shouting, cursing, struggling men." "Struggling" is so vague as to mute any sense of shouting or cursing. The narration does not evoke, it generalizes. The presentation of Conrad's perception is so sparing that it emphasizes a failure to depict the texture of his experience.

We are not even clearly situated. Conrad stands "at the corner of an avenue [it does not matter which], and in the middle of it, a little way off, was a streetcar, and around the car a tumult of shouting, cursing, struggling men." The sentence is grammatically sound. The streetcar is clearly in the middle of the avenue, and everything is happening at some distance. But the violence has no urgency. The lashing, the pulling, the hailing, the arrival of the patrol car, and finally the clubbing that occur over the next few sentences, are muted by the accumulation of clauses, and by successive pronouns that refer to clear antecedents but whose antecedents cease to matter: "The driver was lashing his horses forward, and a policeman was at their heads, with the conductor, pulling them; stones, clubs, brickbats hailed upon the car, the horses, the men

trying to move them." The sentence describes the scene precisely in the most general terms, the action stated but not fully evoked.

Earlier, when March was riding the elevated train, the narration appeared to strain to identify empirical evidence with a moral vision. Here, moral orientation is absent. Events appear as sense data to a disinterested eye, and this mode of depiction presupposes no particular moral response. March, who will have to carry out the novel's task of figuring out what these deaths mean, arrives too late, only to discover the bodies. Conrad's death represents the elimination of a transcendent principle that the novel might have affirmed. His goodness might have served as the novel's immanent ideal, a goal toward which to develop. Instead he dies by an act of unaffected writing, which is at pains to realize events as intrinsically meaningless.

March turns to religious speculation in the last fifty pages of the novel, in order to give his search for moral order some new linguistic and conceptual purchase. This theological turn is obviously perverse given the novel's anti-transcendentalism, and it shows how far Howells will go in bringing every aspect of middle-class ideology to account for its historical situation. Howells's treatment of religion deserves a fuller discussion than I can give it here, so my focus remains on the formal consequences of his moral realism. In fact, it is the possibility of a realistic ethics that Howells is looking for in March's religious terms.

March begins by distancing himself from the unreflective piety of his wife's Bostonian Puritanism. "I should think that when God sees what we poor finite creatures can bear, hemmed around with this eternal darkness of death, He must respect us," March begins immediately after Conrad's death (370). Isabel gasps at his anthropocentrism, but

he manages to placate her with pelagian heresy: "Oh, I know. We school ourselves to despise human nature. But God did not make us despicable, and I say whatever end He meant us for, He must have some such thrill of joy in our inadequacy to fate as a father feels when his son shows himself a man. When I think what we can be if we must, I can't believe the least of us shall perish." Isabel secretly swells with admiration for her husband's resolve—"in her heart she drew nearer to him for the words she thought she ought to rebuke him for"—and Fulkerson, the eternal middle-class optimist, playing the role of the liberal Protestant, undercuts the potential sentimentality by adding, "Oh, I reckon the Almighty won't scoop any of us."

Thus two popular religious attitudes lend their support to March's endeavor. But Howells is not about to conflate them. The lightly treated introduction to March's new vocabulary sets up more rigorous inquiries in which religious terms are accountable to logical rather than spiritual application. When Isabel wonders at Conrad's unsuspecting innocence in wandering into the riot, March becomes insistent:

> All that was distinctly the chance of life and death. That belonged to God; and no doubt it was law, though it seems chance. But what I object to is this economic chance world in which we live and which men seem to have created. It ought to be law as inflexible as in human affairs as the order of the day and night in the physical world, that if a man will work he shall both rest and eat, and shall not be harassed with any question as to how his repose and his provision shall come. Nothing less ideal than this satisfies the reason. But in our state of things no one is secure of this. No one is sure of finding work; no one is sure of not losing it. I may have my work taken away from me at any moment by the caprice, the mood, the indigestion, of a man who has not the qualification for knowing whether I do it well or ill. At my time of life—at every time of life—a man ought to feel that if he will keep on doing his duty he shall not suffer himself or those who are dear to him, except through natural causes. But no man can feel this as things are now; and so we go on, pushing and pulling, climbing and crawling, thrusting aside and trampling underfoot, lying, cheating, stealing; and when we get to the end, covered with blood and dirt and sin and shame, and look back over the way we've

> come to a place of our own, or the poorhouse, which is about the only possession we can claim in common with our brother men, I don't think the retrospect can be pleasing. (380)

The essay starts off from a clearly established opposition: there is God's law, and then there is economics, and the problems of the latter must be addressed without any *a priori* reliance on the former. The unimpeachable moral authority of God is presented in the first two sentences as notional, beyond the limits of rational understanding. In this way, March speaks an everyday, unreflective assumption of God's goodness and human culpability. But Howells is aware of the philosophical trouble that arises from unexamined assumptions, and he does not allow March simply to trade one metaphysical theory for another. The evocation of God's authority establishes a penchant for absolutes that only highlights March's inability, despite his insistence, to make absolutes of his secular claims. Taken together, these claims can be summed up as: What humans have made, humans can alter.

March eschews metaphysics in order to seek a practical ethics that can address the intractable contradictions of everyday economic life, but Howells presents this as necessarily a compromised endeavor. Any such ethics must confront its own contingency as it falls short of a comprehensive solution. March does what he can. First he posits an impersonal, rational law that could regulate the market: "It ought to be law as inflexible as in human affairs as the order of the day and night in the physical world, that if a man will work he shall both rest and eat, and shall not be harassed with any question as to how his repose and his provision shall come." This supposes the possibility of human rather than divine regulation, and it echoes the socialist commitment to a comprehensive solution to the irrationality of the market. But the insistent morality ("It

ought to be law"; "a man ought to feel") reveals a sense of futility as the actual evidence of economic life mounts in direct opposition: "No one is sure of finding work; no one is sure of not losing it. I may have my work taken away from me at any moment by the caprice, the mood, the indigestion, of a man who has not the qualification for knowing whether I do it well or ill. At my time of life—at every time of life—a man ought to feel that if he will keep on doing his duty he shall not suffer himself or those who are dear to him, except through natural causes. But no man can feel this as things are now. . . ." Implicit in these claims is the failure of Lindau's and Conrad's various socialisms, which posit revolutions emerging from contrary historical evidence. Everyone, March thinks, is subject to the caprice of the market, but so is everyone complicit. Collective participation amounts to a systematic oppression beyond any single person's control and beyond the systematic neatness of any theory. As the sentences unfold the indisputable evidence of this oppression seems to show March's morality to be as idealistic as the religion he put aside.

That is unless March is not trying to resolve his contradictions and rather works within them. What his essay does suggest is that a rational ethics can emerge from apparently antithetical conditions. Moral indignation might be a sign of impotence or, if it appeals to the logic of basic human necessities, like keeping one's job and feeding his family and living generally without undue anxiety, it might seem like self-evident truth. Ignoring the obvious is precisely what March admonishes us for: " we go on, pushing and pulling, climbing and crawling, thrusting aside and trampling underfoot, lying, cheating, stealing; and when we get to the end, covered with blood and dirt and sin and shame, and look back over the way we've come to a place of our own, or the poorhouse, which is

about the only possession we can claim in common with our brother men, I don't think the retrospect can be pleasing." The legitimacy of the social criticism depends on a rational argument. There are religious references to sin and shame, but the implication is not that we are therefore doomed by our inherent evil. March refers to a socialistic brotherhood, but he makes no promise of a golden age, neither the Kingdom nor a co-operative commonwealth where the difficulties of moral decision will be cleared away. There is no psychological appeal to progressivism, and in fact we are presented with its renunciation. March makes his case from within the conditions that frustrate morality and potentially doom it to failure, a most unpromising scenario from which he still makes obvious a reasonable course of action.

The "infernal juggle of the mind" meant for Howells that people knew they were compromised but simultaneously found themselves justifying on practical grounds the same conditions they abhorred. The moral conscience was alive in America, and the pragmatism March demonstrates was its greatest hope. But as idealists Americans were also good at finding moral reasons to endorse the status quo. This insight produces writing for Howells, but March never does the writing about New York that he had planned in his more optimistic days. Unlike his author he needs to have his mental furniture in order before he can even begin to write. This would require him to mend the discrepancy between his conscience and the course of everyday events, and failing this he cannot imagine an appropriate form.

The emotions that provide the ambition for a reconciling form could be found in everyday life, and March seizes on them when he can. This happens at Lindau's wake. Dryfoos feels responsible for his son's death, having angrily struck the boy for his

sympathy with the strikers and sending him into the streets to his death. Dryfoos thinks Lindau was there to defend his son, and seeking atonement he honors the man he once despised for his socialist ideas. The moment inspires March's most distinctly literary reflections.

> March felt all the grotesqueness, the hopeless absurdity of Dryfoos' endeavor at atonement in these vain obsequies to the man for whom he believed his son to have died; but the effort had its magnanimity, its pathos, and there was a poetry that appealed to him in this reconciliation through death of men, of ideas, of conditions, that could only have gone on warring in life. He thought, as the priest went on with the solemn liturgy, how all the world must come together in that peace which, struggle and strive as we may, shall calm us at last. He looked at Dryfoos and wondered whether he would consider these rites as a sufficient tribute, or whether there was enough in him to make him realize their futility, except as a mere sigh of his wish to retrieve that past. He thought how we never can atone for the wrong we do; the heart we have grieved and wounded cannot kindle with pity for us when once it is stilled; and yet we can put our evil from us with penitence; and somehow, somewhere the order of loving-kindness, which our passion or our willfulness had disturbed, will be restored. (395)

It would be hard, given Howells's marked ambivalence toward March, not to hear in this sentimentality some final exasperation. "Poor March, my dear Howells," James exclaimed in his letter, "what tricks you play him—even worse than those you play on Mrs. March!" (277).

There is no reason to take it ironically. It is a sober reflection on an ethical argument that is no less convincing than the one we considered a moment ago. The logic is the same: March infers a morality from the evidence to the contrary: it is too late to atone for an error committed, but the attempt can redeem us and go some way in realigning the moral order on which depends our hope for the future, of our souls but also

of our lives on earth. March does momentarily intuit some binding moral law that is not entirely imaginary, because he feels it. In this state he achieves something like belief.

Howells's realism encompasses March's irrational belief as a means of exploring the mentality of the American middle class. But even if he shares March's yearning, Howells remains critical, which is manifest in the very extension he gives to March's performance. This is where James could not follow the method; it seemed that Howells was careless of disengaging from the writing precisely when he committed himself to the commonplace. For Howells, the commonplace sentiment expressed March's middle-class condition: however momentarily satisfying he finds his reflections, it will turn out that what he glimpses is not the other world but the unfulfillment of his character.

The literary March cannot resist the hopelessness in Dryfoos's attempts to make things right. Sentimentality is at this moment compelling precisely because it is futile, because it cannot make real the contents of its own longings, except as self-conscious language. March is magisterial on death: "*all* the world," he pronounces, "must come together in that peace which, *struggle and strive as we may*, shall calm us *at last*." He is melancholy: "we never can atone for the wrong we do; the heart we have grieved and wounded cannot kindle with pity for us when once it is stilled." Finally, rising from the dust, he is inspirational: "and yet we can put our evil from us with penitence; and somehow**,** somewhere the order of loving-kindness**,** which our passion or our willfulness had disturbed, will be restored," that "somehow, somewhere" retreating into tantalizing imprecision. The unseen symmetry between visible suffering and divine purpose that the liturgy suggests to him is precisely the symmetry the novel has discovered, on all other formal-philosophical grounds, to be inconceivable. March has a self-satisfying moral

moment, but he does not therefore raise his fist and declare war on an amoral universe, like Ahab, or on an immoral society, like Eugène Rastignac. Nor does March walk grandly off the stage, like Isabel Archer, his individualism intact despite his middle-class constraints. He simply persists, defined by the constraints of his class and his situation, and by his author's refusal to see him or history any differently.

We can see why James was perplexed. It would be hard to imagine any of these other three characters without their defiance of the prevailing laws, whether natural or social, or seemingly both, that confine them to their class's angst. Defiance defines them, in fact defines their authors' aesthetics and verily the intellectual constitution of the novel. For James *Le Père Goirot* was "a supreme case of composition" in which the "situation sits shrouded in its circumstances, and then, by its inner expansive force, emerges from them, the action marches, to the rich rustle of this great tragic and ironic train, the embroidered heroic mantle, with an art of keeping together " (643). Balzac was monumental not only in the scope and intensity of his observation but in the perfect fusion of his subject and a peculiar way of seeing it, which James dubbed romantic. Rastignac's rebellion would be, by James's reading, the natural result of Balzac's form, the point to which it unfolded, and the same might be said of Isabel Archer. It seems the writer's middle-class malaise assumes an objective presence as form, in fact is built in to the writer's unconscious conception of the novel from the beginning. Form makes concrete what was previously an ideal, and when that ideal is finally visible in a character or action, James knows he has seen perfection.

What James saw with some surprise in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* was that Howells lacked idealism, and so while the novel demonstrated the scope of Balzac—

James called it "simply prodigious"—it could not arrange its multitudes so as to conclude its moral stance. Therefore it appeared incoherent. James thought Howells's conception of reality was itself incoherent, too much involved in the disorder of his American subject matter and therefore resistant to the discipline of art. But it is the grudging admiration, not the reverence he showed Balzac, that suggests the depth of James's engagement with Howells's technique; his puzzlement was the measure of his interest. "The novelist is a particular *window*, absolutely," James told Howells, using his familiar figure, "& it's because you open so well & are hung so close over the street that I could hang out of it all day long. Your very value is that you choose your own street—heaven forbid I should have to choose it for you" (276).

I think it is the urge he expresses to take up Howells's material for himself, to rewrite Howells in the right way, that shows just how interested James is, and how vital Howells's process and innovation appears to him. He is trying to accept Howells's material so that he can appreciate the method, because these cannot be separated. What James accepts here is a literary style that is also a way of looking at the world, a politics and a philosophy whose value he was just beginning to see. Howells did not complete his form, and so James does not want to call it beautiful. But James also sees that unarrival is the point of Howells's form, that beauty is rather a quality of treatment, a fidelity to one's subject.

The mark of Howells's commitment to form was precisely his commitment to his material, to realizing middle-class life in its everyday aspect, and to a rigorously empirical method that faced, in fact embodied, the contradictions and failures of American life.

Chapter 2

Howells, George Eliot, and the Moral Aesthetic

Looking back on his early literary interests, in 1893, Howells wrote that

> the chief part of my ethical experience has been from novels. The life and character I have found portrayed there have appealed always to the consciousness of right and wrong implanted in me; and from no one has this appeal been stronger than from George Eliot.

Readers familiar with Howells's criticism would not have been surprised by his emphasis on literature's ethical project or by his choice of Eliot as its central protagonist. Indeed, Howells considered Eliot the most serious artist among the English novelists, above all a writer of middle-class ethical life. Her influence, he wrote, was second only to Hawthorne on the new American fiction. But Howells's praise of Eliot always came with a caveat, as in the present case: "Her influence continued through many years, and I can question it now only in the undue burden she seems to throw upon the individual, and her failure to account largely enough for motive from the social environment. There her works seems to me unphilosophical" (*MLP* 81).

This had been an ongoing complaint: Eliot worked out her ethical problems largely through her characters' deliberation, as though she could *think* her way to resolutions. The "perpetual recurring explanation of the characters' motives and

feelings," Howells wrote in *Harper's* a few years earlier, "amounts to a critical comment on the course of the action and the nature of the problems involved, which we should have preferred to have in an appendix" (*ES* 164). Eliot's acuity as a narrator permitted her abstract philosophical reflection, but it left her characters' moral ideas largely unchallenged by circumstance. Her novels presented not full historical worlds where moral reflection could be partial and even incoherent, but instead a collection of minds, really one mind, in a self-contained, unified moral universe. "Autographic criticism of this shape is, of course, defective art," Howells continued in that same essay. Eliot was an impressive intellect with an impeccable moral sense. Her failing was not intellectual or moral: it was *literary*.

Howells thought writing novels was essentially a philosophical activity, a development of characters and plots in pursuit of a deeper understanding of everyday life, with a particular focus on ethics. Ethics was a matter not of ideas merely but of literary form. A novel could do more than illustrate the author's moral ideas. It could discover as it unfolded how morality actually worked in everyday society, and why moral ideas often went wrong. Although posed as something of a passing comment, the charge that Eliot was un-philosophical was a devastating critique. She was un-philosophical because she did not acknowledge the contingent character of ethical life, the "motive from social environment" that confounded individual conscience. She could reflect at length on motive, but when it came to situating those motives in history she rather stopped thinking altogether.

This was not to say that Eliot did not provide insight into the problems of moral philosophy. It was to say, however, that her formal procedure delimited what she could

find out about the ethical life of the English middle class. For Howells this was an issue of the true representation of history, of how deeply literature could know the reality of everyday life. Moreover, it was literature, more than even sociology or economic study, that could provide such an insight. Literature could work from the mundane detail into further complexity without arriving at the comprehensive statement or theory. It rather arrived at its own understanding.

The thrust of Howells's critique of Eliot is descriptive rather than evaluative, and this chapter proceeds in the same spirit. My aim is to demonstrate, with particular attention to style and form, the way novelists of similar ethical concerns, for whom the pursuit of realism was itself an ethical project, could produce in their novels such different moral worlds and, indeed, different visions of history. It will emerge, I hope, that novel writing is itself a primary historical activity, a way of understanding history in its passing complexity and even incoherence, and not a mere epiphenomenon of a retrospective developmental narrative. My readings, then, demonstrate what writing discovers about its moment, not only what it reflects.

The ethical and historical were linked for both writers, but their approaches were diametrically opposed. Eliot wrote to affirm the immanent goal of humanist philosophy, the pursuit of the good. In her novels the everyday moral thinking of ordinary people provides the illustrative instances of a history already tending toward a preconceived outcome. Whatever Dorothea Brooke's shortcomings and obstacles, there is in *Middlemarch* a straight line from her pronouncement that she had been finding out her religion since she was a little girl and, at the end of the novel, her settling into the duties of wife and humanitarian. Her moral fulfillment is potential all along in the very

conception of her character, and she does not develop so much as play out a history that tends toward the realization of middle class ideals.

Howells was skeptical about art's ability, or its vocation, to reconcile middle-class values with social and economic reality. In politics Howells was a democratic socialist, but in literature he depicted moral thinking as it occurred in everyday life, that is, despite such ideological commitments. As history works against his characters, frustrating their ideals, it becomes apparent that the novel is developing without any implicit or preconceived resolution of its ethical problems. There is no transcendent theory informing Howells's writing. He wanted to work within the limitations of middle-class ideology and represent the texture of everyday life, which was (and is, as it is lived) anyway formless and un-transcendent. Even Silas Lapham, who renounces a crooked capitalist system and instead chooses a virtuous poverty, succumbs to the moral uncertainty brought about by historical events beyond his control. Indeed, Silas's moral decisions are not decisions as we normally think of them: he is not a proper protagonist. Like all of Howells's central characters, Silas does not have the intellectual resources to devise a coherent theory or plan of action, but rather works by instinct, an imprecise and often clumsy way of navigating his life. It is a life nonetheless. For Howells, Silas's psychic incoherence, and his best, if inadequate, efforts to impose order, are precisely what characterize him as middle-class.

Howells worked from within history, giving the fullest account possible of the opaque present, where moral instinct, not principle, encountered practical circumstance. His formal procedure made impossible any external perspective from which history could be conceived as a shape. The result was that his novels themselves did not achieve a

definite shape. His characters' problems are left unresolved, his plots seem unable to realize themselves. But if we follow his development of scenes and plots, even sentences, we will see that his form is merely unapparent, that it is it working toward historical insight, in fact producing it, in a way that is precluded by Eliot's more conventional approach.

Far from a limitation, readers ever since have identified Eliot's self-contained form with artistic excellence, indeed with sound philosophy. Her claim to historical insight in fact depended on giving order to the contingency of everyday life, of looking beyond the mundane to broader concepts of progress and moral fulfillment. Indeed, the affirmation of transcendent morality was the vocation of the novel since its inception. Howells identified this tendency as romanticism, a fetish for the abstraction from everyday life. This was evident in popular entertainments, such as the theater, with its heroes and villains, but it was as obvious in art that took itself seriously. The case of Eliot was only the most exemplary of an art whose implicit goal was to reestablish a morally coherent, even epic view of life. This not only falsified a modern economic life characterized by its banality and invariability, it preconditioned art's formal possibilities. Coherent moral statements required finished forms.

The issue was art's relation to life, whether art was to reflect life as people lived it or as they dreamed it. Late in his career, again in the context of Eliot, Howells was still pressing the issue. "It is observable that the authors who deal most profoundly with problems mostly leave them unsolved," he wrote, meaning moral problems, which had a way of resolving themselves in life despite our conscious efforts. Howells doubted that art should try to resolve them any better. "The greatest achievement of fiction, its highest

use, is to present a picture of life; and the deeper sense of something desultory, unfinished, imperfect, it can give, even in the region of conduct, the more admirable it seems. . . [P]recision, definition, roundedness is the defect of faltering art, the throe of weakness, not the issue of strength" (*SLC* 166). The realistic artist observed life more finely, in its absence of shape. But to the "aesthetic sense" of most novelists, life presented itself as occasion for the author's moral prescriptions: "It has been the defect of most moralists who have dealt with it in fiction that in their zeal for conduct they have failed to recognize the limitations of error, to offer a final reconciliation of the wrong done with the good loved even by the wrong-doer" (167).

Howells has often been called an optimist for such statements, but his point is even more banal than that. The "reconciliation of the wrong done with the good loved even by the wrong-doer" is not a kind of equilibrium on the scales of universal justice, just tipping toward the good; it is the utter banality of everyday moral life. Even Eliot, Howells surmises, unmarried, living with a man and therefore an outcast in her Victorian society, would have treated her own experience in fiction with "puritanic spirit": "She would have spared nothing to herself, nothing to her reader." And yet life, Howells goes on,

> so much briefer than art, is so much wiser, so much finer, that the results in its hands was aesthetically much more perfect than the art of George Eliot could have accomplished. The situation continued with greater happiness than could probably have come to her from any other, and if the wife who was conventionally not a wife had ever a bad conscience there was nothing to intimate it . . . The alleviations and extenuations which her art would have refused in the study of the situation were supplied by life in a measure which rendered it not only tolerable but constantly eligible. (166)

The aesthetics of ordinary life for Howells is in its ambiguity, in the absence of absolute moral principles. Eliot's situation occurred in a wider social context that was largely indifferent to her moral conduct, when in fact one would have expected society to be largely hostile. There might even have been an inexplicable psychological element: Eliot simply remained happy despite her suspicions that others were sneering. Whatever moral objection existed it did not bring the universe down on her. The paradox Howells indicates is that while ordinary life has a way of dulling the edges of our moral categories, the impulse of the storyteller is to emphasize moral conflict and alleviation, to dramatize life. Drama gives distinction to life by illuminating the extremes at which experience becomes concept, even if it does not necessarily make the mundane life we live more distinct.

Idealism is the most prosaic thing under the sun, part and parcel of everyday life, and in tension with it. This tension is Howells's subject, realized in his form. An episode from *A Modern Instance* (1882) shows the way historical conditions in America provide Howells with the ground from which to discover formally, and not illustrate merely, the moral compromise of middle-class life.

The scene takes place in the garden of an old Boston family, the Hallecks, who from Puritan origins have made their fortune in the leather industry. The scion of the family, Ben, is a moral and intellectual drifter. Crippled as a boy, he now hobbles through life without a vocation, his ambition apparently wounded also by the utter pointlessness of entering a profession. He carries on neither his family's religious nor industrial faith. He is talking to the woman he secretly loves, a Maine provincial named Marcia Hubbard. She has come recently to Boston with her husband Bartley, Ben's

former school chum who is now a writer of sleazy yellow journalism. Bartley is good-natured but, unknown to Marcia, an occasional drunk and a gambler. Lonely while her husband is at work, Marcia brings her infant every day to the Hallecks' garden. In the Hallecks she seeks a higher society, into which she hopes to introduce her child. For this reason, and without any basic understanding of the doctrine, she wants to join the Hallecks' church. Ben is appalled at her naivety. He also blames her profligate husband for their deteriorating marriage, for which Marcia, out of ignorance and low self-estimation, blames herself. Ben holds his tongue. His secret love for a married woman rankles his conscience.

These young people belong to a generation reared without the old, stable New England institutions of family and church. Even more than their parents they are detached from a reliable, internalized moral authority. Howells presents their moral situation as complex, but so is his own and his reader's, for absent is any normative morality to provide a reference point from which to judge these characters' motives and behavior. Our sympathy with Ben in the scene is divided: we might favor the legal dissolution of the doomed marriage, but this would make us partial to the opportunism of an interested party, and it might even make us thoroughgoing immoralists.

Neither endorsing nor impugning Ben's moral constraint, Howells rather works within his dualistic logic. Certainly, Ben's assessment of the Hubbards' marriage does not contradict what we have already been shown in the novel, and his prediction that Marcia will eventually be miserable is, as a matter of plot, correct. We might share his outrage at Bartley's moral ignorance. At the same time, his outrage is presented as an exaggerated response, a drama of indignation. Marcia and Bartley are not real human

beings in Ben's fantasy but figures from a romance. As Ben looks down at Marcia and her baby in the garden, the narration proceeds:

> There is something in a young man's ideal of women, at once passionate and ascetic, so fine that any words are too gross for it. The event which intensified the interest in his mothers and sisters in Marcia, had abashed Halleck; when she came so proudly to show her baby to them all, it seemed to him like a mockery of his pity for her captivity to the love that profaned her. He went out of the room in angry impatience, which he could hardly hide when one of his sisters tried to make him take the baby. Little by little his compassion adjusted itself to the new conditions; it accepted the child as an element of her misery in the future, when she must realize the deformity of her marriage. His prophetic sense of this, and of her inaccessibility to human help here and hereafter, made him sometimes afraid of her; but all the more severely he exacted of his ideal of her that she should not befall beneath the tragic dignity of her fate through any levity of her own. (399)

If we are sympathetic with Ben's judgment, we are also granted a peculiar view of what is implied in our sympathy. The opening sentence locates Ben's thinking within the unconscious irrationality of his puritan pedigree. With idealism comes at once strong feelings that must be tempered, and so made all the stronger, by a reactionary moral austerity. Of course there are no "words" that are worthy of such ideals: to formulate ideals clearly would be to rob them of their force as conviction. Indeed, Ben is all the more convinced by his rectitude because it is bolstered by a religious fervor: "at once passionate and ascetic"; "the love that profaned her"; "His prophetic sense of this, and of her inaccessibility to human help here and hereafter." The language is not Ben's, of course. Howells uses his narrator to posit exactly and without comment the inherited and unconscious notions that contradict Ben's conscious reflections. The unseen moral universe is not entering the text from without but from within, as the very basis of Ben's confusion. Howells constructs Ben's character not on what Ben *can* articulate, that

which might be realized in a world of self-control, but rather out of language that consigns him to a delusional otherworldliness.

Howells presents the unmediated voice of ordinary self-justification. The historical accuracy of Ben's character depends on arriving at an understanding of the immanence of moral ideas but also their inherent imprecision in the face of circumstance. Even Ben recognizes that, however clearly he can see the outlines of Marcia's plot—the naïve expectations, irrational behavior, her eventual misery—he can offer no useful response to her queries, only "pensive sarcasm." "I think it's best to belong to some church, don't you?" Marcia asks him.

> There was something so bare, so spiritually poverty-stricken in these confessions and questions, that Halleck found nothing to say to them.
>
> He was troubled, moreover, as to what the truth was in his own mind. He answered, with a sort of mechanical adhesion to the teachings of his youth: "I should be recreant not to think so. But I'm not sure that I know what you mean by belonging to some church," he added. "I suppose you would want to believe in the creed of the church, whichever it was."
>
> "I don't know that I should be particular," said Marcia.
>
> Halleck laughed sadly. (400)

There is no implicit alternative to Ben's spiritual vacancy, or any visible path to salvation for Marcia. Ben is aware that to even express an inherited piety is a lie. Naturally, he cannot resist following up with some acknowledgement of the absurdity at the heart of their discussion. "I'm not sure that I know what you mean by belonging to some church," he says, knowing Marcia will misunderstand his appeal for clarity. Her response is appropriately vacant: "I don't know that I should be particular." The conversation resolves nothing, and it is soon clear that neither quite knows whether there

is an issue to resolve. Without the spiritual longing, which history has made irrelevant, there can be nothing to recover. Marcia is lost, but she has only a vague sense that she ever came from anywhere. Ben just cannot bring himself to care that the teachings of his youth did not stick.

One would expect a novel whose subject is the decay of institutions to propose at least some local solutions. For this to happen, however, an implicit morality would have to guide the scene, and in this one, such a structure is simply absent. Ben in fact understands the moral implications of his desires and fantasies, and he also understands that it is his grasp of complexity that stultifies any action or any moral resolution. Yet his moral knowledge does him no good. Such knowledge, I will show later, provides Dorothea Brooke a key to reading her situation and acting upon it, and more importantly it provides the reader the assurance his sympathies are aligned with the novel's moral project. In Howells's scene, no spiritual principle is assumed or argued for, and no transcendence is permitted the reader in the form of a moral. The texture of everyday American life, observed from within, does not offer the possibility of such theoretical transcendence. Howells is not conceptualizing the middle class, he is rather catching it in action, for it has no precise definition, unless it is defined by its ongoing and unpredictable development.

In fact, it is unlikely that even Howells could have foreseen Ben's fate. When as predicted Bartley abandons Marcia and files for divorce, Ben finds himself prohibited by entrenched middle-class morality, articulated through the exaggerated respectability of the lawyer Atherton, from marrying the woman he has loved. In a final scene Ben confronts Bartley and states the moral case: "[Y]ou owe some one else a debt no one can

pay for you. We needn't waste words. What are you going to do to repair the wrong you have done to that woman and the child[?]" (583). Bartley's response is supposed to reflect the new moral laxity: divorce "was the only way out for us. We had tried it for three years and we couldn't make it go; we never could have made it go; we were incompatible." Then he states the plain historical reality that shows Ben's idealism: "But, as I understand the law, Marcia isn't bound in any way"; and Ben gets what he always wanted: "I know that she always had a very high opinion of you," Bartley continues, "and that she thinks you are the best man in the world: why don't *you* fix it up with Marcia?"

Ben's response is unrecorded, and what we are told of his actions only obscures matters. Rather than renounce the established rules, Ben retreats to the backwoods, essentially from modern life, and becomes a minister, no longer asking "if the truth was here or there, any more; he only knew that he could not find it for himself, and he rested in his inherited belief. . . ." (586). He embraced faith, and "if he took one jot or tittle away from the Book, the curse of doubt was upon him." Rather succumbing to belief than convinced, he banishes altogether questions of ethics. There seems no other ending for him. He had become in that final scene a reflection of Bartley's amorality, which is an interesting twist, for Howells had made him take Bartley's place as the central character for the last third of the novel, as though Ben could sort out the moral problem embodied in Bartley. Instead, Ben finds himself living within moral terms that have become outworn and chafing under the impossibility of reconciling himself to the present. By ruling out a remarriage Howells preserves the sanctity of marriage as a middle-class idea, but the idea has exacted an allegiance that is absurd in the face of

events. Ben is an unwilling rebel who participates by an act of conscience, and finally resignation, in quashing his own rebellion. His retreat to a place without ethics makes evident Howells's intention to develop the novel's moral program into incoherence.

There is not even an implicit moral proposal in *A Modern Instance*, no lesson to derive. The novel presents the problem and tells us to work it out for ourselves as we possibly can. A distinct recognition of the limits of the novel and perhaps also of philosophy in providing rules or even ideals therefore separates Howells's approach from that of George Eliot. She no more than Howells subscribed to a philosophy of moral rules or categorical imperatives. However, formal imperatives are another thing, and Eliot was above all a novelist. Plots have to be worked out in some way, and for Eliot a well-executed plot was at once a beautiful form and a sound philosophy. She was not one to be vague or inexact in presenting her humanist ideals.

Eliot subscribed to the idea of sympathy, an ethics based in what were thought to be objective moral laws, the intuition of which gave every person theoretical and even emotional access to the needs of other people. This philosophical profile alone highlights her difference from Howells and his difficulty composing his novels. If moral facts are objective, the novelist need only to accurately depict the world of moral action in everyday life in order to make these laws evident, indeed integral.

The novel for Eliot was therefore a powerful medium for inculcating morality. It surpassed abstract speculation and rather tapped the inherent moral sense by situating the reader in an imaginative world where moral decision making could happen without the distractions and complications of real life. To sympathize with Dorothea Brooke is at once to engage in a hypothetical ethics, but also to experience for oneself the

transformative possibilities of virtue in an everyday world. The only limit on philosophy is the novelist's talent for dramatic depiction.

Eliot wrote *Middlemarch* on the eve of the second Reform Bill of 1867, setting the novel on the eve of the first, in 1832. While the bills were designed to reconcile England's historical constitution with modern circumstance, the novel continued this work on the moral front, by prescribing a proper philosophical attitude for the middle class. Like the *Pioneer*, the fictitious journal for which Eliot's artist-turned-statesman Will Ladislaw wrote, *Middlemarch* was meant to be a literary vehicle for social progress.

In Will Ladislaw, Eliot represents men's proper role in English moral development, but her special interest is in the role of women. Since women could not participate in the practical politics of reform and therefore had no direct effect, Eliot imagines them as a moral force, in fact as embodiments of moral law. Dorothea is no ordinary orphan, she is a saint in a long line of saints that includes Saint Theresa. Eliot establishes this affiliation in order to show that it has not been women who were inadequate to history but the opposite: "Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity" (3). Social conditions have suppressed a natural and immanent moral tendency, and this novel intends to show the possibilities of a world where this tendency is realized. The implicit theology is intentional. Eliot wants *Middlemarch* to be a spiritual text that allegorizes historical experience as the attainment of immanent morality. Like scripture, the novel will depict figuratively a shared human experience that provides an imaginative framework that could give order and meaning to

everyday life. A practical means of self-knowledge, the novel is also transcendent: it shows that the piety of everyday life connects one to a goodness and justice immanent to reality.

An illustrative scene occurs late in *Middlemarch*, when, after a night of despairing moral disorder, Dorothea Brooke has her early morning resolution to fix it. She mistakenly believes she has discovered an extramarital affair between the man she loves, the reform agitator Will Ladislaw, and Rosamond, the disaffected wife of the physician Lydgate, who has been involved in a local political scandal that will ruin his career. Eliot writes:

> And what sort of crisis might not this be in three lives whose contact with hers laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing the sacred branch? The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her. She yearned toward the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will. 'What should I do—how should I act now, this very day, if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three?'
>
> It had taken long for her to come to that question, and there was light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains, and looked out toward the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the fields she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was part of the involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (741)

The passage is shaped as a devotional: a moral crisis presents itself as a trial for the devout; the question is posed, "what should I do?"; a meditative search produces a resolution (as light fills the room) and the burden is lifted. The answer comes from an unimpeachable, domesticated authority, to which Dorothea appeals instinctively: "She

yearned toward the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will." She does not discover the way to salvation but rather returns to an original relation, a locus of certainty from which she has been drawn by her worldly experience.

Of course, as moral action takes place no where but in the world, Eliot does not intend Dorothea's resolution to be abstract: "how should I act now, this very day, if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three?" Transcendence is thus a mundane affair. However, the mundane for Eliot blends with the sacred world of human aspiration, which if not exactly otherworldly—Eliot was not a believer—nevertheless exists as an idealized version of the mundane. Scripture provided the figurative tales that instructed its reader in ways of seeing the ideal. When Dorothea looks out from her window, she sees more deeply into the everyday world and finds a complexity that is only apparent with reference to that original compendium of humans' highest aspirations. "On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the fields she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog." Like Isaiah, Dorothea assumes the burden of such seeing, the burden of the world. The burden completes her, makes her "part of the involuntary, palpitating life." She inhabits an ideal perspective that brings her to higher knowledge and is thereby restored.

This is not just a way of seeing, it is an emotional experience. The passage retains the affect of the religious devotional. Dorothea's resolution to act proceeds from despondency, from the yearning for something greater, "the perfect Right," which is greater than even the immediate situation calls for. She wants not just a practical solution but a transformation, to be ruled, to be both the object and the willing subject of a

righteousness that has, as the idealized everyday outside her window shows, real presence in the order of things. In fact, as much as she would transcend her self-concern, "my own pain" and "selfish complaining," she harbors these to compel herself to see the world more clearly in the light of her moral ideals and to redeem herself.

Emotion grounds what seems a religious experience, making redemption a mundane affair. Transcendence appears as an experience of everyday middle-class life. The everyday assumes a richness of inherent possibility, even meaning, to which ordinary moral instinct has access, and no transcendental ontology, no world elsewhere, needs to be imagined. At least not as a literal presence: Dorothea's quotidian contains another plane of existence if only she can see it, will it into being. Transcendence is realized in the moment of her aspiration, is in fact at that moment posited as an ontological feature of the everyday world. Transcendence is, in short, philosophical, secular. Of course, Dorothea is not conscious of any philosophy: her moral resolution is reached by ordinary intuition. Yet the scene unfolds according to an idea, even an argument, that it is perfectly reasonable, not less because it is also emotional and tied to our highest aspirations, that one can, and should, look at the world as an ideal duality.

Dorothea's awakening is supposed to signal her emergence from the passivity of mere idealism into moral action and history. This helps Eliot to make her larger historical argument that the practical, everyday politics of reform will find its moral ballast in the ordinary instincts of women who are shut out from affairs of state. The historical limitation of women has throughout been a formal problem for Eliot. Her political interests compel her to conceive the woman's role as greater than simply providing the domestic values that inspire virtue in their active men. At one point

Dorothea admits, "I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things" (512), one of those women being her former self. She perhaps expresses Eliot's own contempt. So in making Dorothea embody not mere domestic virtues but instead universal morality, Eliot gives her protagonist a role much greater than that of any men in the novel, the role in fact of fulfilling history's intrinsic tendency to realize the rightful dominance of the middle class.

Eliot demonstrates the way philosophical idealism dovetails nicely with humanism, the belief that there is self-evident content in the idea that our efforts must by necessity tend to the flourishing of human life. Together they can provide a basis for a politics that is at once self- justifying in its association with universal truths, and at the same time apparently responsive to the realities of mundane life. What happens in between, the question of how one gets from the un-transcendent everyday to the ideal, is beyond the ability or interest, and perhaps even the moral idealism, of theory. In her moral decisions, Dorothea is abstracted from the quotidian in two directions, first by her access to a transcendent morality, then by her intense focus on the immediate situation of saving three souls, a marriage and a reputation. Each is supposed to be analogous to the other, but it was the gist of Howells's complaint that they were not.

It was the point of Howells's scene that the immediate and mundane were shaped, indeed constrained by historical circumstance, rather than tending to any moral clarity. Ben represses his love for Marcia and his concern for her, not out of any allegiance to moral principles but because of a rectitude he has inherited and against which circumstance has him in revolt. He is the product of a culture without coherent moral authority. Marcia hopes for her child's social prospects and for her own improvement,

but these are in doubt because she does not have the intellectual resources that could compensate for the absence of moral upbringing. Her fate is anyway tied to her husband's failures, which Howells shows are not Bartley's alone but those of a developing economy in which self-interest has itself become a moral option. Marcia is simple of mind but her innocence is the ordinary one of being tied to events, past and present, beyond our knowledge and control.

Eliot's lovers are not troubled in this way by history. Will and Dorothea are rather kept apart by a plot designed around an internal moral argument. When Dorothea learns that Will's grandmother was disinherited, thereby depriving her grandson of a living, she suggests to her husband Causabon, who is also Will's uncle, that he provide for his nephew in his will. Dorothea is entirely innocent in this request. Jealous of the affinity between his wife and nephew, Causabon instead affixes a codicil stipulating that should Dorothea ever marry Will she would lose the estate altogether. Dorothea discovers this provision after Causabon's death and she is shocked. She had never had an unfaithful thought, and indeed her growing affection for Will is based in her recognition of his moral claim to the inheritance, which makes him the object of a powerful, erotic drive to expiate her involvement in his misfortune and to become the woman Causabon would have suppressed.

The separation of star-crossed lovers, prolonged by misunderstandings and by the tact each observes in not broaching the subject, constitutes the novel's central plot. Dorothea is uncertain of Will's feelings, and Will does not want to seem to be after her money. Their moral credit accrues each time they meet and avoid the topic. Each time Will says he will go away for good, but it is clear that moral idealism and political

pragmatism must eventually join together. In fact, it is the sign of the novel's coherence that the reader always knows more than these characters, and so always sees that the scruples keeping them apart are less significant to our moral sense than all the wrong that has been committed against them.

A characteristic scene involves Will attempting to dispel any notion of misconduct on his part, and Dorothea assuring him she knows he is honorable. As always, Will is visibly tormented, while Dorothea rather fights an internal battle with her sense of decorum and responsibility to her late husband. The scenes never develop beyond this scenario, for neither Will nor Dorothea are defined beyond their virtue: they are already completed elements in the novel, only awaiting the plot to catch up. The moral credit of each character is so high, in fact, that Eliot can have them speak the novel's morality as well as identify precisely the moral stakes, thereby generating suspense by withholding moral fulfillment. Will registers this suspense:

> In the stormy fluctuation of his feelings [Dorothea's words] seemed to him cruelly neutral, and he looked pale and miserable after his angry outburst. He went to the table and fastened his portfolio, while Dorothea looked at him from the distance. They were wasting these last moments together in wretched silence. What could he say, since what he had got obstinately uppermost in his mind was the passionate love for her which he forbade himself to utter? What could he say, since she might offer him no help—since she was forced to keep the money that ought to have been his—since to-day he seemed not to respond as he used to do to her trust and liking? (594)

Narrator and character are in perfect sympathy, the character's thoughts rehearsing the novel's own moral preoccupations, in the process summarizing the main problem of the plot. Therefore Will's scruples, "the passionate love for her which *he forbade himself to utter*," affirm the novel's own, and in fact conform to the codes of his

society without self-betrayal or even a sense of the moral contradiction his situation presents. His self-laceration is to his credit, and even he observes his own virtue and monitors the degree to which he will transgress. "I have not spoken too strongly now," he says, in portraying his situation as hopeless, hopelessly moral:

> "There are certain things which a man can only go through once in his life; and he must know some time or other that the best is over with him. This experience has happened to me while I am very young—that is all. What I care more for than I can ever care for anything else is absolutely forbidden to me, even if it were in my reach, by my own pride and honour—by everything I respect myself for. Of course I shall go on living as a man might do who had seen heaven in a trance."
>
> Will paused, imagining that it would be impossible for Dorothea to misunderstand this; indeed he felt that he was contradicting himself and offending his self-approval in speaking to her so plainly; but still—it could not be fairly called wooing woman to tell her that he would never woo her. It must be admitted to be a ghostly kind of wooing.

In fact, in her modesty Dorothea does misunderstand: Will might be referring not to her but to another woman, Rosamond Lydgate, and the impediment Will speaks of is her marriage. Dorothea is too modest to detect Will's slight violence against manners and says nothing. Will departs, and Dorothea has a moment of joy reflecting on how well they both behaved. For perhaps Will really does love her, she thinks, and "it was really herself whom Will loved and was renouncing, that there really was no other love less permissible, more blameworthy, which honour was hurrying him away from" (596). Lest we be uncertain, when they are finally brought together, that they have undergone the appropriate struggle: "The joy was not the less—perhaps it was the more complete just then—because of the irrevocable parting; for there was no reproach, no contemptuous wonder to imagine in any eye or from any lips. He had acted so as to defy reproach, and make wonder respectful."

Moral knowledge permits these characters an absolute congruence between conventional morals and individual conscience. And as the plot confirms their moral judgments, so is the reader offered a kind of moral knowledge, or is rather confirmed in a belief, that the trials of everyday life are only so many tests of a basic moral identity by which each of us is connected to others. The novel cannot, nor does it try to, offer more than a confirming belief, because it is frankly allegorical, detached from everyday life in its romantic love story and exemplary figures. "Many who knew her," Eliot writes of Dorothea at the end of the novel, the marriage having finally taken place, "thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should be absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (783). The ordinary life of Dorothea Brooke, in which the "determining acts . . . were not ideally beautiful" (784), is the life Eliot does not record, for there is nothing to learn there, it is too mundane. To "we insignificant people with our daily words and acts" it is the exquisite creature imagined by romance that is important, because she represents the realization, if not exactly the possibility, of achieving the moral ideal. The realm of the possible, of the history that lies between our ideals and their realization, cannot be known except as an ideal. We must take it on faith that "the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so bad with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs" (785).

The ordinary life beyond the pages of Eliot's novels could not have provided her the illustrative force of Dorothea's tale. It was not an issue of mere subject matter, as

ordinary life does appear in the Garths, for example, or more obviously in the denizens of *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss*. It was rather an issue of form: ordinary life could not provide ample evidence of transcendence, not because there were no good, moral people, but because these ideals were unapparent in the absence of structure in everyday life. How could one narrate the saintly activities that were diffuse and therefore invisible to history?

The question of whether the novel could depict moral transcendence in ordinary life while also presenting an accurate account of history is the one Howells took up in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). The plot centers on the moral decision of an ordinary man. Silas Lapham got rich off an indestructible paint ore discovered on his Vermont homestead. He moves his family to Boston where, amid an economic depression, he has the opportunity to profit from a crooked business deal that could save his business, his home, and his children's social prospects. The deal entails selling what he knows are worthless land securities to unwitting foreign investors, securities he took as collateral when, feeling guilty, he lent money to a former partner he once forced out of his paint business. Silas renounces the deal and the modern, urban society it exemplifies, the shallow social aspiration, the competition and immoral consumption. He returns to Vermont in financial ruin and, ostensibly, in moral triumph.

Yet from the novel's very conception moral clarity was anything but obvious. In the prospectus Howells submitted to his publisher, the plot was to center on an act of atonement. Silas achieved his wealth and social position through "an injustice to a partner whom he has crowded out of the business," and this "wrong-doing has never ceased to rest heavily on [his] conscience." Rather than succumb a second time to

immoral business practice, Silas "*feels the weakening effect of the old wrong that he committed*. . . At last, almost by force of 'that, not ourselves, which works for righteousness' he resists the temptation and suffers ruin." The moral seems clear: Silas's "after life of adversity *from which he does not recover*, is sketched. The reader is made to feel that this adversity, consciously and deliberately chosen, is 'The Rise of Silas [Lapham]'."

In the last line Howells is speaking as the novelist, thinking about his program, therefore about the meaning of his novel. He knows that only a consciously active character, whose motives are in direct correlation with their consequences, can deliver such certainty. As a moralist, however, Howells doubted people were as consciously deliberate in their ethics as they thought, or that deliberation necessarily predicted results. This shows in his description of Silas's decision-making. Silas "feels" the effect of moral deterioration, and only through an abstract force "not of ourselves" is he able to resist temptation, the result that he "suffers" ruin. Howells is thinking of Silas as a passive moralist working from instinct, even guided by events beyond his control.

At first Silas would seem the perfect vehicle for promulgating a moral program. He represents a provincial type characterized by an instinctual dependence on internalized verities, or home-spun wisdom. The "very devil was in it," he thinks when presented with the lucrative but dishonest deal that could save his business. He is conscious that he is a moral being and, in fact, he observes moral strictures that remain solid in the face of evidence or event. The problem is that Howells cannot trust Silas' unrationalized morality without first putting it to the test of events, for Silas is foremost a character rooted in history. He defines a sociological type, the rural New Englander

whose residual Puritanism has settled into common sense, and for whom the ideal of American democracy confirms his absolute right to assert that common sense against any challenge to his pride or to his sense of absolute justice. While he wants Silas to be successful in his moral endeavors, Howells is more interested in how internalized morality confronts an amoral economic world.

Indeed, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is a novel about class, and morality is always a class issue. Silas's daughter Irene is being courted by a young gentleman, Tom Corey. Like the Hallecks in *A Modern Instance*, the Coreys are an old Boston family, but more elite and sophisticated. The father Bromfield did not go into the family business but instead as a youth went to Europe and dabbled in painting. Tom introduces Irene to the novels of George Eliot. To get in good with her father, and bored by idleness, Tom proposes to go to work for Silas. With the prospect of taking him on and mixing with the Coreys, Silas becomes anxious about social customs. His argument is that the Laphams should meet the Coreys as equals. His wife Pert is more realistic.

> "Now look here, Silas Lapham! You understand this thing as well as I do. You know I appreciate you, and that I'd sooner die than have you humble yourself to a living soul. But I'm not going to have you coming to me, and pretending that you can meet Bromfield Corey as an equal on his own ground. You can't. He's got better education than you, and if he hasn't got more brains than you, he's got different. And he and his wife, and their fathers and grandfathers before 'em, have always had high position, and you can't help it. If you want to know them, you've got to let them make the advances. If you don't, all well and good." (970)

Pert has an acute, instinctive grasp of the tension between universal moral claims and real social relations in American life. You shouldn't have to humble yourself to anyone, she says, appealing to her husband's pride. This is because he has a natural and

inherent moral value that transcends mere social circumstance, and which makes him the equal of anyone. The proof of this claim, as in any claim to natural law, lies in the urgency of the assertion, the spontaneous willing of universal equality. "I'd sooner die," Pert says, than believe we are subject merely to the fortunes of history.

Yet Pert manages to balance the claim to equality with its negation. On social grounds, for which there is real empirical evidence, Bromfield Corey is in fact Silas's superior. Corey *knows* how to be superior because it is in his genes, and this knowledge is manifest in the very form of everyday social interaction, and in fact it has the proven track record of generations of economic and educational achievement. If Corey hasn't got more brains than Silas—and Pert is not so sure he doesn't—he's got different, and it is a difference that matters. Corey too has his moral value, and it does not need to be proven because unlike Pert's moral knowledge, Corey's distinction is already a historical reality. Pert knows that she is no one's inferior in any absolute sense, but in the Boston of everyday life she is going to have to observe Corey's distinction.

There is some class pride, then, or rather an attempt altogether to transcend class, in Silas's refusal to participate in the fraud that could save his business. He is affirming his natural moral equality against the sordid everyday complicity in the market that defines middle-class life. Deliberate moral action clears away the ambiguity of human accountability in economic fortune, a particularly vexed question amid a depression. Indeed, Howells represents the market as an analog to history itself, a depersonalized force operating beyond local intervention: "it wa'n't any better than gambling . . . It's like betting on the turn of a card," (1139) is how Silas describes his speculation. Like any

good protagonist, Silas makes a moral decision with the expectation that his individual act will set things right.

It is not that easy. Silas will ruin his old partner Rogers yet again if he refuses to sell the worthless stock to the English agents. When Silas claims responsibility to the investors, Rogers responds with an entirely sound capitalist logic.

> "I don't see what you've got to do with the people that sent [the Englishmen] here. They are rich people, who could bear it if it came to the worst. But there's no likelihood, now, that it will come to the worst; you can see yourself that the Road had changed its mind about buying. And here I am without a cent in the world; and my wife is an invalid. She needs comforts, she needs little luxuries, and she hasn't even the necessaries; and you want to sacrifice her to a mere idea! You don't know in the first place that the Road will ever want to buy; and if it does, the probability is that with a colony like that planted on its line, it would make very different terms from what it would with you or me. These agents are not afraid, and their principals are rich people; and if there was any loss, it would be divided up amongst them so that they wouldn't any of them feel it." (1167)

Roger justifies himself on the basis of rational calculation. Investor capital is fair game for market speculators because investors have pooled their money precisely in order to reduce their risk. Risk is assumed. Rogers speaks the underlying principle of market behavior that is in ordinary business dealing tacit and outside of ethical deliberation. The pitfalls are obvious, but we go about our everyday lives knowing there is no reversing capitalism.

There is, then, some justice to Rogers's accusation: *you want to sacrifice her to a mere idea!* We are supposed to recoil at this unabashed amorality, but we are also presented with the immediate effects of Silas's decision in Rogers's wife, who is an invalid. These reactions are hard to reconcile. One is hardly being realistic to imagine

jeopardizing the well-being of people he knows and loves in order to repudiate the logic of capitalist society. Putting the interest of the investors above real, immediate concerns, Silas sacrifices not only Rogers and his wife but also his own family's prosperity. Moreover, the situation may work itself out so as in retrospect to relieve Silas of any moral obligation to the investors. Silas is, Rogers argues, free to put his immediate interests first, to speculate on moral chance. But Silas's primary aim is to fulfill a moral obligation that he holds instinctually prior to any specific necessity. It is simply wrong to sell the stock, he thinks, and he seems to believe that bad behavior accrues against his moral credit. He rejects the deal and sends Rogers to his ruin. Howells delivers on the plot he promised in the prospectus, and he is aware that it is fantastic. Thinking of Rogers and his wife, Silas reflects, "This was his reward for standing firm for right and justice to his own destruction: to feel like a thief and a murderer" (1171). Obligation, it turns out, is not so clear.

The utilitarian position, that one's primary consideration should be social responsibility, would seem to justify Silas's decision. "One suffer instead of three, if none is to blame?" the Reverend Sewell proposes. "That's sense, and that's justice" (1085). Sewell is a great comfort to the Laphams during their trials, and no wonder. He puts a rational spin on Pert's instinct for natural morality. "It's the economy of pain that naturally suggests itself," Sewell goes on, "and which would insist upon itself, if we were not all perverted by traditions which are the figment of the shallowest sentimentality." By simple calculation a rational person should be able to see his obligation instantly. Any thought of mitigating circumstances is the delusion of selfishness. "Tell me, Mrs. Lapham, didn't this come into your mind when you first learned how matters stood?"

"Why, yes, it flashed across me." Sewell's argument is to trust common sense. But it is unclear, even at first to the Laphams, why public welfare should be the necessary impulse in cases that directly involve one's friends or family. Whether people like the Laphams who are normally indisposed to detached deliberation can ever achieve Sewell's ideal is also questionable. "I lose all patience!" the Reverend says at the end of he scene, having "grown quite heated and red in the face" (1086). The obvious, rational choice must after all take the form of an imperative: "Keep clearly in mind that you are doing right, and the only possible good. And God be with you!"

Sewell's function is didactic. He provides the rational justification for the Lapham's unrationalized morality. Otherwise Silas's resolution might seem mere impulse rather than a kind of moral knowledge. The blatant preachiness, however, indicates a formal problem. Howells has wanted to show that there is indeed a kind of knowledge in Silas's unreflective decision-making, that his apparent ignorance of reasons is in fact a kind of pragmatic morality. But as I have tried to show in the case of Rogers, the depiction of ordinary moral decisions in a novel has to provide some intelligible justification: it has to be *shown*. There has to be a position exterior to the action that can orient the reader's response. George Eliot's form developed from just such an exterior position, so that she wrote scenes in which her characters spoke the reader's appropriate response without disrupting the overall shape of her narrative. Howells's disruptions are obvious because what he wants to show, the complex and mundane thinking of ordinary people, cannot be shown in a novel, at least not if the writer's aim is coherence. Sewell exemplifies the problem of the novelist of everyday life. By making the unrational rational he gives voice to what cannot be articulated, makes the ordinary extra-ordinary

and therefore misrepresents it. He makes the ordinary manageable by giving it determinate form.

Two distinct narratives are developing together, an analysis of everyday moral complexity and a plot of moral fulfillment. These remain in tension until the very end, generating the novel's historical insight. The final scene has Silas back on the Vermont homestead, "shabby and slovenly in dress… fallen unkempt, after the country fashion, as to his hair and beard and boots" (1200). It appears as if life in Boston was a dream, and like Rip Van Winkle he has returned to his former life, indifferent to the history that has occurred around him. "Well, it don't always seem like I done it," he says. This ought to affirm the transcendent power of common sense morality, which restores, to use Emerson's words, an original relation to the universe, a fundamental simplicity and honesty that has been degraded by social life. Silas has not only regressed, he has been reduced to an essence, a representation of a moral ideal, emptied of all the desires and expectations of middle-class life that have until now defined him as a character in a novel and situated him in a recognizable world.

This ending cannot possibly make sense. If Silas cannot in retrospect offer an account of his moral actions, there is little reason to think that the novel is proposing a similar course of action in the historical world. There is no *reason* for Silas's actions, at least none the novel can offer. A novel concerned with the fulfillment of a moral life must provide some way for the reader to perceive the appropriate moral response and the possibility of conceiving his own life from this position. Howells appears intent on withholding such clarity. It is the Reverend Sewell, the voice of clarity, who conducts the final interview. Interested in exploring issues of "the moral world," he suggests to

Silas that " 'your fear of having possibly behaved selfishly toward [Rogers] kept you on your guard, and strengthened you when you were brought face to face with a greater'—he was going to say temptation, but he saved Laphams's pride, and he said—'emergency'" (1201). "Well, I don't know what it was," Silas responds, and Sewell presses for some final articulation to prove his moral theory. About Silas's giving up his prosperity he asks, "And do you ever have any regrets?"

> "About what I done? Well, it don't always seem as if I done it," replied Lapham. "Seems sometimes as if it was a hole opened up for me, and I crept out of it. I don't know," he added thoughtfully, biting the corner of his stiff mustache—"I don't know as I should always say it paid; but if I done it, and the thing was to do over again, right in the same way, I guess I should have to do it." (1202)

The tone is hard to discern. Has Silas reached some philosophical resolution or is this nonsense? He presents his decision as chance: "as if it was a hole opened up for me, and I crept out of it," and he claims no real volition: "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." He cannot abstract from the particulars of his circumstance to a general moral rule: what he did is inextricable from the circumstances in which he did it. This is a very low level of moral self-consciousness, and it is consistent with the way Howells has throughout depicted everyday moral decisions. This is not the problem. The problem is that, coming at the end of the novel, this commitment to Silas's ordinary psychology denies the transcendence through which the novel might have made a comprehensive statement and thus some reassuring sense of our moral lives. Instead it confirms, against its own impulse to discover an essential simplicity and goodness, the persistence of the inscrutable mundane.

The historical Silas Lapham, the unreflective, puritanical Vermont innkeeper who once aspired to a normal middle-class life, remains integrated with the romantic hero of the novel. This shows romance to be a mere prosaic aspiration, or what is the same thing, it makes a romance of everyday life, which is inherently false. Meanwhile ordinary middle-class life goes on anyway. Silas's daughter Penelope marries Tom Corey, who relinquishes his claim to the gentleman's life to take up the virtues of competition and hard work. He "goes in" with Silas's competition, a couple of ambitious West Virginians, and becomes a development manager in Mexico. Silas's puritan work ethic has evolved for a global economy. If he has been abstracted from history, Tom replaces him and completes the historical development. He fits exactly the portrayal of Silas that appeared in a sarcastic profile written by Bartley Hubbard, who appears briefly at the beginning of the novel: "His life affords an example of the single-minded application and unwavering perseverance which our young business men would do well to emulate" (877). Even as romantic hero Silas is the good middle-class parent.

"Fiction is the chief intellectual stimulus of our time," Howells wrote a few years after *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, "and taking it in the broad sense if not the deep sense, it is the chief intellectual influence." Then, with more caution, "I should say moral influence, too; but it is often a moral stimulus without being a moral influence; it reaches the mind, and stops short of conduct" (*SLC* 227). Fiction could provide readers with an aid to moral reflection, but there was no accounting for what happened between reflection and action. That translation was at last inaccessible. Except perhaps to fiction itself, which as Howells's procedure has shown could imagine in detail the scenarios in which the moral idea tried to realize itself amid the contradictory claims of everyday life.

Whether reading novels could make someone a better person was unknowable, even improbable. The best a novel could achieve was to make the distance between stimulus and conduct apparent as a philosophical problem, and to explore the problem. For Howells this was the best way for fiction to be moral, to make evident the basic problem, the texture and even inscrutability of everyday moral life.

Eliot was more determined to solve the problem. "If art does not enlarge men's sympathy," she wrote in a letter, "it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that *opinions* are a poor cement between human souls; and the effect I ardently long to produce by writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures" (*GEL* 3:111). The difference here from anything Howells ever wrote about fiction's moral errand is the evangelical fervency of Eliot's program. The novel is not a philosophical reflection of the problem of moral action but an inducement to moral transformation. It can stimulate a sympathy more powerful than any idea, a feeling that in fact renders mere intellectual reflection negligible. Eliot is not concerned with mere conduct but rather something more integral, even metaphysical despite its worldly aims, a better world based in love.

As scripture was symbolic of human aspiration, so for Eliot was literary form. Novels were speculative, figurative stories about everyday moral life. Dorothea Brooke was a study in sympathetic imagination and feeling, in the trials and most importantly in the effects. She lived in the years leading to the Reform bill, but she did not, could not, participate in the practical politics of reform. Her contribution was moral, not directly but in concept. Her goodness stood as an inspiration, an ideal aim.

Ordinary life was therefore only Eliot's indirect subject. It was the rather the possibility of transcendence inherent in the everyday that was her subject, and that possibility was conceivable first as a yearning and only then found its basis in a philosophical idea. These gave her novels an aspect of perfect integration. The sympathy she demonstrated through her characters was identical with the sympathy she showed toward her characters. As they realized their common humanity and address one another's needs, so does the plot resolve itself and the novel develop more fully its moral program. This was her contribution to a tradition of idealist thought, though not necessarily a continuation. Eliot did not have to be a Kantian in her ethics to perceive moral imperatives, as long as they affirmed her humanist commitments and ensured a coherent philosophy and therefore a coherent, beautiful form.

The "novelist who begins where I leave off, will yet write the novel which has been my ideal," Howells wrote in the same essay I quoted a moment ago. He admits that he has not himself been able to shake the influence the "false school" of the "dramatic situation" (228). His future novelist, however, "cannot transport life really into his story . . . . But he will not rest till he has made his story as like life as he can, with the same mixed motives, the same voluntary and involuntary actions, the same unaccountable advances and perplexing causes, the same moments of rapture, the same days and weeks of horrible dullness, the same conflict of higher and lower purposes, the same vices and virtues, inspirations and propensities." The novel for Howells was an ongoing endeavor deeper into the complexity of moral action. Even he had not gone far enough. If fiction could have only an indirect effect, if any, on the moral life of its readers, it could offer a means of thinking about moral issues. The goal was not to affirm what we already know,

or what we already hope. The novel could not prescribe a moral attitude, and it lied if it proposed to transport us outside the problems of mundane life. Howells's novels sought not immanent knowledge but actual knowledge, what was unknown because it was always evident, even beneath aesthetic attention, the stuff of ordinary life. To be sympathetic with his ordinary people therefore meant also to be critical, because contradiction and error was inherent in their beliefs and actions, and in the very structure of social life. The fullest account of middle-class life could not ignore its incoherence, the irreducible detail of the quotidian. It was on this untranscendent aspect of life that the novelist glimpsed the truth.

Chapter 3

A Modern Instance

A Modern Instance is a structural oddity. The novel makes a late shift in focus from its main plot to its subplot, then toward the end it experiments with surrealism and sentimentality before settling into a melodramatic finale. Howells's method was to work from within the middle-class experience and to produce not merely a representation but a theory of it. The structure of *A Modern Instance* is a historical interpretation that suggests more about what Howells knew of his time than the mere content of his plot could. Although he later claimed "the result seems to lack texture," Howells always considered this to be his best novel, to use his word, his most intense. This intensity was not just the consequence of a subject matter "only less intense and pathetic than slavery," but of a particularly successful, if messy, exercise of Howells's method.

An outline of the plot should illustrate the peculiar structure of the novel. The first half of *A Modern Instance* tells the story about courtship and marriage amid the decaying social institutions of family and church. While the Hubbards are not conventional—they elope, for one thing, and for another Marcia is pathologically jealous and Bartley is a particular kind of egotist and cad—the novel does present them as fairly representative of the divorce-bound middle-class couple. We are not made to take sides, as the innocence, ignorance and selfishness is equally divided between the two, and their

historical circumstances appear to be as much to blame as anything. Morally unformed by provincial life they move to Boston, where Bartley fits right in with an unsavory lot of yellow journalists. Husband and wife grate on one another through several scenes, making up each time, and then when Marcia finally accuses him of an affair, Bartley has had enough and hops a train bound for Chicago. In Cleveland, overcome by "the custom of marriage," he loses heart and decides to go back. But his wallet has been stolen, and without telling us why, Howells continues him on to the West and, for the time being, out of the novel. He appears briefly at the end, during the divorce trial and in a final scene in which he has his say. The last we hear of him he has been shot dead for his unscrupulous journalistic practice.

Had Marcia wanted a divorce, Howells provides plenty of justification that might have made hers a convincing case in any court of the day. Bartley has been publicly drunk and nearly arrested, incapable of holding down a job and therefore unable to support his wife and child, and finally he has deserted her. It is actually Bartley who files for divorce, on the notoriously liberal statutes of Indiana, but before the novel gets here it pursues a digression of several chapters. It is not the issue of remarriage that these chapters take up that is surprising, but rather the manner in which it is presented. Having removed his central character from the novel and rendered Marcia a study in impotent denial and grief—she has convinced herself that Bartley is dead long before the fact—Howells turns his attention to Ben Halleck, who is secretly in love with Marcia and would take her as his wife, but who is warned by the lawyer Atherton not to transgress Victorian morality. Not only does the novel takes up the concerns of different characters quite late, but these characters are of a higher social class than the Hubbards, which

means in Howells's universe they are the ones who are capable of talking through the moral implications of the plot. Howells often seems at his worst at these moments, when priggish and respectable characters speak what seem to be his own morals and when the novel apparently tries to force order onto moral disorder. But it is clear that Howells does not exercise quite that kind of authority over these chapters. First of all, he does not permit either Halleck's self-denial or Atherton's detached rectitude to firmly convince us that divorce and remarriage are indubitably immoral. And second, his recourse to these upper middle-class types and their failure to resolve anything suggests not only that Howells found the firmly middle-class perspective of the Hubbards insufficient to exploring the moral aspects of their divorce from the inside, as it were, but also that the issue of divorce itself posed a formal problem for the novel in that it exposed the gap between the universal values that Howells tentatively upholds and the discovery of the weakness of this universalism that novel writing makes.

Like slavery before it, divorce was a phenomenon that disturbed the Protestant middle-class sense of moral order. It seemed to threaten an absolutely certain relation, between the ideal of the American family, which placed all its members and its accoutrements under the ownership of the bread-winning husband-father and thus formed the basis of society in general, and certain notions of natural law, which universalized the ideal and so made it not only indisputably normal but right. That Stowe assumed this relation made it possible for her to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Howells might have rejected the "romanticist" elements of that novel, but in life he held to its underlying morality, and in fiction he at least gave that morality a fighting chance. For political and economic exigencies made it difficult for the novelist who saw his task as taking up

historical reality as the middle class experienced it, and yet who also knew that the novel's form necessarily extended from basic ethical assumptions. Though the upper class certainly had its spectacular separations, divorce was in its sheer numbers an issue of middle-class concern, and the increasing liberalization of divorce laws was not always seen as a relaxation but as a response to the realities of middle-class life. The list of moral infractions that Bartley Hubbard committed and which might have gotten Marcia a divorce, were legislated across the states in order to draw the parameters of what would have been on anyone's list morally reprehensible behavior, not to provide couples with options for separation. But industrial urban life put pressure on the marriage bond; husbands drank, abused their wives, sometimes deserted them. With her children's souls, her property and indeed society at stake, the woman required some sort of protection under the law that the dominant morality alone could not provide.

This of course did not stop the moralists from trying. The first real numbers, which have been reported everywhere in the literature on American divorce since their initial publication, come from a Department of Labor study prompted by lobbyists of the New England Divorce Reform League, founded in 1881 by Yale's Theodore Woolsey and Vermont Congregationalist minister Samuel Dike. In Massachusetts, on the eve of the Civil War, the ratio of divorces to married couples was one to fifty-one; by the time *A Modern Instance* was published in 1882 it was one to twenty-one. Just when national reconstruction was underway, its destruction and the decay of civilization seemed imminent.

Even those who took a more scientific approach to the phenomenon found themselves in the paradox inherent in moral affirmation countering history. For example,

Washington Gladden's "The Increase of Divorce," published in the same issue of *Century* as the opening chapters of Howells's novel, decides that it cannot be a general moral deterioration that is bringing about more divorces—Gladden rationally dismisses this idea as the sensationalist conservatism that overtakes any passing generation of moralists—but instead that "the trouble is institutional rather than ethical." It is not society that is corrupt; it is "certain disorganizing ideas and theories now filling the air" (430). Gladden cites the ideology of '"extreme" individualism, which he sees at work in the court's predilection for contracts and thus individual rights, and in women's suffrage. Actually, Gladden is responding to a widespread legal trend, which was both philosophical and practical. Interpreting the law according to general principles that could apply to all cases was becoming a staple of Gilded Age legal practice, which intended to protect national industrial development from the impediment of individual state laws. This generalizing trend affected divorce as well. Though there was as yet no national divorce law, the trial of such cases, as they increased in number, had moved into the judiciary and out of the state legislatures, where case-by-case hearings had been the norm. Therefore Gladden finds himself, in the face of historical currents that are beyond mere counter-affirmation, affirming the moral high ground.

> It is an evil thing that a good woman should be unhappily wedded to a coarse and selfish man—albeit some of the finest characters are developed in common life under such conditions; but if the law which releases this one woman from an unhappy marriage affords to a hundred others, whose sufferings are much less severe than hers, the weapons with which they may destroy the homes that might, with a little patience and good-will, have been preserved and hallowed, then the law causes far more misery than it cures. (432-33)

In other words, it is preferable that the women suffer a little rather than violate the sanctity of the home. Gladden recognizes of course, as an ethical issue, that women need protection under the law. But he refuses to extend the single case to the more general one, for to do so would be to acknowledge historical necessity and thus concede to the limitation of the absolute ideology of family. Nevertheless the awareness of the one suffering wife as representative remains, and the qualifying "but" and the heightened rhetoric of the clauses that follow it can barely suppress it.

Howells himself thought that the novelist should practice a "scientific decorum," and indeed we can hear in the unfolding of Gladden's passage something of Howells's problem as the realist of American manners, the same tension between affirmation of morality and the intuition founded on observation. The difference is in the way the novel, as Howells works it out, is inherently susceptible to historical persuasion and cannot head off contradiction through mere assertion. The logic of narrative is different from that of the propositional essay. The failure to reconcile an unconscious assumption of immanent moral organization with the historical data it takes up as its material is not merely incidental in the novel but essential to its meaning. In fact it was the apparent absence of any such inconsistency that piqued Howells's suspicion of the two novelists who especially come to mind in any discussion of the historical novel, Balzac and Scott. Howells thought that for neither writer was the imperative to depict characters that imitated actual historical beings in their everyday lives; it was rather to construct exaggerated personages within mechanical plots, so that preconceived moral ideas would be obvious to the reader. But this did not mean that these writers were unhistorical; on the contrary, for Howells their work was only intelligible as products of their historical

milieus. "[H]ow false and how mistaken he often is," he writes of Scott, "with his medieaval ideals, his blind Jacobitism, his intense devotion to aristocracy and royalty; his acquiescence in the division of men into noble and ignoble, patrician and plebian, sovereign and subject, as if it were the law of God; for all which, indeed, he is not to blame as he would be if he were one of our contemporaries" (14). Howells situates Scott within a context in which these attitudes were entirely feasible and when his novels could be construed as truthful representations of everyday life. Of course, Scott's readers were "duller" than Howells's, "slower-witted, aesthetically untrained, and in maturity not so apprehensive of an artistic intention as the children of to-day" (13). These readers were particularly susceptible to a method of historical interpretation that worked deductively from a set of moral propositions, which could only find form in idealized characters and contrived plots. Howells was looking for a novel that worked inductively, that represented history as a continuous flux of mundane events.

If we would accuse Howells of historical bigotry, we might also consider that he was trying to formulate, albeit negatively, the historical experience of his American contemporaries. Howells frequently tells us that the middle-class society that he knew could be understood only in its mundane details, and that its appropriate form was that of an unfolding of events from these details. In a country where the divisions between classes were not inherent but shifting, and where everyone was in the business of making a living and if possible to move into better society, the days were experienced for better of worse as a monotonous succession, which one nevertheless approached with some optimism. The novels themselves often offer a key to reading this historical sense. The "sincere observer of man will not desire to look upon his heroic or occasional phases,"

Howells tells us in *Their Wedding Journey*, "but will seek him in his habitual moods of vacancy and tiresomeness," in his "vast, natural, unaffected dullness." In *A Modern Instance*, Howells conceives "form" not as a manipulation toward sensational effect, but rather as something looser and more ambivalent about middle-class life, something that would "throw about it the poetry of their ignorance and their poverty, or the pathetic humor of their dismay at the disproportion of the prices to their means" (327).[2] The dominant literary forms, the newspaper and the romantic novel, did not register this new experience. American writers had yet to discover the form appropriate to their moment. It is no wonder that Howells crossed the ocean and centuries for his models, Turgenev, and especially Cervantes, whose picaresque form, in "its free and simple design, where event follows event without the fettering control of intrigue, but where all grows naturally out of character and conditions, is the supreme form of fiction; and I cannot help thinking that if we ever have a great American novel it must be built upon some such large and noble lines" (15). The "best possible reason for its being," Howells thought of *Madame Bovary*, was precisely its commitment to the limited, the insignificant and mundane (223). "The expression of French life will change when French life changes," and we can hear in this the correspondence of form and history that Howells wanted to bring to the American novel. Indeed, it is arguable that in *A Modern Instance*, Flaubert is essential to the depiction of middle-class provincials in their daily rounds, especially in Marcia Hubbard.

Howells of course shared the prevalent concern of the intellectual class for the public morality and the fate of American civilization, which divorce appeared to undermine at its foundation, the family unit. As he often joked with Twain, and even

self-consciously with the unmarried expatriate James, he was a thoroughly domestic man. But it was his sense for the unfolding of everyday life amidst the fluid and undefined middle class that formed Howells's theory of novelistic form; and in adapting to this environment the novel not only represented the offending shifts in middle-class manners, but it also registered the inherent contradictions in the moral analyst's thinking. The novel suggested an outside perspective, as it were, on the morality from which the novelist understood from the inside. That Howells knew that he would find himself in the same boat as Balzac and Scott, with a form as implicated in the attitudes and intuitions of his time as any, did not make the fact any easier to accept. For despite his keen sense for the historical development of the novel's form, and his career-long insistence as a critic that realistic literature assumed as many aspects as writers who practiced it, Howells nevertheless seems to have thought that in the American context a democratic literature was the culmination of an historical ideological progression. There was a "universal impulse" toward realistic representation, the example of which Howells drew from continental Europe. But in the United States, where "wholesome common sense" was thought to be the very basis of liberal democracy, and where more than anywhere else the "droll little eighteenth-century world" from which the United States emerged and graduated into the most modern of nations, the realistic form appeared to be the natural one, "simple, honest and true," committed to the commonplace, and therefore thoroughly modern. That a new novelistic form could express this reality in all its complexity, for better or worse, did not in Howells's mind necessarily mean that he would puncture the morality immanent to his political ideals. These were for Howells in his affirmative mode unquestionable, so that even after his public repudiation of official

handling of the Haymarket affair in 1886, and despite the skepticism that is everywhere in the novels, he could still write that in the United States "the differences are not of classes, but of types, and not of types either so much as of characters" (96). His proposal for his first major work as a full-time novelist, to take up a the subject of national concern, divorce, and furthermore his intention to "treat it tragically"—a phrase that perfectly articulated the moral attitude with which he embarked on his project—shows just how confident Howells was that this new method of representation would accommodate the middle-class ideals it sought to explore and inherently affirmed.

Howells twice referred to *A Modern Instance* as an "intense" work, in the summary he sent to Osgood while conceiving the novel, and again at the end of his career, when he identified this as his favorite of his novels. But he must have meant something different each time. Initially he thought the novel's intensity would come out of its subject matter, which presented him not only with a clear issue of national historic consequence but also, from his assumed moral perspective, an obvious formal strategy, to treat divorce "tragically." Of course he knew that the writing would produce its own discoveries—"It is hard for me to present anything more than a motive of my work," he told Osgood—but his projection of this novel, his first as a career artist, was made in the early confidence of having hit upon something important, a subject as well as a method. Late in his career, however, Howells identified the novel's intensity as the feature that distinguished it from his next favorite, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. That novel was as diffuse as it was prodigious, its success so tied with its failures, which were not of form but of the political scene it took up, that it was hard even for Henry James upon reading it to put his finger on what made it important. With *A Modern Instance*, however, that

importance was more concentrated. There were fewer characters to work with and, for most of the book, only one drama. Each of the Hubbards assumed a significant weight, as Howells has to work out, and then rework his ideas through these characters, each time generating new issues that revealed to him the formal unruliness of divorce. This novel must have seemed more intense to Howells because the contradictions between his original vision and its artistic achievement were not finally problems but rather the realization of a novelistic method.

This is to say that Howells works toward disorder, that in fact it is primarily a sense of disjunction rather than of certain underlying meaning that characterizes his historical imagination. Bartley Hubbard is illustrative. As a character he is a cautionary principle against the moral dissolution of American society, but this also makes him a sort of virus in the novel's system. Unlike the orphans of the English novel, Bartley is never destined for integration into his environment because his author cannot imagine it. His alienation defines him. Even in the context of provincial Equity he is decidedly lower middle class, a newspaper editor whose ambition and intelligence garners him some local respect (which Howells views with typical irony) but at the same time marks him as a striver and, at times, an upstart. His proper match is actually not Marcia Gaylord, the lawyer's daughter, but Hannah Morrison, whose father is a cobbler and a drunk. He is clearly in his element when he slangily converses with the Morrison boy, Andy the hostler, whose youthful adulation is in part a recognition of Bartley's apparent social mobility. In fact, in Equity and later in Boston, it is Bartley's capacity to adapt to his social environment by projecting his social handicap, his neediness, and simultaneously displaying a motivation for self-improvement, that gets him anywhere. It

is the makeshift existence of a man without moral or social foundations. Bartley is a kind of social scavenger, and had Marcia been taught the sense not to fall for him, he would already be on his way to make his fortune in the West, in Chicago. From the beginning of the novel Howells conceives of Bartley as a misfit, one who by his nature is destructive of social norms and not to be finally brought into the fold.

Anyone would have recognized Bartley's kind of mobility as a defining characteristic of an expanding American economy and the heterogeneous class structure that came with it; many perhaps with distaste. Howells zeroes in on this social anxiety, not through narratorial comment but through dramatic specificity. The committee of nabobs who appoint Bartley editor of the Free Press is immediately suspicious of his moral credentials, but Howells makes it clear that their concern is not based in any notion of the transcendent purity of soul but rather in a subtle provincial snobbery. They are of course impressed with Bartley's industry as an impecunious youth and his success at college, which he partially paid for himself, having been "all poor boys themselves and justly feared the encroachments of hereditary aristocracy" (191). But their self-satisfaction is nearly trumped by their resentment of his boots and the cut of his pants, "the fashionable keeping of everything about him, for Bartley wore his one suit as if it were but one of many." He acts like an aristocrat and treats them as inferiors, and yet they are cowed by this superiority and so must find recourse in a desultory question of moral character, which no one has the intention of really pursuing. To deepen the mockery, Howells has the question resolved by Squire Gaylord, who makes a derogatory remark about newspaper editors and dismisses the issue as irrelevant. Later, the ostracized Bartley will elope with the Squire's daughter and skip town.

Howells knows that as the novel's figure for the breakdown of institutional morality, Bartley must emerge from a particular historical milieu. But in looking for social mechanism that enables Bartley, Howells finds himself presenting his own egalitarian ideals ironically: the committee's respect for the industrious, self-made man is actually an excuse to avoid an undemocratic acknowledgment of class distinction. These men will give a poor boy a chance because they were once in his shoes, but that he should presume equality, and worse, put on airs of superiority, is offensive. Howells intuits a correlation, between the decay of middle-class moral institutions and the effete democratic pretensions on which these institutions base themselves. If we are made to deride these provincials for their peculiarly American snobbery and thus to feel comfortable in our own vigilant egalitarianism, we also in taking the novel's historical claims seriously suspect that the novel is undercutting that self-satisfaction. Ideology, the passage suggests, is impotent in the face of historical exigencies with their own purposes. Inherent in this new principle of social mobility that Bartley represents is a complete lack of any particular motive other than to rise and to stay afloat. Bartley defies traditional social categories; he has no certain origin and no particular social destination. He is ambitious for ambition's sake, and Howells will often find himself reminding us later in the novel that this ambition is amoral. Howells clearly imagines Bartley as the residue of an historical process that has brought about a general deterioration of basic middle-class values. But as Howells discovers him to be the product and not the cause, Bartley comes in the midst of his creation to act as the foil to his author's attempt to reinforce those values. For if Bartley represents a sense of social disruption, simply

accounting for his possibility as a phenomenon requires that Howells take up the contradictions between the America he posits and the one he observes.

At this early stage of the novel, of course, Howells presents all of this with a light irony, and we can hardly suspect the consequences of the apparently innocent antinomies that are at work. Indeed, it is a characteristic of Howells's style, when he measures the irreversible progress of history, especially his own, to seek in ironic detachment a reconciliation of a dutiful respect for the past, where he imagines a moral provenance, and an opposing anti-nostalgic confidence in the rightness of the present. For example, here is how he described the progress of belief to the skepticism he inherited:

> After a season of skepticism [my father] had become a religious man, like the rest of his race, but in his own fashion, which was not at all the fashion of my grandfather: a Friend who had married out of Meeting, and had ended a perfervid Methodist. My father, who could never get himself converted at any of the camp-meetings where my grandfather often led the forces of prayer to his support, and had at last to be given up in despair, fell in with the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, and embraced the doctrine of that philosopher with a content that has lasted him all the days of his many years. (MLP, 6)

Three generations of thought are covered here, and each departs from the previous, which it cannot fully comprehend as a mode of being. The historical foreshortening therefore seems to diminish the events it describes, though in this way Howells also manages to treat his forefathers' experiences with some tenderness. The humor is not meant to belittle but rather to render quaint, and therefore innocuous, the events it describes. Yet the farce of the failed camp conversions and the facility with which the father takes up Swedenborg, register Howells's superiorly ironic distance from these events. There is no going back, nor would we want to. Humor is Howells's way to remain aloof from the present's superior perspective, to demote it, as it were, while

recognizing it as his only available perspective. He thought this attitude characterized his time. "[W]e have somehow all been there, " he wrote in his first essay on Mark Twain. "[A]s yet the average American is the man who has risen; he has known poverty, and privation and low conditions: he has very often known squalor; and now in his prosperity he regards the past with a sort of large, pitying amusement; he is not the least ashamed of it: he does not feel that it characterizes him any more than the future does."[3] This is how Howells explains Twain's humor, but he also explains the historical Twain, the rustic Midwesterner who rose to prominence in the Northeastern establishment, and who was now making a fortune by working these contradictory roles. And of course Howells is describing himself and the new opportunity, which his father did not have, to make a respectable career as a man of letters. The economic and social developments of post-bellum America could only be viewed with a bit of bemusement, especially from writers like Twain and Howells, who by temperament and class advancement always maintained an ironic view of their achievements.

Humor is therefore an attitude of historical agnosticism. Howells's sense of history as a rapid advancing through successive and yet ideologically discontinuous stages never gives way to conservatism or to romantic representations of the past. Yet neither is his presentism a heroic stance, nor is his insistence on the representation of everyday life as people actually experience it a claim to stoic resignation; it is rather matter-of-fact, unsentimental, detached. The novelist "dwells in a world of his own creating, where he is a universal intelligence, comprehending and interpreting everything, not indirectly or without any artistic conditions, but frankly and straightforwardly, without accounting in any way for his knowledge of the facts" (SLC, 230). Treating his

material "as if it were real history," Howells intentionally worked for an immediacy of his narrative worlds that imitated the immediacy of experience, which in modern America, if one were realistic about it, one had no choice but to take by the moment. Thus Howells's representations of history suggest a flatness of experience, for his characters, but also in the contemporary world it represents. For unlike Flaubert, who is also everywhere and invisible in his fiction, and whose own aesthetic sense gives a suggestive depth to his characters' experience of everyday objects, Howells represents his worlds as inherently void of particular meaning. His characters are completely defined by their immediate environments; moreover the narration observes the same limitation of insight. In the contracted worlds of Emma Bovary, or Felicité of "A Simple Heart," Flaubert can translate the artistic process into the intense aesthetic intelligence of his characters for the mundane. Howells's characters, who are isolated in their own ways, have no such intelligence because their author does not imagine it as possible for them, and he does not permit his narrators any such intelligence. They are all ensconced in the flux of transforming events that they can only comprehend from within, and there are no moments of stillness from which they can recognize the form of experience.

The country town of Equity, Maine that produces Bartley Hubbard emerges out of this historical imagination. At one level the irony of the narration is typical of indirect discourse. Howells relishes using the colloquialisms of his characters to reveal in the simple and honest wisdom of the average American the limits of common sense: "If [Bartley's] sarcasm proved that he was quick and smart, his recourse to those who had suffered from it proved that he did not mean anything by what he said; it showed that he was a man of warm feelings and that his heart was in the right place" (193). We are not

to put much stock in this judgment, but neither are we given any reason not to see it as a useful fiction. Howells's irony is never quite at the expense of the characters' dignity, never satirical. For as much license as he has as the novelist Howells is reluctant to fully distance himself from the democratic element, and this tension is evident in his historical analysis:

> Religion there had largely ceased to be a fact of spiritual experience and the visible church flourished on the condition of providing for the social needs of the community. It was practically held that the salvation of one's soul must not be made too depressing, or the young people would have nothing to do with it. Professors of the sternest creeds temporized with sinners, and did what might be done to win them to heaven by helping them to have a good time there. The church embraced and included the world. It no longer frowned even upon social dancing, a transgression once so heinous in its eyes; it opened its doors to popular lectures; and encouraged secular music in its basements, where during the winter oyster-suppers were given in aid of good objects. . . Christenings and marriages in the church were encouraged and elaborately celebrated; death alone, though treated with cut flowers in emblematic devices, refused to lend itself to the cheerful intentions of those who were struggling to render the idea of another and better world less repulsive. In contrast with the relaxation and uncertainty of their doctrinal aim, the rude and bold infidelity of old Squire Gaylord had the greater affinity with the mood of Puritanism they had outgrown. (194)

The tone here is similar to that in Howells's chronicle of belief to skepticism, which I quoted a moment ago. If Howells makes his reader laugh at Equity's "chaotic liberality," he has also built this up as a description of the novel's contemporary society; the humor therefore does not provide the distance required for all-out criticism, but rather implicates the reader in the problem the passage describes. If Howells is right, his contemporary reader shares the very sense of historical movement the passage imitates. Undercutting the ostensible critique is a complete absence of any suggestion that events could have worked themselves out any differently or that the breakdown of institutions is even a moral issue, that is, a matter of choice. The change from traditional Puritanism to

a modern laxity has become completely normal and widespread, and neither the town nor Howells appears to regret this progress; in fact, through indirect discourse Howells suggests that everyone seems aware of the irony of their situation. Thus Howells's sense of the contemporary moment is in a strange tension with the content of the passage, which he took up precisely for its moral import, as the social and historical causes of divorce. There seems a contradiction. The laxity of social manners in Equity, the superficial observance of middle-class pieties, the retreat from the odious strictures of traditional Puritanism, all comprise the content of the reader's experience. But in giving this experience form, Howells discovers that he cannot find a historically viable argument for having it any other way. The light irony with which he treats Equity is akin to the lightness of the town's morality, a characteristic of the bewildering sense of historical evolution for which insouciance is the only possible stance.

Howells thus intends to be suspicious of Bartley Hubbard as the embodiment of this modern historical attitude and the breakdown of tradition that makes divorce a conceivable option, and yet he is oddly attracted to Bartley as the product of this history and thus as the perfect vehicle for developing the analysis on which the novel's strength depends. But the imperatives of realistic representation also bring author into sympathy with his character. Howells is careful not to draw Bartley as a villain, for to do so would violate the notion that realistic characters do not fall into simple moral categories that presuppose the reader's reaction. Bartley's egotism and amorality are certainly faults, but Howells represents them as relatively harmless, even banal. It is rather the class-conscious Squire Gaylord, whose passively suffocating dominance over his wife disqualifies him as a reliable seer of marital prospects, who plays up Bartley's

peccadilloes. When he warns his daughter, "Don't you see that the trouble is in what the fellow *is*; and not in any particular thing that he's done?" (261), the Squire equates Bartley's questionable origins with his moral character and impugns him for both. Meanwhile Howells is having a harder time with his condemnation. For example, after Bartley impulsively strikes unconscious his assistant at the Free Press, Henry Bird, for accusing him of a flirtation with Hannah Morrison, Howells presents the ensuing process of guilt and self-concern as a study in the prosaic. Beside the prostrate Bird, in the presence of the boy's mother and Doctor Wills, Bartley "went over the whole affair, except so far as it related to Hannah Morrison: he did not spare himself; he had often found that strenuous self-condemnation moved others to compassion; and besides, it was his nature to seek the relief of full confession" (239-40). The doctor in this scene represents the objective perspective: "Intentions have very little to do with the physical effects," he admonishes Bartley, who insists he did not want to hurt Bird, and we suspect that Howells's strict morality is behind this, condemning the ignorance of irresponsibility. But this appeal to a transcendent morality seems even to Howells disproportionate to the sins actually committed. The scene would hardly be effective, or for Howells realistic, if we took Bartley's plea for pity as anything but pitiable, precisely because it is commonly recognizable. Who hasn't felt the same? "It was not his fault," Howells writes, if Bartley combined "self-sacrifice with safety, and the greatest degree of humiliation with the largest sum of consolation" (241). True, this absolution is anything but complete, but it nonetheless keeps Howells from suggesting this episode as a parable on sin, and it rather retains for him an uneasy sympathy with Bartley that resists absolute moral summation. James had a nice phrase for this tentative quality of Howells's

narratives: "the only immoralities are aberrations of thought," he wrote with Bartley Hubbard in mind.[4] Although this does not account for Howells's relentless dogging of Bartley—we might even say he sacrifices his character to preserve the novel's moral structure—it does get at a local truth, that Howells's severity is latent, parceled out in the smallest proportions; immorality has a way of sneaking up on you.

It was never easy for Howells to circumscribe his moral commitments. Whatever conflicting impulses his novel demonstrates, we still must acknowledge the claim the arguments of the Squire and Doctor Wills make to our attention. Bartley *is* a scamp, as the Squire says; and as the doctor points out, it is precisely Bartley's carelessness of intention that makes him dangerous. "I should be ashamed," Howells wrote to Osgood, in the proposal letter with which we started, "to write a novel that did not distinctly mean something, or that did not show that I felt strongly about it." He clearly meant for these punctuated moments to hit home, to reassure his reader of the middle-class ideology that underlay the novel's purpose. These moments represent the moral structure that holds the novel together, even as Howells gains sympathy for Bartley, whose function is to threaten an unraveling. Of course he was not alone amongst the reform-minded intellectuals who bewailed the moral failures of their time from behind their editorial desks; at his most militantly prudish he would go so far as to elevate the novelist to the heights of "a physician or a priest" (104). There is a particularly telling moment, during the presidential elections in 1884, when many intellectuals, including Twain, defected to the Democratic party in order to support Cleveland. A life-long Republican, Howells voted for Blaine, despite charges of corruption. But his reasons were not entirely political: Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child with a widow and, as Howells wrote to

Twain, by a "contemptible, hypocritical, lopsided morality" his supporters did not hold him to the same standard of conduct as they did the woman. "I want to see him destroyed politically by his past," Howells wrote. "The men who defend him would take their wives to the White House if he were President, but if he married his concubine—'made her an honest woman'—they would not go near him. I can't stand that."[5] Underlying Howells's disgust at the denigration of the woman is an assertion of a moral order, the "hyper-critical omnipotence" that keeps tabs on Bartley and insures that, in the end, they will be paid.

But in making a novelistic world, as Howells finds out, such omnipotence cannot merely be assumed as an ordering principle, it must be constructed; and this work serves as a constant reminder to the novelist of the ideological imposition he must make on the depiction of everyday life. This is not a problem, unless the novelist in question is prone to obsessive self-analysis and irony, even skepticism. Howells was so concerned with assigning meaning to his narratives that he often violated his own prescription to stay out of the way and to trust the reader, and the result is that the novel can seem to resist its own discoveries and thus analyze itself. For example, when Bartley resolves to confess his culpability in striking Henry Bird, not out of concern so much for Bird as for himself, Howells intones, "When our deeds and motives come to be balanced at the last day, let us hope that mercy and not justice may prevail" (238). This comes down with the force of judgment; we hardly need to wait for the last day to know what Bartley's just deserts are. Howells is reigning in his character, which is curious because Bartley's reason for being, as I have already suggested, is to promote disorder so that the novel may confront the historical problem of divorce head-on. Howells will of course maintain his authority, but

that he does this overtly suggests the stakes involved in letting characters like Bartley direct the novel. The narrator's injunction is meant to impose on the novel's world an immanent moral order, to make it seem that there really is an arbiter of justice that has allowed Bartley to get by, just this time, and thus it tries to enlist the reader's moral sense. But its very insistence is its transparency. There is nothing immanent here but Howells's own assumptions of right and wrong, which apparently are not obvious enough in the narrative evidence he has presented to preclude an explicit intervention.

This raises the question of whether Howells could still think the novel's contemporary world was governed by an immanent order, given the difficulty that he had finding it in a depictive process that was based in his experience of that world. Isn't realism supposed to imitate the reality it claims to represent? There is a long history of taking Howells as a naïve theorist of the direct correspondence between realistic literature and life, and this conception often entails the corollary that Howells had to fabricate in his novels the moral order he could not find in contemporary reality.[6] The chapters that open his treatise on the realist method, *Criticism and Fiction*, might seem to support these notions. The novel is "the expression of life" which finds its inspiration in "human nature, known to us all" through "wholesome common-sense." And there is the unmistakable ring of middlebrow wisdom in the novel's aspiration to the standard "which we all have in our power, the simple, the natural, and the honest."[7] Then there are the passages in which we find Howells in his polemical mode as moral arbiter: "no conscientious man can now set about painting an image of life without perpetual question to the verity of his work, and without feeling bound to distinguish so clearly that no reader may be misled, between what is right and what is wrong, what is noble and what is

base, what is health and what is perdition, in the actions and the characters he portrays." Richard Brodhead quotes this passage as evidence of Howells's fear of moral erosion in contemporary America, without also quoting the qualification that appears a few pages later: "This is what I say in my severer moods, but at other times I know that, of course, no one is going to hold all fiction to such strict account."[8]

But Howells clearly understood that the novel and the historical reality it represented were differently constructed, and that although they were mutually informative, ideology was one thing and art another. He originally composed his novelistic theory between 1885 and 1887, in the essays for *Harper's*, and it is in this context that we should consider it. The theory is at times consistent with the contemporary sociological thought Howells soaked up during his editorship of the *Atlantic*, the decade that led up to *A Modern Instance*, and yet it shows remarkable differences as well. As I mentioned earlier, Howells's reformist tendency was a commonplace of his time. Many of those who considered themselves social scientists or critics wrote in mind of the amelioration of the various problems, moral and economic, that plagued an urbanizing America. Their ideas emerged out of the various strands of American reformism, such as Christian utopianism and millenarianism, and they were consistent with Darwinism, which suggested to them that society would gradually evolve toward a certain perfection. But Howells would not have counted himself amongst the reform-minded novelists like Edward Bellamy, who were all to his mind "romanticists," their characters and plots fulfilling prescribed moral trajectories, even though he does share their basic middle-class morality and equalitarian ideals. Howells rather pursued an ethic of "scientific decorum," an aesthetic based in the idea that art imitated its

contemporary world not merely in its content but in its form—in the way the novelist perceived this world and then worked out this perception through the exigencies of writing novels. If he thought that, in working out his scenes inductively from the social reality as he knew it, he would affirm a moral order, he was perfectly conventional. It was a staple of sociological studies to assume that social behavior could be explained in terms of invariant natural laws; this is what made such investigations, like those in biology, scientific to its practitioners. There were of course variations within the idea of natural law. Liberal critics tended to reject theories of strict biological determinism, which in the political realm tended to justify social hierarchy, in favor of a psychological approach, which took society as a collection of individuals, each acting on his own instincts, all connected by a web of relations, those mostly irrational and unconscious assumptions on which society functioned. These critics tended to favor moral instruction, in the form of state policy or rational intellectual commentary.

This is where we find Howells, who on the common human-progressive ideology considered the novelist's highest calling to explore the moral underpinnings of his fictional worlds, perhaps even to rediscover, in the process, the evolving moral sense that he thought underlay the ontological experience of his historical moment. His injunctions that "the arts must become democratic," and that "I would have our American novelists be as American as they unconsciously can," articulate the connection that he and many others made between an American-democratic ideal and the unstudied, unconscious expression of the individual American mind in all its "common beauty, common grandeur."[9] The novelist too, by virtue of living and observing the American life, would thus produce a work of such beauty, as long as he practiced a scientific fidelity to that

life, as he knew it. This idea that the novelist works within the morals of his time, of course, informs his discussions of the European novelists, and it is no surprise that considering the United States as the most modern of realities he would elevate its art on ideological and historical grounds. His objection to Thackeray, which gained him the spurn of English critics, was for this author's elitism, "his thoroughly bourgeois soul" that infused the novels with a contempt for democratic sensibility, which Howells saw as unavailable to a man of his generation or nationality, anyway; or to Balzac, who clung to the vestiges of romanticism, and so to a confining classical moralism under which "he felt obliged to construct a mechanical plot, to surcharge his characters, to moralize openly and badly; he permitted himself to 'sympathize' with certain of his people, and to point out others for the abhorrence of his readers." Telling is the next assertion, which reveals Howells's sense of his own modernity: "This is not so bad in him as it would be in a novelist of our day."[10] Dickens's "purely democratic" sense was actually an exaggerated and artificial response to the English class experience, which produced a moral failure in the writer: "when one comes to read the story of his life, and to know that he was really and lastingly ashamed of having to put up shoe-blacking as a boy, and was unable to forgive his mother for suffering him to be so degraded, one perceives that he too was the slave of conventions and the victim of conditions which it is the highest function of fiction to help destroy."[11] Howells continuously insisted that the histories of class and ideology had a direct effect on the formal qualities of the novel. And the progress of that this history tended toward the democratic, a more natural form than Dickens's, which of course was the American. "[W]e could no more turn back and be of the literary fashions of any age before this than we could turn back and be of its social, economical, or

political conditions."[12] Morality and aesthetics evolved together, and Howells found himself at the vanguard.

But as the case of *A Modern Instance* has shown, the new aesthetic for Howells's American fiction developed in a way that his theory at once made possible but could not predict. Bartley Hubbard began as a sociological impulse, but as the writing progressed he came to embody the history of the American middle class' expansion and moral erosion; and because Howells cannot detach himself from these historical currents as his scenes unfold, the performance of detached commentary on American morals seems superficial, to belie the history that Howells is actually producing. Thus a moral-ideological problem is for Howells a formal discovery, the very product of his realism, which is as much a method as a theory of representative content. A final passage from Bartley's days in Equity, just as he is driven out of town by public censure, will illustrate this method in one continuous negotiation, the kind that has, since the contemporary reviews, made Howells difficult to read.

> The weather had softened and was threatening rain or snow; the dark was closing in spiritlessly; the colt, shortening from a trot into a short, springy jolt, dropped into a walk, at last, as if he were tired, and gave Bartley time enough on his way back to the Junction for reflection upon the disaster into which his life had fallen. These passages of utter despair are commoner to the young than they are to those whom years have experienced in the impermanence of any fate, good, bad, or indifferent, unless, perhaps, the last may seem rather constant. Taken in reference to all that had been ten days ago, the present ruin was incredible, and had nothing reasonable in proof of its existence. Then he was prosperously placed and in the way to better himself indefinitely. Now, he was here in the dark, with fifteen dollars in his pocket, and an unsalable horse on his hands; outcast, deserted, homeless, hopeless: and by whose fault? He owned even that he had committed some follies; but in his sense of Marcia's all-giving love he had risen for once in his life to a conception of self-devotion, and in taking herself from him as she did she had taken from him the highest incentive he had ever known, and had checked him in his first feeble impulse to do and be all in all for another. It was she who had ruined him. (289)

Howells works through several modes that compete with one another for the paragraph's dominant tone. The narrative-descriptive of the opening is a standard of the realist's trade: it represents in brief the history of Bartley's moods and the tenor of the plot's advancement through the slow progress of the horse and cart, and then it slips into an indirect discourse, "the disaster into which his life had fallen," which introduces the paragraph's central theme, that is, its topic and the means through which we will consider it, from Bartley's perspective. Then Howells moves into his critical mode, "These passages of utter despair are commoner to the young," which reminds us that Bartley's reflections are contained within an objective-analytical frame, and must therefore be seen with some detachment and irony. But the reader may experience a double irony, not only in reading Bartley's perspective through the narrator's objectivity, but in what appears to be a relinquishing of narrative authority, through which the narrative seems to self-consciously lose its focus. For Bartley's reflections proceed into his characteristic self-pity, which Howells presents humorously as romantic sentimentality: "Then he was prosperously placed and in the way to better himself indefinitely. Now, he was here in the dark. . . in his sense of Marcia's all-giving love he had risen for once in his life to a conception of self-devotion. . . had checked him in his first feeble impulse to do and be all in all for another"; and while Howells laughs at Bartley it is uncertain whether he does not actually sympathize with him, even justify his reflections. The references to the narrator's previous sympathy on the issue of Bartley's class position ("Then he was prosperously placed and in the way to better himself indefinitely") and his ingenuous desire to be better ("checked him in his first feeble impulse to do and be all in all for another**")** put us on unstable footing: we do not know whether we are derisively to

believe that Bartley is justly punished for his amorality and egotism, or if Howells is not in fact bemoaning the injustice of condemning a character who has no possible means of being different. Who, ultimately, is questioning the grounds of culpability—*and by whose fault?*—Howells or Bartley? The novel will continue to raise this question implicitly, even to the last, when Bartley deserts Marcia. To look ahead to that moment, we see that Howells preserves the marital ideal in Bartley; "the custom of marriage was so pervasive," we are told as Bartley boards the train for Chicago, that had he not been pick-pocketed—by Howells's own perverse intervention, we should note—he would have reformed—he *wanted* to reform, to give up his gambling and be a family man. While Bartley appears as mostly unconscious of his own effects in his world, and as a man therefore tossed about by what he sees as random circumstances originating in unseen, even malicious interests, the "hyper-critical omnipotence,"—and the pick-pocketing surely goes both ways, as a purely random event that we also suspect is meant to suggest some poetic justice—Howells also gives him an instinct for preserving the middle-class norms he in many ways subverts and seems to sympathize with his efforts. These passages are not only disturbing to the reader's yen for novelistic order, they are symptomatic of Howell's difficulty in fully extricating himself from Bartley's historical predicament and achieving a fully external perspective.

This push-and-pull gives Howells's work its intensity. The sense of historical intractability—indeed, the intractability of writing itself—that informs Bartley Hubbard and the moral concern that engendered him are connate and yet in opposition to each other, historically and formally, and giving neither the last word Howells keeps grinding them together as if the effort would produce a breakthrough. What the formal insight of

the novelist thus led Howells to was a discovery that sociology would make later as a unified discipline, namely that scientific analysis could hardly dissociate itself from the analyst's own ideological attachments—in other words, that even such an analysis had its formal qualities. That self-consciousness was an obvious feature of is work was a complaint of contemporary readers: "too much attention to details, too much commonplace, too much analysis," wrote one critic.[13] But Howells did not consider this to be the only formal experiment he was making. "What people cannot see is that I analyze as little as possible, but go on talking about the analytical school—which I am supposed to belong to," Howells wrote to Twain, in the midst of the "realism war" he had started with his essay on James, " and I want to thank you for using your eyes."[14] The "school" he refers to is the one he tried to distance himself from, that of Thackeray, Trollope and George Eliot, whose authorial analyses gave their novels the sharp edges of ideological definition and thus facilitated their plots. He was not doing the same work, he insisted, and the passage we just looked at offers us a picture of the kind of work he was doing, quite beyond the moral-analytical certainty that defined the English novel.

Twain as always was a sympathetic reader, and to Howells he was undoubtedly the best of readers, as thoroughly immersed in the American scene as Howells was and therefore sensitive to the particular qualities of his work. But Bartley Hubbard's reversal of fortunes, and perhaps the complex moral predicament he finds himself in, would have resonated even with the more casual readers of the *Century* who, in the midst of an economic depression, yet had in their recent memories the one of only eight years before. The precariousness of prosperity was a fact of life in a mass market. The interconnection of heterogeneous interests suggested to some, like William Sumner, a system of

competition in which the fit survived, and each individual must instinctively look out for himself; others, like Lester Ward, and later Thorstein Veblen, had faith in the rational transcendence, by state or by intellect, of human nature, and thus rejected the mechanistic models of human social and economic behavior. Temperamentally, politically, and to some extent aesthetically, Howells fell into the latter camp, for he held the mechanisms of conventional plot in low estimation and considered the novel as a form driven by characters, their actions and choices. At the same time, however, this looseness of plot opened his novels up to the possibilities of more instinctive interpretations of his contemporary milieu, and so, as we have seen, to Bartley's amorality and to the subsequent critical assertions meant to curb his novel's wayward implications. But the novelist's craft, and his sympathy for the middle class as *the* relevant topic for the analysis of a developing urban experience led Howells toward the particular and exact, the lacunae of everyday, middling life, and he necessarily rejected systematic thinking and the reduction of character to universal categories, as he found them in the "romanticist" novels. It was in the facts of social life that people revealed their individual desires and propensities, in other words, a lived history.

The minutiae were also what the middle-class novelist knew best and could therefore represent from the inside. The Howellses were certainly not provincials of the Hubbards' stripe: their arrival in Boston after the Civil War was really by way of Venice, where Howells held a consular post and wrote travel sketches for the *Atlantic* while he dabbled in poetry; in Cambridge, Howells's entrée into the graces of Longfellow and the Dante Club was owed to his fluency in Italian language and literature. They felt the sting of class distinction nonetheless. "Everyone here is so snobbish," Elinor Howells wrote to

her sister in 1878. The eclectic sense for the literary styles of an emerging and diverse class of writers from the provinces that landed Howells the assistant editorship of the *Atlantic* in 1866, was also ironically the mark of his pedigree; he was the autodidact from Ohio, the republican newspaper man who socialized himself amongst the transplanted, that is, provincial, Northeasterners of Ashtabula, and whose literary aspirations signaled the presumptuous middle-class idea that cultivation and sensibility could overcome distinctions of class that, ostensibly, no longer mattered in a democratic nation. As he had, and would continue to do, with Isabel and Basil March, Howells projected this new urban middle-class experience onto the Hubbards. But the Hubbards are not the Marches, either: they are unreflective and ignorant of the social experiment they represent (Bartley's latent consciousness is mainly a form of resentment toward those who are morally superior to him, which in this novel, with the exception of the Howells-like news man Ricker, means of a higher class). It is therefore Howells who must indirectly comment on the Hubbards' experience when he moves them to Boston, observing their common habits and foibles.

> They went sometimes to the Museum of Fine Arts, where they found a pleasure in the worst things which the best never afterwards gave them; and where she became as hungry and tired as if it were the Vatican. They had a pride in taking books out of the Public Library, where they walked about on tiptoe with bated breath; and they thought it a divine treat to hear the great organ play at noon. As they sat there in the Music Hall, and let the mighty instrument bellow over their strong young nerves, Bartley whispered to Marcia the jokes he had heard about the organ; and then, upon a wave of aristocratic sensation from this experience, the went out and dined at Copeland's, or Weber's, or Fera's, or even at Parker's: they had long since forsaken the humble restaurant with its doilies and ponderous crockery, and they had so mastered the art of ordering that they could manage a dinner as cheaply at these finer places as anywhere, especially if Marcia pretended not to care much for her half of the portion, and connived at its transfer to Bartley's plate. (337)

The paragraph comes in the midst of an extended description of the Hubbards' attempts at domestic and financial stability in the city. They have rented a room in a boarding house and Bartley is freelancing as a journalist, but the inconsistency of his work makes Marcia anxious, and she occasionally recurs to idea that Bartley take up the law, a profession that would bring the respectability and prestige, as well as the income, that she naturally longs for. This anxiety and the minor squabbles that result only hint at the tragic plot that Howells has in mind, and the chapters rather proceed easily as a stream of representation and plot set-up; Howells shores up the reader's, and his own, sympathy for the couple in an extended exploration of urban middle-class life.

It is hard not to pity the Hubbards in this particular paragraph, as they feign familiarity with these monuments to the aristocratic taste for public improvement; and there is just a little cynicism in this presentation of their ostensibly democratic opportunities. But as we have seen before, Howells preserves the lightness of tone that protects his subjects from ridicule even as it condescends: "they sat there in the Music Hall, and let the mighty instrument bellow over their strong young nerves" strikes the diminutive note, its hyperbolic *bellow* contrasted with the wholesome commonplace of *their strong young nerves*. The quality of historical analysis in fact depends on this sympathy, for it elicits from the reader a defense of the middle-class values of democracy and self-improvement that the passage appears to merely describe. Thus Howells assumes the calculated "risk of overmoralizing": his "fidelity to experience and probability of motive" in the representation of the Hubbards is unified with the particular ideological frame through which we interpret their experience.[15] This effect is perhaps not an intentional application so much as a result of method. And so despite these similarities in

style with the passages I have discussed from the Equity chapters, where Howells finds himself undercutting his own critique of middle-class mores, I think there is a difference here: when Howells is not trying to put his characters into broad historical panoramas but rather presents them in their local habits of class behavior, his sense of the moral structure of the American experience, as he *thinks* it, is more secure, more fluently integrated into the representation. This is because his purview is more limited: he takes in only what is immediately available to his everyday experience and to his apperception of its significance. Bartley is in his domestic mode, and he offers no problems for Howells, in this paragraph and indeed for several chapters. And so for the time being, the presentation of the historical significance of individual character and action is more controlled. The pretensions to high-cultural taste and self-cultivation, and of course the failure to achieve any of this beyond pretence, is presented entirely through individuated character studies: *where she became as hungry and tired as if it were the Vatican. . . Bartley whispered to Marcia the jokes he had heard about the organ. . . especially if Marcia pretended not to care much for her half of the portion, and connived at its transfer to Bartley's plate*. Howells presents the general characteristics of unconscious levity and necessary frugality, which he posits as quintessentially middle-class, in particularized actions that are consistent with what we know intimately of these characters, so that their behavior appears to be habitual, to have their own histories. History by this analysis is truly the story of individuals.

Of course history has other ways of getting into Howells's analysis. The democratic effect depends paradoxically on a distinction of class. The remark that *they found a pleasure in the worst things which the best never afterwards gave them*, the

suggestion of Marcia's low tolerance for art and of their boredom listening to the organ, the very distance required to notice and to gently mock their naïve reverence, all require an eye that can detect a pretender. It is the privilege of objective observation for any reader to achieve distance from a novel's characters, but here that distance is specifically one of class sensibility: of course *we* could distinguish the best from the worst, *we* know our reverential attainment of culture is born of genuine appreciation. The passage's invidious distinctions are not however meant to elicit the reader's sense of superiority but his sympathy, for these youngsters who, like the rest of us, are trying to make their way in the world. The middle-class reader is thus made to take his own attempts at social and economic advancement, a self-evident reality of urban and suburban life, and a sense of class distinction in a single breath. The novel, as we have seen, has always viewed Bartley through the lens of class; but as long as Bartley was in Equity, which the novel views from a distinct cultural, even temporal, distance, the issue of class in a democratic society did not present an immediate problem. But the novel's sensibility is that of the urban upper-middle class, that of professionals and intellectuals, like Atherton; and once Howells brings the Hubbards into the city, where the novel is at home, he confronts the uneasy relationship between the distinctions through which he imagined his characters into being, and the democratic motivation to take these characters seriously as subjects of a historical analysis.

One might wonder how the author who deplored the veiled aristocratic snobbery in Thackeray could find himself writing as though his class sense were a significant element of his assessment of American life. One explanation would be that like everyone else, Howells could hardly see beyond the contradictions that American industrial and

urban development posed for one's sense of class. It was clear that society was shaping itself according to a perceivable hierarchy as industry created more jobs and professions, and as urbanization brought heterogeneous populations into contact with one another and made their relations as well as their differences obvious. But the very possibility, or the necessity, that people could move across geographical and social spaces enforced an already latent middle-class ideology of hard work and social mobility that persisted from the pre-industrial years, which Howells of course shared. There was no doubt a middle class in postbellum America, but there was little agreement on its definition. The distinctions between labor and capital, the working classes and the upper classes, were sharply drawn in the cities by the 1880s, but the people who fell in between constituted an amorphous mass. There were too many factors to consider, such as income, type of labor, manners, which could be confused with other categories, such as ethnicity or religion; and so by the time "middle-class" became an adjective, it was not so much a denotation of a distinct group as a delimiting term. Nevertheless this varying and indefinable category was experienced as a normative reality for those who lived within its circles and routines, and as Howells often shows us, the morals of this class appeared to be essentially American, that is, democratic and equalitarian. But the very ideology born of one's mobility and moral idealism, and their apparently universal manifestations among a diverse and shifting group—Who didn't aspire to move up in the ranks?—made it easy to deny that class distinctions existed at all; society appeared a medium through which disparate individuals moved and related without certain markers of status. As Howells put it, in the United States "the differences are not of classes, but of types, and not of types either so much as of characters."[16]

What we see therefore in the Hubbards' movement through the museums and restaurants, and particularly in those scenes in which they seek out their various homes in Boston—a study of the middle-class condition that Howells develops at length in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*—is an attempt to sketch the definitions of middle-class life in order to characterize as closely as possible the modern conditions that make divorce, the very negation of the middle-class family ideal, an attractive option. The Hubbards embody for Howells the social calculation and the projected futures of upward mobility and self-improvement that characterize the middle class as he knows it. And it is a sketch: for the exploration through selective detail and the formal unfolding of its significance can only approximate an explanation. The passage under discussion may not deal directly with the topic of divorce, and the effects I am describing are not exclusive to the passage but are more general to Howells's depiction of the Hubbards. Yet in appealing to the reader's sympathy, which is also a distinction of class sensibility, the passage assumes that there is a common feeling or awareness, certainly a set of practices and attitudes, that define the indefinable, a middle-class experience that involves recognizable affinities but also the irresistible tendency to distinction that arises in an environment of mobility.

The issue of class distinction between Howells and his middling characters only becomes more of a problem as the novel progresses. As in much of the contemporary sociological writing, which emerged out of a middle-class effort to transform society, there is a latent reformist motive in the treatment of Bartley Hubbard. But Howells's realism, not to mention the exigencies of his plot, which must provide grounds for a divorce, precludes reforming Bartley. Thus Howells confronts a problem of upper

middle-class rectitude and condescension: he must condemn a character whom he never really expected to reform, and who he never thought capable of doing it himself. From the first Bartley is shown as inherently incapable of reform because, as the genteel Ben Halleck puts it, he has "no more moral nature than a base-ball" (368). Yet Howells continuously provides the opportunities only to use Bartley's ingenuousness against him. When the borrowed money that he had bet on the Tilden-Hayes contest is returned, saving him from financial if not moral ruin, Howells tells us "there now ensued in his soul a struggle. . ."

> he had an intense longing to be rid of [the money], to give it back to Halleck, who would never ask him for it, and then go home and tell Marcia everything, and throw himself on her mercy. Better poverty, better disgrace before Halleck and her, better her condemnation, than this life of temptation that he had been leading. He saw how hideous it was in retrospect, and he shuddered; his good instincts awoke, and put forth their strength, such as it was; tears came into his eyes. (487)

The rhetoric is straight out of a middle-class reform novel, though of course Howells means all of it to be ironic. This is Bartley's vision of penitence, and though he thinks he means every word, we have seen these flights of self-pity and sentimentality before and we know these resolutions will never materialize. The passage goes on at some length—Bartley will abandon his iniquitous life in Boston and return to Equity where he will resume the role of dutiful husband, stoically face the ridicule there because he deserves it, take up the law, diligently reinstate his reputation and even work his way to Congress. As he fulfills the middle-class ideal with increasingly ridiculous precision, it seems that Howells takes a perverse pleasure in bringing the joke to its logical conclusion, and through Bartley's own reflections.

Howells's uneasiness with this essentially class condemnation surfaces in the scenes that follow. He tries one last time to argue that Bartley is not completely at fault for his perdition, that Marcia is complicit through her jealous accusations, this time that Bartley had had an affair while she was away, and this effectively drives the wedge between them: "Each had most need of the other's mercy, but neither would have mercy" (490). But one might find this appeal to sympathy disingenuous, for Howells quite unmercifully damned this marriage from the start, as he created neither character to be fit for it, and has suggested, perhaps inadvertently, that its failure was born of the historical chance of being lower middle class. The alternative, to take Howells's moralism seriously, would be to submit to the kind of cheap manipulation he complained of in the popular novel. Howells finds a purely technical way out of this double bind. Bartley abandons his wife and child and boards a train for the West, but after a night on the train he has one last impulse to make good on the marriage contract.

> Yet all the mute, obscure forces of habit, which are doubtless he strongest forces in human nature, were dragging him back to her. Because their lives had been united so long, it seemed impossible to sever them, though their union had been so full of misery and discord; the custom of marriage was so subtile and so pervasive, that his heart demanded sympathy for what he was suffering in abandoning her. The solitude into which he had plunged stretched before him so vast, so sterile and hopeless, that he had not the courage to realize it; he insensibly began to give it limits: he would return after so many months, weeks, days. (491)

Howells is up to date on his behaviorist theory. He puts aside moral volition and represents the marriage bond, and by implication any social piety, as an environmental adaptation. All the acquired social habits that hold a civilization together are absent in the unsocialized and inassimilable lower-class Bartley. But the scientific distance is cut down by the intimacy of indirect discourse and the suggestion of mechanical behavior

hits close to the home of middle-class self-determination. To the last Bartley proves impervious to the effort to impose a moral structure onto the progress of history, which the plot must carry out anyway. Howells's solution is to write Bartley out of the novel, with as little explanation as possible. There is no further ethical quandary; Bartley's wallet is stolen and he simply cannot pay for a return ticket. If the final claim that this is "the ruin he had chosen" (492) is meant to condemn him and protect the reader's sense propriety by affirming the notion of personal responsibility, how it actually does this is ambiguous. For it is uncertain now to what extent Howells believes in our capacities to choose, acting as we do through the acculturating influences of social history; and if he means to finally put the blame on Bartley, to inculcate a moral, he exercises a control over his character that belies his intentions as the objective historical novelist, not to mention his ideal of a class-blind justice.

Bartley's complaint that he is nagged at every step by a "hyper-critical omnipotence" is exactly right. For if Bartley is such the egotist with no sense of his own insignificance and of universal relativity that he must posit some reason for his predicament, it is because Howells made him so, deprived him of the self-awareness that would obviate the need for cosmic explanations and would rather bring his imagination to the solid ground of cause-and effect history. Bartley has always been living in a world of chance because Howells has never given him the capacity for motive that characters who drive their novels usually have. As the central viewpoint character, Bartley has led Howells so far into the realization of history's essential amorality—to which Howells was never that naïve to begin with—that the explicit critical statements within the narrative cannot fully convince the reader, or the author himself. Unlike the popular, the

romantic, and the English novel, in which the sentimental, the moral and the spiritual achieve successful unity, *A Modern Instance* finally lacks confidence in its assumed morality. In the disintegration of its formal and moral elements, the novel achieves an obvious dissonance, which may be taken as Howells's skepticism of the very middle-class pieties he professes, as a condemnation of American society and manners, or as an utter failure to live up to the ideals of organic form, of art. Contemporary readers mostly took the last two views, and were naturally too invested themselves to entertain the first as a possibility. But of course these achievements are related and entwined within the same formal process. It would be a mistake, however, to continue to think that Howells's novel fails in its formal project. His discoveries, whatever ideological doubts they might have raised, were consistent with his method, which as Howells describes it never posits a concept of organic holism but rather explicitly rejects such formal perfection as insensible to the historical experience. In fact, Howells does not seem to hold even an unconscious standard of formal perfection for the novel. When he wrote for the *Century* audience, who would have seen both *A Modern Instance* and *The Portrait of a Lady* in its pages within the previous two years, that the American novel was a finer art than that of Thackeray or Dickens, he was making a claim he meant to be taken quite seriously and literally.[17] Howells had by the time of this essay achieved a formal and historical alternative to the widely accepted and unexamined idea of the novel.

The abrupt removal of the central character, as a reaction to formal exigency, dramatizes the alternative form as it reveals rather than suppresses—reveals its inability to suppress—the ideological subconscious of the novel, and does this as a matter of course, in the very progress of the novel's unfolding. If the social developments that

Bartley Hubbard represents could not have been put aside from history, they can be put aside in the novel, but with the consequence that middle-class moral propriety seems a willful imposition of ideological narrowness and ignorance. It was precisely the "narrowness" of American fiction that for Howells made it historically relevant, for collectively it so represented the dispersed and heterogeneous middle class. But that kind of pluralism comes with the cost of smoothing over the real social distinctions, of manners and of historical circumstances beyond anyone's mere choosing, between the Bartley Hubbards of the world and the Howellses. I do not want to suggest that writing this scene in *A Modern Instance* shocked Howells into a realization of social inequality in the United States; something like this occurs over several years and several novels, and this novel is just a part of that process. The immediate realization is more local. What Howells does understand—as we will see in a moment, in his study of the bourgeois Atherton—is that Bartley's inherent rottenness is born of the novel's own assumption of upper middle-class moral dominance, which would never really recognize Bartley as an equal, as long, paradoxically, as he appears inassimilable and untamable. Howells is at an impasse with Bartley. Limited in self-consciousness and in his author's faith, Bartley cannot provide the self-propelled moral development that would at least assure the middle-class reader that this dreary analysis of the American middle class has not fully succumbed to disillusionment; but at the same time Bartley has always been a tacit reminder of the incorrigibility of the lower-class aberrancy on which the novel builds its historical analysis, only now what was tacit has become a real issue for the novel's progress. By ejecting Bartley, however, Howells does not get rid of his problem, but rather changes the terms under which he can deal with it. He takes up the questions of

the historical role of moral formulations and their validity as class constructions, which is to say he analyzes his own formal predicament, with characters who are closer socially to himself and to his reader. As we will see, little is resolved, but the novel is able to move forward.

Before moving away from Bartley, however, I would like to consider just how much an investment Howells makes in him and why. In a more novel more confidently committed to middle-class pieties, Bartley would never have been the central character but a minor one. Characters who are misguided and lacking in self-awareness do not have to be problems for their authors. Fred Vincy in *Middlemarch* can incur all the humiliation and misfortune that a mysterious and hypercritical universe will throw at him, but Eliot maintains her distance from him, for her real interest anyway is in Dorothea Brooke, whose middle-class commitments to a marriage of love and mutual understanding, to serving the poor as well as to self-fulfillment, are those of her author; these commitments hold the novel together, and Fred is a cautionary and comic sideshow. But as we see even in the instance of Ben Halleck, another wayward scion, characters who are prone to bouts of egotism in a Howells novel, even milder cases than Bartley Hubbard, arrest the novel's attention out of proportion to its capacity to rein in their implications (even poor Ben has to be exiled to South America at one point). By focusing on Bartley, Howells gives his novel over to a character whom he imagines from the start as limited, in perception and middle-class acculturation certainly, but also as a lens through which to refract the novel's own moral analysis without irony that suggests doubt. There is a perverse tendency in Howells to flirt with formal explorations that strain his more conscious ideological commitments, and as I have shown he tends to

overcompensate by making morality an explicit, and explicitly upper middle-class, issue. The next generation of naturalists like Frank Norris, for whom Howells was a writer of "teacup tragedies," imagined that they avoided Howells's problem by removing the precious bourgeois concern from their depictions of reality: limited characters were actually the point of their scientism, which was coolly detached and unemotional. The differences in realisms here is not an issue of truthful representations of life but, first, of the kind of science these writers thought they were doing—Howells thought it was a scientific-objective fact that people were governed by their manners, and so biology was not comparatively as interesting—and second, of method—Howells was not, in the final analysis, comfortable with his own prescription for narratorial non-intervention; the "risk of overmoralizing" was one he was compelled to take, lest the moral concern disappear altogether form the historical imagination. It was the confidence in this authorial control, which is at once social and formal, that led Howells at the outset to make Bartley Hubbard our liaison to the world of marriage and divorce, and he thought he could do this without providing the novel with a reassuring, morally unambiguous countervailing model.

Thus in the practice of art, as in only momentary lapses in life, Howells finds himself ambivalent to his class commitments. This was because the artist had no certain function in middle-class society, and there was moreover no apparent room in a commercial economy for the kind of imaginative contemplation, the slow, isolating work that went in to producing novels. Resigning from the editorship of the *Atlantic,* where he had been overworked, Howells agreed with Osgood to write, in addition to various shorter pieces, a novel a year in exchange for a weekly salary. His was the first

generation in which one could make a profession as a man of letters; but to lump the novelist into this category is to miss the incongruity between the novelist's interests and the American class system. Everyone observed class distinctions, but in democratic idealism everyone also wanted to deny their solidity. One might have looked at this situation as one of naïve egalitarianism and blandness, or one could have taken the contradictions as they came. James went to Europe, and Twain approached novel writing as a craft, akin to "working up" magazine stories, in the lowbrow manner of Bartley Hubbard (the phrase is Twain's as well as Hubbard's). Howells found himself somewhere in between. He strives in his criticism to marry cultivated and high-Romantic abstractions such as Beauty and Truth to the more workaday renderings of the commonplace. He rebels against the established notions of the high art novel and yet makes a claim for the artistry of the formless and historically rooted novel of middle-class concerns. His novels sold well in both the United States and in England, but he knew that the popular taste often gravitated to less serious forms, that American middle-class life did not always produce the conditions congenial to the art novel. "We are all, or nearly all, struggling to be distinguished from the mass, and to be set apart in the select circles and upper classes we have read about," he wrote of the American taste for English novels. "We really are a mixture of the plebeian ingredients of the world; but that is not bad; our vulgarity consists in trying to ignore 'the worth of the vulgar,' in believing that the superfine is better."[18] Howells never disavows his faith in the middle class, but their very commonness consists, as he says, in their aspiring to finer things, whether this means an ideology of material acquisition and social improvement, or a notion of what

qualifies as art. But this aspiration, held by many critics on both sides of the Atlantic, often derogated the kind of art he valued and practiced.

Rooted as he was in the business of writing and supporting a family in the United States, Howells understood his forays into Europe as bohemian jaunts but not as a commitment to the artist's life, as James did; and the various summering spots for the upper middle class that he frequented were not ascetic retreats for writing, in the manner of Flaubert. In fact the case of Flaubert offers an illustrative juxtaposition. Emma Bovary shares with Bartley Hubbard the function of the viewpoint character whom the author imagines to be socially inferior—provincial, ignorant, striving, beset by the petty material anxieties of the lower middle class, at times intelligent but mostly, constitutionally, detached from the surrounding reality by an intense self-importance born of their total lack of critical self-awareness. Both are therefore presented objectively and given little authority over their own perceptions; the effect is that, rather than being "life-like" or real, they appear to be mediums for their authors' artistic purposes. In the process—that is, in the process of writing, they garner their authors' respect. Emma's closely observed world, and our absorption in it, could only be achieved through Flaubert's own aesthetic sense, the pictures as he imagines them in the fullness of his novelistic world, and which only take shape in the unfolding of sentences and paragraphs. When the doctor, Larivier, a stranger to the inanities of Yonville l' Abbaye, enters upon Emma's death and sheds a tear, we are surely meant to share his regret, for Flaubert understands that the very critical mass that the novel achieves, largely with Emma's help, requires this recognition of her worth and concomitantly of the novel's achievement. Thus in art Flaubert finds himself identified with the middle class he so intensely hates.

Howells later confessed to Brander Matthews that he had "drawn Bartley Hubbard, the false scoundrel, from himself," but unlike Flaubert, his attitude toward the middle class was ambivalent rather than hostile. But this only meant that, in the morally fastidious milieu of the United States, Howells's identification with Bartley seemed more scandalous, not less, and Howells instinctively knew this would be the case. His style is thus quite different from Flaubert's. He often qualifies the close descriptions of the content of Bartley's perceptions by an immediate move into the explicit objective mode, lest he confuse his own aesthetic sense with his character's acuity. An illustrative instance occurs when Bartley finds himself, with Marcia and the baby away in Equity for a visit (he has just received her letter), practically living a bachelor's life in Boston. I quote the entire paragraph in order to give the sense of Howells's extended observation.

> Bartley realized Flavia's existence with an effort, and the rest of this letter bored him. What could he care about Olive Halleck's coming, or Ben Halleck's staying away? All that he asked of Ben Halleck was a little extension of time when his interest fell due. The whole thing was disagreeable; and he resented what he considered Marcia's endeavor to clap the domestic harness on him again. His thoughts wandered to conditions, to contingencies of which a man does not permit himself even to think without a degree of moral disintegration. In these ill-advised reveries he mused upon his life as it might have been if he had never met her, or if they had never met after her dismissal of him. As he recalled the facts, he was at that time in an angry and embittered mood, but he was in a mood of entire acquiescence; and the reconciliation had been of her own seeking. He could not blame her for it; she was very much in love with him, and he had been fond of her. In fact, he was still very fond of her; when he thought of little ways of hers, it filled him with tenderness. He did justice to her fine qualities, too: her generosity, her truthfulness, her entire loyalty to his best interests; he smiled to realize that he himself preferred his second-best interests, and in her absence he remembered that her virtues were tedious and even painful at times. He had his doubts whether there were sufficient compensation in them. He sometimes questioned whether he had not made a great mistake to get married; he expected now to stick it through; but this doubt occurred to him. A moment came in which he asked himself, What if he had never come back to Marcia that night when she locked him out of her room? Might it not have been better for both of them? She would soon have reconciled herself to the irreparable; he even thought of her happy in a second marriage; and the thought did not enrage him; he generously

> wished Marcia well. He wished—he hardly knew what he wished. He wished nothing at all but to have his wife and child back again as soon as possible; and he put aside with a laugh the fancies which really found no such distinct formulation as I have given them; which were mere vague impulses, arrested mental tendencies, scraps of undirected reverie. Their recurrence had nothing to do with what he felt to be his sane and waking state. But they recurred, and he even amused himself in turning them over. (477-78)

Howells's "mannerless" style is the perfect expressive vehicle for Bartley's direct and artless thinking ("meditation" would not quite be the right term here). The art is rather in Howells's formal construction of the passage, a translation of his sense of the careless middle-class mind, which he posits as a function of more general historical developments that make divorce possible; but the composition and style of the passage are intentionally artless. Bartley's thoughts riff on the theme of his marriage in variations. They begin with questions immediately pertinent (*What could he care about Olive Halleck's coming, or Ben Halleck's staying away?),* then move to the thesis of his reverie (*he resented what he considered Marcia's endeavor to clap the domestic harness on him again)*; then his thoughts move from the past (*As he recalled the facts*) to the imagined future (*he even thought of her happy in a second marriage)*, with detours along the way, to Marcia (*He did justice to her fine qualities)*, to self-consideration (*he smiled to realize that he himself preferred his second-best interests),* to hypotheticals (*What if he had never come back to Marcia that night when she locked him out of her room?*) But embedded in this loosely structured sequence of thoughts are shades of subtext that characterize Bartley's psychology: *In fact, he was still very fond of her; when he thought of little ways of hers, it filled him with tenderness. He did justice to her fine qualities, too: her generosity, her truthfulness, her entire loyalty to his best interests*. The motive for crediting Marcia here, and his tenderness, is at once ingenuous but also completely

self-justificatory, self-congratulatory. Howells always grants Bartley some credence and never holds him up to the reader's mere derision through ironic detachment; yet we wonder if we should not discount Bartley's logic after all. The narrator's identification with Bartley becomes more ambiguous as Howells does not clearly distinguish them: *He wished—he hardly knew what he wished. He wished nothing at all but to have his wife and child back again as soon as possible*; even as Bartley apparently snaps out of his reverie it is not so certain that this is not another self-absolving trick of Bartley's own mind and not the narrator's objectification.

When Howells returns to a distinct narratorial mode, *the fancies which really found no such distinct formulation as I have given them; which were mere vague impulses, arrested mental tendencies, scraps of undirected reverie*, the psychological rhetoric suggests that what we have been watching is an analysis rather than a "reverie." As a piece of imaginative writing, the paragraph has come uncomfortably close to entertaining Bartley's transgressive fancies. The narrator warns us that these are "ill-advised reveries," but this hardly compensates for the matter-of-fact assumption, just before—*His thoughts wandered to conditions, to contingencies of which a man does not permit himself even to think without a degree of moral disintegration*—that such thoughts, or rather the suppression of such thoughts, are more general to Howells's readers, such that a statement like this would make sense as a psychological speculation. The very analysis, whatever claim is finally made to its purely speculative quality, requires Howells to imagine the very psychology that could slip so easily from the constraints of ideology, and the more involved this imagination becomes with its creation, the more both author and reader become convinced by the very deepening of the

language's suggestion; if there is any scandal in Bartley's dissipation it is subsumed into the detached experience of art. The very claim that Howells makes, to give form ("formulate") to the unseen, even unsuspected historical causes of marital breakdown, which can only be found in a literary rumination on the middle-class unconscious, is itself an extraordinary claim to the prerogatives of art. The moral purpose of the writing thus comes mixed with aesthetic delight, the transcendence of any moral concern. The passage suggests a fissure in the middle-class imagination, presenting to the reader his own propensity for errancy from within, as it were.

But the fissure is visible for the attempt to conceal it. The passage makes a last-ditch effort to show Bartley's reverie as a mere construction, to show that what is plainly suggested does not really exist in any form, was not even really *thought*, for Bartley is not a thinker. Whereas in his sole concern for the possibilities of art Flaubert would let his contradictions remain in his work, for art has the last word, Howells cannot but try to reinforce his ideological commitments. In his critical moods he thought that art did not, and should not, transcend its immediate social world, but had to remain at the level of, and be in the service of, common sense. The culture at large was in a rage for practicality, and those who valued classical learning or the higher arts found themselves making arguments that a life of the mind had also to be useful. Practically Howells never could have retreated from his middle-class circumstances, from the spirit of his age and his class, which was forward-thinking and acquisitive; he could not have experienced, as Flaubert did, the flourishing of the middle class as a sense of loss but of unquestionable historical progress, by which he himself had gained. The disavowal of the imaginative identification that we see at the end of our passage, which suggests a "realistic"

representation of a psychological process, is in its commitment to realism also the suppression of aesthetic transcendence.

The paradox of limited characters is that they exact from their authors who still believe in the interior life and the moral world a kind of aesthetic commitment that complicates any position of critical detachment. Novelists usually do not identify themselves with their characters, at least not publicly, and with good reason, but it is worth noticing that both Flaubert and Howells did. They were not naïve or flippant, it was not the personae they identified with but rather, I think, the formal achievement these characters represented, and not merely in their completion but in their process of construction, in the actual writing, the "intensity," as Howells called it, of creative effort. So if Howells removes Bartley from his novel in order to forestall the moral and political problems that Bartley entails, he also removes a vital creative principle. But he could not have imagined, or would not, a referent in the contemporary world that would allow him to follow out Bartley's implications, for to do so would have meant making Bartley a much worse candidate for divorce: cruel, possibly violent, an incorrigible drunk, an outright criminal—any of these would have advanced the plot toward the inevitable divorce and would have been historically accurate to divorce statutes, to boot. But then Howells would have produced the kind of novel he was very intentionally rejecting, one of sensation and "spice" that distracted the reader form serious moral reflection. With Bartley he seems to reach a point at which there us nothing left to write, and nowhere to go.

Nevertheless Bartley has defined the novel's moral trajectory, and with him gone Howells must still work out, or rather he mulls over, the problems Bartley has raised for

the novel. He does this through the character of Ben Halleck, who is more cerebral, more reflective than Bartley was, and despite having fallen to the periphery of upper-class Boston, he still maintains for the reader an authority in issues of morality that is his birthright, even if he uses that authority to doubt his inheritance and often himself. His presence in the novel is justified by his function in a subplot, in which Howells has him secretly in love with Marica Hubbard, for whose sake alone Halleck loans the money that Bartley nearly gambles away and eventually loses in making his escape from married life. This subplot becomes the main plot once Bartley is gone, but as Ben is essentially paralyzed by the conservative morality that has come to constitute the real tragic superstructure of the novel, personified in the lawyer Atherton, he can only talk about his sinful longings but he can never act. Moreover Howells has him sufficiently invested in the very morality he rebels against, and so Ben is never even permitted the transgressive flights that Bartley enjoyed. The novel therefore comes to a virtual stand-still for several chapters.

But it is precisely Ben's conflicted position that, at first, makes him a safer vehicle for exploring the moral implications of the history of the middle class that has developed in the novel. Like Bartley, Ben is not identified with the novel's social class; Howells demotes him from the upper class in order to associate him with the Hubbards. His not having gone to Harvard, his moribund orthodoxy, even his lameness, which Howells equates to a moral fastidiousness that makes him at once virtuous and tiresome (in childhood he was carelessly injured by another boy, toward whom he harbors no resentment as an adult), all make him unfit for the amoral modernity of genteel society: "Of course, I'm not going to say that leather is quite as blameless as cotton, socially, but

taken in the wholsesale form it isn't so very malodorous" (362). We can hear Howells's characteristic irony here, which as usual hovers around agnosticism about the justice of things as they are. Ben is thus also at a further handicap—a complete lack of conviction—in any campaign he may wage against the dominant ideology, and so Howells can have him speak the immorality of divorce logic and yet still rein in the implications, checking him with either the strictures of Atherton or with a reminder of his guilty love for a married woman. "I use my reason, and I see who it was that defiled and destroyed that marriage, and I know that she is as free in the sight of God as if [Bartley] had never lived," he says to Atherton, arguing that Marcia "can get a divorce."

> If the world doesn't like my open shame, let it look to its own secret shame—the marriages made and maintained from interest and ambition and vanity and folly. I will take my chance with the men and women who have been honest enough to own their mistake, and to try to repair it, and I will preach by my life that marriage has no sanctity but what love gives it, and that, when love ceases, marriage ceases, before heaven. If the laws have come to recognize that, by whatever fiction, so much the better for the laws! (539)

The men and women Ben refers to are, of course, all those in the novel's contemporary world who have sought divorces, whom Atherton calls a "community of outcasts." Yet whatever Atherton's disgust for "our infamous laws," Halleck still speaks in the past tense—the morality and the laws that go with it are already advancing; Ben is only advancing with them. His words reflect a historical progression that is already beyond the reach of the novel's concern, and for the passage to have any resonance at all the reader should be able to recognize the arguments from reason and love as potentially valid. It is not Atherton, finally, who sets Ben straight, nor is it, as the narrator claims, Marcia, whose appeal to Ben to help her find her lost husband "struck his passion dumb." It is Howells who lowers the moral boom: "In that delusion his love was to have been a

law unto itself, able to loose and to bind, and potent to beat down all regrets, all doubts, all fears, that questioned it" (539). Having brought Ben to speak explicitly the modern justification for divorce that the novel had been exploring in other ways and with uncertain moral implications, Howells retracts and admonishes, just as explicitly. More self-conscious and more invested in upper-class society, Ben has no recourse to the abandon that Bartley has, and his firm roots in the dominant morality, what the novel calls his "conscience," permits him in the end to hold fast in the face of history.

Indeed Ben seems to bear the moral beating that Howells cannot bring upon Bartley, who just would not understand. Bartley's intransigence, his very identification with the historical progress Howells is trying to analyze, makes him difficult to work with; like a problem child he cannot be taught to obey the conventional rules of conduct, because he has no inherent respect for the "civilization" the novel to the last believes in. Ben is the good boy who watches on, disgusted, but who is secretly jealous of the bad boy's freedom and would rather tempt the scorn of his parents, to be exposed as a fraud, than for his secret longings to go unrecognized. This is not an issue of characters' psychology, of course, but of the novel's form: Ben's character merely reflects his function in the novel, to mitigate the problems Bartley caused; through him Howells can at least keep the novel's moral sense alive where Bartley's historical significance undermined it. I say "mitigates," for Ben does not finally provide Howells with an affirmative moral principle, but in his conflicted nature he rather figures as a resignation to uncertainty, even to skepticism. Howells clearly conflates the characters' functions when he takes up the issue of the novel's class-based condemnation of Bartley, in a scene where Ben encounters the Athertons "at coffee":

> he looked listlessly about the room, aware of a perverse sympathy with Bartley, from Bartley's point of view: Bartley might never have gone wrong if he had had all that luxury; and why should he not have it, as well as Atherton? What right had the untempted prosperity of such a man to judge the guilt of such men as himself and Bartley Hubbard? (546)

Ben's own self-justification is at work here; nevertheless Howells is placing the libertarian implications of his novel, characterized in Bartley and Halleck, in opposition to the novel's upper middle-class moral structure. This reflexive self-examination has become so integral to the novel's logic that as Ben takes over the central role from Bartley, Howells continues to confront the conflict between his instinctive grasp of history and his moral beliefs. In fact Ben's questions are literal formulations of the ones Howells has continuously found his novel to raise: How can an unquestionable moral ideology be reconciled with the exigencies of formal development, which are responsive to history? From where does the upper middle-class author, who imagines his characters into being from what he knows as the contemporary social milieu, get the authority to manipulate these types in order to satisfy an ideological imperative that is itself only part, a socially interested one, of the history it attempts to represent?

Howells does attempt to answer these questions, but he is particularly careful now not to answer them too decidedly, for he becomes interested in the issues of form that he is discovering and therefore sees no reason or way to resolve them. As the representation of the novel's overt ideological position, what one might call Howells's critical mode, Atherton goes right the heart of these issues. In the chapter following the one I just cited, the Athertons are again at tea, an event at the nexus of upper middle-class respectability, the morally righteous and the domestic. Here we see Atherton as he lifts "with his slim, delicate hand, the cup of translucent china, and drained off the fragrant Souchong,

sweetened, and tempered with Jersey cream to perfection" (555). The privilege of class within a global market are unmistakably tied to Atherton's fastidiousness, even to a femininity which, immediately following his disquisition on the vanquishing of brutishness by civilization, suggests that the "fittest" are not fit in the way that popular evolutionary thought would like to have it; in this passage, the winners in competitive economics are, as far as nature goes, effete.

> "The natural goodness doesn't count. The natural man is a wild beast, and his natural goodness is the amiability of the beast basking in the sun when his stomach is full. The Hubbards were full of natural goodness, I dare say, when they didn't happen to cross each other's wishes. No, it's the implanted goodness that saves,--the seed of righteousness treasured from generation to generation, and carefully watched and tended by disciplined fathers and mothers in the hearts where they dropped it. The flower of this implanted goodness is what we call civilization, the condition of general uprightness that Halleck declared he owed no allegiance to. But he as better than his word."

The immediate concern of the speech is Ben's struggle to preserve his moral instinct, but it is easy to see here a summary of the entire novel. It is also a statement of the novel's thesis and the logic that informs it; and as such it reveals its basic problems. It was precisely on the appeal to natural goodness that the novel's sympathy with the Hubbards lay, and the tragedy for Howells is in the very insufficiency of their sympathetic natures where cultivation is lacking. This premise is consistent with popular Victorian notions of culture, which at the time of Howells's writing had not been disintegrated from its evolutionist trappings: manners and taste could, through consistent practice and education, be sewn into the habits of a race, which Howells here takes as the American one. But the obvious critique of Atherton's own privileged rectitude is a reminder that Howells is putting this Victorian ideology into a specifically American context, where economic prosperity has brought into contact a diversity of social

elements, which all might defined as the middle class. Why else would someone like Atherton even have to be concerned with the Hubbards? The novel's logic has been to unfold through the tensions produced by this contact of different elements, a new social phenomenon for the urbanite novelist, and as Bartley and Ben Halleck have demonstrated, Howells is not as comfortable with an ideology of naturalized social distinction and its assumed moral laws as Atherton's rhetoric would suggest.

Thus as the scene progresses Atherton speaks to the difficulty that the novel's own ideological circumstance presents for its construction. "Sometimes when I think of it, I am ready to renounce all judgment of others, " he says, but after the novel's own fashion he is not quite ready to cede his ground. "But somehow the effects follow the causes. In some sort they chose misery for themselves,--we make our own hell in this life and the next,--or it was chosen for them by undisciplined wills that they inherited. In the long run their fate must be a just one" (556). The quick shift from "they" to "we," *they chose misery for themselves,--we make our own hell in this life*, which posits a moral judgment as a universal statement, is the tacit assumption of realism, and in the case of this particular novel, of the effort to justify the sacrifice of the Hubbards in the name of affirming conventional middle-class values. And yet even as Howells has been careful to plot his novel so that "the effects follow the causes"—Bartley and Marcia are indeed complicit in their own misfortunes—the novel never appears fully convinced that such limited characters, so unconscious of their world and of their own minds, really do *choose* their fates; in fact this is a novel that works on the formal premise that characters do not have to make choices in the conventional sense, that choice does not always emerge from, or in obvious violation of, the novel's moral sense. The novel in fact

repeatedly makes it difficult for the reader to gage the appropriate moral response to its characters. Atherton's further qualification, *or it was chosen for them by undisciplined wills that they inherited*, takes up the problem I identified earlier, that history in the novel is a progress without the immanent morality required for unequivocal arguments. Atherton's severe and rational pronouncement that "their fate must be a just one" is therefore too insistent. Howells wants to explain by this appeal to transcendent justice what he has done with his characters, but Atherton's reservation, *must be a just one*, only indicates Howells's uncertainty, which at this point he cannot resolve and so must leave as a mere conceptual proposition.

It is this tendency to overtly assert order where his formal discoveries reveal an instinct for rupture that has given Howells for a century the reputation of being a prig, a "pious old maid," to use Sinclair Lewis's devastating and not unusual characterization. The mere assertion always seems to weigh more than the disruptive instinct in these imputations, however, which shows just how thoroughly the reading for content over form has come to define our assumptions about the realistic novel. "You know how I hate anything that sins against order, and this whole thing is disorderly," Atherton complains; and of course *this whole thing* is the novel itself, its plot, its theme, the way Howells has handled it, and when he reacts through his character to the implications of the novel's content, Howells comments on this handling, reflects on his work. Realism for Howells did not inhere in the mere content of his depictions but in their "truth," the way depictions manifest through the compositional process the novelist's sense of the contemporary world; novels refer to these worlds not primarily through verisimilitude but as records of the literary processes by which writers *think through* their worlds. It is

"necessary to judge books not as dead things, but as living things," Howells writes in *Criticism and Fiction*, "things which have an influence and a power irrespective of beauty and wisdom, and merely as expressions of actuality in thought and feeling."[19] Thought and feeling is precisely what Atherton represents, the upper middle-class intellectual's response to the fragmented, "horizontal civilization" that Howells conceived his America to be, a formulation that belies its own purely democratic intention, as it could only arise from the limited and apprehensive perspective of the upper middle class: who else would be concerned with this leveling and still insist on its civilization? The theory of an organic society that Atherton posits—"We're all bound together. No one sins or suffers to himself in a civilized state"—is thoroughly bourgeois in its retroactive strike on the socially and morally ambiguous progress of history. The stilted and artificial dialogue, so obviously the author's interjections, are nevertheless constitutive of the novel's historical realism, for the novel's attempt to gloss over its own incoherence, only when it is too late, is the register of an apprehension amongst the upper middle class that it was not after all ideologically dominant, that the mass of Bartleys out there, unconsciously torn between the emulation of their social superiors and a nagging sense that the cards are stacked against them, was more ambivalent, and more pervasive, and therefore that the historical trend was toward the relativization of bourgeois morality.

We can see why Howells thought that his realism was different from his English and French precursors: his method does not finally permit him to reinforce the transcendental moral framework of the novel. Formally there is no way to resolve its inherent social tensions. And yet he must finish the novel and, moreover, he must get to the divorce trial, which from the novel's conception has been the projected climax and is

essentially hardwired into the plot. After the jettisoning of Bartley Hubbard, the novel's quest for its formal completion begins under difficult circumstances, for there is no ideological certainty that could lead Howells to a satisfactory resolution, which he would probably reject at this point anyway, as pandering to his reader's reflexive yen for closure.

His solution, in the last five chapters, is to turn to the romance. Howells understood the romance as a mode of representation in which characters can operate as ideas and therefore transcend their immediate historical trappings, which means that the writer is also at liberty to direct his plot beyond history and thus give formal exigency primacy over historical accuracy. The difference from realism, or what Howells called the "novel," is really in the extent to which the writer manipulates his material, a difference of degree rather than kind. Though it was an "outworn" form, the romance was nevertheless an extrapolation from the contemporary world and therefore, in its way, mimetic, and Howells considered it a formally experimental option for the realistic novelist. For example, in his first essay on Henry James, published in the *Century* just months after the appearances of *A Modern Instance* and *The Portrait of a Lady* in the same magazine, Howells wrote that James "stood at the dividing ways of the novel and the romance. . . His best efforts seem to me those of romance; his best types have an ideal development, like Isabel[.]" It is the formal possibilities that Isabel generates that interests Howells; from that novel we learn "that it is the pursuit and not the end which should give us pleasure; for James often prefers to leave us to our own conjectures in regard to the fate of the people in whom he has interested us." The indeterminacy of James's ending, a formal decision that does not take Isabel out of her historical milieu but

nevertheless does not absolutely embed her in it either, constitutes a "new kind in fiction," because unlike the conventional moral structures of the English novel, James's (an by implication Howells's) elicits the reader's "conjecture," a kind of formal completion in itself, and thus the novel opens up to the various, perhaps even contradictory ideological interpretations available in the immediate historical context. The novelist moves between modes of representation in order to imagine, and to propose, alternative visions of the problems raised within the novel, which are also those of the external world.

The final chapters of *A Modern Instance* have always bewildered readers, precisely because the novel's moral structure breaks down, because it lapses from strict realism, and because it therefore apparently fails to achieve a coherent vision. But as I have said earlier, the ideology immanent to these ways of reading requires formal holism, for the novel is supposed to contain its own solutions, apart from the world it represents. I have tried to show, however, that on the contrary, the novel requires its reader to move within and without the basic middle-class values that appear natural and given, to both the novel's and the reader's sense of social reality—it is not surprising that readers would be confused and even disturbed to see Howells fall short of affirming these values. The finale, like James's ending that Howells admired, actually produces for Howells as much historically relevant meaning as the rest of the novel, no more or less than history itself contains in the novelist's construal of it.[20] Howells brings the plot to a resolution and scatters the various characters to their eternal fates, but this appears to be the main function of the romance form; he does not finally resolve any of the philosophical issues that the bulk of his novel has raised.

Of course, the immediate details of plot and style would seem to belie any commitment to a recognizable world the novel has until now shown. It was particularly scandalous to a reader accustomed to sympathizing with the heart of domestic morality, the wife, that it is the husband, Bartley, who files for the divorce. But the legal reality presented its own travesties. Bartley would only have been required to sign an affidavit claiming residency in Indiana in order to petition for divorce; worse, the courts treated divorce suits as torts—Bartley would have had to sue for damages, which is what he in fact does, certain that Marcia would never find out about the suit and so forfeit her rights to defense. The standard means of summoning the defendant to court was through a newspaper announcement; in cases of abandonment, this was the only possibility of notifying wayward spouses of the charges brought against them. Howells gets around this technicality by having the Indiana newspaper announcing Bartley's suit reach Ben Halleck in Boston by an extraordinary chance. Addressed mysteriously to "Mrs. B. Hubbard," but apparently with no clear address, the paper circulates among other Bostonians with the same initials, until someone scribbles the Hallecks' Rumford Street address on it; indeed, Ben initially reads the addressee as "Mr. B. Halleck" (543). The occurrence is so improbable that Howells offers an explanation for it, and one that does not strictly observe the protocol of realistic chance. Ben shows the notice to Olive, speculating that Bartley intentionally had the paper misdirected.

> "And it has come to you! Oh, Ben! Who sent it to *you*?" The brother and sister looked at each other, but neither spoke the awe-stricken thought that was in both their hearts. "Ben," she cried, in a solemn ecstasy of love and pride, "I would rather be you this minute than any other man in the world!" (546)

Either way we read this, as the siblings' religious interpretation of a purely fortuitous event, or as the novel's sudden endorsement of the idea of supernatural intervention, it is clear that the exigencies of plot, and the moral imperative to which the characters must respond, override the concern for realistic probability; we are asked to simply accept this aporia in order to move forward. The reader is also asked to accept Olive's conversion, or reversion, from the skeptical observer of upper-class pretensions to equalitarianism and piety, to someone who, in light of her brother's apparent calling to defend the wronged wife-mother Marcia, is chastened without a fight by conventional morality: "And I *do* like quiet, and orderly ways, and all that we call respectability," she says later, in order to justify their strange mission to Indiana (560).

With these adjustments, Howells enlists the reader's sympathy in the cause to defend Marcia, but he also enlists the reader in the cause of divorce, in this case to vindicate the novel's domestic morality against the immorality it has released in Bartley. Howells somewhat deflects responsibility for the suggestion by having it spoken by Clara Atherton, whose function has recently been to provide the right cues for her husband's magisterial pronouncements: "Abandonment!" she says, when she hears of Bartley's charge, and she is as eager to join the cause as anyone, at least in spirit. "Oh, if they only knew how she had been slaving her fingers off for the last two years to keep a home for him to come back to, they'd give *her* the divorce!" (547). We are meant to share her husband's condescending smile at this simple and inadvertently scandalous remark, but we might also reflect on how the novel cannot by this point avoid the suggestion of a counter-suit, especially now that marriage to Bartley is a morally impossible scenario. And we see just how far Howells will go in marshalling his authorial prerogatives to

avoid the stain of the suggestion in the final courtroom scene, when the Squire, in a moment of vengeful inspiration, surprises everyone by proposing a cross-petition for divorce; and now that the necessary proposal has been made, Howells strikes the Squire down into a state of paralysis with all the force of an angry God. Thus the novel can seem to condemn what it cannot dispel, to recoil from what it has to imagine. Yet these obvious manipulations of plot do not permit an escape from history, they only throw the novel's historical implications into relief: now that it has taken up the issue at all, the novel finds itself having to endorse at least one motive for divorce if it wants to preserve the sanctity of the virtuous wife.

Some of the novel's last-minute surrealism, in fact, goes toward justifying Marcia's part in the final separation. In the prospectus to the novel Howells had written that "the reader's sympathy is chiefly with the wife because she inevitably suffers most," completely consonant with popular middle-class sentiment and, in most cases, with practical reality. Though Marcia tries to be the preserver of the middle-class home to the last—she never recognizes Ben as a possible replacement for her absent husband, even though we do—Howells is careful to show that she is complicit in the destruction of her marriage, through her incessant jealousy and irrational self-absorption. Moreover, she fails in the most important domestic duty, to maintain her husband's moral soundness through patience and forbearance. But of course we do not blame her in the way we have come to blame Bartley, for hers was a negative power; whereas the novel's intimacy with Bartley's mind and motivation suggests at least some volition, Marcia's assaults on the marriage bond are essentially uncontrollable. "So many readers detest her," Howells wrote, as the reviews appeared, "but to my mind she had a generous soul with limitations

that appeal only to my pity."[21] She agrees to go to Indiana, not to fight Bartley in court, but to renew her marriage: "O Bartley! poor Bartley! He thought I could leave him, and take his child from him. . . But we can explain it now, and it will be all right. He will see—he will understand—I will tell him just how it was" (549). But Howells tempers this innocence with something sinister. When to shake her out of her naïve optimism the Squire suggests that Bartley has already remarried (which turns out not to be true), Marcia undergoes a transformation:

> The languor was gone from [her] limbs. As she confronted her father, the wonderful likeness in the outline of their faces appeared. His was dark and wrinkled with age, and hers was gray with anger that drove the blood back to her heart; but one impulse animated those fierce profiles, and the hoarded hate in the old man's soul seemed to speak in Marcia's thick whisper, "I will go." (551)

Howells presents these impressions as objective truth, without qualifying them through the perspective of another character. The unusual style, which reminds one of Hawthorne, is absolutely serious; the foreboding is therefore no mere suggestion, it is the new condition on which we are to understand these characters. Now we are in a novel in which evil has a substance, the texture and color of skin, and a trans-substantive power on the level of demonic possession. In this way, Howells can explain how the domestic ideal can be implicated in its own disintegration, without suggesting that there is a problem immanent to the ideal itself, that it is perhaps based on transcendental values that are at odds with the progress of history. We retain our sympathy with Marcia and all that she represents, while the malignancy seems to be introduced from the outside, from where evil always comes. The taint of her participation in the journey West is unmistakable—"Do you suppose she has the same motive?" Ben wonders at her sudden

change under her father's influence. "I couldn't forgive her!" (560)—but the ideal of her passivity and faith at least seem untouched.

As if to dramatize just how far ahead of Northeastern conservatism the novel has brought him, Howells represents the West as the future that has already happened, and indeed the Hallecks and Gaylords can only stare out from train windows as if the landscape outside were unfolding their own obsolescence. This is truly an instance of manifest destiny, from the frontiersman's perspective, from which Howells is now viewing his characters, whose physical displacement figures the historical one. It is an interesting development, that once Howells abandons his strict historical-realist approach he is also able to fully separate himself from his New England cultural allegiances; the novel seems now to have given up on its cautious observance of the urban middle-class propriety it has tacitly promoted for its reader, and seems rather to have finally achieved a self-objective position. The West accordingly appears as a developing paradise. Amidst the rolling hills, the farmers on their plows, and livestock, the Northeasterners see "little towns full of signs of material prosperity" (567). Ben, torn between his inherited morality and being an apologist for progress, is given a glimpse of things to come:

> There is something in this transformation of man's old-time laborious dependence into a lordly domination over the earth, which strikes the westward journeyer as finally expressive of human destiny in the whole mighty region, and which penetrated even to Halleck's sore and jaded thoughts. A different type of men began to show itself in the car, as the Western people gradually took the places of his fellow-travelers from the East. The men were often slovenly and sometimes uncouth in their dress; but they made themselves at home in the exaggerated splendor and opulence of the car, as if born to the best in every way; their faces suggested the security of people who trusted the future from the past, and had no fears of the life that had always used them well; they had not that eager and intense look which the Eastern faces wore; there was energy enough to spare in them, but it was not an anxious energy. (566)

Having sprung from the earth, which was claimed in order to be developed, these westerners make no apologies for their clear conscience and forward movement, the signs of their modernity; they are the essence of the American modern. The change in setting, in subject matter, and in perspective, both the characters' and the novel's, appear to relax the "eager and intense look" the novel has worn throughout.

In this arcadian vision the Midwesterners typify in their spirit the middle-class ideal that Howells did not find in the historical trajectory of the Northeast. They constitute little more than an idealized backdrop against which to set his central characters, but they permit Howells to disengage from the contentious compromise his novel has made between commitment to the middle-class norms of New England, and the external perspective, which is critical, even irreverent toward this effete culture. Only a transplanted Midwesterner, these final scenes suggest, could see these Bostonians for what they were. The price, of course, is a sense of abandon; the novel seems to give up on its inner tension and instead, by the sheer movement of characters across geographical space and through a series of episodes, to advance itself eagerly toward a resolution. Sometimes in the attempt to disguise this eagerness Howells seems to stall for time, and thus having to account for his characters in the meanwhile, he finds himself heightening their idealized qualities in order to preserve a sense of development and suspense. His self-consciousness shows. When, before reaching Tecumseh, the train halts at a broken rail and the passengers scatter over the prairie to kill time, Ben articulates the novel's own self-reflection. As if to invoke the episodic novel he loved so much (and perhaps the tempered ambition of his own novel) Howells presents his characters with an Indiana windmill, built by "an old Dutchmen" miller on the prairie. "How strange that it should

be here, away out in the West," Olive says. "If it were less strange than we are here," Ben replies, "I couldn't stand it" (572). The complete foreignness of the windmill, this little bit of Europe on the American plains, indicates the difference, upon which Howells cannot help but to comment, between the way the form of his novel had been unfolding according to historical instinct, and now the obvious insertion of novelistic elements that bring artifice to the fore. In contrast to a plot that emerged out from a close observation of manners, these fantastical effects could only seem clunky and over-insistent. Consider, finally, the Squire, "grossly" feeding at train station restaurants in order to feed his hatred, or so Howells wants to suggest. The Squire has actually shown a preternatural resurgence in health since he has taken on the cause of destroying Bartley, and it is largely on the fulfillment of this abstract vengeance that the novel hopes to build the suspense that will see the reader through to the ending. In the climactic courtroom scene, where the Squire delivers his condemnation of Bartley and demands his incarceration as a bigamist (a demand, the novel is clear, made in hatred and not on the facts), Howells continues to allude overtly to other fictional forms.

> The old man's nasals cut across the judge's rounded tones, almost before they had ceased. His lips compressed themselves to a waving line, and his high hawk-beak came down over them; the fierce light burned in his cavernous eyes, and his grizzled hair erected itself like a crest. He swayed slightly back and forth at the table, behind which he stood, and paused as if waiting for his hate to gather head. (577)

Howells usual method is to aim for social analysis in the close observation of physical features, but here description in completely in the service of plot. He makes no attempt to disguise the literary-constructed essence that is Squire Gaylord, who is more bird from hell than he is man. There are influences, even symbolic depth, in this

representation, which are totally uncharacteristic of Howells's usual style. When Marcia foils the Squire's plan by pleading for Bartley's acquittal, he falls back with a "ghastly" look and in "convulsive gasps" and, as we learn, into paralysis; he has fulfilled his function. Marcia's unremitting love and innocence has driven evil back into its corner, broken its spell, and thus the novel achieves the kind of dramatic resolution that its initial aesthetic premises would seem to have foreclosed.

Except that this does not resolve the novel's more interesting difficulties. The novel never took seriously the efficacy of a symbolic vision of history or of everyday life. It never managed to regret the loss of theological conviction, and rather found itself ambivalently on the side of progress, and thus, except for punctuated moments of narratorial declaration, listed toward moral agnosticism. When Bartley finally returns in the flesh, most of it surely dry rot, he achieves for the novel a sense of compositional completion; however, his final scene also solidifies the novel's formal significance as ultimately uncertain about the world it explores and the attitude it wishes to take. After the trial, Ben is invited to a clandestine nighttime meeting with Bartley, who with characteristic insouciance articulates the moral logic the novel has resisted, but has simultaneously found itself to have corroborated. "Halleck, you are a good fellow," Bartley says, and we should keep in mind that Ben has maintained the middle-class sense of moral propriety in the face of the novel's challenges; and so again the novel seems to address its own ideological position.

> You are *such* a good fellow that you can't understand this thing. But it's played out. I felt badly about it myself, at one time; and if I hadn't been robbed of that money you lent me on my way here, I'd have gone back inside of forty-eight hours. I was sorry for Marcia; it almost broke my heart to think of the little one; but I knew they were in the hands of friends; and the more time I had to think it over, the more I was reconciled to what I had done. That was the only way out

> for either of us. We had tried it for three years, and we couldn't make it go; we were incompatible. Don't you suppose I knew Marcia's good qualities? No one knows them better, or appreciates them more. You might think that I applied for this divorce because I had some one else in view. Not any more in mine at present! But I thought we ought to be free, both of us; and if our marriage had become a chain, that we ought to break it." (583)

As usual, Bartley comes off at once as sympathetically ingenuous, even accurate—his account of his flight is exactly as the novel presented it—and at the same time suspiciously self-justifying. Howells's ambivalence says it all. Bartley speaks right to the novel's own difficult realizations, even the vague *understanding*, of the historical forces that have come to bear on its moral project; it is no wonder that Bartley can justify himself even to the bitter end, for Howells cannot dismiss Bartley's significance without losing his own purchase on what makes the character so compelling. And so he permits Bartley his say, a sort of ode on nonchalance to counter Ben's tortured self-discipline. Ben's disgust is only implicit; Howells does not record his reaction, but relies on the reader to supply the response, and without this explicit guide to the scene, Bartley's feints at conscience assume a disturbing authority: *it was a chance robbery that determined everything, but that's okay, because if you really think it through (practically, as we have to these days) this was the best thing that could have happened; marriage is just the joining of free individuals, and it becomes a constraint, then off with it; sure I have some regrets, but the idea's to move on and not to let past mistakes get you down*. If Howells is right, this is already a prevailing logic in the culture, whatever moral reaction one might have to it.

For Bartley's argument from incompatibility emerges not merely out of an extrapolation from increasingly liberal divorce laws, but from the economic logic that

underlies the social relations in the novel more generally. Divorce laws were largely enacted for the economic exigency to protect, by exacting compensation for damages, the woman's solvency in the case of desertion. The commentators whom Atherton echoes in his injunctions to save American "civilization" thought that the contractual logic that lay beneath this claim, that spouses were independent parties, was undermining the inherent domestic morality of the middle class by reconfiguring it as a business relation, and moreover, that it was largely the doing of intellectuals who were injecting American institutions with liberal theories from abroad: society was not corrupt, it was being corrupted. But Howells does not draw such clear causal relations, for it is the very nature of individuated characters to confuse the broadly social with the local. For Howells's characters there is no distinction between business logic and their own mundane interests. Bartley invokes the contract in an argument with Marcia, when he reminds her that their marriage lacked the stamp of moral sanction, evidence of their intentions, and so was nothing more than the certificate they had paid sixty dollars for: "We are married, right and tight enough; but I don't know that there's anything *sacred* about it" (468). In the very next scene, Bartley appeals to his strict adherence to contract in order to justify the betrayal of Witherby's trust by writing a juicy and profitable story for a rival newspaper (469). Finally, Howells confuses love with financial management when he joins Atherton and Clara Kingsbury, the financial adviser and heiress, in marriage: "I must make my terms," Atherton says, in way of a proposal. "I accept—the conditions," Kingsbury replies, in Howells's version of upper-class titillation. In each case the characters are motivated, or tainted, by a financial transaction of a kind, it is suggested, that defines their particular class: for the Hubbards such transactions are apiece with their

pretences to respectability, for the Athertons the very basis of their self-understanding as superiorly rational beings. Bartley's cause for separation therefore has more than the immediate liberality of the law as its referent; it is Howells's acknowledgment of intricately intertwined historical currents, which are as banal in their normativity as they are destructive to the middle-class moral stability that buttressed his whole society.

Entwined itself, the novel cannot separate these currents. Bartley's easy assertion that his marriage is null because the two people involved are simply not right for each other, is unanswerable. The scene ends with the speech, and Ben, the last and inadequate line of defense against Bartley's modern perspective, is sent to languish in a moral backwater somewhere in the Maine woods. Bartley too is sent to a backwater, or rather farther into the frontier, to Arizona, where Howells has him killed for his crimes against society. Even so, his words stand as a final testament to the irrepressible logic the novel has developed all along; indeed, his speech may be what we remember most about the novel's ending. And this makes sense, for Bartley has always demanded his own development; in fact, Howells's own sense of the principle of character, as a vehicle for the rationalization of conduct, required it. We recall that Howells ejected Bartley because the character's capacity for self-reflection stopped at the limits of his own self-interest, and thus without the contextual awareness that would, in his own mind, link him to society, he suggested an intractable self-isolation, which amounted to amorality, for it loosed him from even the tug of conscience. Howells rather turned to other characters to sort out the problem Bartley posed and to establish the moral counterargument. But when Howells brings Bartley back, he has to permit his character to justify himself, if only that we can finally turn way in revulsion; for as a matter of composition, the only

way the novel can claim to have finally contained Bartley within its scheme is to explain him, to posit knowledge where otherwise there would be ambiguity. At the level of composition, then, Bartley is contained, but at the price that he finally realizes the individuality of character that Howells had previously reserved for his upper-class characters, that capacity to guide himself through the novel and to know why. We may not put much stock in Bartley's claim to have 'thought it over,' but he did think nevertheless, and he did come to a resolution about his actions, which has all the certainty of a theory. That he speaks without compunction or doubt is in fact his most threatening implication. In his self-realization Bartley has no ties to the novel's conservative middle-class morality, and rather figures a new morality, based in the self and not in the novel's imagined community; he understands and is completely at home within the new dispensation, and as such he suggests the inevitable relativization of knowledge and the proliferation of ideological perspectives that has already begun and will continue into the future of the novel's external society.

Bartley dead, Marcia and the Squire sent back to Equity to dry up, and Ben preaching by rote to a soon extinct rural community in the Aroostook, the Athertons are the only ones left standing in the novel. There is something perversely comical in their continued concern, for they go on talking as if their moral formulations could still sound relevant to the reader, as if these still applied to the world the novel has drawn. Howells might have intended to give the final word to the upper middle class, but he does not absolutely endorse its morality. Atherton's exasperated "I don't know! I don't know!" is an open acknowledgement of the impasse the novel has reached. But this is not an admission of meaninglessness; on the contrary, by explicitly nodding to the limits of the

novel's consciously ideological program, Howells actually points to the peculiar achievement of his novel, the way it created a margin of consciousness that did not exist at its inception. The Athertons are troubled, to be sure, but they remain comfortable in their final victory; for in practical terms, it is a victory, for they can continue to spin their moral speculations and let the rest of the world work itself out, apparently according to their rules, which are in the final analysis, under Howells's hand, the ones Bartley Hubbard succumbed to. But the innocence is gone, the absolute certainty of being right, even if you get the last word.

Chapter 4

The Rise of Silas Lapham

"I am on fire and I must boil. . . I must give my daughter her chance in this despicable world,—where I'm so much better for having had none; I must get my boy through school and into college,—where I'm so much wiser for not having been! It's the pleasures and follies that we pay the dearest for." So wrote Howells to James Parton in March of 1885, as he was finishing *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. It was a momentary outburst, but it was neither the first nor the last that punctuated Howells's normally pious profession for living for one's children and seeing them advance beyond the social level of their parents.

The country was in the midst of an economic depression. Meanwhile, in anticipation of their daughter Winifred's introduction to society, the Howellses bought a home on Boston's Beacon Street in July 1884, and became, in a city where the disparities of wealth and poverty were most felt, the neighbors of the Brahmin class. This pricked Howells's conscience. Having moved in just when everyone else on the street had scattered to the various summering spots, Howells complained in a letter to his father that "While these beautiful, airy, wholesome houses are uninhabited, thousands upon thousands of poor creatures are stifling in wretched barracks in the city here, whole families in one room. I wonder that men are so patient with society as they are."[22] The

irony of his situation, merely implicit in his indignation here, is more evident in the bemusement he confessed to James.

> Sometimes I feel it an extraordinary thing that I should have been able to buy a house on Beacon str., but I built one on Concord Avenue of nearly the same cost when I had far less money to begin with. In those doubting days I used to go and look at the cellar they were digging, and ask myself, knowing that I had had barely money enough to pay for the lot, "*Can* blood be got out of a turnip?" Now I know that some divine power loves turnips, and that somehow the blood will be got out of the particular turnip which I represent. Drolly enough, I am writing a story in which the chief personage builds a house "on the water side of Beacon," and I shall be able to use all my experience, down to the quick. Perhaps my novel may pay for the house.[23]

As usual, Howells's humor indicates ambivalence. He wonders as his good luck and mobility, but he also wonders what its real price will be. The heavens have it in for him, but the uneasiness fuels the writing. "Drolly enough" he goes about his exploring anxieties, seemingly aware that the writing process will uncover more problems then he can foresee. If he uses "all my experience, down to the quick," he might discover the same irresolvable class issues in this new novel that he had in *A Modern Instance*.

Howells was initially more optimistic. In the synopsis for what began as "The Rise of Silas Needham," he had in mind something more affirmative of his morality, something to justify middle-class pieties where the previous novel had doubted them. As there would be in the finished novel, the synopsis contains two 'rises.' First, Silas's attainment of wealth and social position through "an injustice to a partner whom he has crowded out of the business," a "wrong-doing [that] has never ceased to rest heavily on Needham's conscience"; then, when Silas is faced with another opportunity to profit by wrongdoing, "*He feels the weakening effect of the old wrong that he committed. . .* At last, almost by force of 'that, not ourselves, which works for righteousness' he resists the

temptation and suffers ruin." The moral is clear: Silas's "after life of adversity *from which he does not recover*, is sketched. The reader is made to feel that this adversity, consciously and deliberately chosen, is "The Rise of Silas Needham."

Nothing proves one's virtue like suffering for it, and Howells was prepared to sacrifice Silas at the altar of prosperity. In this early outline of the plot, Howells tries to predetermine the essential meaning of the middle-class gospel of advancement, to frame it as primarily a moral issue, that is, one of conscious embrace or renunciation of the economic life. By deciding Silas's moral victory beforehand, Howells might have thought he could write himself to that victory, without the distraction from his persistently nagging concerns about his own situation.

Problems were nevertheless intrinsic to the plan. Howells believes in the "essential goodness and patience and moral strength" of Silas's middling ilk, he even means to defend their "vulgarity." But the religious tenor of his morality suggests that there is more at stake in this story of middle-class adversity. Money, it seems, spells damnation. In his very conception of the novel, Howells had an extra-historical concern, one that exceeded his interest in the mundane economic life of his characters. He wanted to redeem middle-class life, purify it of the stain of prosperity. This was not going to be a mere representation of historical reality, but a cautionary tale.

As soon as the novel begins, however, Howells's interest in the realities of class relations puts him on a different path. In the synopsis, Howells considered Bartley Hubbard, who interviews Silas for the *Events*, merely as a vehicle for establishing Silas's biography, but he turns out to be interesting in himself. Readers of *Century* magazine would have remembered Bartley from *A Modern Instance*, as the roguish ham who

caused so much trouble for the proper New Englanders. This makes him an interesting choice as the introduction to the now wealthy Silas Lapham. It is the nature of Bartley's function to reveal class pretensions, of other characters, and in the course of writing, those of his author. Silas's folksy pride comes under Bartley's pen to seem itself a kind of pretense.

> "Mr. Lapham," he wrote, "passed rapidly over the story of his early life, its poverty and its hardships, sweetened, however, by the recollections of a devoted mother, and a father who, if somewhat her inferior in education, was no les ambitious for the advancement of his children. They were quiet, unpretentious people, religious, after the fashion of that time, and of sterling morality, and they taught their children the simple virtues of the Old Testament and Poor Richard's Almanac."
>
> Bartley could not deny himself this gibe; but he trusted to Lapham's unliterary habit of mind for his security in making it, and most other people would consider it sincere reporter's rhetoric.
>
> "You know," he explained to Lapham, "that we have to look at all these facts as material, and we get the habit of classifying them. Sometimes a leading question will draw out a whole line of facts that a man himself would never think of." He went on to put several queries, and it was from Lapham's answers that he generalized the history of his childhood. "Mr. Lapham, although he did not dwell on his boyish trials and struggles, spoke of them with deep feeling and an abiding sense of their reality." This was what he added in his interview, and by the time he had gotten Lapham past the period where risen Americans are all pathetically alike in their narrow circumstances, their sufferings, and their aspirations, he beguiled him into forgetfulness of the check he had received, and had him talking again in perfect enjoyment of his autobiography. (863)

This passage enters fully into Bartley's representation of Silas, and Howells seems to enjoy it. If Bartley goes further than necessary with his "gibe" ("they taught their children the simple virtues of the Old Testament and Poor Richard's Almanac") neither will Howells disavow this charge against the old Laphams anywhere in the novel. Their simplicity is as much an outmoded relic of unquestioned, hard-line puritanism and popular kitsch as it is folk virtue. Bartley may be unfair, but he is not inaccurate. We are made complicit in his derision by the enjoyment of his style, the sensational journalism

Howells thought indulged the middle class's worst impulses toward easily digested formulations, but to which he evidently takes a certain relish. Style fixes our impression of Silas even better than Howells might have intended, and the novel will have to work itself out from this initial characterization.

Thus Howells, as Bartley, presents us with a specifically class-based characterization of Silas, tinged with a working-class resentment, or more specifically the resentment of the provincial who has yet to make it in the city against the one who has made it. Bartley's popular profile rhetoric is not merely conventional, though he revels in his mastery; it is an instrument of his own contempt for the self-made millionaire. The veiled condescension, the implied smirks as Bartley writes up the article in his room, all tell us as much.

But Howells's target is not merely the pretentious rich. Bartley is equally condescending to his readers, knowing they will take his irony as "sincere." It is no wonder that he approaches his vocation with some cynicism, for he knows—and more important, Howells knows—that the conventions of yellow journalism, which call for the reverential treatment of "solid men" who have made their fortunes while remaining essentially the same in their up-country morals, indulges a fantasy that the wealth attained by the likes of Silas Lapham is yet attainable for everyone else, and better, that money doesn't change you. "Mr. Lapham, although he did not dwell on his boyish trials and struggles, spoke of them with deep feeling and an abiding sense of their reality." Bartley's untrustworthiness and the slipperiness of his irony permit Howells to question not the sincerity of Silas's pieties but rather the viability of his democratic fantasy. Irony, through journalistic style, is Howells's means of representing the doublethink of the

middle class, that suspicion of wealth and distinction that comes from moral idealism, combined with an utter infatuation with wealth prompted by the exigencies of economic life.

If he accused Thackeray of having a "thoroughly bourgeois soul," Howells is measuring the thoroughness of his own in this opening chapter. Bringing Bartley Hubbard back, Howells has brought in all the skepticism about his own social mobility that the character embodied in *A Modern Instance*, and he has made it the first principle of the present novel, thus recurring to his habit of writing from ambivalence. In Bartley, Howells has invested his lingering sympathy for the social climber, a version of the young Howells who, coming from Ohio, had to prove himself among the Cambridge intellectuals. His presence is a corrective for the over-ambitious moralism in which Howells conceived Silas and a reminder to Howells of the mixed class sympathies that made his move to Beacon Street feel like a betrayal. Howells undercuts Silas, but only to test his own commitment to Silas's middle-class simplicity. Bartley insures that the justification of Silas's moral purification will be conducted under the most difficult circumstances: if Silas cannot intellectually defend himself, perhaps Howells can.

Howells wants more than a romance: he wants to believe that Silas's morality can be a real historical force, emerging through a realistic depiction of middle-class life. Like Bartley, Silas represents a part of Howells's past, an imagined period of simplicity that preceded the compromises of urban bourgeois life. The moral project of the novel, and thus Howells's understanding of his own circumstances, depends on imagining Silas as equal to the challenges that are put before him. The problem is that Howells cannot make

the romantic realistic enough. "I took hold of the paint and rushed it—all I could," Silas tells Bartley, of the time he returned from the war and started up his industry.

> But I found that I had got back to another world. The day of small things was past, and I don't suppose it will ever come again in this country. My wife was at me all the time to take a partner—somebody with capital; but I couldn't seem to bear the idea. The paint was like my own blood to me. To have anybody else concerned in it was like—well, I don't know what. (873)

Silas belongs to an economic logic that Howells knew was obsolete, which is why it is represented as a sentimental attachment to the paint, as if it had an *actual* value—"the paint was like my own blood to me." This sentimentality, we are to understand, is born of a quaint belief in the concrete, the direct relation between the producer and his product, which is a kind of realism that Howells poses against the abstract values of post-bellum economics. He is trying to locate the real value in Silas's folksy ethics, and the sentiment is supposed to impress us as sincerity. Silas's pious self-identification with a past age that he fully acknowledges will never come again, barely conceals Howells's own feelings. Howells is intensely self-conscious of his own sentimental attachments and the likelihood that they will conflict with his sense of historical truth. The question arises here, early in the novel, whether Silas's refusal to submit to the compromises of laissez-faire economics will be an act of moral fortitude, or whether it will be a romantic sham. Silas is an idealization and Howells knows it, but the ideal, as much as Howells's own moral sense is wrapped up in it, exerts a strong pull. Retrieving an imaginary past could make the novel as much a fairy tale, but Howells's malaise seeks expression, and apparently that expression cannot be produced out of his current attitude toward middle-class striving.

Later in life, reflecting on the economic development of the Midwest and the youthful ambition it nurtured in the aspiring poet to go East, Howells wrote that "the great matter for him is to keep some place in his soul where he shall be ashamed" (110). [24] What nagged him, upon looking back, was the utter lack of interest he showed, as a boy, in the preoccupations of his father, including the life of a newspaper man. He had already exceeded his father's learning and aspirations. Howells remembered the family's impecunious years in Ohio, and the strain it put on his mother, and on his own nerves, as the consequence of his father's failure to capitalize on the antebellum economic boom. William Cooper's newspapers failed, as did his utopian venture at New Leaf Mills. Looking back, Howells never blames his father; in fact, from the boy's perspective, Howells sees him as heroic, "the bravest man I have known because he never believed there was any danger, I think he must have felt himself as safe from sorrow in it as if he were in the world beyond this" (84). Despite this tenderness, it is clear that Howells sees his father's ambition, stanch morality, his radicalism, and his Swedenborgian optimism, as weak stays against his family's trials.

The boy Howells remained "duteous," but he was also planning his escape. Literature made him ambitious to become an urban intellectual, and the self-imposed study by which he prepared himself "kept me absent and hampered me in the vain effort to be a part of the reality I have always tried to portray" (88). The shame Howells shows in his prose was not merely willful. It was temperamental. His literary acuity outpaced his father's, and the opportunities followed: journalism in Columbus, introduction into polite urban society, the first poems for the *Atlantic* that recommended him to the Cambridge intelligentsia, and then the commission to write Lincoln's campaign

biography that led to a consulship in Venice, where he wrote poetry and travel sketches while his American peers were absorbed in a civil war. Howells was talented and ambitious, but it was because his generation was the first to consider intellectual work as a profession, and this set the conditions under which he developed as a writer and became known to the literate public. This opportunity had not been available to his father, and the historically mindful Howells refrains from a comparison between father and son. But according to the evidence Howells presents, his father probably would not have been able to capitalize on his opportunities anyway. On his own talent, Howells had capitalized on his opportunities with a vengeance, actually fulfilling his boyhood fantasies.

It is perhaps this severe self-discipline of shame that prompted Howells to formulate the synopsis of *Silas Lapham* as though he could ameliorate, through fiction, a disturbing sense that he had betrayed something essential to his moral self-conception. Indeed, Silas speaks for Howells: "I've had my share of luck in the world," he tells Bartley, reflecting on his corner of the paint market, "and I aint a-going to complain on my *own* account, but I've noticed that most things get along too late for most people. It made me feel bad, and it took all the pride out of my success with the paint, thinking of father" (867). The rustic simplicity somewhat reduces Howells's own complex impulses, but as Bartley makes so clear in his profile, there is something of a set-piece quality in Silas anyway. His characterization is too perfect a solution to the moral and historical quandary in which Howells found himself. Silas really does not have a complexity that belies the sociological type that Bartley creates in his profile.

If Silas becomes a mere caricature of the country bumpkin, the moral weight of the story will be lost. If Howells compromises him, as he thought the middle class was

compromised by its commercial ambitions, however, Silas becomes something less tractable as a character: he becomes subject to Howells's ambivalence, which is irresolvable. Howells reminded himself, in his synopsis and in his notebook, that Silas should be "vulgar not sordid." He wanted accurately, at times satirically, to depict the life of the newly rich commoner, but he did not want Silas to fall beyond the pale of moral propriety. Howells wanted to be fair to Silas's position. This was an intellectual as well as moral issue, for treating Silas sympathetically would mean that Howells would have to work inductively, from the evidence of vulgar life, and this would lead to a true picture of that life. It would also make that picture more complicated. Silas's common manners and tastes, it turns out, cannot be separated from his ethics. His morals are vulgar. "What I say is, a thing has got to be born in a man," Silas says, naturalizing industry and achievement, "and if it ain't born in him, all the privations in the world won't put it there, and if it is, all the college training won't take it out" (959).

Howells knows that Silas's simplicity would make him, not impervious, but completely susceptible to the self-justifying logic of capitalist industry. Silas falls easily into the ideology of a plutocrat, to use a term Howells might have used. Though he does not produce the paint with his own hands, Silas considers himself entitled to its enormous commercial profits and, moreover, he takes it personally: he had it in him. This view is meant to expose his hubris, but it is fair. Sociologically, Howells understands Silas's vulgarity to be a coping, or adaptive measure, a means of self-identification in a society where the "instinct for self-preservation" is king. Silas utters the pieties of middle-class life automatically, because he seems to be in himself the proof of their truth.

Howells imagines Silas as no more exempt from the pretenses he himself had been made to put on, and in fact the darker aspects of Silas's character reflect Howells's lingering embarrassment, or at least the memory, of integrating himself among his social superiors. In his early Cambridge days, his taste and his intellect had come under suspicion by the likes of Charles Eliot Norton, who wrote, during Howells's editorship of the *Atlantic*, "As for art in American letters, recent numbers of the 'Atlantic Monthly' forbid one to think of it." A few years later, when he thought that Twain had insulted the old Cambridge luminaries at the Whittier birthday dinner with a satirical and class-tinged sketch, Howells, who had introduced Twain to the *Atlantic* and had invited him to speak at the dinner, defended his friend to others, but he could not bring himself fully to exonerate Twain in private. "I must have been insane when I wrote that speech," Twain wrote, mortified and probably looking for reassurance. Howells's response was double-edged: "One of the most fastidious men here, who read the speech, saw no offense in it. But I don't pretend not to agree with you about it."[25] The experience forced Howells to confront the difficult position in which he found himself, an advocate for the common tastes and perceptions, and his ambition to cultivate himself into the literary establishment and its ideals of art, which were less than democratic. Becoming an honorary elitist is what separated Howells from the common run of emigrants. It was a peculiar historical predicament, and Howells suffered at both ends.

His study of the Laphams, therefore, works within a very fine sense of what separates the vulgar from the cultivated. Howells is, in fact, obsessed with such distinctions. He moves to a study of the Laphams' manners from a narration of their first meeting with the Brahmin Coreys, whose mother and daughters have wandered beyond

their accustomed elite summering spots, to a "wild little Canadian watering-place" where the Lapham ladies fortuitously come to the assistance of an ailing Mrs. Corey.

> A certain intimacy inevitably followed, and when the son came he was even more grateful than the others. Mrs. Lapham could not quite understand why he should be as attentive to her as to Irene [the younger and prettier of the Lapham daughters]; but she compared him with other young men about the place, and thought him nicer than any of them. She had not the means of a wider comparison; for in Boston, with all her husband's prosperity, they had not had a social life. Their first years were given to careful getting on Lapham's part, and careful savings on his wife's. Suddenly the money began to come so abundantly that she need not save; and then they did not know what to do with it. A certain amount could be spent on horses, and Lapham spent it; his wife spent on rich and rather ugly clothes and a luxury of household appointments. Lapham did not yet reach the picture-buying stage of the rich man's development, but they decorated their house with the costliest and most abominable frescoes; they went upon journeys, and lavished upon cars and hotels; they gave with both hands to their church and to all the charities it brought them acquainted with; but they did not know how to spend on society. Up to a certain period Mrs. Lapham had the ladies of her neighborhood in to tea, as her mother had done in the country in her younger days. Lapham's idea of hospitality was still to bring a heavy-buying customer home to pot-luck; neither of them imagined dinners.
>
> Their two girls had gone to the public schools, where the had not got on so fast as some of the other girls; so that they were a year behind in graduating from the grammar-school, where Lapham thought that they had got education enough. His wife was of a different mind; she would have liked them to go to some private school for their finishing. But Irene did not care for study; she preferred housekeeping, and both the sisters were afraid of being snubbed by the other girls, who were of a different sort from the girls of the grammar-school; these were mostly from the parks and squares, like themselves. It ended in their going part of a year. But the elder had an odd taste of her own for reading, and she took some private lessons, and read books out of the circulating library; the whole family were amazed at the numbers she read, and rather proud of it. (882-83)

The awkward and somewhat star-struck introduction to polite society; the cautious building of wealth followed by the sudden infatuation with spending; the domestic improvements and the respectability they imply; the concern for their children's education, and ambition to see them join high society, and yet a lingering suspicion that it isn't their education that's holding them back; summering and travel as a social and

economic formality; the quirky daughter with literary inclinations—all of this was Howells's own experience, and so his representation of these common middling types is mainly sympathetic, attentive not only to their manners but sensitive to their concerns. The Laphams are taken seriously as sociological types. But Howells's familiarity also permits him to measure the distance he has achieved from the Laphams' social position. His critique of the middle class and the economy that produces it depends on objectifying his own characteristics and subtly disclaiming them, and in this sense he rehearses the same tendency toward mobility that he describes.

There are two overt judgments made in these paragraphs, and both refer to the Laphams' poor, or non-existent, taste ("rich and rather ugly clothes"; "abominable frescoes"). The other claims in the passage could be corroborated by the Laphams themselves, in substance if not in tone. It is the tone that matters. Howells treats the Laphams with a measure of contempt that only intimacy can produce. His complaint is from within the class he studies, and his comments are thus embedded in the appearance of objectivity. The Laphams' getting and spending are represented in behaviorist terms: they acquire money unbidden and spend it indiscriminately simply because they have it. The economy of the expression follows suit: "A certain amount could be spent on horses, and Lapham spent it." The paragraphs are built on the cataloguing of their acquisitions, their habits and anxieties, the one paragraph simply continuing into the next without comment or modulated tone. From the premise that the Laphams have more money than they need, the narration does not form conclusions but, in Howells's characteristic style, remains agnostic.

Nevertheless, the Laphams are diminished. There is a hint of cynicism about the conventional process of taste-acquisition—"Lapham did not yet reach the picture-buying stage of the rich man's development"—but it is the unreflecting mimicry of conventional taste that Howells ultimately derides: "they decorated their house with the costliest and most abominable frescoes." One would have to know the importance of a dinner to hear the devastating critique of Silas's self-important ignorance: "Lapham's idea of hospitality was still to bring a heavy-buying customer home to pot-luck." Not only does Silas lack appreciation for art or manners, he cannot understand anything so impractical as education— "they were a year behind in graduating from the grammar-school, where Lapham thought that they had got education enough" (the momentary adoption of Silas's idiom makes the gibe hit harder). The younger daughter "preferred housekeeping" anyway. The elder has an "odd taste of her own for reading," which can only mean she trifles with the classics, and we can hear the mock-objectivity in the narration of the family's blind reverence for her relatively extraordinary intellect, which they do not understand and so must value as they know how—"the whole family were amazed at the numbers she read."

The identification of Howells's technique with middle-class ambition did not go unnoticed among his most careful readers. Twain especially understood the self-examination that was required in assuming the habits and accoutrements of prosperity, and he had a practiced ear for Howells's irony. Twain called Howells's tension between sympathy and criticism the "mystery" of his writing.

> Hang it, I know where the whole mystery is, now: When you are reading, you glide right along, & I don't get a chance to let the things soak home; but when I catch it in the magazine, I give a page 20 or 30 minutes in which to gently & thoroughly filter into me.—Your humor is so very subtle, & elusive—(well, often

> it's just a vanishing breath of perfume, which a body isn't certain he smelt, till he stops & takes another smell)—whereas you can smell other people's all the time. And your sarcasms on women & people—dern it I always take them for compliments, on the first reading.[26]

What Twain could "smell" in other's work was the whiff of satire or judgment, a more obvious irony that implicates the reader. James thought this subtle quality of Howells's work reflected the vacancy of American society, but he did see a method. Howells's writing

> reminds us how much our native-grown effort is a matter of details, of fine shades, of pale colors, a waking of small things to 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. We have to look for these things in fields where a less devoted glance would see little more than an arid blank, and, at the last, we manage to find them.[27]

James did not find the monotony of middle-class life adequate material for the novel, but he had a veiled respect for the nuances Howells managed to wring from that monotony, from within it. Neither of Howells's friends and most candid readers separated the Howells they knew from the formal qualities of his writing, because each for different reasons, sympathy or self-differentiation, understood his peculiar anxieties.

One of these anxieties, as we saw in the letter to James, was the cost of mobility: you had to buy your status. You had to preserve a sense of shame, too, which for Howells manifests as self-irony: "somehow the blood will be got out of the particular turnip which I represent." He is in over his head, financially and morally, and he braces himself for the punishment he surely deserves. The humor also attempts to make light of his situation, and thus it seems to forestall punishment through agnosticism: Who knows what is right or wrong, after all? From unfashionable Nankeen Square, the Laphams

contemplate a home "on the water side of Beacon," and they are compelled to test the fortitude of their humility:

> "No; we're both country people, and we've kept our country ways, and we don't, either of us, know what to do. You've had to work so hard, and your luck was so long coming, and then it came with such a rush, that we haven't had any chance to learn what to do with it. It's just the same with Irene's looks; I didn't expect she was ever going to have any, she was such a plain child, and, all at once, she's blazed out this way. As long as it was Pen that didn't seem to care for society, I didn't give much mind to it. But I can see it's going to be different with Irene. I don't believe but we're in the wrong neighborhood."
>
> "Well," said the Colonel, "there aint a prettier lot on the Back Bay than mine. It's on the water side of Beacon, and it's twenty-eight feet wide and a hundred and fifty deep. Let's build on it."
>
> "Mrs. Lapham was silent awhile. "No," she said finally; "we've always got along well enough here, and I guess we better stay."
>
> At breakfast [the next morning] she said, casually: "Girls, how would you like to have your father build on the New Land?" (887)

Mrs. Lapham is more than a little eager to seize on Irene's serendipitous blazing out, but her opportunism is a consequence of the circumstance of having social improvement suddenly within her grasp. Once not even a consideration, joining the upper classes is now not merely a temptation but a necessity. Pert's ambition compromises her, as it conflicts with her proud country simplicity, and Howells is sympathetic to this conflict. It is not she who receives his condemnation, but Silas, who in a fit of machismo is only too ready to show that he could buy and sell the Coreys "twice over." It is he who drives his wife to the undeveloped lot and, Howells tells us, puts "the poison of ambition" into her mind (890). The moralizing is not subtle, and it is not intended to be. Mrs. Lapham's ambivalence simply hits too close to home, and Howells is looking for something more certain: he will have his morality without alloy. Silas commits the sin of ambition and betrays the mythology of humble origins that he

espoused in the first chapter, and thus he sets into motion the plot of the novel, which will test out and perhaps affirm that morality.

If through the Laphams Howells is able to work out apparently contradictory aspects of himself, at times this push and pull is more aggressive on one side. The Laphams represent the transition from a simple, unself-conscious life, to the self-preservative ethos of affluent urban society, but in their simplicity they tend to assert their opposition to the urban cultural establishment, to which Howells feels he belongs. Silas is a projection of what his author might have become, had his ambition tended elsewhere than to the urban intelligentsia, and thus Howells understands Silas as a negative image, the man without literature or culture, whose indifference and ignorance practically amounts to hostility.

"Well, we do buy a good many books, first and last," Silas tells a bemused Tom Corey, the scion of old Boston money. He does not mean books *to read*, Howells is careful to tell us, but gift books, "the costly volumes which they presented to one another on birthdays and holidays."

> "But I get about all the reading I want in the newspapers. And when the girls want a novel, I tell 'em to get it out of the library. That's what the library's for. Phew!" he panted, blowing away the whole unprofitable subject. (940)

Irene's avowed preference for the stage and stereopticon over *Middlemarch*, and her mother's frankly rustic reference to novels as "lies," are all innocently meant, but as representations of a class they assume the weight of an assault on intellectual culture. The Laphams do not improve with their affluence. They imitate their social superiors in the habits of acquisition—Silas purchases a complete library to furnish his new house—but they do this without giving up their homely virtues of simplicity. They take reading

as strange alienation from the practicalities of everyday life, and this anti-intellectualism in turn indicates a greater moral failure. Is it any wonder that the less attractive Lapham daughter is the reader in the family?

Penelope's reading is not so much an intellectual pursuit as a means of compensating for her lesser value on the marriage market. A good part of the love story in the novel is devoted to her suppressing her own desires in order to promote her much prettier sister's engagement to Tom Corey, who everyone assumes is pursuing Irene. Penelope's wit and intelligence, not to mention her taste for George Eliot, are the stoic badges of the ugly duckling, whose value on the market is so low that she can afford to spend her time reading. Howells's sympathy with Penelope (she is the one who wins the husband in the end) is equal to his contempt for her family's ignorance. Howells's own daughters were both inclined to literature and art. The elder Winny, a poet, suffered a prolonged illness, a relapse of which occurred in Europe as Howells was writing the first notes for *Silas Lapham*. He never fully comprehended this illness, which several critics since have speculated to be psychologically based, and probably attributable to the moral and intellectual confinement of young middle-class women. Howells figures the Laphams' intransigence as an intellectual limitation, the misrecognition of Penelope's peculiar vitality, one of mind if not beauty. "You never thought me!" Penelope bitterly cries when the truth of Tom's affections is revealed, to which her mother can only admit that she suspected that Irene was not Tom's "equal" (1071). Silas's "thick imagination" appears all the more coarse and reprehensible. His proud disdain for literature trivializes the life Howells has made for himself in the urban cultural elite, his vocation as a

novelist, and especially his trial of carrying it all off under the self-assigned burden of guilt.

Eventually Howells submits Irene to the same pain of misrecognition. This love-story plot, which plays out as a comedy of errors, with repeated misreadings, mismatched lovers, and at bottom a romantic conceit, is probably the most productive and dark aspect of the novel, as far as Howells's analysis of middle-class striving goes. He discovered well into writing that the novel had become "more of a love story than I had expected," as he told his editor, Richard Gilder,[28] which suggests that he had, once again, discovered more interest, or more problems, in his initial premise. The appearance of Tom's and Irene's courtship is founded on a mistake. She is the pretty one, and the first one he has a chance to flirt with. She innocently assumes that a news article sent to her by someone else, unsigned, is actually a covert love letter from him. She is sweet and completely ignorant, and it falls to well-read and sardonic Penelope to entertain Tom when he comes around. Naturally it is she who captures his interest.

Tom does not catch on that everyone, even his own regretful parents, think it is Irene he is after. When he finally discovers the mistake and confesses his love for Penelope, who secretly returns his love, she rejects him on the grounds that, as innocent as any of them were in the mess, she would be forced to betray her sister. She will not be happy if it means her sister's unhappiness. Howells presents this as a romantic delusion, yet another misreading. "We are all blinded, we are all weakened by a false ideal of self-sacrifice," (1085) says the minister, Sewell, who earlier in the novel pronounces, in Howells's own critical vocabulary, that "novelists might be the greatest possible help to us if they painted life as it is, and human feelings in their true proportion and relation, but

for the most part they have been and are altogether noxious" (1044). The onus is placed on the novelist, but as we have seen Howells suspects middle-class taste and ignorance are also to blame.

Both Lapham daughters are subjected to this culture of irrationality. It is ultimately Irene who suffers the most, and her sacrifice shows how far the novel is driven by a moral imperative that belies its own doubt. Heroically conceding Tom to her sister, Irene leaves Boston for the Vermont homestead to convalesce, and thus the social and economic anxieties of the novel's main plot find their complement in another, over the well-being of a child. For a novel concerned with the middle-class family, and for a novelist who writes out of the concerns for his own family and more immediately for his own daughter, this formal decision is significant because it entails revisiting one of his own most dreaded scenarios. Sending Irene to the homestead, Howells places our attention, and so the burden of worry, onto her parents; mostly it is the uncertainty of her recovery that troubles them: "She don't complain any," Persis tells her husband. "I don't know as I've heard a word out of her mouth since we left home; but I'm afraid it'll wear on her, Silas" (1101).

Meanwhile, Silas is about to head West to learn that the properties he obtained as securities against a loan he has made to a former partner are nearly worthless, now that the railroad is naming the prices. We are meant to infer a connection between events, that Silas's absorption in the amoral contingencies of economic dealings is somehow responsible for his daughter's pain. Silas has some atoning to do. By placing this burden not merely on Silas, but on both of the parents, Howells raises the stakes of his plot, but in a way that suggests an admonition against the middle-class family as a moral unit.

There is something deficient at the family's core, that it cannot even protect its own children against the incursions of economic life. The twists in the superficially light love story therefore operate, finally, to bring the novel under the pressure of an anxiety that goes right to the heart of the family, to its integrity as a morally reproductive entity. But this ambivalence toward the historical middle class does not precede the novel's writing, it emerges internally, from within the novel's unfolding, as Howells intuitively works out a connection between the moral compromise in his prosperity and the nagging sense of failure in caring for his ailing daughter.

In the end, of course, Irene returns from the country stronger, "toughened and hardened. . . like iron" (1185). Her recovery is probable enough, but Howells's insistence on bringing her back not only chastened but a resolutely mature realist—she demands a full account of the family's precarious finances—shows just how determined he is to restore his optimism beyond any trace of doubt. This recovery happens simultaneously with Silas's moral victory, when he refuses to sell his worthless land to unsuspecting buyers, and then discloses his insolvency to the investor who was about to help him merge with his competition, three inexperienced but savvy brothers from West Virginia who have produced a comparable paint and have better, more modern facilities. The message is clear: though Silas has put himself and his family out of house and home, they are all better off, morally speaking. Now they all go back to the homestead, for good. Except for Penelope, who goes to Mexico with Tom, who has determined to make it without his father's money, and whom, as a compensatory democratic gesture to counter Silas's financial ruin, Howells makes the new agent for the rival paint company. With the right daughter married and Silas secure in his salvation, the novel achieves its

moral argument and assures us that all is right, if not in the world of our petty ambitions, then in a much grander sense, where it counts. But one suspects that the novel achieves this success despite itself, and at the expense of its own discoveries. This is the same problem Howells faced in *A Modern Instance*, though here, probably because he was writing so close to his own immediate concerns, he was more careful to insure the clean resolution.

In the words of his most recent biographers, Howells "plays God to Lapham's Job."[29] He certainly does not attempt to disguise the novel's parabolic structure. It seems that as long as the conventional form prescribed a Protestant humility and worldly self-discipline, Howells was not averse to aligning it with realism. He imagined himself a gentleman in the Northeastern intellectual tradition, and he considered his art to be socially useful, even reformist in its goals. He must have thought that Silas's defeat of the devil's influence would be sanctioned by his readers, for whom there was an implicit, at the least conventional, connection between scriptural precepts and everyday secular conduct. This is to say that such conventional morality was immanent to Howells's idea of a realistic representation of the Laphams. They were spun from the deep soul of New England, which meant for Howells that they carried a vestigial Puritan fastidiousness, even though in the modern world they had lost the ethos of continual practice, and therefore the spiritual focus of their forebears was in them fragmented and dispersed amongst various social and economic exigencies.[30] Howells believes that the Laphams' merely instinctual, if sometimes errant morality makes them at base good people, and in this view he intends partly to defend the basic goodness of his own suburban stock. But he also condescends to the Laphams, for he believes them crude and unreflective, even

unfit for the modern world, from whose enlightened perspective he writes. Howells perhaps makes things too easy for himself. He promotes the morality he himself must believe, but his simple and unreflective characters present him license to do this in the stuffiest of terms, and thus he intentionally precludes any possibility for moral ambiguity. It is not discovery but confirmation that drives this aspect of the novel.

For example, when Mrs. Lapham (Pert) learns that they had all mistaken Tom Corey's intentions toward the daughters, this is how Howells presents her state of mind:

> The mother slowly closed the door and went down-stairs, feeling bewildered and baffled almost beyond the power to move. The time had been when she would have tried to find out why this judgment had been sent upon her. But now she could not feel that the innocent suffering of others was inflicted for her fault; she shrank instinctively from that cruel and egotistic misinterpretation of the mystery of pain and loss. She saw her two children, equally if differently dear to her, destined to trouble that nothing could avert, and she could not blame either of them; she could not blame the means of this misery to them; [Tom] was as innocent as they, and though her heart was sore against him in this first moment, she could still be just to him in it. She was a woman who had been used to seek the light by striving; she had hitherto literally worked to it. But it is the curse of prosperity that it takes work away from us, and shuts the door to hope of health of spirit. In this house, where everything had come to be done for her, she had no tasks to interpose between her and her despair. She sat down in her own room and let her hands fall in her lap,—the hands that had once been so helpful and busy,—and tried to think it all out. She had never heard of the fate that was once supposed to appoint the sorrows of men irrespective of their blamelessness or blame, before the time when it came to be believed that sorrows were penalties; but in her simple way she recognized something like that mythic power when she rose from her struggle with the problem, and said aloud to herself, "Well, the witch is in it." Turn which way she would, she saw no escape from the misery to come—the misery which had already come to Penelope and herself, and that must come to Irene and her father. She started when she definitely thought of her husband, and thought with what violence it would work in every fiber of his rude strength. She feared that, and she feared something worse—the effect which his pride and ambition might seek to give it; and it was with terror of this, as well as the natural trust with which a woman must turn to her husband in any anxiety at last, that she felt she could not wait for evening to take counsel with him. When she considered how wrongly he might take it all, it seemed as if it were already known to him, and she was impatient to prevent its error. (1075-76).

The passage does not present Pert's thoughts, but it does pretend to limit itself to her moral universe. Her statement, "Well, the witch is in it," breaks the silence of the paragraph's meditation, and thus it asserts the humble agnosticism with which she faces her situation: bad things happen, it's just a fact of life, but one must go on. The folksy formulation is meant to suggest that the moral challenge is recognized and stoically taken up. Howells actually sees quite a bit of philosophy in this common sense, and on this basis he builds the paragraph's moral argument. The bald moralistic statements—*it is the curse of prosperity that it takes work away from us, and shuts the door to hope of health of spirit*; *She had never heard of the fate that was once supposed to appoint the sorrows of men irrespective of their blamelessness or blame, before the time when it came to be believed that sorrows were penalties*—are not within Pert's capacity to articulate, but they are available to her moral instinct; they arise, in other words, from the agnostic stance, whereas a strict doctrine would foreclose any such instinct. Part of Howells's argument is against institutional doctrinism—*The time had been when she would have tried to find out why this judgment had been sent upon her. But now she could not feel that the innocent suffering of others was inflicted for her fault; she shrank instinctively from that cruel and egotistic misinterpretation of the mystery of pain and loss*—especially the kind that has become detached from its institutional origins and is embedded in the moral habitude. Pert's common sense grasp of only the immediate situation and its immediate consequences—*Turn which way she would, she saw no escape from the misery to come—the misery which had already come to Penelope and herself, and that must come to Irene and her father*—quite apart from any systematic moral speculation, permits her think entirely in the realm of necessity, which in the

middle-class universe means she must take counsel with her husband, to seek resolution only through the normal channels of family hierarchy.

Howells intends through Pert's limitations his own articulation, presented as her instinctive sense, of another transcendent morality to replace the Puritan one he eschews. The moral-instructional rhetoric is right out of middle-class devotional media, the self-help guide or sentimental novel: *She was a woman who had been used to seek the light by striving. . . it is the curse of prosperity that it takes work away from us, and shuts the door to hope of health of spirit*. Pert is a cautionary model, whose trials are meant to warn "us" against the dangers of our social and economic circumstances. But of course these are the very circumstances the middle-class reader enjoys, and here the passage reveals the historical reality it tries to oppose. "There is a kind of lie against righteousness and common-sense which is called the Unmoral; and is supposed to be different from the Immoral," Howells wrote in *Harper's*, and the formulations in our passage are meant to answer any such new-fangled idea that there are no absolutes and only social constructions; after all, though these formulations are put within Pert's ken they yet remain isolated statements coming from outside of her mind. They sit as it were on the surface of the text, because finally they cannot be integrated into the stream of Pert's experience without Howells's introduction. They can in fact only occur to her instinct in the historical context she inhabits, where there are no absolutes on which to base a moral judgment, but only ambition and prosperity. The pert agnosticism of "Well, the witch is in it," permits Howells his moral platform precisely because it starts from the assumption of an antinomian society as its contemporary reality.

That idle hands are for the devil's work is certainly born out in this passage, and Howells perhaps owes more to the Puritan morality than he acknowledges. Max Weber would later argue that even when religious belief has passed the ethic of continual devotion to work and prosperity lingers without justification, and Howells's own enormous output would seem to support this thesis. Howells was never himself a believer, but he took the religious sense of his characters seriously, as far as he understood it. As we see in the passage above, Howells thought that common sense could produce a suitable ethics without doctrinal aid. He therefore sees the habit of piety as a useful spur to rationalization, not to a return to the church he sees as effete and outdated. The minister Sewell, to whom the Laphams turn for advice, is above all a rationalist, whose lessons on morals and literature supplement the entertainment at the dinner tables of the upper class. His "economy of pain," the imperative to limit suffering to the fewest possible sufferers, is standard utilitarianism, which Howells presents as a cold splash of realism to the Laphams. In their prosperity they have lost their sense for ascetic self-discipline and have been, in Sewell's words, "perverted by traditions which are the figment of the shallowest sentimentality" (1085), the novels and popular entertainments that tempt the middle classes into the isolation of conspicuous consumption and self-concern: "There's no new trouble under the sun," he tells the uncomprehending Pert, who has neglected her church membership. What Sewell does is to reeducate the Laphams in traditional middle-class values, the common sense they have lost. "[Y]ou know at the bottom of your hearts" what your duty is, he tells them. "You would be guilty if you did less. Keep clearly in your mind that you are doing right, and the only possible good. And God be with you!" (1086). Certainty in the righteousness of

one's pursuits under the eye of God is the basic psychology of middle-class life, and Howells prescribes the ethic to the Laphams as the means to weathering the anxieties of success in a modern economy.

The heterogeneity of the American upper classes, in Howells's day and in our own, does not necessarily contradict Howells's thesis that there is a crisis of conscience amongst the rising middle classes, that wealth and utilitarian religious observance do not produce, on one hand moral righteousness, and on the other uncertainty, which Howells experienced himself. It would seem, however, to cast the aura of fantasy around his plot. If Howells's study of the Laphams' middle-class habits, their unreflective consumption, their pretensions to upper-class manners and yet rejection of cultivated taste, and above all their concern for morality, is accurate, it may be hard to believe that relinquishing their prosperity would be a likely option. This is not so much a moral as historical issue. When her father announces his plan to build on Beacon Street, Penelope says, "I don't see any use in not enjoying money, if you've got it *to* enjoy. That's what it's for, I suppose; though you mighn't always think so" (893). Even taken as sarcasm, to which Penelope is prone, these reflections perfectly define the middle-class ethos, which requires no justification other than the availability of means to enjoyment. The house, the attending staff, the horse, and the yellow gloves Silas buys for the Coreys' dinner party, all draw the picture of his class's implication in capitalist logic: Silas *defines* it. The plot through which he rises to moral victory therefore works against the sociological current of the novel. As Silas rejects the opportunity to unload his worthless property and thus save his family from ruin, he works against the economic logic that has so far fostered him, and in the process he demonstrates an unfitness for the world that was much of his

making. It is truly a moral victory of sorts, but as such it stands outside of the historical reality from which Howells draws the social phenomenon of Silas Lapham. The opposition to history is blatant. Readers might have recognized Silas Lapham as a type amongst them, but they hardly could have recognized the novel's plot as equally representative.

The character of Rogers, the former partner whose money had saved the business during a depression, and whom afterwards Silas forced out, is an indicator of the historical pressure that Howells resists in order to execute his plot. At first Rogers is a reminder of Silas's economic amorality—"It was a business chance," Silas claims, to absolve himself from Rogers's misfortune (902). But he comes himself to represent that amorality when he implicates Silas in a dishonest, though not legally fraudulent, business deal. He tries to persuade Silas to sell some western land deeds, which he had turned over to Silas as collateral for a loan, to a pair of Englishmen, who will in turn sell the shares to English investors who want to build a colony. What these investors do not know, and what Silas did not know when he accepted the deeds from Rogers, was that when the railroad was built on the land its value would plummet. Now it falls on Silas to decide whether he will recoup his losses by selling out, or refuse to sell and thus save these unwitting investors and his moral well-being. When he does refuse, claiming responsibility to the investors, Rogers speaks the logic that Howells is trying to defy:

> "I don't see what you've got to do with the people that sent [the Englishmen] here. They are rich people, who could bear it if it came to the worst. But there's no likelihood, now, that it will come to the worst; you can see yourself that the Road had changed its mind about buying. And here I am without a cent in the world; and my wife is an invalid. She needs comforts, she needs little luxuries, and she hasn't even the necessaries; and you want to sacrifice her to a mere idea! You don't know in the first place that the Road will ever want to buy; and if it does, the probability is that with a colony like that planted on its line, it

> would make very different terms from what it would with you or me. These agents are not afraid, and their principals are rich people; and if there was any loss, it would be divided up amongst them so that they wouldn't any of them feel it." (1167)

From an economic standpoint Rogers is entirely reasonable. We cannot know whether his speculations will turn out to be true, but this is exactly the point: he is justified on the basis of the rational calculation of future profit. The investor capital is fair game for market speculators, for these investors have pooled their money, in something like a modern hedge fund, precisely in order to reduce their risk: risk is assumed. Howells permits Rogers his say, even makes Silas's moral decision more difficult, as he has to condemn an invalid woman to poverty, but the challenge to this logic is presented in Rogers's exclamation, *you want to sacrifice her to a mere idea!* This is for Howells a kind of blasphemy. Only from within the "lie against righteousness and common-sense which is called the Unmoral" could Rogers make such a claim, and with such vehement incomprehension of Silas's scruples. He offers to buy the stock from Silas so that he can sell it to the Englishmen himself, but Howells has Silas balk even at this, to persevere in the "struggle to be just" (1168). Even Pert, who stands by, silently hoping Rogers's offer would release them from moral responsibility and financial ruin, is subject to our "pity" that she should find herself potentially compromised. The pity also extends to Rogers, for his invalid wife, certainly, but mostly because he is a lower-class striver who is made dependent on the vicissitudes of modern life and must succumb to its exactions. Our pity, for the type and not for the man, is only supposed to make it easier to see him as an economic casualty, an indicator of the obstacles Silas must overcome, and so we are willing to sacrifice him for the fulfillment of the plot. But the invalid wife, I

think, makes a greater claim than Howells intends. Her need for comforts and little luxuries, which even Howells has a hard time denying her, reminds him of the very real fact that everyone is living within an intricate web of economic interdependence, that one's complicity is not willing but beyond the question of will. Rogers is one of the lower-class characters who flit in an out of Howells's novels, usually to showcase the moral quandaries of the middle class, and his presence here might seem to cast Silas's resolution into doubt. The sense of the contemporary economic scene that Rogers embodies makes it all the more difficult to accept that willing transcendence over this reality would be available to the likes of Silas Lapham, whose entire sense of self, from the first chapter, is based in the capacity to buy, whether into high society or into divine protection.

Howells sends Silas straight out of history when he sends him back to Vermont, and he does this in the face of his own prosperity and that of the rising middle class that, whatever its collective malaise, did not find it necessary or even conceivable to renounce modernity altogether. At the end of the novel, "shabby and slovenly in dress… fallen unkempt, after the country fashion, as to his hair and beard and boots" (1200), Silas appears as if his life in Boston were a dream, and like Rip Van Winkle he has returned to his former life, indifferent to the history that has occurred around him. "Well, it don't always seem like I done it," he tells a visiting Sewell, on whose good authority we are to judge Silas's virtue. Silas does not judge it for himself—his goodness is inherent and unconscious. Removed from the urban milieu in which Howells normally does his historical work, the anti-intellectualism that had earlier in the novel signaled a more damaging ignorance can now be presented as a saving grace. And yet Howells seems

finally suspicious of his own ending. "And do you ever have any regrets?" Sewell asks Silas, about sacrificing his fortune.

> "About what I done? Well, it don't always seem as if I done it," replied Lapham. "Seems sometimes as if it was a hole opened up for me, and I crept out of it. I don't know," he added thoughtfully, biting the corner of his stiff mustache—"I don't know as I should always say it paid; but if I done it, and the thing was to do over again, right in the same way, I guess I should have to do it." (1202)

It is difficult to tell whether this is supposed to be seasoned insight or plain nonsense, and this seems much the point. Is this a statement of moral conviction, or the absence of conviction? Unreflective goodness might be an ideal virtue, but it does not provide Howells with an affirmative statement that justifies the moral program on which the novel seemed to operate in earlier scenes, and which predicated Silas's ejection from modern economic society. For his return to the farm is essentially an argument that a middle class reared on a pre-rationalized capitalism and its homely rectitude cannot make the transition to the amorality of speculative capitalism; but this in fact did happen and with great success. This final paragraph of the novel must necessarily fall short of resolution. In its need for an implicit morality that will manifest itself when threatened by worldly exigency, the paragraph reveals its origin in the contemporary world where, on the contrary, the middle class has enjoyed a conspicuous prosperity, apparently without compunction.

The ending brings the novel to a structural close, but its tentativeness shows that there is a formally unresolved issue. That Silas turns out to be an inaccurate representation of the historical middle class is not necessarily the result of his author's misguided determination to realize some fantasy of moral fulfillment, despite history; in fact, the improbable plot does not disprove Howells's thesis that middle-class morals are

a real and viable force in modern life. But the character and source of that morality is a question from which the novel finally retreats, and a suspicion of unfinished business therefore lurks in Silas's final incomprehension of the complexities from which his author has just extricated him. The ambivalence of this ending must be taken seriously: Howells still believes in Silas's heroism, in his inherent goodness, but he is also unsatisfied with his incomplete understanding of it. The problem, I think, is that Howells has understood Silas's goodness as essential to his character and to his class, whereas in the course the novel's explorations that assumption has had to justify itself in light of the historical evidence of class distinction the novel adduces. The results end up confirming the sense of moral compromise out of which Howells intended to write Silas. But he does not by this lose his faith in the middle class: actually, he achieves an historical insight.

Believing in Silas's essential righteousness, Howells always thought his character would be redeemable in the end. He could therefore expose Silas for his vulgarity, then, to redeem him, expose that vulgarity as a social construction and not a real quality. The upper-class Coreys would provide the constructive lens. Howells is particularly good at showing how condescension and self-doubt are built into these inter-class relations, and how social convention automatically conforms people to their appropriate roles. The pivotal dinner party that introduces Silas to high society is initiated by a perfunctory invitation: the Coreys feel obliged to pay off their debt to Pert for her attentions to the ailing Mrs. Corey the past summer. While Mrs. Corey considers the invitation a matter of social form reluctantly observed, the Laphams in their self-conscious inferiority suspect they are being toyed with.

> "I don't know what it all means," [Pert] said, shaking her head and speaking with a pleased flutter. "She was here this afternoon, and I should have said she had come to see how bad she *could* make us feel. I declare, I never felt so put down in my life by anybody."
>
> "Why, what did she do? What did she say?" Lapham was ready, in his dense pride, to resent any affront to his blood, but doubtful, with the evidence of this invitation to the contrary, if any affront had been offered. Mrs. Lapham tried to tell him, but there was really nothing tangible; and when she came to put it into words, she could not make out a case. Her husband listened to her excited attempt, and then he said, with judicial superiority, "I guess nobody's been trying to make you feel bad, Persis. What would she got right home and invite you to dinner for, if she'd acted the way you say?"
>
> In this view it did seem improbable, and Mrs. Lapham was shaken. She could only say, "Penelope felt just the way I did about it."
>
> Lapham looked at the girl, who said, "Oh, *I* can't prove it! I begin to think it never happened. I guess it didn't."
>
> "Humph!" said her father, and he sat frowning thoughtfully awhile—ignoring her mocking irony, or choosing to take her seriously. "You can't really put your finger on anything," he said to his wife, "and it ain't likely there *is* anything. Anyway, she's done the proper thing by you now." (1025-26)

The scene is presented humorously, Silas quelling his instinctive resentment against his superiors by questioning his wife's unscientific assessment, but the humor betrays an absurdity: the dialogue, in the style of farce, tends to no certain knowledge. Whether or not Pert is right that she was slighted by Mrs. Corey is indeterminable; the point is that she perceived one, even if none was intended. From within the experience of class distinction, as Howells presents it, one seems to swim through an opaque medium, groping for signs, and one's interpretation depends on one's perceived rank. As her husband momentarily did, Pert assumes she had been condescended to, for she suspects her own inferiority. The subtle stroke, her "pleased flutter" at receiving the invitation, shows her to be complicit, by her truckling desire to be distinguished, in the system of social hierarchy. And yet facing the prospect of actually performing up to this distinction, Pert get colds feet.

> ". . . *I* don't know what we're going to talk about to those people when we get there. We haven't got anything in common with them. Oh, I don't say they're any better," she again made haste to say in arrest of her husband's resentment. "I don't believe they are; and I don't see why they should be. And there ain't anybody has got a better right to hold up their head than you have, Silas. You've got plenty of money, and you've made every cent of it." (1028)

Pert's recourse under the pressure of social inferiority is to middle-class pieties, an instinctive natural equality and an ethic of economic self-making. Implicit in her defense of her husband's pride and self-worth is a presumptive democracy, but its status as presumption, as *a priori* idea that does not square *a fortiori* with the fact of the Coreys' historically proven social superiority, causes her anxiety. Again, Howells has his characters speaking into an epistemological void, configuring the terms of their social footing without any clear sense of what they are trying to figure out.

The presumptive democracy is of course Howells's own, and he is only partly aware in writing these scenes that he is as uncertain as Pert. His slight mockery of the Laphams, here and throughout the novel, is another instance of the historical agnosticism we have seen before, a tendency as much as a conscious method of permitting instinctive contradictions into otherwise benign representations of middle-class life. The decidedly light treatment of the Laphams' preparation for their social debut is supposed to garner our affection as we laugh, but Howells's humor is only a hedge against a deep sense of humiliation and skepticism about the practical value of transcendental democratic ideals. "We're too old to learn to be like them," Pert says, meaning the Coreys, but they will nonetheless accept the dinner invitation, on democratic grounds. "The children ain't," Silas replies, "shrewdly" calculating the prospect of social mobility. Only in America could such a calculation be so baldly made, but like everything else, you have to pay for

it. Silas does not own a dress coat "on principle," but now he must compromise that democratic principle and get himself fitted not only for a dress coat but a waistcoat as well. He consults an etiquette book—a sure sign of vulgarity—for the finer points on table manners, wavers on a cravat, perspires his way through a manicure so that he can stuff his coarsened hands into a possibly déclassé pair of leather gloves. When he finally gets the gloves on at the Corey mansion, "they looked, in the saffron tint which the shop-girl said his gloves should be of, like canvased hams. He perspired with doubt. . ." (1034). It is all funny, though Howells's obvious pleasure in Silas's brutishness begins to darken the humor. It is an early sign. When Silas sits in incomprehension of the dinner table discussion, and not because he is drunk, the ambition for his children seems to have cost him quite a bit. As the chapter proceeds, Silas simply falls apart. He cannot in his drunkenness finish a story he begins to tell to the gentlemen, and later he begins to brag of his wealth and presume upon the equality with which his hosts had tried to treat him. It becomes apparent that Silas's humiliation is the whole point of the chapter, or it has become the point, and we start to wonder how the humorous levity that had made us sympathize with the Laphams, and the democratic optimism that underlay Pert's assertions, could have turned out so wrong. By the time Silas prostrates himself before a mortified Tom Corey in the following chapter, even Howells's pity is mixed with contempt.

It is a sobering chapter, and Howells perhaps means to show that the Laphams' social mobility is not really worth having, that it strains the good intentions of all involved, and that it does not measure what really counts, people's moral worth, which the plot from here sets out to confirm. But we already know where that plot ends up, and

it seems a hard condemnation of the middle class, to relegate them merely to their ideals, which can only be realized outside of history. The democratic premise that informs the novel's total project begins to show its insufficiency as a basis from which to do historical work. On the other hand, the details admitted through Howells's purportedly humorous investigations are richly suggestive as a theory of middle-class morality, though it is a troubling one for Howells. Pert's insistent equalitarianism and Silas's bragging are assertions of their value as middle-class people against a deep sense of inferiority. These assertions are therefore pragmatic, means of coping in a social reality, and so are thoroughly historical. Howells cannot find a way to affirm his democratic ideals against the thrust of his intuitive-historical narration, and thus they provide little help for the Laphams, whose obsessive morality and nostalgia for simple values are but vague yearnings for an equality, beyond money (the root of all evil anyway), that does not materially exist in America. The rise of Silas Lapham is motivated by a nagging suspicion of inferiority.

This contradiction between conception and execution in Howells's method is at the heart of the novel's most memorable scene, the blundered after-dinner narrative that seals Silas's fate in society. There is something akin to Melville's troubled relationship with Ahab in this scene, where Silas attains a heroic status for the epistemological audacity he provides for his author, at the very same moment that he reveals his author's sense of futility as he confronts the absolute limit of literary knowledge. For whatever its practical consequences, the story is a success in its profession of a kind of literary knowledge that opposes romantic concepts, in this case, ironically, heroism.

Silas intends the story to secure his respect amongst the gentlemen assembled at the

Corey table; it is a statement of equality and, as Howells presents it up to its sudden abatement, a coup. The scene is prepared in advance, during dinner, where Howells introduces the topic of literature distinctly as a class issue. First, the gentlemen speak the position of the literary class, and then, when Silas speaks, Howells tests their theories against an actual performance, which simultaneously confirms their theories and yet exceeds their pat formulations.

Bromfield poses this thesis: "you architects and the musicians are the true and only artistic creators. All the rest of us, sculptors, painters, novelists, and tailors, deal with forms that we have before us; we try to imitate, we try to represent. But you two sorts of artists create form. If you represent, you fail. Somehow or other you do evolve the camel out of your inner consciousness" (1039). This is the doctrine of realism as Howells explains it in his criticism—the "inner consciousness" of the novelist is not independent but enmeshed within its contemporary reality—and it is therefore compatible with the polemic, here in the voice of parson Sewell, against the morally corruptive sensationalist novels "with old-fashioned heroes and heroines in them" (1044). When the gentlemen retire afterward to their cigars and Apollinaris, the subject of real heroism comes up. "What astonishes the craven civilian in all these things is the abundance—the superabundance—of heroism" (1047), Bromfield remarks, listening in as the Bellingham cousins, who both served in the civil war, try to find their common ground with Silas, who had been a captain in a Vermont regiment and who had seen worse fighting. But the Bellinghams, out of conviction, idealism, or consideration for Silas, want to generalize the heroism to all who fought. Charles Bellingham goes so far as to propose that the novelist would find the present-day heroics amongst the middle-class multitudes who go

about fulfilling their duties as good citizens. "The commonplace is just that light, impalpable, aerial essence which they've never got into their confounded books yet. The novelist who could interpret the common feelings of commonplace people would have the answer to the 'riddle of the painful earth' on his tongue" (1048). But while it has been clear from the discussion at table that these aristocrats are abstractly sympathetic to the common man, it is also clear that their notions are mostly disengaged with the reality of which the speak, even their own. Charles, the champion of the middle-class novelist, even claims that his war experiences have lost their vividness and rather assume a fictive quality. His cousin challenges him on this indulgence, and they all laugh. Their form is repartee—they require the give and take of social conventions and platitudes.

The discussion is in earnest but it is for sport: everything is colored through the protective disengagement of wealth and privileged speculation. And so it falls to Silas to introduce a dose of realism. He ostensibly takes up the subjects of heroism and divine sacrifice, but of course as he has drunk too much he cannot finish his tale, and it becomes quite something else. I quote the entire story, as Howells tells it through Silas.

> "I want to tell you about a fellow I had in my own company when we first went out. We were all privates to begin with; after a while they elected me captain—I'd had the tavern stand, and most of 'em knew me. But Jim Millon never got to be anything more than corporal; corporal when he was killed. . . I can't say he went into the thing from the highest motives, altogether; our motives are always pretty badly mixed, and when there's such a hurrah-boys as there was then, you can't tell which is which. I suppose Jim Millon's wife was enough to account for his going, herself. She was a pretty bad assortment. . . and she used to lead Jim *one* kind of life. Well, sir. . . that fellow used to save every cent of his pay and send it to that woman. Used to get me to do it for him. I tried to stop him. "Why, Jim,' said I, 'you know what she'll do with it.' 'That's so, Cap,' says he, 'but I don't know what she'll do without it.' And it did keep her straight—straight as a string—as long as Jim lasted. Seemed as if there was something mysterious about it. They had a little girl,—about as old as my oldest girl,—and Jim used to talk to me about her. Guess he done it as much for her as for the mother; and he said to me before the last action we went into, 'I should like to turn tail and run, Cap. I

> ain't comin' out o' this one. But I don't suppose it would do.' 'Well, not for you, Jim,' said I. 'I want to live,' he says; and he bust out crying right there in my tent. 'I want to live for poor Molly and Zerrilla'—that's what they called the little one; I dunno where they got the name. 'I ain't ever had half a chance; and now she's doing better, and I believe we should get along after this.' He set there cryin' like a baby. But he wa'n't no baby when he went into action. I hated to look at him after it was over, not so much because he'd got a ball that was meant for me by a sharp-shooter—he saw the devil takin' aim, and he jumped to warn me—as because he didn't look like Jim; he looked like—fun; all desperate and savage. I guess he died hard." (1049-50)

Silas thinks he will make a grand statement at this point, but there is none to make, after all. This might be attributed to his drunkenness, but it is hard to imagine what would come next, for Silas appears throughout uncertain whether Jim Millon is strictly speaking a hero. The story leaves the question a question. Silas is given an extraordinary privilege here, to narrate a portion of the novel, at length, and with a compositional skill we are not likely to assign him. Whereas the general discussion had been discontinuous, its participants not wholly invested in its outcome, Silas is allowed a formal exploration, starting with a theme on which he supposes a clear position, but which ends in a surprise discovery, that Jim's death has no particular meaning. In fact, it is not where Silas arrives finally that makes the story's sense, it is its internal movement and contradictions, from Jim's questionable motives to his utter selflessness; his sense of uncertainty, even futility in his efforts and yet a sense of clear purpose; his expressions of fear and doubt and lack of self-awareness and yet the recognition of his manly duty; the senseless and absurd irony of his death, in exchange for Silas's life; the ugly, disfigured corpse that suggests not heroic sacrifice but just plain suffering and defeat. Silas speaks, hoping to generate meaning in the process, but he cannot produce the romantic heroism he or his audience expected but rather discovers that he had been on a fool's errand to try

make the commonplace extraordinary and serve the needs of an idealized view of life. The significance of the story within the novel therefore depends not on its conclusions but its failure to conclude, and while it is embarrassing for Silas, it also a triumph of form, a closer approximation of the truth, as Howells would have it, than any abstraction about heroism one might want to derive from it.

The putative failure of Silas's narrative to achieve certain meaning strangely mirrors what is happening in Howells's narrative. Silas actually delivers a perfect example of Howellsian realism, but in this particular setting he achieves only his humiliation, and Howells presents it as such. The heroism is fleeting, confused with Silas's social defeat. Each narrator in his own way sets out to discover the viability of language to make sense of the mysteries of social hierarchy, and to argue against the claims of invidious distinction, and yet each finds that his attempt is frustrated by the contradiction between an initial idealism on one hand, on the other the historical data as he takes it up and finally understands it. This disjunction is, as I have shown, a consequence of Howells's theory of a self-contentious historical method. But the method does not enable him to predict which of his ideas will come under question, or that they will at all, or even prepare him to fully understand which ideals he *does* hold. Howells's democratic equalitarianism is ingrained, unquestionable in his more conscious moments, and in his writing a controlling assumption that keeps him on the sane side of skepticism. Yet like Melville, to return to my comparison, Howells finds himself working against his idealist tendency. The degree of conscious intention in Howells is certainly less than in *Moby-Dick*, and Howells is more likely to think that there are actual truths to be gotten. But they both want some harder truth they can live with, and their work puts their

inherited transcendental principles to the test. While Howells would not have found Emersonian idealism sufficient for a realistic view of life, any more than Melville did, he yet retained the ideal of Emerson as his American literary precursor in democracy: "It is only the extraordinary person who can say, with Emerson: 'I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic. . . I embrace the common; I sit at the feet of the familiar and the low,'" Howells wrote for *Harper's*; and in his complaint that critics of the American novel turned to the past for their models, and rather that the "true standard of the arts is in every man's power," we hear echoes of Emerson's original relation to the universe. Indeed for Howells, morality, so closely linked to the artist's vision, was an all-pervasive, transcendent force. His argument for the use of American materials and history in the novel is therefore inseparable from a persistent idealistic strain of thought in America that joins the transcendental inheritance with one's own intuitive sense of rightness, the apotheosis of common sense morality. And yet, what we see in Silas's humiliation is the historical discontinuity of that idealism, a rent in Howells's unconscious democratic individualism, which should have discovered at least some virtue in the simple morals of Silas's tale. But Silas's heroism is instead apiece with his embarrassment, and the price he pays for his self-assertion is to be put back into his place. Howells would therefore have to rely on a contrived plot, the rise of Silas Lapham, to achieve the affirmative statement.

The more explicit sociological commentary in the novel is therefore ironic. Bromfield Corey, the most astute observer of interclass relations in the novel, is the medium through which Howells can raise his own doubts and yet restrain himself from all-out endorsement of an upper-class view. Howells's joke is to have the aristocrat

diminish himself with irony—even *he* has to accept fact, as Silas puts it resentfully yet accurately, "gentlemaning as a profession has got to play out" (891). To reconcile his forced relations with the mineral paint king, as he refers to his son's new boss, Bromfield muses to his wife, "If money is fairly and honestly earned, why should we pretend to care what it comes out of, when we really don't care? That superstition is exploded everywhere" (946). This liberalism only reveals the uncertainty behind it. The observation that history itself is eradicating an overly fastidious concern for manners and old money—*That superstition is exploded everywhere*—is not an historical argument so much as a theory: Howells is identifying a general attitude, as he understands it. But as we have seen, Howells *does* care where money comes from and how it is earned, and he does not separate the means from the morality the market imposes. Therefore while Bromfield is made to speak the liberal perspective, his statements always suggest the counter-perspective: both are simultaneously entertained and a tension persists. Thus even in the light of his own reservations about his son's marriage into the Lapham clan, recently ruined by Silas's moral victory, Bromfield still expresses an unsure footing.

> "Well, Anna, you can't say but if you ever were guilty of supposing yourself porcelain, this is a just punishment of your arrogance. Here you are bound by the very quality on which you've prided yourself to behave well to a bit of earthenware who is apparently in danger of losing the gilding that rendered her tolerable."
>
> "We never cared for the money," said Mrs. Corey. "you know that."
>
> "No; and now we can't seem to care for the loss of it. That would still be worse. Either horn of the dilemma gores us. Well, we still have the comfort we had in the beginning; we can't help ourselves, and we should only make bad worse by trying. Unless we can look to Tom's inamorata herself for help." (1184)

The cruel irony Bromfield identifies in his wife's diminished superiority is a bitter recognition, rendered sweet with self-deprecating humor, of the democratic dispensation

under which all classes in America must live. The Coreys might have made their money off the Revolution—they were Salemites, some of the richest merchants in the country who benefited from post-Revolutionary trade opportunities—but it was nominally a democratic revolution, after all, and Mrs. Corey's politesse must be considered accordingly. But it is the burden of this democratic spirit that Bromfield articulates, and in his concern that the Laphams "are uncultivated people, and so far as I have seen them, I'm not able to believe that poverty will improve them"—Howells's own unchanging view—is the skepticism that informs the novel's leveling tendency in general. The reluctance to grant unqualified equality, particularly in the sphere of social relations where the politics of influential people and popular attitudes are formed every day, is a drag on the novel's democratic unconscious; Bromfield explicitly presents its occasional insights.

Though Howells did not consider the moral and the political to be opposed, his fiction nevertheless brings them into contention. There is an impulse in his work to seek out formulations that could be a guide to the moral life in a capitalist, apparently class-riven America, but these formulations are always frustrated in the very manner his novels think them through. Bromfield Corey's famously excised lines must have been written in the throes of such frustration.

> ". . . I spend my summers in town, and I occupy my own house, so that I can speak impartially and intelligently; and I tell you that in some of my walks on the Hill and down on the Back Bay, nothing but the surveillance of the local policeman prevents me from applying dynamite to those long rows of close-shuttered, handsome, brutally insensible houses. If I were a poor man, with a sick child pining in some garret or cellar at the North End, I should break into one of them, and camp out on the grand piano." (1040-41)

"I wonder that men are so patient with society as they are," Howells wrote to his father, in the letter with which I began this chapter. The similarities between the private and intended public expressions are obvious; what is remarkable is that the novel does not contain its anguish under the putatively democratic experience and rather freely exerts its violence. When Howells moved into better quarters, he thought he was rising to the heights of social insensibility, that his middle-class morality would succumb to apathy. And so we hear at once in Bromfield's speech the utter impotence of the upper-class, delivered over a nice dinner and fairly retracted in the face of the more temperate persuasion, and Howells's sense of the bankruptcy of his own middle-class morals, which give way at the first promise of comfort and protection from the poor man for whom they profess sympathy. Bromfield's respect for impartiality and intelligent observation, for law and order, and the conveniently hypothetical commitment to action—*If I were a poor man*—all indicate that nothing will be done after all, that nothing *can* be done.

The speech actually brings together two of the letters with which I began. In the letter to James, just before the lines I quote, Howells wrote, "The sun goes down over Cambridge with as much apparent interest as if he were a Harvard graduate: possibly he is; and spreads a glory over the Back Bay that is not to be equaled by the blush of a Boston Independent for such of us Republicans as are going to vote for Blaine." Again, the political and moral are in tension, not only in Howells's conscience but, as he saw it, in the historical moment. He and Twain had differed over this issue of political allegiance; fed up with corruption, Twain had gone mugwump and supported the Democrat Cleveland, a known philanderer, in the 1884 election. Howells simply could not countenance Cleveland's extramarital transgression, but he found himself equally

compromised in his vote for Blaine, who was suspected, and never exculpated, of accepting kickbacks from the railroads, surely an instance, as Howells describes in the novel, of the "immorality which regards common property as common prey, and gives us the most corrupt municipal governments under the sun—which makes the poorest voter, when he is tricked into place, as unscrupulous in regards to others' money as an hereditary prince" (1164). As his expression of guilt to James suggests, there was for Howells no good choice to make between the betrayals of marital and civic virtues. Either horn of the dilemma gored him.

But it was not simply that the environment provided no healthy stimulus for the American moral instinct. Howells suspected, from his own latent yearning for affluence and respectability, that the middle class was itself complicit in the national paralysis. The current middle class was operating on it own implicit morality, one that incorporated the logic of the market quite well, and he pursues this morality in the novel's subplot. The "rise" of Silas Lapham comes with its concomitant demotion of the upper class, which Howells represents in Tom Corey. Tom is unabashedly mediocre, impeccably bred yet clearly slacking as a member of Boston high culture—he has, for one, stopped reading serious literature, which for his father, Bromfield, and for perhaps Howells, is a sign of declining civilization; for another, he is interested in the Lapham daughters. But there is democratic virtue in his mediocrity. He has the vocational yen, that urge to be practical and for profit: "I must do something," he tells his father. "I've wasted time and money enough." And then, especially revealing of Howells's mind, "I am ashamed to come back and live upon you" (921). As early as his notebook entries Howells had planned for Tom to insist on his independence from his father's money, a supplement to the anti-

aristocratic impulse that underlay the apologia for Silas's down-home morality. Tom is descended from imperialists of global trade, but his ambitions are considerably more modest. He is conceived from the start not as a gentleman of the traditional mode but as Howells's idealized middle-class striver, at once ambitious for mere success and yet cultivated and self-aware. Tom's ethical ambition is a concession, as well—Howells recognizes the compulsion as essential to the middle-class character—but ambition in Tom has at least the benefit of being untouched by the anxiety of compromise, for it tends not only away from social mobility but eschews such aspiration altogether. In Tom, Howells imagines not the abandonment of his own founding morality but its attainment as a virtue, a rise as a fall.

Howells identifies most with his young gentlemen, who through the new social and economic circumstances must find their vocations and develop sympathies that cut across class lines. Through Tom, as he had in Ben Halleck, Howells finds the essayistic mode through which to explicate the class issues that are implicit in the formal progress of his novel. Tom speaks with ambivalence toward the Laphams, though Howells is nudging him into the role of their apologist, using Bromfield at this early stage as the spokesman for the aristocracy, yet another moribund class, but one Howells is not interested in reviving. "Ah, we shall never have a real aristocracy while this plebeian reluctance to live upon a parent of a wife continues the animating spirit of our youth," Bromfield says, through his pince-nez and over the *Revue de Deux Mondes*. "It strikes at the root of the whole feudal system" (921). This obsolescence is interesting because it puts Bromfield into the same category in which the novel ultimately finds Silas himself, of those classes Howells cannot imagine as part of his contemporary economic reality.

Both end up lacking the predatory instinct, Silas because of his indomitable middle-class morals, and Bromfield, who as a young man took up painting and mixed in European society rather than go into business, never acquired his father's Puritan discipline. Both are absolutely unfit for modern economic life, one by his virtue and the other by his effeminacy. It is up to Tom to supply the happy medium, fill the historical vacuum, and represent the present as Howells considers it ought to be.

> "I suppose that in a new country one gets to looking at people a little out of our tradition; and I dare say that if I hadn't passed a winter in Texas I might have found Colonel Lapham rather too much."
>
> "You mean that there are worse things in Texas?"
>
> "Not that exactly. I mean that I saw it wouldn't be quite fair to test him by our standards."
>
> . . .
>
> When [Bromfield] asked finally, "What are the characteristics of Papa Lapham that place him beyond our jurisdiction?" the younger Corey crossed his long legs, and leaned forward to take one of his knees between his hands.
>
> "Well, sir, he bragged, rather."
>
> "Oh, I don't know that bragging should exempt him from ordinary processes. I've heard other people brag in Boston."
>
> "Ah, not just in that personal way—not about money."
>
> "No, that was certainly different."
>
> "I don't mean," said the young fellow, with the scrupulosity which people could not help observing and liking in him, "that it was more than an indirect expression of the satisfaction in the ability to spend."
>
> "No I should be glad to express something of the kind myself, if the facts would justify me."
>
> The son smiled tolerantly again. "But if he was enjoying his money in that way, I didn't see why he shouldn't show his pleasure in it. It might have been vulgar, but it wasn't sordid. And I don't know that it was vulgar. Perhaps his successful strokes of business were the romance of his life—" (920)

The distinction between vulgarity and sordidness is Howells's, straight from his notebook. He wants to defend Silas against the reader's superior contempt that might arise in the face of the novel's own evidence, for Silas has until now mostly swaggered in resentment toward his social superiors. This dialogue is meant to work the reader to a

different conclusion, and then beyond it. Tom's relativist argument tries to put Silas beyond judgment by making him strange, but strange because he is the future: Tom has to go West of his staid Boston standards to understand the imminent "force" that Silas represents. This defamiliarization of the common prepares us for Tom's reconsideration of Silas's most damning trait, that he defines himself by his *ability to spend*. Silas is, to use our modern concept, a consumer; consumption is his personal creed. Howells has already made us laugh at the Laphams' tastes and spending, but here he works completely on his faith in their essential goodness. Tom goes beyond Howells's notes: not only is Silas's bragging not sordid, it is quite possibly not vulgar either. The definitions of words is not what is important here, it is the sincerity of the assertion. Tom's assessment is not based in evidence but in sympathy, a willingness to entertain the "romance" of financial success as a self-justifying ethos. Against his own skepticism about the moral consequences of wealth and conspicuous consumption, Howells is trying to give Silas the benefit of the doubt.

But the proposal of Silas's basic goodness and historicity as a thesis rather than as a fact finally leaves the question open. Indeed Tom's function at this point seems to be to maintain a critical, if sympathetic, perspective on the novel's main plot, to keep the possibility of analysis open where Howells's implicit faith in Silas would seem to occlude it. Tom is the character that permits the novel to move between Laphams and Coreys, to bring them together, to comment on the results, and to move the love story forward to Irene's education into reality, the episode that gives Silas's moral triumph its weight by materializing the failures of his consumerist ethics. But while Irene represents the moral stakes, Tom is the measure of Howells's historical instinct, the representative

of the contemporary spirit of rational industry, as opposed to the old model of Howells's boyhood, which Silas embodies. Without Tom's ambition, the novel would have no analytical, only a moral argument to make: Silas's rise would simply come off as a condemnation of the modern economic order and a celebration of an anti-modernist folk ideal. Tom could only emerge from Howells's sense of the current economic environment. Bromfield says,

> My hardihood surprises me. Here is a son of mine whom I see reduced to making a living by a shrinkage of values. It is very odd that some values should have this peculiarity of shrinking. You never hear of values in a picture shrinking; but rents, stocks, real estate—all these values shrink abominably." (947)

Market logic provokes this play on the concept of value, which is stable as a compositional principle in paintings, Bromfield's purview, but radically unstable in his society, where his class distinction is losing its authority. Adaptable, deferential, insipid, "with the sense of discipline which is innate in the apparently insubordinate American nature," Tom is the perfect relativist, his father's son by birth but not in spirit. He is part of a more generalized mediocrity that Howells sees as the effect of relative and volatile value in America, a compliment to Silas's tasteless consumption and braggadocio. If Silas represents the rise of low cultural stock, Tom is the devaluation of the high. The generation of the Boston Brahmin was passing, and as far as Howells was concerned it was, in literary terms, passé. He was nevertheless an heir of the "apostolic succession"—Holmes Sr.'s ironic reference to Howells's rise into Lowell's favor at the *Atlantic* in 1860—and in Tom there is some attempt to define that inheritance while claiming independence from it. Tom is the new intellectual and, typical of Howells's self-irony, he is compromised by the modern need to make a living. Like Silas, he incorporates

contradictory elements of his author's character, which trace the historical trajectory of Howells's own rise.

Tom helps Howells not only to explain his own position as the economically implicated intellectual, but a sociological trend in urban America, the dispersal of the old aristocracy amongst the general population. The introduction of the vulgar element into the upper classes was one thing; the slow process by which the children of the upper class gradually descended in taste and sensibility into mass culture was another, equally compelling one. But this is not really within Howells's experience. He does not know firsthand the humiliation of social decline, and the levity of Bromfield Corey could only be understood as the *schadenfreude* of a class that does not quite understand him. The most extensive passage in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in which we see Tom struggle with his disgust at his association with the Laphams does not reflect the fear and loathing of a true gentleman so much as a middle-class self-suspicion of inherent vulgarity from which it cannot distance itself enough.

> It had become a vital necessity with him to think the best of Lapham, but his mind was in a whirl of whatever thoughts were most injurious. He thought of him the night before in the company of those ladies and gentlemen, and he quivered in resentment of his vulgar, braggart, uncouth nature. He recognized his own allegiance to the exclusiveness to which he was born and bred, as a man perceives his duty to his country when her rights are invaded. His eye fell upon the porter going about in his shirt-sleeves to make the place fast for the night, and he said to himself that Dennis was not more plebeian than his master; that the gross appetites, the blunt sense, the purblind ambition, the stupid arrogance were the same in both, and the difference was in a brute will that probably left the porter the gentler man of the two. The very innocence of Lapham's life in the direction in which he had erred wrought against him in the young man's mood: it contained the insult of clownish inexperience. Amidst the stings and flashes of his wounded pride, all the social traditions, all the habits of feeling, which he had silenced more and more by force of will during the past months, asserted their natural sway, a he rioted in the contempt of the offensive boor, who was even more offensive in his shame than in his trespass. He said to himself that he was a Corey, as if that were somewhat; yet he knew that at the bottom of his heart all the

> time was that which must control him at last, and which seemed sweetly to be suffering his rebellion, secure of his submission in the end. It was almost with the girl's voice that it seemed to plead with him, to undo him, effect by effect, the work of his indignant resentment, to set all things in another and fairer light, to give him hopes, to suggest palliations, to protest against injustices. It *was* in Lapham's favor that he was so guiltless in the past, and now Corey asked himself if it were the first time he could have wished a guest at his father's table to have taken less wine; whether Lapham was not rather to be honored for not knowing how to contain his folly where a veteran transgressor might have held his tongue. He asked himself, with a thrill of sudden remorse, whether, when Lapham humbled himself in the dust so shockingly, had had shown him the sympathy to which such *abandon* had the right; and he had to own that he had met him on gentlemanly ground, sparing himself and asserting the superiority of his sort, and not recognizing that Lapham's humiliation came from the sense of wrong, which he had helped to accumulate upon him by superfinely standing aloof and refusing to touch him. (1057-58)

Howells's approach to examining the mindset of his characters is to seek out the extent of his own sympathy with them, and there is often a degree of uncertainty and inconsistency in these investigations. The narration objectively presents the contents of Tom's upper-class mind, at times seems to imitate his thoughts, but it maintains throughout a particularly middle-class perspective, a projection, as it were, into the upper-class mind from the curious middle-class spectator. But this double-consciousness does not produce, as we might expect, an irony that indicates our appropriate response, that certain footing from which to understand the novel's progress. We are rather in the midst of an exploration in which the narration is itself uncertain of its aim. This is because Howells respects Tom's cultivated superiority, his intellectual quality, but at the same time he wants to inject into this superiority a democratic ethos, that is, an unconscious, indwelling democracy. Howells wants to imagine two different social milieux joined by the essential qualities he believes the other inherently lacks, and so the passage works through a kind of ventriloquism to convince us, and itself, of its realism.

He thought of him the night before in the company of those ladies and gentlemen, and he quivered in resentment of his vulgar, braggart, uncouth nature. The objectification of Tom's thoughts and feelings betray the narrator's distance in sensibility. Tom's quivering "resentment," the emphasis on the faux respect accorded to "those ladies and gentlemen," and the stilted analytical turn, *uncouth nature*, do not represent the mindset of a gentleman humiliated by his inferior but rather a middle-class projection of what he *might* feel, what he ought to feel. The narrator further pretends to understand Tom's "class allegiance" by analogy—*He recognized his own allegiance to the exclusiveness to which he was born and bred, as a man perceives his duty to his country when her rights are invaded*—the formulation of "exclusiveness" itself suggesting a self-relative position to the upper class. Finally the fine distinction between Silas and the porter Dennis—*the gross appetites, the blunt sense, the purblind ambition, the stupid arrogance were the same in both, and the difference was in a brute will that probably left the porter the gentler man of the two*—is the kind Howells would entertain, in order to show that money really does not make the man after all, but probably not Tom, for whom such a point would not have to be made. In fact, the entire passage works in such explicit terms to draw the distinctions between Tom's and Silas's sensibilities, that it lacks the solipsism, the sense of internalization that would make it convincing as a representation of an upper-class mind.

Howells could not have written this passage any differently, of course, and he attempts to justify his absolute control over Tom's mind by making his democratic impulse an issue of plot: Tom is in love with one of the Lapham daughters. After the narrator admonishes Tom for his snobbery—*He said to himself that he was a Corey, as if*

that were somewhat—presenting it as Tom's own sense of his social decline, the paragraph shifts into a rationalization in favor of Silas's virtues. Howells clearly presents it as a rationalization, but the thrust of the paragraph has been leading us here all along, and so we are prepared to give it credence rather than take it ironically. Corey falls back into his previous democratic mode, reasoning from the premise of potential equality in the realm of morals to a justification of Silas's shameful behavior, and to a relativist conception of class, where he, Tom, is the one who has transgressed against decency and has failed in his moral-democratic duty. The final formulation, *Lapham's humiliation came from the sense of wrong, which [Tom] had helped to accumulate upon him by superfinely standing aloof and refusing to touch him*, is Howells's most explicit critique of Tom's supposed superiority. Yet by neutering Tom, the narration does not finally refute any of the claims of vulgarity that Tom, or the novel, has made against Silas. *Superfinely* is yet another term of distinction, between outright snobbery and gentlemanly sympathetic tolerance. Howells does not pretend to finally reduce Tom to Silas's level, socially; he rather defines a relationship that observes real differences that he himself feels acutely, while he also tries to convince us that differences do not matter in a larger moral sense.

Tom's upper-class reflections are therefore a way for Howells to consider a historical development more significant to the middle-class experience, and it is no surprise that he draws from his own. The leveling of his society and the possibilities it presented for what Howells still considered to be a new country prompted him to seek out an idealized version of the middle-class citizen, and naturally he drew Tom from his own values, for intellectual curiosity, superiority of sensibility, and for a willingness to face

the necessity of being useful and prosperous in a society that did not necessarily value either of those. Yet even as the passage we just examined demonstrates a measure of success in formulating a modern analogue to Silas's antebellum virtue, its very success throws into relief the counter-tendency of Tom's historical significance, as it has accumulated over the novel's progress. His democratic urges to work for a living, to seek out the real value of the likes of Silas Lapham and to pay his respects, to marry one the Lapham daughters despite the misgivings of his family, all the while retaining that privileged, superior perspective that permits him to act consciously and conscientiously, have all made Tom into the image of the Howellsian middle-class gentleman, but it has only brought Howells to the point, at the end of the novel, of justifying Tom historically.

In his notebook Howells wrote, "The young trees growing out of the fallen logs in the forest—the new life out of the old. Apply to Lapham's fall." As far as the plot goes, the new life that emerges from Silas's fall is the next generation of businessmen, which Tom Corey exemplifies. Having learned the ropes of the paint business, he becomes the enterprising imperialist after all, but not in the mold of his grandfather but that of Silas Lapham, as he might have been. Tom 'goes in' with the West Virginians and becomes a development manager for the business at points south of the American border, picking up where Silas left off, but now under a new corporate model, with advanced production technologies and interconnections with the expanding railroad network. There is something ironic and a little disappointing in Tom's fate, and it is hard not to recall Bartley's mock praise of Silas in his "Solid Men of Boston" profile: "His life affords an example of the single-minded application and unwavering perseverance which our young business men would do well to emulate" (877). This comment had snidely diminished

Silas's conservative antebellum business ethic in comparison with the current mania for industry, but it had made fun of both by reducing them to the same blind ambition. To be sure, Tom's ambition comes with the added component of ethical democracy, not wholly separable from his love for Penelope, whom he takes as his wife, but he is no less a part of the economic order of which Howells had made Silas a founder and then, spectacularly, a casualty. Tom's rise, as it were, into commonplace expectations is not only necessary as far as the novel's realism requires, it is also the historically viable option. The love story has to settle in some realm of historical reality, because Silas's transcendent moral victory, and its attendant reward, the happy and lucrative marriage for his daughter, has to be rooted in some recognizable world, lest it seem wholly improbable. There is, besides, no other way to imagine the life of the newlyweds in Howells's democratic America, where the only aristocrats are descending ones, and where everyone is compromised by the economic imperative. The picture as Howells presents it feels ultimately more like a concession to history than a paean to the middle class. The morality and "manhood" that he revived in Silas Lapham as a counterforce against the tide of capitalist logic is, at the end of the novel, enshrined in bucolic nostalgia; meanwhile the next generation simply moves on to new and unself-conscious prosperity, at peace with the order of things.

But the novel does not confront the future of the middle class, or the present for that matter, not intentionally anyway. It turns back into itself and reframes the issue of historical development as one of lessons to be learned. When the social division between the Laphams and Coreys proves to the be insurmountable—Tom's romantic egalitarianism must not be spread too thin—Howells writes in conclusion, "it is certain

that our manners and customs go for more in life than our qualities. The price that we pay for civilization is the fine yet impassable differentiation of these. Perhaps we pay too much; but it will not be possible to persuade those who have the difference in their favor that this is so" (1198). What could *civilization* signify here, if not a sense of historical progress? There must, after all, be a process through which the mixing of class sensibilities continues to produce "differentiation." The term points directly to Tom and Penelope and their progeny, to the forward march of economic necessity that will continue to bring the likes of them into contact and conflict. Yet the didactic thrust of the sentence presents this historical progress as inevitably beyond our control, and thus turns its historical-progressive meaning into a moral one: we should and can only object to such invidious distinction *after the fact*. The issue of whether the new generation is morally better off than the old is sidestepped: Tom assumes the mantle of economic responsibility, and certainly its compromises, while the narration presents economic necessity as the given reality, beyond question. The alternative Howells has found to the moral anxieties of Silas Lapham is not a generation unburdened by the sins of its fathers, but rather one that simply does not have the need to consider the moral stakes. Moral urgency occurs in the face of a threat, but for Tom and Penelope there is no threat, only the normative expectation of future prosperity as a positive good.

Chapter 5

A Hazard of New Fortunes

"Now we're imprisoned in the present, and we have to make the worst of it."

A Hazard of New Fortunes, p. 52[31]

Around the dinner table of the natural gas magnate Dryfoos, Howells assembles the various ideologies of his novel, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Fulkerson, the editor of the magazine through which these characters are connected, and Howells's representative of middle-class ambition, has just told a story about a visit to Moffitt, somewhere in the Midwest, where he witnessed a lockout and the suppression of a union at Dryfoos's refinery. Beaton, the magazine's designer and an artist who imagines himself to be aloof from bourgeois moral preoccupations, says to Dryfoos, "Pity your Pinkertons couldn't have given [your workers] a few shots before they left." Dryfoos's response and the rest of the discussion follows:

> "No, that wasn't necessary. I succeeded in breaking up the union. I entered into an agreement with the other parties not to employ any man who would not swear that he was nonunion. If they had attempted violence, of course they could have been shot. But there was no fear of that. Those fellows can always be depended upon to cut each other's throats in the long run."
>
> "But sometimes," said [the Southern gentleman] colonel Woodburn, who had been watching for a chance to mount his hobby again, "they make a good deal of trouble first. How was it in the great railroad strike of '77?"

> "Well, I guess there was a little trouble that time, Colonel," said Fulkerson. "But the men that undertake to override the laws and paralyze the industries of a country like this generally get left in the end."
>
> "Yes, sir, generally, [says Woodburn] and up to a certain point, always. But it's the exceptional that is apt to happen, as well as the unexpected. And a little reflection will convince any gentleman here that there is always a danger of the exceptional in your system. The fact is those fellows have the game in their own hands already. A strike of the whole body of the Brotherhood of Engineers alone would starve out the entire Atlantic seaboard in a week; labor insurrection could make a head at a dozen given points, and your government couldn't move a man over the roads without the help of the engineers." (297)

If Howells shares any of these views, it is Woodburn's. It is not the oligarchic feudalism that the colonel goes on to profess that is Howells's; it is the insistence on the "exceptional" and "unexpected" in history, which reflects impatience with the status quo and portends revolution, but whose vagueness signals wishful thinking. The discussion does not offer any suggestion for an immediate transformation, either social or moral. Instead it projects a battle of attrition between organized labor and an industrial society prepared to defend itself with violence.

Never gainsaying the capitalist's right to his wealth—Dryfoos is shown to be as deeply and unwittingly constrained by economic exigency as anyone else—Howells seems nevertheless to throw his sympathy behind labor. Woodburn's warning about the Brotherhood of Engineers has its precursor in a letter Howells wrote to Twain, shortly before he began writing the novel. In December 1887, the Brotherhood acted as strikebreakers on the Philadelphia and Reading line, only to have the favor returned a few months later, when their own strike on the Burlington was foiled by strikebreakers organized by the Knights of Labor. Howells projects beyond labor's internal division. "Here the fools [of the press] are now all shouting because the Knights of Labor have revenged themselves on the Engineers, and the C. B. & Q. strike is a failure. No one

notices how labor has educated itself; no one perceives that *next* time there won't be any revenge or any failure!"[32]

Not much time had passed since the press vilified him for defending the Chicago anarchists, and Howells still saw himself as engaged in a larger narrative with vaguely apocalyptic undertones. "If ever a public was betrayed by its press, it's ours," he tells Twain. "No man could safely make himself heard in behalf of the strikers any more than for the anarchists." "Safely" is the key word, for a man could make his protest heard if he were willing to risk the dangers involved. With Twain as an ally, Howells seems to think the risk is worth taking.

But his confidence is a matter of tone and not of historical certainty. In the letter, as at Dryfoos's dinner table, Howells is reticent about the means by which the resolution of socio-economic conflict will be achieved. Not quite apocalyptic, perhaps, but nevertheless decisive, or at least pivotal, will be "*next* time" labor realizes its collective strength, but exactly what the consequences will be is unknown. Howells is intentionally obscure. He deplores violence, and he is certainly not endorsing it to Twain, but such heated anticipation, in such suggestive language, can only be understood against a background of potential violence. Woodburn's evocation of the bloody strikes of the seventies is delivered with all the impartial indifference of a man who wouldn't perhaps mind so much as long as his utopia could be brought about. In the immediate utterance of a personal letter, however, Howells is clearly more interested in, if agnostic about, the means of this final showdown. He even fears the means. If through silence he implicitly deprecates of violence and suggests a political resolution, he is also, as he shows through Woodburn, compelled to acknowledge the pure fact of historical evidence. Twain knew

the record too, and it is taken for granted in Howells's mentioning the anarchists that they were in the midst of a repeat of the seventy-seven strikes, those of eighty-seven, of which Haymarket was a culmination.

The imminence of another eruption feeds Howells's novel. Violence does not materialize at Dryfoos's plant. It is the latent threat and uncertainty that really interests Howells. In fact, as Fulkerson relates the incident, it is not clear who the aggressor is, and who is simply defending his rights. That Howells wants to sympathize with the workers only makes the ethical issue thornier. The very fact of this discussion around the table is meant to underline the novel's interest, not in the events themselves or in a reconstruction of the cause and effect of history, but in the problems these events pose for the middle class. Here is the crux of the novel's ethical proposal. By refusing to name the events of recent memory, which the reader knows well, the novel invites the reader into a select group that knows there are depths to be plumbed beneath the events, which have received only a superficial representation in the public sphere. The novel self-consciously assumes the moral dilemma that the middle-class reader has not otherwise been asked to consider, but which, Howells insists, he *must* consider. What else could have been expected from the novelist who publicly defended, and publicly failed, the Chicago anarchists?

Vague historical reference normally confers an epic quality onto a novel's representation, as though not a specifically historical but a universal conflict were being waged. Not in *Hazard*. The implicit acknowledgement of its author's participation in the Haymarket affair—at the level of plot, for example, the middle-class magazine editor Basil March risks his career in order to defend the opinions of a German ex-revolutionary

socialist—places the novel in the immediate historical present. In fact, the novel seems even mundane, caught in the compromising reality of middle-class life, amid events beyond its control and understanding. "The novelist is a particular *window*," James wrote to Howells, using a favorite figure, which he extended in order to appreciate the grittiness of *Hazard*'s American life: "& it's because you open so well & are hung so close to *the street* that I could hang out if it all day long" (my emphasis).[33] James's assertion that the novel was "so damningly & inexplicably American" identifies perfectly its peculiar evocation of the real, its self-conscious engagement with yet unfinished issues. Although Haymarket is not explicitly evoked, it is an obvious reference, and with it comes a train of related events that are likewise commented upon, from the moral perspective, as Howells merely alludes to them in their broadest outlines.

The violent protest at the McCormick reaper plant in Chicago is one such event. The results of this protest were known to Howells's readers, and they were perhaps indistinguishable from those of countless outbreaks of the previous decade. I present a brief outline of the event, not to over-emphasize its particular importance to the novel, but to evoke through specific details a sense of the recent past, or of the immediate present, that the novel depends on, and which give Woodburn's warnings a special resonance.

On May 3, 1886, former molders of the McCormick works gathered outside the plant as they had been for a few months. These were skilled, not common laborers, and this would have been a strike, had not McCormick preempted it with a lockout and then reopened the plant with unskilled, nonunion men operating pneumatic molding machines. Determined to maintain his control against union agitation, McCormick hired Pinkerton

detectives to supplement the police garrison stationed at his plant to protect the scab workers. Like other industrial captains in Chicago, he was protecting his legal rights, which in the past month had been chipped away, as many owners conceded to strikers' demands for an eight-hour day in order to avoid the complete paralysis of their businesses and a repeat of the violence of a decade earlier. The threat was there nevertheless. Already there had been clashes between strikers and hired riflemen along Jay Gould's southwestern rail lines, and the violence finally reached Illinois in April, in East St. Louis, when seven striking railway workers were killed by posses enlisted from their own ranks. The massive strike of May 1, in Chicago, when between thirty and sixty thousand workers walked off their jobs, demonstrated the extent to which labor could organize itself peaceably to press for the eight-hour day, but it also saw the revival of a more radical element, particularly among the German and Bohemian workers, many who gravitated toward the incendiary rhetoric of the anarchists. When, on May 3, news arrived that Gould had successfully suppressed the strikes on his railway, law enforcement in Chicago prepared to do the same.

August Spies, the editor of the anarchist *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and eventually one of the condemned men in the Haymarket trial, did not incite violence among the men gathered outside the McCormick works. He spoke, in his thick German accent, about the eight-hour day. Pent-up frustration propelled itself. The men attacked with sticks and stones the scabs who emerged from the plant at the end of the day. When police fired into the mass of rioters, shots were returned. Two hundred more police arrived with guns and clubs. Under the impression that the casualties were more numerous than they were, Spies rushed to the office and issued a call to arms in what became known as the

"Revenge Circular," which would later be used as proof of a general anarchist conspiracy.

That it was never determined who threw the grenade at the rally just off Haymarket Square the following night as Spies finished yet another address, seems a mystery fitting the paranoia and aggression of those days and months. Would identifying a culprit have made any difference in the end? The men who sit around Dryfoos's table seem distanced, even academic, as they strike their various positions on a current of events they can hardly comprehend, and there is a sense that the heart of the matter will continue to elude them, no matter how much they talk. At bottom, each is driven by his own "hobby." Fulkerson's and Dryfoos's are primarily commercial, Woodburn's is utopian, indeed he is finally a windbag. The others, Beaton the artist and March the editor, are hangers-on and only theoretical skeptics of the commercial impulse, natively bourgeois and therefore lukewarm in their resistance to the norms they complacently inhabit. Only Lindau would have any sense of the working class lives that depend on the outcome of events, and even he is compromised by his place on Dryfoos's payroll. In this particular context, the socialist axioms Howells has him speak seem as impractical as Woodburn's feudal oligarchy.

Howells does not imagine these characters as their real-world counterparts, but as representative of the welter of middle-class anxieties, second-hand ideologies culled from magazines and the safety of dinner tables, like the one represented in this scene, a Delmonico's, for instance, where intellectuals and their patrons meet and knowingly discuss the issues of the day. Howells works from within the world he knows, and yet the whole scene is pervaded by self-consciousness of the inadequacy of it various

languages. It is therefore self-critical, though it does not propose to offer—does not even seem to posit the possibility—of a transcendent vision to replace the ones in which its is mired.

This is why the thrust of Woodburn's cranky utopianism is, for the moment, as good a vehicle as any for Howells to articulate his frustration with the middle class's moral impotence in the face of socio-economic injustice. "You couldn't do that, Mr. Dryfoos, under your system," Woodburn says, when Dryfoos proposes the legal suppression of unions. "And if you attempted it, with your conspiracy laws and that kind of thing, it might bring the climax sooner than you expected. Your commercial society has built its house on the sands. It will have to go" (298).

Howells means every word of that last sentence, but it has of course no substance, only the force of assertion. The more restrained yet substantive expression is in the previous sentence, in Woodburn's dismissal of "your conspiracy laws and that kind of thing." Woodburn has no respect for the law because it does not go far enough in subjugating labor: the implication ("under your system") is that the ambiguous legality of unions is the consequence of a timid liberalism that exploits labor on one hand while on the other remains theoretically committed to their rights as citizens. Such a morally confused system cannot stand. Woodburn means this seriously, but we are to take it as hyperbole, and therein is the force of Howells's critique. It is a matter of tone, not of the substance of Woodburn's theory. Howells is being equally derisive of a law that permits a betrayal of the moral basis on which it is supposedly founded. In the Haymarket trials, conspiracy laws were expediently construed in order to present the case as an epic war of republican order against the organized forces of anarchy. "You stand now, for the first

time in this country, between anarchy and law," State counsel told the jury, "between the absolute overthrow of the present system of society and government, by force and dynamite, and constitutional law."[34] Such is the tenor of closing arguments, but this was a view shared by the Court and, evidently, by the public as well. "Justice is Done," declared the Chicago *Inter Ocean* when the verdict was passed. "Destroying Factors of Republican Institutes Pay the Penalty with their Lives. . . American Justice Deals Anarchy Its First and Final Death Blows."[35]

Howells had followed the case closely and afterward conferred with the chief counsel for the defense, Roger Pryor. Pryor advised him to write a letter to Governor Oglesby on behalf of the condemned when the process of appeal failed in the Supreme Court. Howells also made a public appeal in the New York *Tribune*, the language of which suggests, in the context of my reading of *Hazard*, just how constrained by common wisdom was Howells's initial criticism of the trials, and how ambivalent this made him. "The [Supreme] court simply affirmed the legality of the forms under which the Chicago court proceeded," Howells pointed out, but "it did not affirm the propriety of trying for murder men fairly indictable for conspiracy alone [;]. . ." His notion of conspiracy here is consistent with the law as it was generally articulated in the statutes in most states, as interference by combination and intimidation of the normal operations of business. Howells is circumspectly technical: conspiracy, not murder, should have been the charge against the anarchists. He does not raise the moral issue, but rather leaves it implicit in the exercise of the law. This is an appeal for clemency, to a public largely suspicious of anarchism but which, Howells hopes, still has enough reverence for the law to see reason.

He is not taking any chances, at this point, by suggesting the innocence of the condemned.

But then, in the very next clause (this was all one sentence) there is a curious reversal: the Supreme Court "by no means approved the principle of punishing them because of their frantic opinions, for a crime they were not shown to have committed." The reversal is from the initial assertion that the anarchists were "indictable for conspiracy" to the objection to punishing them for their "frantic opinions." The one clause seems to respect the due process of the Chicago court, and then, in the next, Howells argues that the Supreme Court should have overturned that process. He knew from Pryor that the defense's case rested to a large degree on contesting the spurious charge of a general conspiracy, on which the prosecution justified its charge that the defendants were therefore responsible as accessories to the killing of a policeman, whether or not they actually threw the grenade.

Howells was not taking any chances, but neither could he avoid the suggestion of moral outrage. His temperate rationalism was meant to quell passions, not excite them. Indeed, Howells's language works on the assumption that the reader is capable of a rational consideration of the case, and that rational thought itself can give realistic definition to circumstances that, in the public mind, are a vague confusion of ignorance, fear, and misunderstanding. This faith in reasoned morality is totally absent from the dinner table scene, where apparently civil discussion amongst middle-class characters results not in resolution but in complacency. As a literary experiment, the scene ends in a discomfiting recognition of the impotence of theory and language to formulate a suitable response to the injustice, as Howells considered it, committed in the name of public

order. In this sense, the scene is a version of the *Tribune* letter. In both cases, Howells works within commonplace logic in order to expose its contradictions and inadequacy, but instead of producing from this distillation a convincing moral resolution, he discovers that morality is stymied by the confused logic.

In this way, he actually gets to some truth about the Haymarket affair. The outcome of the trial could not be explained simply by the prejudices of a packed jury or of the presiding judge, or by the cleverness of the prosecution's arguments. While it was obvious to many that this was an instance of juridicial miscarriage, few saw the way clear for a public denunciation of the verdict. Howells was one of only a few public intellectuals to come forth. The public seemed simply relieved that the representatives of a vaguely foreign and dangerous ideology had been done away with, hopefully for good. It was the euphoria of decisive action, and it came about, as the whole of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* suggests, not through any particular malice of the middle class, but through apathy, or ignorance the proceeds from the privileges of liberalism.

The Marches enjoy these privileges, believing that one can simply go about one's life in peace, apartment hunting and indulging hopes and nostalgia, and meanwhile maintain, through a process of rationalization, some sense of perspective on what one cannot morally assimilate. As Isabel March says to her husband as they pass through a working-class ghetto, "I don't want you to sentimentalize any of the things you see in New York. . . I don't believe there's any real suffering—not real *suffering*—among those people; that is, it would be suffering from our point if view, but they've been used to it all their lives" (60). Her position does not change over the course of the novel. Howells is not interested in educating Isabel; he wants instead to work from within her limited

perspective, because it is a real force in his society. He wants to test middle-class ideology against the historical events of the novel, and thus understand that ideology's contradictions and self-betrayals, even hopelessness.

Basil March is Howells's compromised protagonist. The compromise is not only moral but, as the foregoing discussion has indicated, formal. By exposing March's middle-class limitations, Howells alters the usual function of the protagonist. As he alternates between relying on March as the novel's (sometimes) viewpoint character and undercutting March's authority, Howells develops an alternative to the individualism underlying the conventional protagonist, which is essentially a moral and political position. Howells does not take history into the novel as a set of data to be organized by the experience of a central protagonist into a formulation of historical meaning, or into a moral statement, whether explicit or implicit in a middle-class ideology.[36] In fact, history is inassimilable. It is Howells's sense that middle-class ideology is mistaken when it is most certain, when it posits the most perfect order, and when it conceives history as essentially and inevitably a fulfillment of a class fantasy.

In the creation of Basil March, the dreariness Henry James noted in Howells's work finally achieves its most perfect expression, because it is more than an instinctive prognosis of an American middle-class ailment. What looks like epistemological modesty is only ambition in a different direction from that of the usual novel. Howells's purpose is to reduce the immanent middle-class concepts of history and morality to their basis, and from this poverty work toward an understanding without illusion. The resemblance between Basil March and his author are obvious: both are middle-class magazine editors transplanted from Boston to New York; both balance their literary

aspirations with supporting a family; and both are self-ironic in order to give their melancholy its due amid banal middle-class optimism. March is a peculiar creation even within Howells's oeuvre. He is more historically embedded than Howells's previous creations in the sense that he is less formally and stylistically extricated from his author's own historical experience. March does not appear in the sharp definition of a depicted type, the liberal middle-class editor from Boston, but as a voice that speaks the novel as it unfolds, neither completely inside nor out. He is never entirely sure whether he has the self-objectivity necessary to exceed his own limited understanding.[37]

The initial sketches of March and his wife, Isabel, as they arrive in New York, show just how subtle and precise Howells's style had become. The tension in his previous novels depended largely on a mixture of sympathy and repulsion toward his characters. The rendering of the Marches is something finer, eliciting neither sympathy nor repulsion, rather reducing the distance required for such stark reactions. It is often hard to separate the narrator's criticism of the middle-class Marches from what might be simple declarative statements of information. We seem to be privy to an unconsciously self-derisive identification. Indeed, a benign insidiousness lurks below the playful description of their marriage:

> March's irony fell harmless from the children's preoccupation with their own affairs, but he knew that his wife felt it, and this added to the bitterness which prompted it. He blamed her for letting her provincial narrowness prevent his accepting Fulkerson's offer [to edit the New York magazine] quite as much as if he otherwise entirely wished to accept it. His world, like most worlds, had been superficially a disappointment. He was no richer than at the beginning, though in marrying he had given up some tastes, some preferences, some aspirations, in the hope of indulging them later, with larger means and larger leisure. His wife had not urged him to do it; in fact, her pride, as she said, was in his fitness for the life

> he had renounced; but she had acquiesced, and they had been very happy together. That is to say, they made up their quarrels or ignored them. (22)

We might paraphrase Howells's statement this way: March uses an offhand comment to his children to get at his wife; he blames her limited imagination for not following through on what he, in fact, cannot bring himself to do, to seize the opportunity he has always wanted; he is simply too accustomed to compromise, and now he resents his marriage as the impediment to his fantasized future; though, as March knows, his wife is not entirely to blame, she has passively facilitated his apathy, and what we call happiness in marriage must be therefore just a willful ignorance of our discontent. The ambivalence of the narration is characteristic of Howells's style. He wants to work within the limitations of March's intellect in order to develop the novel and to realize fully a middle-class perception. Instead of a critical narrator, he needs a parallel consciousness, not quite detached from March's purview but nevertheless exterior to his capacity for understanding, a sort of unconscious or immanent ideology that is itself responsive to contingency and not superior to it.

About passages like this one, Frank Norris's charge that Howells wrote teacup tragedies quite misses the point. Certainly, March's quandary is not the stuff of tragedy, but this is precisely his problem. There is nothing he can take seriously enough to reform and he is quite content—that is, he is resigned to—his boredom, a routine of domestic squabbles and self-loathing. There are no epic aspirations here. But the contents of the passage are nevertheless under pressure, their potential force latent in the ideological implications of the writing itself. The narration's tone is objective and uninflected, its very banality suggesting a counter-narration: "His world, *like most worlds*, had been

superficially a disappointment"; "they had been very happy together. *That is to say*, they made up their quarrels or ignored them." This is not facetiousness, the knowing superiority and shared irony of narrator and reader. The clauses that I italicized barely register in the reading, but they acknowledge the possibility that the reader might share the Marches' malaise. The shame Howells once expressed in a quip about being a "theoretical socialist and a practical aristocrat"[38] while the country's republican dream was falling apart, is presented here in an even-handed description of everyday life. That the narration hardly flinches is its critical power. To James, who once referred to the accoutrements of Howells's domestic life as his "impedimenta," or to Twain, whose letters to Howells are filled with sardonic comments about family life, such a passage would have come off as darkly humorous, if not outright and justifiably depressing.

The confessional style presents middle-class malaise as a problem from which the novel cannot take a critical distance. The reader is not offered a clear way of understanding middle-class life, but rather historical reality itself. There is no need for the narrator to point to the malaise, for it is already immanent to the subject matter, which the narrator needs only to describe.

> Mrs. March was reputed to be very cultivated, and Mr. March even more so, among the simpler folk around them. Their house had some good pictures, which her aunt had brought home from Europe in more affluent days, and it abounded in books on which he spent more time than he ought. They had beautified it in every way and had unconsciously taken credit to themselves for it. They felt with a glow almost of virtue, how perfectly it fitted their lives and their children's, and they believed that somehow it expressed their characters—that it was like them. They went out very little; she remained shut up in its refinement, working the good of her own; and he went to his business and hurried back to forget it and dream his dream of intellectual achievement in the flattering atmosphere of her sympathy. He could not conceal from himself that his divided life what somewhat like Charles Lamb's, and there were times when, as he had

> expressed to Fulkerson, he believed its division was favorable to the freshness of his interest in literature. It certainly kept it a high privilege, a sacred refuge. Now and then he wrote something and got it printed after long delays. . . But, for the most part, March was satisfied to read. He was proud of reading critically, and he kept in the current of literary interests and controversies. It all seemed to him, and to his wife at secondhand, very meritorious; he could not help contrasting his life and its inner elegance with that of other men who had no such resources. He thought he was not arrogant about it, because he did full justice to the good qualities of those other people; he congratulated himself upon the democratic instincts which enabled him to do this; and neither he nor his wife supposed they were selfish persons. On the contrary, they were very sympathetic; there was no good cause that they did not wish well; they had a generous scorn of all kinds if narrow-heartedness; if it ever came into their way to sacrifice themselves for others, they thought they would have done so, but they never asked why it had not come in their way. They were very gentle and kind, even when most elusive; and they taught their children to loathe all manner of social cruelty. March was of so watchful a conscience in some respects that he denied himself the pensive pleasure of lapsing into the melancholy of unfulfilled aspirations; but he did not see that if he had abandoned them, it had been for what he held dearer; generally he felt as if he had turned from them with a high altruistic aim. The practical expression of his life was that it was enough to provide well for his family; to have cultivated tastes and to gratify them to the extent of his means; to be rather distinguished, even in the simplification of his desires. He believed, and his wife believed, that if the time ever came when he really wished to make a sacrifice to the fulfillment of the aspirations so long postponed, she would be ready to join him heart and hand. (23-24)

This cannot properly be called satire, though some readers will certainly hear the middle-class platitudes uttered in the service of ridiculing them: *working the good of her own*; *his life and its inner elegance*; *On the contrary, they were very sympathetic*; *cultivated tastes*; *she would be ready to join him heart and hand*. Different readers are bound to read different messages into the passage. The respectable middle-class person might have taken it as a tribute.

Middle-class pieties are presented as unquestionably normal. We are told that it is pleasurable to have deferred aspirations, that in fact it is virtuous to harbor unfulfilled dreams in order to give purpose to one's sacrifices. Howells has derided virtuous self-

sacrifice before, as self-congratulatory romantic drama in *The Rise Silas Lapham*. Here, that sacrifice is presented in its more mundane form. The romantic tendency is still alive in the Marches, but it provides them with not only an ethics of the moment but of an entire life. One can put aside his romantic novels, but the novel of life requires one to have imaginative resources in order to give that life meaning, where the routine of economic and social life would press it into a conventional narrative. The passage, in this sense, is rooting for the Marches. Their humiliation is the basis of their pride, and it is little wonder that they hold themselves superior to those who are less wealthy or intelligent, that they cherish a sanctuary—their home, their essential selves—where they are able to transcend their doldrums, and that they consider their own cultivation to be limited only by their means of paying for it.

American life seems to offer something that never actually arrives. There is an unfulfilled promise, but no one is certain what it is, and the deficiency is perceived as a personal shortcoming, an imperative to morality. In fact, the passage is at its most critical when it cannot exact any particular moral commitment from middle-class life.

> he could not help contrasting his life and its *inner elegance* with that of other men who had no such resources. He thought he was not arrogant about it, because he did full justice to the good qualities of those other people; he congratulated himself upon the democratic instincts which enabled him to do this; and neither he nor his wife supposed they were selfish persons. On the contrary, they were very sympathetic;

Howells does not suggest that there is any alternative to the Marches' self-congratulation or any external position relative to their "democratic instincts." That phrase that takes in a whole socio-political culture, and it is the very expression of the

implicit ethics of American society. "On the contrary" perfectly identifies the Marches' situation, however: it at once indicates that their moral fastidiousness is the only possible, and therefore commendable, attitude to take ('*Of course* they were sympathetic to those who were less fortunate!), while, for those inclined to hear the satire, it reveals the inevitable absurdity of this self-serving moralism ('Of course they *thought* they were sympathetic, if "sympathy" means self-aggrandizing condescension!). But again, the exposure of middle-class compromise, of the "divided life," does not deliver the criticism of satire, precisely because the narration does not provide the reader with any assurance that it is external to the situation it describes. To read the passage as simple mockery is to miss the essential thrust of its style. The moral shortcomings of the middle class must be seen as endemic.

The Marches are, indeed, typical, more so as the passage accumulates. But the passage is just the beginning of a continuous accumulation that, as it will turn out, never ceases in the novel. We never get outside of the Marches, to a position from which the commendation or criticism we perceive in their depiction becomes intelligible as a broader program. The Marches are never finished. They develop the novel toward no certain destination. Howells seems intent on following them wherever they go, as though he were following a couple through the streets of New York, just to see where they go, curious as to where they might lead him.

Basil March's slight literary sensibility is just enough to justify his sociological speculations, without making him appear atypical. In fact, Howells is simultaneously doing a sociological study on March. These studies become virtually indistinguishable. March's middle-class psychology, its acuities, but more often its limitations, defines the

epistemological limits of the writing. The writing discovers only what March is capable of understanding. Thus there is no narratorial superiority, no irony, for the very terms on which the novel develops, on which the reader depends, are entirely within the faculty of middle-class thinking. The form does the work of Howells's sociology, not the content of ironic observation.

> They drove accidentally through one street that seemed gayer in the perspective than an L road. The fire escapes, with their light iron balconies and ladders of iron, decorated the lofty house fronts; the roadway and sidewalk and doorsteps swarmed with children; women's heads seemed to show at every window. In the basements, over which flight of high stone steps led to the tenements, were greengrocers' shops abounding in cabbages, and provision stores running chiefly to bacon and sausages, and cobblers' and tinners' shops, and the like, in proportion to the small needs of a poor neighborhood. Ash barrels lined the sidewalks and garbage heaps filled the gutters; teams of all trades stood idly about; a peddler of cheap fruit urged his cart through the street and mixed his cry with the joyous screams and shouts of the children and the scolding and gossiping voices of the women; the burly blue bulk of a policeman defined itself at a corner; a drunkard zigzagged down the sidewalk toward him. It was not the abode of the extremest poverty, but of a poverty as hopeless as any in the world, transmitting itself from generation to generation and establishing conditions of permanency to which human life adjusts itself as it does to those of some incurable disease, like leprosy. (56)

The writing oscillates between objective catalogue and aesthetic appreciation. The passage begins from the Marches' perspective. They are demoralized by a fruitless day of apartment hunting, having been made aware of just how provincial, and how pretentiously genteel, they are, and they have taken a carriage ride to lighten their spirits. Their hopes for uplift are dashed. The overcrowding, the suggestion of manual labor and home cooking, the filth and dissipation, and the parochial, preventative eye of the state, all to the passage's effect of frank, realistic ugliness, is not quite what the Marches were looking for. Yet they are enclosed within a scene largely of their own making, which is

reflected in the art of the passage. The fire escapes and basements define the frame of the scene. Our eye is then directed through the street in the middle, where we at last come close enough to hear voices, and finally to a vaudevillian burlesque, the drunkard about to stumble into the cop. The symmetrical composition has its counterpart in the syntax—"Ash barrels lined the sidewalks and garbage heaps filled the gutters"; "the joyous screams and shouts of the children and the scolding and gossiping voices of the women"—and, as the passage becomes interested in itself, in the relish of language—"teams of all trades"; "a peddler of cheap fruit *urged* his cart; "the burly blue bulk of a policeman."

In fact, the scene, in all its immigrant color, has an old-world feeling to it, as though Howells were writing about the Roman ghettos and not the new American city. He is aware of the contradiction in relishing his depiction and taking the political stance of seeing American poverty clearly, but he knows that for the middle class, aesthetic distance from social reality is precisely the condition of objectivity. The next paragraph continues:

> The time had been when the Marches would have taken a purely aesthetic view of the facts as they glimpsed them in this street of tenement houses, when they would have contented themselves with saying that it was as picturesque as a street in Naples or Florence and with wondering why nobody came to paint it; they would have though they were sufficiently serious about it in blaming the artists for their failure to appreciate it, and going abroad for the picturesque when they had it here under their noses. It was to the nose that the street made one of its strongest appeals, and Mrs. March pulled up her window of the coupé. "Why does he take us through such a disgusting street?"

The joke on Mrs. March is that while she might have appreciated poverty from the safe distance of a tourist, when she was affronted by it in her own back yard she sees

that it really stinks. The further implication, however, is that she is being rudely educated into yet another aesthetic, not the picturesque but the realistic, which appreciates poverty in a wholly new way, head-on, offending the complacent sensitivity of middle-class taste.

We wonder what the effect of such education is. Middle-class normativity exerts a powerful resistance to any offence. The Marches have descended from the elevated train and into the streets, but in their coupé they are still only distant spectators. Our initial description of the immigrant slum is appropriately rendered entirely from a distance; one needn't walk actual streets to conjure these details. The narrator's coda,

> It was not the abode of the extremest poverty, but of a poverty as hopeless as any in the world, transmitting itself from generation to generation and establishing conditions of permanency to which human life adjusts itself as it does to those of some incurable disease, like leprosy

projects the insuperable distance between the middle-class spectator and the very real and dire economic effects of the system that supports him, precisely by suggesting the absence of that reality in literary representation. The metaphor of leprosy, positing generational poverty as an "incurable disease," is intended as a liberal gesture of sociological and historical understanding. One can hear the authority of George Eliot's narrators in the tone of this pronouncement. Its obvious recourse to analogy to make the case demonstrates the difficulty such thinking has in getting to the object of its analysis. Cresting off the extended description, the metaphor reaches for an understanding of immigrant poverty. The result is to throw up its hands in the face of a problem that is anyway beyond its capacity to imagine otherwise, as though poverty were a force of nature.

There is nothing here meant to shock the reader into recognition, nothing on the order of Jacob Riis's exposés of slum life, which brought readers much closer to actual conditions, at least in their content. It is not Howells's intention to convert the reader to a higher consciousness. The question in such a case, as I will show in the next chapter, would be, Conversion to what? What is the substance, or ontology, of that moral position? There appeared to be plenty to investigate within the texture middle-class consciousness and thought, in the here and now, directly apprehending the world. The scene continues under March's direction, in response to his wife's disgust: "This driver may be a philanthropist in disguise," he says, as we are told, "with dreamy irony." Howells is making fun of him, but also showing that March is aware of his flights and not completely committed.

> "[He] may want us to think about the people who are not merely carried through his street in a coupe, but have to spend their whole lives in it, winter and summer, with no hopes of driving out of it, except in a hearse. I must say they don't seem to mind it. I haven't seen a jollier crowd anywhere in New York. They seem to have forgotten death a little more completely than any of their fellow citizens, Isabel. And I wonder what they think of us, making this gorgeous progress through their midst? I suppose they think we're rich, and hate us—if they hate rich people; they don't look as if they hated anybody. Should we be as patient as they are with their discomfort? I don't believe there's steam heat or an elevator in the whole block. Seven rooms and a bath would be more than the largest and genteelest family would know what to do with. They wouldn't know what to do with the bath anyway."

March is doing his best to be sympathetic, to take the correct, enlightened view. But he cannot decide whether he wants the poor to be innocent simpletons—"They seem to have forgotten death"; "they don't look as if they hated anybody"—or whether they are as perceptive as he is, philosophers who have dispensed with the mysteries of inequality

and death. The inevitable result of such sympathy is solipsism—"I wonder what they think of us, making this gorgeous progress through their midst?" March continuously betrays his own chauvinism as he tries to switch places with the poor, and so he must, perhaps with some self-mockery, retreat to his superior perspective: "They wouldn't know what to do with the bath anyway." How the poor manage, "I don't know," he says a moment later, "and I'm afraid I don't want to" (58). Being politically liberal requires a measure of ignorance, and a theoretical sympathy, spun form words. "You ought to get Mr. Fulkerson to let you work some of these New York sights up for Every Other Week, Basil," Isabel says, giving us a critical distance from March. "[Y]ou could do them very nicely."

In fact, he cannot do them at all, and March's impotence with the pen is just one of the dramas of paralysis that sustains the novel. Howells does get quite a bit of writing out of March's writer's block, and by examining the conditions of not writing, he turns his own aesthetic inside out, exposing its mechanisms in order to reinvent them. What would an urban middle-class art look like? What form would emerge from a middle-class politics, and what would it tell us about those politics? March's solipsism is a boon for Howells, as long as it can get the novel to a more fundamental truth about the middle class than theoretical, or traditionally artistic, formulations have done before. The manufactured endings of *A Modern Instance* and *Silas Lapham* were attempts to square the circle, to make whole that which was discontinuous. There, the novelist's responsibility was to pronounce, against ambivalence, on the historical significance of his story and to justify its theoretical understanding by assuming the absolute and universal rightness of its morals.

March's liberal sociology, however, is tentative. Howells prevents March from attaining certain knowledge, by limiting the developmental potential of his reflections. The word for his desperate speculation (though March does not yet feel the desperation) is "philosophy." When Fulkerson asks for one of the New York pieces, in writing, March's response is, "I couldn't, really. I want to philosophize the material" (156). On the elevated train, amid the "picturesque admixture" of immigrants and business men,

> He had found himself in a car mostly filled with Neapolitans from the constructions far up the line, where he had read they are worked and fed and housed like beasts; and listening to the jargon of their unintelligible dialect, he had occasion for pensive question within himself as to what notion these poor animals formed of a free republic from their experience of life under its conditions; and whether they found them practically very different from those of the immemorial brigandage and enforced complicity with rapine under which they had been born. (158)

Once again, Old Europe surfaces in modern America. The triumph of modernity—and March is quietly triumphal in taking his "free republic" as his reference point—is presented as the reduction of history to a long slog toward present enlightenment, and the writing is not untroubled by this historical arrogance. The more liberal reader will probably laugh at March's facile assumption of genetic superiority ("these poor animals"), but the brief genetic history of the Italian immigrant is, perhaps, not so controversial. The reader's mockery of March is self-mockery, after all, for the passage does not seriously challenge his brand of democratic sympathy. March's view of the poor animals seeking the republican dream is the politically liberal position of the intelligent middle class. Laughing at March simply reminds one of his own degree of difference from the immigrant, but it is an important degree. Positing Europe as the dark

age before the American renaissance is therefore perfectly natural, if ambivalent. The standard narrative of the American transcendence of history, which explains its burgeoning economic and political culture, appears as continuous with history after all, mired in its detritus and yet to transform all it takes in. March's intellectualism (it is suggested that he can distinguish correct Italian from its dialects) is written here, then, as a historically compromised, limited perspective.

To press the point, Howells explicitly identifies the omnivorous liberal appetite for projecting itself.

> The small eyes, the high cheeks, the broad noses, the puff lips, the bare, cue-filleted skulls, of Russians, Poles, Czechs, Chinese; the furtive glitter of Scandinavians—fire under ice—were aspects that he identified and that gave him abundant suggestion for the personal histories he constructed, and for the more public-spirited reveries in which he dealt with the future economy of our heterogeneous commonwealth. 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. These were matters of his waking dreams as he stared hard at them, while the train raced further into the gay ugliness—the shapeless, graceless, reckless picturesqueness of the Bowery. (159)

Of course, the writing does not do any better than March, and the narration seems to be in uneasy identification with him. It is not March who thinks, "It must be owned that he did not take much trouble about this," but the narration expresses the same incapacity to know. It gestures toward an outside reality without committing to anything in particular: "what these poor people were thinking, hoping, fearing, enjoying, suffering; just where and how they lived; who and what they individually were" are not important enough to *actually* find out. What is important is the liberal sentiment that it *would be* important to find out. The tone of the passage is both superior to March and regretful of

its own shortcoming. "It must be owned" is characteristic Howells, self-consciously critical, uncertain how far his own writing is complicit.

The writing keeps going, digging itself deeper into its limitations, but also outward toward an understanding of the historical problem March embodies. The irreducible, unaccountable reality that sinks March's capacity to write is reflected in the narration's dense accumulation.

> There were certain signs, certain facades, certain audacities of the prevailing hideousness that always amused him in that uproar to the eye which the strident forms and colors made. He was interested in the insolence with which the railway had drawn its erasing line across the Corinthian front of an old theater, almost grazing its fluted pillars and flouting its dishonored pediment. The colossal effigies of the fat women and the tuft-headed Circassian girls of cheap museums; the vistas of shabby cross streets; the survival of an old hip-roofed house here and there at their angles; the Swiss-chalet, histrionic decorativeness of the stations in prospect or retrospect; the vagaries of the lines that narrowed together or stretched apart according to the width of the avenue, but always in wanton disregard of the life that dwelt, and bought and sold, and rejoiced or sorrowed, and clattered or crawled, around, below, above—were features of the frantic panorama that perpetually touched his sense of humor and moved his sympathy. (159-60)

Modernity seems to outstrip March's capacity to register it. His "sense of humor" and his "sympathy" miss exactly what he appears to take in, a sequential flashing of images seen from the elevated train window. The peculiar angles that result in improbable lines; the erasure of staid, classical and traditional aesthetics by the straight and decisive line of the rail; the reduction of life to its essential anonymity, which calls for a new sensibility; these are the prescription for modernist painting, and March's quaint taste for the picturesque is hopelessly obsolete. The passage continues:

> Accident and then exigency seemed the forces at work to this extraordinary effect; the play of energies as free and planless as those that force the forest from the soil to the sky; and then the fierce struggle for survival, with the stronger life persisting over the deformity, the mutilation, the destruction, the decay, of the weaker. The whole at moments seemed to him lawless, Godless; the absence of intelligent, comprehensive purpose in the huge disorder and the violent struggle to subordinate the result to the greater good penetrated with its dumb appeal to the consciousness of a man who had always been too self-enwrapt to perceive the chaos to which the individual selfishness must always lead.

March seems almost aware of his innocence here, seems to be born into a modern consciousness. God is no longer a relevant concept, he perceives, and it is rather accident and exigency that reign. Lawlessness is the new law. From the perception of disorder comes the totalizing theory: it is all really tending to order in the end, when the result will be subordinated to the greater good. It is difficult to tell who, exactly, is positing this perverted Darwinism. The narration seems at first to be educating March out of his selfishness, penetrating his mind with a new sense for the modern, with an intimation of common weal order. But it is also March who is given the credit for these reflections; or rather, it is he who is accountable to these reflections. His awakening into selflessness comes with an insidious social Darwinism that justifies, all over again, the chaos of selfishness. This "chaos" is both actual and psychological, a chaos of the mind and sympathy. The theory of the order beneath disorder is confused, "self-enwrapt," an epistemological dead end.

The passage unfolds this way because the ideas and terms are confusing, even for Howells. He pits these platitudes against the historical evidence of the city in order to generate the friction of his writing, from which new understanding is supposed to emerge. The programmatic yearning for collectivity and sympathy, implicit in the criticism of March, turns out to lead back into the "chaos of selfishness" it tries to exceed.

Howells is demonstrating his own difficulty in making the city concrete. He is aware of the epistemic impossibility of a middle-class art to penetrate the abstract representation of American historical reality, once it seeks that reality outside of itself. The world 'out there' apparently can only be known to the extent of a class's incapacity to free itself of its own theories. But how? March is not unintelligent; in fact, he is an intellectual. His theories are up to date. The evidence of his senses strains his theories, but it also makes theory necessary. The exploration of March's solipsism, however, leads Howells to a next step. The passage does make concrete in its matter the modern middle-class psyche, without either condemning or celebrating it. March's thinking is presented *as is*, with no additional novelistic project attached to it, no moral from which to develop later scenes. History, Howells might say, has been recorded, captured in all its concreteness, within the very structure of perception that defines the middle-class world and its representations.

Howells thus confronts a problem of the novel form head-on. He finds that a truthful depiction of the middle class delimits the potential for artifactual wholeness. As we will see, the novel never resolves March's confusion, never comes to its own conclusions. What Howells does come to know in his fiction he knows with a price: his own moral programs are short-circuited, and artistic perfection escapes him. This is why he has always had a hard time convincing readers that his common materials, and the aesthetic they require, could properly be called beautiful.

It would be useful, at this point, to compare Howells with an undisputed master of the novel form, in order to see exactly what he was opposing in his own work, and to understand the differences, as he saw them, in the way history could enter the novel.

Like Howells, George Eliot was an editor, and for her fiction was the literary counterpart to politics and sociology, and to theological and historical scholarship. Fiction also pursued important questions, but more akin to philosophy, it sought its knowledge through an examination of its own habits of thought. In novels, Eliot could work out her moral programs through the logic of character and plot development, but always within the controlled environment of her own intellectual proclivities. Particularly for Eliot, ideas could be bodied forth in writing with the tendency to order, to complete formulations.

A case in point is *Daniel Deronda*. Deronda himself is sent on the novel's errand, to remedy the reader's ignorance of European Jews, and to discover the implications of Jewish nationalism. It is important, in the context of our examination of Howells's method, to notice this otherwise obvious strategy of using a protagonist as the vehicle for developing the author's program. Both writers do it, but in much different ways, and the consequences go right to the heart of their respective arts. Deronda's search to understand his own Jewishness begins with his attraction to an orphaned and, we are told, angelic Jewess, whom he heroically but modestly rescues from committing suicide. He begins to read on the subject of Judaism, and he takes to wandering through the Jewish enclaves of Frankfurt and London, arousing his "historic sympathy." The passage I work from is typical of the novel.

Eliot clearly aligns the character with the novel's projected aim. Deronda's peculiar intellect initially delays plot, in favor of gathering information:

> His early-awakened sensibility and reflectiveness had developed into a many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action: as

> soon as he took up any antagonism, though only in thought, he seemed to himself, like the Sabine warriors in the memorable story—with nothing to meet his spear but flesh of his flesh, and objects that he loved. His imagination had so wrought itself to the habit of seeing things as they probably appeared to others, that a strong partisanship, unless it were against an immediate oppression, had become an insincerity to him. His plenteous, flexible sympathy had ended by falling into one current with that reflective analysis which tends to neutralize sympathy. (307)[39]

Deronda's hesitation is his virtue, even if the novel's projected outcome for him is hindered by his inaction. The hesitation is intellectual. Deronda thinks too much, but this is according to the novel's ethics. He is no moral weakling—he will defend the oppressed where he finds them. His mental equivocation is based in a well reasoned, and not injudiciously bestowed sympathy, a capacity for seeing multiple perspectives, not as oppositions but in their relational truths. Deronda is tormented by his own acuity. This is not the vacillation of limited reflection.

> With the same innate balance he was fervidly democratic in his feeling for the multitude, and yet, through his affections and imagination, intensely conservative; voracious of speculations on government and religion, yet loath to part with long-sanctioned forms which, for him, were quick with memories and sentiments that no argument could lay dead.

Deronda tends toward innovative thinking, but his conservatism prevents him from becoming deluded by his own speculation. There is a bedrock of conviction, even if it is momentarily based in private rather than collective "memories and sentiments." He has the intellectual raw material to learn—not to change, necessarily, but to be educated, to evolve. Eliot thus reinforces the intellectual ethic of the novel itself, setting the terms of its explorations, and teaching us how to read every scene that follows.

Deronda's characterization is exactly a projection of Eliot's imperative to order, and she is explicit on the stakes involved:

> A too reflective and diffusive sympathy was in danger of paralysing in him that indignation against wrong and that selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force; and in the last few years of confirmed manhood he had become so keenly aware of this that what he most longed for was either some external event, or some inward light, that would urge him into a definite line of action, and compress his wandering energy. (308)

Both the event and inward light will come with the introduction of Mordecai into the novel. In the first clause, Eliot stresses the moral problem to be solved; in the second, she predicts the plot, preparing her reader to expect that progress and resolution will necessarily coincide with the fulfillment of her moral program.

All of this proceeds from, and tends to the support of, Eliot's broader historical thesis. Tying plot directly to the promotion of morality on a national scale—and this is understood, in Deronda's divided character, to mean both a Jewish nation and Britain—Eliot justifies the novel's artificiality as politically productive and historically important work. That is, the thinking that the novel does, and its accumulated matter, is directed by a middle-class nationalist ideal that the reader also assumes, as a condition of understanding and appreciating the novel. The promise of continuity, already a mainstay of the British historical imagination, is too precious to surrender:

> [Deronda] was ceasing to care for knowledge—he had no ambition for practice—unless they could both be gathered up into one current with his emotions; and he dreaded, as if it were a dwelling-place of lost souls, that dead anatomy of culture which turns the universe into a mere ceaseless answer to queries, and knows, not everything, but everything else about everything—as if one should be ignorant of nothing concerning the scent of violets except the scent itself for which one had

> no nostril. But how and whence was the needed event to come?—the influence that would justify partiality, and make him what he longed to be and yet was unable to make himself—an organic part of social life, instead of roaming in it like a yearning disembodied spirit, stirred with a vague social passion, but without a fixed local habitation to render fellowship real? To make a little difference for the better was what he was not contented to live without; but how make it? It is one thing to see your road, another to cut it.

The anxiety rehearsed here is only partly shared by the character. The historical anxiety is all Eliot's. Randomness, disorder and discontinuity are presented as a kind of hell. Indeed, Deronda's search for wholeness is wholly religious, his yearning to embody himself, to make himself for once real, reflects Eliot's need to make concrete—to realize in the writing, in the artifact, and thus obviate the mere abstraction of ideals—a theory of history that shores up English identity and stability. The questions about how to achieve real fellowship are certainly Eliot's, and on the extra-literary level she voices them with the utmost urgency. The narration, however, is not as anxious as Deronda, as it projects the outcome of the plot. For the time being, in fiction, ideas can come to fruition.

There is a considerable epistemic difference between Eliot's and Howells's novels. Deronda's quandary, to settle into a viable moral and intellectual position that will not preclude further flexibility, is for Eliot precisely the problem of novel writing, of *thinking* itself. Hesitance or patience, whichever we assign to Deronda, is the measured ethics of an intelligent historical consciousness. Without it, Eliot cannot think at all, or rather, she cannot, in writing, locate a position from which to project her novel. Deronda's conservatism is her own, and her epistemic tendency is to work from a fundamental a priori, to permit Deronda to venture along a circumference, gathering knowledge, but held tight by the centripetal force of the novel's implicit moral center.

Indeed, even the reconnaissance along the edge is limited. The Jewish milieu into which Deronda ventures is composed of literary, Howells might say romantic, rather than historical types. Deronda himself is a monumental idea, a thorough Englishman with the potential to become a statesman, who is divided within himself about his connections to an ancient culture. He is at once ancient and modern, the very embodiment of the continuity that fuels Eliot's vision of England. He is the chosen one. History has worked its way to his emergence, and he completes it. Thus the satisfying utopian pull of the novel. The consummate order, the art of George Eliot, presents history as an allegory of middle-class moral fulfillment, a typology. Such is the intellectual habit of her work, that which defines its aims and limits its range.[40]

As we saw in the presentation of March, yet another stultified intellectual trying to make sense of history and of himself, Howells resists such tight control. The historical data, that barrage of unknowable, unapproachable modernity, results in an ever arriving prose, which never attempts to harness historical matter. The difference between these writers is the more remarkable because they are both implicitly defining a moral program, which they imagine to be of national and historical consequence. These programs are, in their substance, similar, to promote civic action based in human sympathy. But for Howells, it is the structural morality that disciplines Eliot's thinking about history that is at issue. If Eliot conceives realism through the terms of middle-class morality, Howells is questioning these very terms, eking out their inherent epistemological confusion.

March operates in *Hazard* as a principle of testing morality against historical data. The anonymous immigrants that people his New York are no more distinct in their broad noses and puffed lips than Eliot's Jews, but they are, in their anonymity, an

acknowledgement of the utter strangeness of the changing social and physical landscape. To make them humanly visible, individuals, might be a valiant imaginative effort, but it would be experientially and epistemologically false, writing in search not of the people themselves but of the writer's idea about them. Such an aesthetic would be solipsistic, not only in its practice but in its conception. March's solipsism, on the other hand, is written out in order to expose its flawed mechanism. The novel participates in its own self-examination. Howells's narrator, it seems, would exceed its historical limits, if only it could, if the writing could break through to some new realization. Where Eliot was patient, waiting for history to come to her, Howells's writing is trying to push history forward, to break itself out of the stagnation of its own habits of thought, in response to a world that is demanding the development a new sensory apparatus.

The new apparatus is the discontinuous novel, and it emerges from the middle-class experience in America. March's psyche is characterized by a growing disorder. This historical accuracy, or truth, comes at the price of imperfection. As *Hazard* progresses through March's adventures, it clings very loosely to its moral center and rather flirts with other ideological possibilities. None prove viable, but neither can they be dismissed. Howells's thinking moves centrifugally, but the axis remains fixed, and the novel registers the stress of this widening circumference as it takes in more ideas than it can assimilate. It was not that Howells didn't posit an artistic perfection on the order of Eliot's; indeed, a formally perfect realization of his historical investigations was his goal. It was that, given his view of history, such perfection was impossible. The aesthetic ideal of order and his skepticism about America's historical progress were at odds. Howells knew, years before James recognized it, that something formally new would emerge from

the States, if not from his own pen. But this innovation was born of such doubt and despair in his country and class, that it became inseparable from that doubt. Its discoveries, in some sneaking, suspicious way, looked to Howells like artistic failure. In *Hazard*, Howells writes about not writing, chronicling the self-doubt he takes to be indicative of his class, and thus historical insight accumulates on the back of failed artistic experiments.

Deronda's progress is the organization of complexity; March's is the discovery of yet more complexity. For Howells there was little in the progress of American history that could support a conservative moral program. What would he have preserved? He owed his own ascendancy to the consolidation of liberal order, and he had begun to question both over the past several years. Like any middle-class business man enjoying his country's unregulated economic expansion, he emulated the rich, with his fur-lined overcoat, townhouses and summer homes. He went further than even liberal minded intellectuals in his guilt, however, carrying his father's midwestern radicalism, a hard-line moral commitment to equality born of poverty and modest goals. Howells was not so naïve as to think that simpler life could return amid the country's headlong development, but its memory nevertheless made claims on his divided attention, between mobility and social responsibility.

It is the radical in Howells, not the conservative moralist, that exerts the strongest force on *Hazard*, but it does not take over. The responsibility of the realist was to history, which in the United States, as recent events had shown, was resistant to incursions against its sense of order. Howells permits his more incendiary ideas as much

slack as he can, within a society governed by middle-class norms. His interest is not in resolving history in favor of one idea or the other, but in the tension between them, a formal tension from which a new historical understanding, and very much a personal one, can emerge.

Lindau, the German socialist who read Heine with the young March, and whom March hires as a translator for the *Every Other Week*, is based in reality. Howells writes in *Years of My Youth* that Lindau was based on a composite of two figures from his own past, two German "forty-eighters," a watch maker in Columbus who tutored the young Howells in German, and an editor Howells befriended as a journalist in Columbus, who "carried in his leg a ball which some soldier of the king had planted there, one day, when [he] stood behind the barricade in Berlin" (164)[41]. Lindau did not receive his disfiguring injury in Germany. Howells conflates the world-historical struggle with America's own bruised past: Lindau has lost his hand fighting for the Union, against slavery, in the Civil War. Howells makes it clear that the Civil War was indeed a revolution, or the completion of the original, which turns out like them all: "Do you think I knowingly gave my hand to save this oligarchy of traders and tricksters," Lindau taunts March, "this aristocracy of railroad wreckers and stock gamblers and mine slave drivers and mill serf owners? No; I gave it to the slave; the slave—Ha! Ha! Ha!—whom I helped to unshackle to the common liberty of hunger and cold" (167).

At 22, Howells was obsessed with John Brown. He remembered Brown as a cult figure around Jefferson, Ohio, where the underground railroad was active, and who was admired by the German editor in Columbus. Though he later came to deplore the violence of Harper's Ferry, Howells retained a sense of that violence as a desperate

assault on an all-encompassing moral degeneration. Fanatics like Lindau, Miss Vance and the minister Peck, are always "cranks" in Howells's novels, but they are cranks with legitimate gripes against the prevailing order they oppose. Indeed, the consummate bourgeois March is shown to be somewhat of a priggish whiner when faced with Lindau's harangues against American capitalism. "Oh, it isn't such a bad world, Lindau!" he says at one point. "And I don't believe there's an American living that could look at that arm of yours and not wish to lend you a hand for the one you gave us all." The tasteless pun is meant to rebound back onto March, and lest we miss it, Howells continues, "March felt this to be a fine turn, and his voice trembled slightly in saying it" (167).

This exchange, in fact, characterizes the novel's own uneasy relationship with Lindau. Through the old German, Howells introduces his more aggressive socialist sympathies, but the impending violence that Lindau suggests (any reader could catch a whiff of the Haymarket smoke) is finally too threatening, and Howells will not fully commit. Lindau embodies conflicting tendencies, a romantic ideal of the revolutionary fight against the tyranny of oligarchs and patriarchs, Howells's old Ohio-republican past, and the futility of revolution and violence, the suppression or fulfillment of which leaves in its wake the reconstitution of middle-class order.

Lindau thus enters the novel as a formal problem, an element that cannot be integrated. Howells introduces him in a scene at Maroni's, a working-class restaurant frequented by Fulkerson, Lindau's alternate. Each whispers into March's ear like devil and angel. At this point we know which is which. Fulkerson has just insured his enlistment of a still hesitant March to the editorship of *Every Other Week*, and the smell

of "a man tempted to crime" still lingers about their table as Fulkerson reveals, to March's further discomfort, the corporate money that is financing the whole affair. Having just left his insurance job in Boston, March thought he was done with that kind of humiliation. Lindau, whom Fulkerson identifies as a "socialist," actually appears as the safer bet, morally. ""If they don't like the way we manage our affairs, let 'em stay at home," Fulkerson says. "They do a lot of mischief, shooting off their mouths round here. I believe in free speech and all that, but I'd like to see those fellows shut up in jail and left to jaw each other to death. *We* don't want any of their poison" (74).

In the emphatic "we" Howells probably hears the press sentiment that poisoned the public opinion against him in his defense of the Haymarket anarchists. Fulkerson's language is actually a bit tame, in comparison. The problem, of course, is that March has to countenance Fulkerson's hatred for personal and professional reasons, and he feels more than a little humiliation when he recognizes in Lindau his old mentor from Indiana. Lindau motions unconsciously to take March with both hands, but he cannot. "I wanted to gife you the other handt too, but I gafe it to your gountry a goodt while ago," he says, and March's response is as uncomfortably patronizing as one could expect. "To *my* country? Your country too, Lindau?" But he remembers the agreement he has just made with Fulkerson, and all he can do is treat Lindau's gravitas as a joke. "Well, *you* ought to have a share in the one you helped to save for us rich men, Lindau" (82).

Outside, March wrestles with his conscience. "I never expected to meet Lindau in the world again. I had an impression that he had been killed in the war. I almost wish he had been." The return of the past reminds March of how much the world has changed since before the war. Things were simpler when Goethe and Schiller were his literary

ideals; now he is about to assume responsibility for his contemporaries' literature, and it is perhaps a little more of a business than he would have liked to admit. Lindau is not only an anachronism in his literary tastes, but as a vestige of the lost life and principles and ideals on which the victorious North had based its war, and which made the present prosperity that brought March to New York and now pays his salary. It would have been better indeed had Lindau died. At least then the vague memory of heroism could seem to justify the current prosperity. But the real thing: it's almost a nuisance.

For Howells, the claim of his republican past is the strongest moral claim he can make on March. As we saw in his peregrinations through the city, there is no other fixed reference point from which March can venture out epistemologically, nothing in the present on which the novel can build a moral platform for itself. But Howells appears self-conscious as he introduces Lindau into this present, and he seems to preempt any charge against artificiality by frankly acknowledging it. With Lindau he plays the game of regionalist fiction. The rendered German accent is supposed to be realistic, but its realism depends on the superior, normative position of the reader: it is inherently diminutive. The accent is just silly enough that we can, albeit with some discomfort, avoid taking Lindau's criticism too seriously. Howells seems thus to keep Lindau in reserve, not quite as a real character, but as the novel's conscience. Lindau reminds March of his own compromises, but at the same time the more dangerous affiliation with radical disillusionment is safely repressed. It is to the point that the novel register this disillusionment, without fully acknowledging its claim.

Therefore, when Lindau is taken seriously, there is an air of futility about his indignation, as though the character cannot quite shed its diminutive status. In Lindau's

flat, March tries to persuade him that industry is magnanimous in its providing work for the poor. In fact, the purpose of March's visit is to offer Lindau work on the corporate funded magazine. Howells makes the attacks on his liberalist patrimony clear by rendering Lindau's German into grammatical English.

> "Yes, when [the millionaires] have gathered their millions together from the hunger and cold and nakedness and ruin and despair of hundreds of thousands of other men, they 'give work' to the poor! They *give* work! They allow their helpless brothers to earn enough to keep life in them! They give *work*! Who is it gives *toil*, and where will your rich men be once the poor shall refuse to give toil? Why, you have come to give *me* work!" (166)

The American religion of owning one's labor is called a lie. Lindau reiterates the Marxist-socialist complaint against the capitalist ploy of subsistence wages, and it is hard to imagine that Howells's middle-class readers would have sympathized with Lindau, except in some liberal fantasy. Of course, the tension is in the fantasy. Howells does not deny Lindau the force of his words here: they are clear enough. We are to take them as seriously as we possibly can, while understanding that we are not, in the end, responsible for them. The literary fantasy is thus, as it is for Howells, a mixed sense of outrage and futility; outrage against the system, or against Lindau for expressing it; futility in any attempt to correct whatever injustices Lindau invokes. It is not long before Howells reverts back to the dialect, at the moment Lindau aborts his diatribe, as though coming out of a crazed fit. "Oh, well, it is only talk, Passil, and it toes me goodt! My parg is worse then my pidte, I cuess" (167). Now we are back in familiar territory.

The reversion is inevitable: Lindau's character must be maintained, his real politics kept at a safe distance. But March's defense of the liberal cause seems equally

ridiculous in the scene. When Lindau mocks the outcome of the war against slavery, quoted earlier—"the slave—Ha! Ha! Ha!—whom I helped to unshackle to the common liberty of hunger and cold"—March assumes the role of the wiser, world-weary soul: "I'm sorry to hear you talk so, Lindau, very sorry, " the "pain" so deep that he barely raise himself to leave. March's position is as clear as Lindau's. He has too much invested in the ideology of opportunity and self-ownership, and too much reverence for the greater idea of the war to simply cast it all aside for some impossible dream of total equality. And Howells recognizes the naivety in this. On his own, March reflects that Lindau's words were "violent enough,"

> but in connection of what he remembered of the cheery, poetic, hopeful idealist, they were even more curious than lamentable. In his own life of comfortable revery he had never heard anyone talk so before, but he had read something of the kind now and then in blatant labor newspapers which he had accidentally fallen in with, and once at a strikers' meeting he had heard rich people denounced with the same frenzy. He made his own reflections upon the tastelessness of the rhetoric and the obvious buncombe of the motive, and he had not taken the matter seriously. (168)

March decides that it all rather amusing, if somewhat lacking in taste. Lindau must have gotten his ideas from "reading and feeling rather than his reflection," and thus March permits himself the sanctity of his boyhood America, when people like Lindau were smarter, less cynical, hopeful idealists.

The historical truth Howells evinces from these scenes is that the middle class, compromised itself, is very nearly ready to embrace a system that promotes a more equitable distribution of wealth, if only it were not presented as a dangerous European importation of secret plots and dehumanizing theories. Lindau is perhaps a caricature meant to point to the absurdity of such caricatures, but Howells too cannot quite shake

the anti-American association that Lindau's socialism suggests: "I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas," he wrote to James. Audacious indeed, for Howells wants to say that the middle class has no intellectual basis for its ideology, rather a vaguely nostalgic, hopeful idealism, which is detached from historical reality. The social theory of Lindau may be presented as a rant, but the very conception of the character, and the problem it presents to the comfortably reverent, old-fashioned March, is for Howells already an indication that history has moved beyond the middle class's willingness to see it. The threat Lindau presents is exactly the character's appeal to Howells. In Lindau's interactions with March, the novel verges on a consciousness that lies just beyond its own knowing.

Nevertheless, that emergence remains latent, and then it is violently suppressed, in the novel's plot and, indeed, in the novel's ultimate willingness to know. When Lindau is felled by a policeman's club amid a labor strike, and eventually dies, we hardly see him. In the novel's pivotal scene (which I will look at in detail in the next chapter) Lindau enters peripherally, his very presence at that particular moment, on that street corner, a bit of a surprise. In his rendered accent he hurls an accusation of state corruption at the uncomprehending officers—"Ah yes! Glup the strikerss—gif it to them! Why don't you co and glup the bresidents that insoalt your lawss, and gick you Boart of Arpidration out of toors? Glup the strikers—they cot no friendts! They cot not money to pribe you, to dreadt you!" (368)—and then he is struck down. By now his harangue is familiar, but the charge seems less than radical now, something like common sense. For Lindau's mock amazement at the inevitable extermination of working-class resistance is only a more explicit expression of the novel's own frustration in breaking through is political and

moral stagnation. The riot scene is the only thing that really happens in the novel, when the historical milieu seems to press the characters into action and require them to develop themselves. History, that is, appears to move forward, but it has to happen in the worst possible way, in the destruction of the very thing the novel would seem to be trying to realize: the assimilation of the republican ideals of the past to the socialist idealism that would bring the middle class into sympathy with the workers. In this scenario, the threat that Lindau presents would be domesticated into a more palatable, gentler version of social harmony. But Howells cannot imagine within the realm of historical probability any other plot that could force him beyond the middle-class stasis in which he finds his characters.

It is true, as Lindau says, that the workers have no friends. American liberalism is universalist and moral, all the stronger because it is essentially idealistic. Lindau's complaints seem hopelessly historical and mundane in comparison: to complain of petty corruption and to invoke the mechanics of labor negotiations, as law enforcement is about to hit you with a club, is truly quixotic. Thus American idealism seems to render any opposition merely ideal itself. But the billy club only actualizes the more prevalent, apparently benign force of middle-class defensiveness. March's distaste for Lindau's incendiary rhetoric is not mere class squeamishness, but is tied to a whole mythology, which Howells makes obvious, when March brings Lindau home and introduces him to Isabel.

> But what she really could not reconcile herself to was the violence of Lindau's sentiments concerning the whole political and social fabric. She did not feel sure that he should be allowed to say such things before the children, who had been nurtured in the faith of Bunker Hill and Appomattox as the beginning and end of

> all possible progress in human rights. As a woman she was naturally an aristocrat, but as an American she was theoretically a democrat; and it astounded, it alarmed her, to hear American democracy denounced as a shuffling evasion. She had never cared much for the United States Senate, but she doubted if she ought to sit by when it was railed at as a rich man's club. It shocked her to be told that the rich and poor were not equal before the law in a country where justice must be paid for at every step in fees and costs, or where a poor man must go to war in his own person, and a rich man might have someone to go in his. (253-54)

As usual, Howells exposes the platitude by taking it seriously. As with March's earlier reflections, we are not to be entirely certain whether we are to laugh or to sympathize. It is surely the reader's own sense of patriotic duty, instilled from childhood, to defend the idea of America, despite indisputable realities like taxes and, in war time, substitution. Isabel's legalistic reverence for order—"She did not feel sure that he should be allowed to say such things"—is certainly moral, but this morality is one with the imaginary, metaphysical authority that dictates the rightness of American liberal idealism. Isabel is truly living in the land of Emersons, as Howells once called it, where history does not suggest continuity so much as its total completion. Quibbling about specifics is beside the point of massive and perpetual realizations of the ideal.

The phrase about Emerson is from a letter Howells wrote to his son John, who was studying architecture in Paris, in 1894. Howells had just returned from Paris himself, to the States, where his father had recently suffered a stroke. His regret at cutting his stay in Europe short is expressed in typical irony.

> Perhaps it was well I was called home. The poison of Europe was getting into my soul. You must look out for that. They live much more fully than we do. Life here is still for the future,—it is a land of Emersons—and I like a little present moment in mine. When I think of the Whistler garden![42]

In Whistler's garden, behind his apartment on the rue du Bac, Howells could have his "present moment," a sense of life that is fuller than that in the United States, where the young men are "pointed for business," as he goes on to write, "not two ideas in their skulls." What is missing in the States is a tangible sense of time; all is action, darting to an aim. Progress is unhistorical, insouciant, idealistic. The garden is Howells's reference to the concrete: an actual place tied to actual events. The poison of Europe, apparently, is to be preferred to the adrenaline of America.

Thus Isabel's conservative ideology appears, in all its optimism, to have little purchase on historical events. Order is immanent to America, and no claim to the contrary will, or can, be brooked. Her practical aristocracy and theoretical democracy are, of course, Howells's own, as he expressed his peculiar detachment from social reality to his father.[43] Detachment was the peculiar privilege of the middle class, and as the irony suggests, one bears it with a measure of self-loathing. For the distance between theory and practice simply cannot be bridged—no imaginable historical situation permits it—and the paradox expresses perfectly Howells's moral paralysis. Howells wants to believe Isabel's idealism; he understands that it gives meaning to her experience, helps her to account for her life. But she too perfectly formulates it, her idols unassailable to question. Her morality does not permit her enough skepticism.

Lindau never stands a chance in *Hazard*. He is too flat a character, hitting his single note as middle-class ideology drowns him out. It is not so much that his death silences him as that the novel's register of middle-class reality simply absorbs him. The novel seems padded round by Fulkerson's good natured neutralization of conflict, but as March's uneasy bargain with him suggested, this padding just dulls one's sense of

compromise. Fulkerson starts out as the slick business man, unscrupulous, but clever and convincing. What makes him particularly dangerous is his complete ingenuousness. He was "one of those Americans whose habitual conception of life is unalloyed prosperity. When any experience or observation of his went counter to it he suffered something like physical pain" (82). But his guilelessness also makes him likeable: he is all about the money, but it is money for its own sake, quite apart from its good or evil effects. When he is facetious, as he is with the incorrigibly serious Conrad—"Mr. Dryfoos has charge of the publishing department—he's the counting room incarnate, the source if power, the fountain of corruption, the element that prevents journalism being high and holy thing it would be if there were no money in it" (119)—he also completely serious in his indifference to corruption. He can point out the truth because he has no moral stake in it.

But as his visceral ideology of prosperity indicates, Fulkerson is not the idealist that Isabel is. His concerns are not with abstractions but with immediate profit, and herein lies his happiness: he thinks only of the next dollar. He thus gives the novel a strange sense of moral uncertainty, for his single-minded commercial pursuit, uncomplicated by ethics, permits the novel to remain aloof from the trials of its other characters, in a sense, to cope with the moral quandaries they present. Fulkerson is comic relief that reminds us that our laughter is part of the problem. When the first issue of the *Every Other Week* is a critical failure, Fulkerson is delighted that the product looked good and sold well. "That unanimity and variety of censure in the morning papers, combined with the attractiveness of the thing itself, has cleared every stand in the city" (173). "I was afraid maybe you had got it *too* good, with that Boston refinement of yours," he tells March. His tastes can be eclectic because, of course, he has no particular tastes. The

magazine combines regional fiction with Lindau's translations of Dostoyevski, a "chic" European artistic design and, Fulkerson suggests for future issues, a tract on "responsible slavery," by the stiffly anachronistic Colonel Woodburn. If Lindau's participation in this venture seems strange, that is the point: Fulkerson's drive for commercial success can absorb and nullify any aesthetic or political position, rendering all harmless and ineffectual.

It is not surprising, then, that the untroubled Fulkerson carries out the most fulfilled plotline in the novel. His early paean to Dryfoos—"another proof of the versatility of the American mind and of the grandeur of institutions and opportunities that let every man to grow to his full size so that any man in America could run the concern if necessary" (184)—turns out to true for Fulkerson himself: he obtains part ownership, with March, of the magazine, when Dryfoos gives it up after his son's death. And the morality play also works out in his favor. While Lindau's resignation denies March the moral resolution of resigning himself the editorship in protest of Dryfoos's coercion to fire the offensive German, Fulkerson wins the credit for nearly resigning himself, in defense of March. His valiance wins him the hand of the southern belle, Miss Woodburn, and so Fulkerson fulfills the marriage plot as well. "[T]here ain't anything like a home, *is* there?" he reflects to March. "[W]hen I get to pushing that mower round, and the Colonel [Woodburn] is smoking his cigar in the gallery, and those girls are pottering over the flowers, one of these soft evenings after dinner, I feel like a human being" (250). Fulkerson's domestic conventionality was perhaps inherent in his pure liberalism; then again, this could be the desecration of the "Christian home." There seems little distinction for Howells, who has found that the most complete narrative thread in his

novel, the one that unfolds itself the easiest, is, as far as history goes, the most typical, and most typically ironic from a moral perspective.

Fulkerson therefore characterizes one of the novel's implicit, albeit dangerously irresponsible fantasies, of insouciantly disappearing into the social and economic reality for which it struggles so desperately to find moral remedy. For Fulkerson is not the evil alternative for Basil March in some pilgrim's progress; he is, in his typicality, Howells's figure for the tendency of American history, "one of those Americans whose habitual conception of life is unalloyed prosperity," by which of course Howells means to capture not one of a crowd but the total of the defining ideology of middle-class life. It is not a matter of choosing, or of salvation, for March or for the reader, or indeed for the novel. Fulkerson's appeal, his benignly calming effect on the novel's nerves, his satisfying capacity for fulfilling a plot and thus bringing the epistemic thrust of the novel, at least his part of it, to closure, suggest that the novel is convinced, despite its moral preoccupations, that the way things are exerts an inevitable attraction on its will to think in opposition, and that there is always the option of giving in. Thus Fulkerson is also the reminder to the novel that even the unexamined middle-class fantasies that bolster the moral programs, and tend to the perfection, of other novels, is foregone at the considerable price of remaining just outside the moral compass that must at some point be closed and settled in order to realize art.

Fulkerson is not the only character that exteriorizes the novel's immanent longing. Pulling in the opposite direction is Conrad Dryfoos, the Christian socialist who appropriately enough would rather imitate Jesus than to work the economic levers of the *Every Other Week*'s accounting department, where his father has installed him to make a

man of him. Conrad also represents a dream of disappearing, not into the order of worldly things, but into the heavenly realm of selfless responsibility, of poverty and personal insignificance. It "burns in his heart to help 'em [poor folks]," Conrad's mother says, in her simple Dunkard way. "[H]e says money ain't the thing—or not the only thing you got to give to them poor folks. You got to give your time, and your knowledge, and your love—I don't know what all—you got to give yourself, if you expect to help 'em" (200). Conrad is therefore a cipher in the novel. He does not occupy or direct scenes so much as provide a negative force to the economic and personal plots of the other characters. He is what they are not: he is not historically motivated, or even interested in the novel's progress. His concerns lie elsewhere, outside the novel's purview, in the tenements where the novel does not go, and from which Basil March preferred to keep a safe aesthetic distance. He is gleaned piecemeal by other characters who can barely see him—not even his family seem to totally comprehend his motives—and never does his own consciousness materialize in any way that suggests he is in the historical world the novel depicts.

Howells stands plenty to gain, for the time being, in not fleshing Conrad out, for into his absence the novel can posit the possibility for a kind of goodness that it otherwise cannot find in historical reality. But there is a danger here too. Conrad presents a powerful moral longing for the novel, like Fulkerson the disappearance of the anxieties of history; but this makes him a liability to the novel's ethical program to confront history head-on, without illusion. He is a tacit principle of moral possibility that must never be realized, lest history in the novel become didactic and artificial. Howells's response to this problem is to maintain a safe distance, while being careful not to violate Conrad's

pristine surface. When Conrad suggests that the magazine might do some good socially, March's response is, "What do you mean by good? Improve public taste? Elevate the standard of literature?" (128). March is disarmed, bewildered by Conrad's idealism, but so is Howells. Conrad's "seriousness" makes him unfit for the facetiousness of the age, as Fulkerson embodies it, or for such mercenary pursuits as a popular magazine. He "ought really to be in the pulpit, or a monastery, or something," (129) March says, with some derision; that is, he ought be anywhere but here, perhaps in a "Catholic age" (241), where Howells imagines him, fixed in the frescos of medieval chapels.

I will discuss the pivotal scene of Conrad's death in the next chapter, but for now I suggest that when Howells kills Conrad he eliminates the fantasy inherent in the character as a basis for the novel's further investigations. Realism could contain Conrad as long as he provided a mirror to reflect the moral vacancy of the world around him, but it cannot in any way recur to that ideal in order to solve its moral problems, a last step Howells simply will not permit himself. The invisibility of Conrad at the scene of his death—the whole of it is, we will see, presented in a distinct indistinctness—indicates the novel's own reluctance, even failure, to realize Conrad and to fully invest in his idealistic promise. And even before that, the novel begins to register the problem of his presence, or rather the problem of his impossibility, and seems (for a lack of a better phrase) to punish itself for not being able to fulfill Conrad's moral function, and so for pursuing its sense of history so faithfully that it confronts its own vacancy. For the plot to remove Conrad, and thus to force the novel into a moral recognition, is out of proportion to the character's substance: the whole novel is derailed in order to kill such a slight character.

The brunt of the novel's self-punishment is absorbed by Conrad's father, Jacob Dryfoos, the Ohio farmer-turned-natural-gas-tycoon, whose is compelled by a sneaking inferiority, despite (or because of) his extraordinary wealth to coerce everyone into submission, including his son. Dryfoos is very much of the historical milieu the novel explores, as March makes plain:

> "I don't believe a man's any better for having made money so easily and rapidly as Dryfoos has done, and I doubt if he is any wiser. I don't know just the point he's reached in his evolution form grub to beetle, but I know that so far as it's gone the process must have involved a bewildering change of ideals and criterions. I guess he's come to despise a great many things that he once respected, and that intellectual ability is one of them—what *we* call intellectual ability. He must have undergone a moral deterioration, an atrophy of the generous instincts, and I don't see why it shouldn't have reached his mental makeup. He has sharpened, but he has narrowed; his sagacity has turned into suspicion, his caution to meanness, his courage to ferocity. That's the way I philosophize a man of Dryfoos' experience, and I am not very proud when I realize that such a man and his experience are the ideal and ambition of most Americans." (193-94)

March's class snobbery and priggish scolding of American ambition notwithstanding, this assessment is borne out by the novel. Dryfoos is the extreme example of moral compromise. And though Dryfoos is excessively rich, Howells shows him to be thoroughly vulgar, more lower-middle class than aristocrat, caught within the same banal ideology of individual industry and opportunity as were his extra-literary models, Carnegie and Rockefeller. Dryfoos is meant to exemplify the hazard of new fortunes, but for Howells this is not middle-class revenge on the rich, but rather the indictment of the middling types who emulate the rich, which is really what Dryfoos is. So much himself a result of economics and history, Dryfoos no more than any other character in the novel can be a cause; he has no purchase on his own life, no control over

his destiny. He is an updated Silas Lapham, but whose immolation at the altar of morality is more brutal and thorough. Where Silas returns happily to the farm, Dryfoos has sold his farm, sold even the family burial plot where his dead twin infants lie. "We can't go back!" he tells his imploring wife, and we hear Howells's own irretrievable distance from his Ohio past and his father's country republicanism. "I feel like I was tied hand and foot, and I don't know which way to move; I don't know what's best to do about anything. The money don't seem to buy anything but more and more care and trouble. . . But it had to be" (202). There is some sympathy here with Dryfoos, but making him verbalize the trap of his own naivety, that money could ever have bought him anything but care and trouble, is a cruel degradation.

Crueler still is that his most significant contribution to the novel's plot is to send Conrad to his death. For his compromise is so deep that he mistakes ambition for love, and so there is no return when it comes to the management of his son. It is Conrad's basic unfitness for the economic world that enrages Dryfoos, offends his sense of value, and occludes any recognition of his son's essential goodness, and in him we see the novel struggle with its own frustrated idealism. Dryfoos's total identification with historical reality, as Howells imagines it, is therefore bound to collide with Conrad's idealization and force that ideal into history. It happens, in fact, in a conversation about the striking streetcar workers, the novel's most immediately obvious historical reference. Dryfoos, we have learned, suppressed strikes on his own oil fields with the help of Pinkerton detectives, driving workers out and replacing them with scabs. Now the same thing is about to happen in New York, and when Dryfoos presses Conrad to out with his

sympathies, Conrad responds in most specifically worldly, most politically minded dialogue of which Howells has heretofore made him capable.

> "I think they were very foolish to strike—at this time, when the elevated roads can do the work. . . It's war, but sometimes there don't seem any other way for the working man to get justice. They say that sometimes strikes do raise the wages for a while. . . The men say that with partial work, and fines, and other things, they get sometimes a dollar, and sometimes ninety cents a day. . . I know you don't think that way, and I don't blame you—or anybody. But if I have got to say how I shall feel, why, I shall feel sorry they didn't succeed, for I believe they have a righteous cause, though they go the wrong way to help themselves." (364-65)

In that last sentence Conrad speaks the novel's own position, balanced between moral support of the strikers and uneasiness with their provocative methods. Given his situation—his father is taunting and threatening him—Conrad is remarkably fluent and measured in his wonkish response. He must say just the right things and clearly enough so that we see his opposition to his father, and feel the appropriate shock at the unwarranted violence of his father's striking him with his ringed fist, for it is Dryfoos, not Conrad, who must at this moment seem to have irrationally lost his bearings in the world.

Thus Howells eliminates the thing he cannot quite bring himself to believe in, and the novel loses its own bearings. Not long afterward, we find March and Fulkerson pondering the novel's peculiar position, which is ambivalent. On one hand, a kind of relief sets in, as the novel no longer has to pursue a moral aim and a plot that it anyway would find unconvincing: "It's astonishing how you always *can* get along in this world without the man that is simply indispensable," Fulkerson says, characteristically untroubled by chance and amorality. "Makes a fellow realize that he could take a day off

now and then without deranging the solar system a great deal" (384). It is an admission that the realistic novel cannot possibly achieve its moral ideals if it is faithful to history. Howells cannot possibly want to believe this, but it is nevertheless what he has discovered, and here he goes beyond the deflations of moral order of previous novels, and beyond the initial skepticism with which he deconstructed March's ideology at the beginning of this novel. For he does not quite seem to understand what Conrad means to him and to his novel until he has to kill him off. March continues Fulkerson's reflection, but along a different line.

> "Yes," March admitted. "It's terrible to think how unnecessary even the best and wisest of us is to the purposes of Providence. When I looked at the poor young fellow's face sometimes—so gentle and true and pure—I used to think the world was appreciably richer for his being in it. But are we appreciably poorer for his being out of it now?"

Providence here is an imprecise term, as March's religious speculations tend to systematic incoherence, which we will see in the next chapter. It is an expression of historical immersion, referring to what March does not know and cannot imagine beyond. His questions as to the significance of Conrad's presence and absence are therefore not metaphysical but formal; they aim at epistemological clarity about the present moment, its relation to its past and future, to "the world," in other words, to March's world, the progress of this novel. In his questions we can perhaps hear others: What moral understanding has this novel achieved? What *can* it achieve? Should Conrad's death be exploited for the novel's moral aims? What are the alternatives? The novel must continue to some resolution, but March is distinctly aware that a necessary, underlying principle has gone, which might have provided a key to its ending and to knowledge. He

cannot decide, however, whether the novel is not better off without Conrad, whether this newly discovered poverty is in fact an opportunity, if not a promising one, to strike out in another direction.

This is what March will do in the remainder of the novel, to seek alternative means to resolution. And thus Howells departs from one hesitation to capitalize on his own ideals and to fulfill the inherent possibilities there, and moves into another investigation. The novel is disjointed and tentative: form, composition and style seem to have been thrown overboard. We might formulate March's questions in yet other ways. What does a novel do once it has eliminated its possibility for good? What kind of art is it that eliminates its promise of transcendence?

Chapter 6

A Hazard of New Fortunes, Part II

When Conrad is killed by a policeman's stray bullet, we realize that this is what we have been waiting for all along. The rioters who assault the scab-driven streetcar and the police officers assigned to defend it, represent the frenetic activity and motion that the novel has so far suppressed. But now that something has finally begun to happen, to wrench the novel out from its apparently endless search for its trajectory, it is all confusion. Conrad does not see what is coming, and neither could we; nothing has prepared us for it. The scene ends as quickly as it begins. Conrad hears a shot; he thinks to call out in defense of Lindau, who has been clubbed by the police; he looks into a policeman's vacuous face. It is not clear that Conrad even knows he has been shot. He merely "falls forward," as if he were still alive and watching his own death. The narration hardly flinches.

Here is Howells's presentation:

> He was walking over toward the West Side, aimlessly at first, and then at times with the longing to do something to save those men from themselves, forming itself into a purpose. Was not that what [Ms. Vance] meant, when she bewailed her woman's helplessness? She must have wished him to try if he, being a man, could not do something; or if she did not, still he would try; and if she heard of it, she would recall what she had said and would be glad he had understood her so. Thinking of her pleasure in what he was going to do, he forgot almost what it was; but when he came to a streetcar track he remembered it and looked up and down to see if there were any turbulent gathering of men, whom he might mingle with and help to keep from violence. He saw none anywhere; and then suddenly,

> as if at the same moment, for in his exalted mood all events had a dreamlike simultaneity, he stood at the corner of an avenue, and in the middle of it, a little way off, was a streetcar, and around the car a tumult of shouting, cursing, struggling men. The driver was lashing his horses forward, and a policeman was at their heads, with the conductor, pulling them; stones, clubs, brickbats hailed upon the car, the horses, the men trying to move them. The mob closed upon them in a body, and then a patrol wagon whirled up from the other side, and a squad of policemen leaped out and began to club the rioters. Conrad could see how they struck them under the rims of their hats; the blows on their skulls sounded as if they had fallen on stone; the rioters ran in all directions.
>
> [A protesting Lindau suddenly appears, drawing a policeman to Conrad's corner.]
>
> The officer whirled his club, and the old man threw his left arm up to shield his head. Conrad recognized Lindau, and now he saw the empty sleeve dangle in the air, over the stump of his wrist. He heard a shot in that turmoil beside the car, and something seemed to strike him in the breast. He was going to say to the policeman, "Don't strike him! He's an old soldier! You see he has no hand!" but he could not speak; he could not move his tongue. The policeman stood there; he saw his face; it was not bad, not cruel; it was like the face of a statue, fixed, perdurable, a mere image of irresponsible and involuntary authority. Then Conrad fell forward, pierced through the heart by that shot fired from the car. (367-68)[44]

As a consciousness, Conrad hardly exists in the novel. This is as close as we get to seeing from his perspective, and Howells makes sure that seeing is not wholly equivalent to understanding. The fantasy of Ms. Vance's pleasure and admiration is the most real datum to Conrad's perception. In the rest of the passage he does not realize so much as he simply sees. Consider the change in the passage's tone. As Conrad approaches the scene, the sentences simulate a process of rationalization:

> Was not that what [Ms. Vance] meant, when she bewailed her woman's helplessness? She must have wished him to try if he, being a man, could not do something; or if she did not, still he would try; and if she heard of it, she would recall what she had said and would be glad he had understood her so.

The subjunctive mood, the parenthesis ("if he, being a man,"), and the successive conditional clauses in the second sentence, each referring back to its previous clause, serve to enclose the passage in self-reference. Once Conrad notices the commotion on the street, however, the sentences unfold linearly, efficiently, suggesting not so much sight or consciousness as disinterested description: "he stood at the corner of an avenue, and in the middle of it, a little way off, was a streetcar, and around the car a tumult of shouting, cursing, struggling men." "Struggling" is so vague as to mute any sense of shouting or cursing; we will imagine the scene as vividly as we can, of course, but the writing does not evoke, it generalizes. Arguably, the switch in tone might simply indicate a transition between two modes of Conrad's consciousness, introspective and prospective; for example, the linear sentences simulate living *in* the conjunctions ("and. . . and. . ."), within the flux of experience. Even so, the writing of Conrad's perception is so sparing that it emphasizes a failure to depict the texture of familiar experience.

We are not even certainly situated. Conrad stands "at the corner of an avenue [it does not matter which], and in the middle of it, a little way off, was a streetcar, and around the car a tumult of shouting, cursing, struggling men." The sentence is grammatically sound, the streetcar clearly in the middle of the avenue, and all of it happening at some distance. But the violence of has no urgency. The lashing, the pulling, the hailing, the arrival of the patrol car, and finally the clubbing that occur over the next few sentences, are muted by the accumulation of clauses, and by successive pronouns that refer to clear antecedents but whose antecedents cease to matter. What matters is that our attention shifts between actors and objects, and then back, taking in the scene rather as if it were a painting, suggesting movement through the application of (we

imagine) optical effects on an explicitly static grouping of related, depicted objects. To even catalog the actions, as I did a moment ago, is to suggest a greater sense of movement than Howells's writing permits. The "dreamlike simultaneity" is effected by writing that is quite precise and calculated to present the action as mere sense data rather than dynamic movement.[45]

Conrad seems finally to die not from events, but by an effect, of affectless writing, which robs the character of the meaningful death we would expect him to have. Our reaction to Conrad's killing is uncertain, because the writing has not permitted us time, nor has it provided the usual cues, that would prepare us to react. Cataloging the objects and verbs that constitute the scene, rather than describing a reaction, is perhaps the only accurate way to describe our experience of reading of the scene. If something significant has happened here, the narration does not quite want to admit it.

Conrad is an odd candidate for the subject of the novel's pivotal event. He is not just a minor character; he is hardly a character at all. He has little solidity of his own. His attraction to Ms. Vance is not merely "virginal," as Howells describes it; it is prelapsarian in its innocence. "The brutal experiences of the world make us forget that there are such natures in it and that they seem to come out of the lowly earth as well as down from the high heaven," Howells writes, in the only other passage in the novel that focuses on Conrad. "In a Catholic country he would have been one of those monks who are sainted after death for the angelic purity of their lives" (241). Howells imagines Conrad not as an American type, but as a concept of innocence that lies beyond the historical. In nineteenth-century Protestant America there are no saints, not because there are no viable candidates, but because no one has sufficient religious sense to see them.

Not that Howells does. His skepticism about the historical embodiment of spiritual ideals is precisely the essence of Conrad's character. Conrad lingers at the edges of scenes, disengaged until addressed, and then his words seem literally to come from another world. It is not the cause of labor he defends, but the cause of Jesus Christ. "And I believe he meant the kingdom of heaven upon this earth as well as in the skies," he tells Basil March, who takes him as something of a fanatic (304). Conrad's insubstantiality is a consequence a realistic-historical imagination that cannot conceive a character who joins heaven and earth. Beaton, perhaps the most empirically motivated character in the novel, gets it just right about Conrad: "He's flat; he has no relief, no projection" (346). In other words, Howells cannot, or will not, *write* Conrad. First of all, such medieval purity in contemporary reality is implausible and thus makes Conrad a liability in a historically grounded novel. But there is something else going on. Howells retains in the Conrad a vague religious ideal—religious because vague—of a salve for the economic and social problems he records in the novel. He will not realize, or fully characterize, this principle of idealism, because in essence, not in historical particularity, it sustains the novel's progress, the tracing of wayward paths through modern economic life. Conrad's presence, primarily an absence, provides the ethical-epistemological motive; it holds out the potential for discovering moral knowledge about a world gone wrong.

And yet, when the moment comes, Howells finds he has no access to such knowledge. When he sends Conrad to his death, he kills the possibility for the millennial outlook that the character represented, not only as a prophet for the Kingdom on Earth, but as an impulse to formal holism, the satisfaction of the moral impulse. There are

contradictory impulses at work. We recall that Howells's rejection of the conventional English novel or the popular "romanticist" novel was a moral imperative. He thought that these novels falsely represented reality when, in order to facilitate morally predictable plots, they abandoned the secular historical imagination, the mental predisposition of anyone living in the modern world. History had no particular pattern or trajectory, and realism should observe this fact, in content and in form. The scene of Conrad's death exemplifies Howells's historical attitude, which I described in a previous chapter as agnosticism. Howells wrote self-consciously from within history, his novels emerging from a process of formal interpretation that was itself historically conditioned. He never achieved an entirely external perspective, and writing this scene he does not even try, but works within his limitation. Conrad's frozen moment, the "simultaneity" induced by his daydream, indicates therefore not a tenuous link to reality but reality itself. This was history as Howells understood it, a contradiction between idealism and historical realism. The faith in a principle of goodness that Conrad provided for the novel, which perhaps sustained it, is exterminated in a thick representation of empirical experience, the opaque medium of experienced history, from which the writing does not permit itself to transcend in order comment, to clarify, or to otherwise pose the specter of meaning.

This contradiction poses a problem for the remainder of the novel. If Howells has not located a viable philosophical basis for middle-class conscience in the first part of the book, he has not left much to go on in the last fifty pages. Basil March's newly found theological earnestness would seem to provide transcendence out of the historical realism of Conrad's death scene and to begin to bring the novel toward an affirmation of

Conrad's goodness. March seems headed, if not toward a conversion to Conrad's faith, then at least toward a seasoned acknowledgment of the need for a specifically religious postulation of moral order. But this is not the case. *Hazard* leads in quite a different direction from the ambivalent affirmation we have seen in the previous novels, in that it discovers the futility of attempting to mitigate its skepticism for the sake of formal completeness. Instead, it plunges deeper into skepticism.

Appropriately enough, it is middle-class Basil March who discovers Conrad's dead body on the street. Appearing only in the final short paragraphs that follow our passage, March is a coincidental bystander and no witness to the killing; that scene must remain, for the characters and for the novel itself, an epistemological vacuum. When we return to March's perspective, we seem to return to the novel's normative tone and consciousness, to its broader view, and the scene from which we have just emerged appears all the more strange and inaccessible. We might reread the scene for something we have missed; but of course, what we have missed is not there, and so the theological errand on which March embarks must start from scratch, as it were. It is as though he understands that he is character in a novel that has gone wrong and that has led him astray of the philosophical basis from which to start making sense.

"I should think," March begins "musingly" in the very next chapter, "that when God sees what we poor finite creatures can bear, hemmed around with this eternal darkness of death, He must respect us" (370). Such is the tenor from now on, as the novel has succumbed (we are told) to the "fatigue that comes from Heaven" (371), perhaps an acknowledgement of its epistemological impasse. And there is some

uncertainty about March's theological approach. The possible blasphemy of his anthropocentrism is registered, first, by Isabel's reproachful gasp, "Basil!" But the theologian goes on:

> "Oh, I know. We school ourselves to despise human nature. But God did not make us despicable, and I say whatever end He meant us for, He must have some such thrill of joy in our inadequacy to fate as a father feels when his son shows himself a man. When I think what we can be if we must, I can't believe the least of us shall perish."

The second distanciation from Basil's reflections is in Fulkerson's characteristically impious levity, only it is not March's sacrilege but his optimism that is questioned: "Oh, I reckon the Almighty won't scoop any of us," Fulkerson says, and Howells adds, "with a piety of his own," which we might take as a joke. The joke maintains the scene's skepticism, while not wholly discounting March's musings. The virile faith with which March proposes to confront his darkness, positing a divine sanction of heroic human striving amid impenetrable unknowingness, is a projection into the philosophical void that Howells could not fill in Conrad's death scene. Isabel secretly swells with admiration for her husband's muscularity—"in her heart she drew nearer to him for the words she thought she ought to rebuke him for"—but Fulkerson's dubious formulation presents this newfound resolution as possibly unconvincing. March has already shown himself incapable of insight. Following his earlier sociological and aesthetic failures, his religious speculations appear as yet another, equally tenuous approach to an elusive ethics.

March's religious terms are reaching for a humanist philosophy that can match the conviction, and the world-transformative aspiration, of belief. Never himself a believer,

Howells retained a powerful impulse to believe, an inheritance of the spirit, if not the doctrine, of his father's Swedenborgianism. We have seen how the inherent faiths of universal morality and human perfectibility, however Howells wanted affirm them, underwent the stress of historical intuition in *A Modern Instance* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. By the closing chapters of *Hazard*, Howells's historical agnosticism has developed into a sense that there is nothing intrinsic to reality that needs revelation, no action that can bring it about if there were. Conrad's death sealed this commitment to historical realism, made it part of the novel's formal project rather than its product; and this is a significant development in Howells's work. Still, Howells retains a strong impulse to work his way back to the affirmative statement, to formulate a coherent moral philosophy apposite with his historical realism. He has not lost his moral idealism, but it has been tempered. What Howells is looking for now is the possibility of transcendence within historical engagement.

The inherent paradox in this project was not lost on him. "Words, words, words! How to make them things, deeds," he wrote to Edward Everett Hale. "You have the secret of that; with me they only breed more words. At present they are running into another novel, in which I'm going to deal with some mere actualities; but on new ground—New York, namely."[46] Howells praised Hale's novels for their "evident intention" to act as guides to practical altruism, indeed as spiritual texts. "It is work that no one else can do, and it teaches me patience with conditions that I believe wrong, but that must be borne, with all the possible alleviations, till they can be gradually changed." To the Unitarian minister and liberal reformer, the nephew of Nathan Hale, Howells is duly and ingenuously deferential. But he would not have written Hale's kind of

socialized Christian novels, even if he aspired to their spirit. "I'm going to deal with some mere actualities," he tells Hale, regretting his skepticism, and surely diminishing his own despiritualized representation of social reality, as it was developing into *Hazard*. But those mere actualities were the very stuff of Howells's fiction; and as he found out in the scene of Conrad's death, experience unfolded before uncomprehending eyes. Could we find a corresponding meaning in those events beyond the mere fact of them? Such vacancy of spiritual truth in historical reality was regrettable, but it was, Howells thought, nonetheless true. Such depiction was itself an ethics, even if its usefulness as a moral guide came under question, and rather consisted in mere words.

Words are all Basil March has to get himself to the end of the novel, religious ones, to be sure. He projects words against the dumb reality that Conrad's death presented to him in an attempt to locate a fundamental meaning. When Isabel reflects on Conrad's unsuspecting innocence in wandering into the riot, March says,

> All that was distinctly the chance of life and death. That belonged to God; and no doubt it was law, though it seems chance. But what I object to is this economic chance world in which we live and which men seem to have created. It ought to be law as inflexible as in human affairs as the order of the day and night in the physical world, that if a man will work he shall both rest and eat, and shall not be harassed with any question as to how his repose and his provision shall come. Nothing less ideal than this satisfies the reason. But in our state of things no one is secure of this. No one is sure of finding work; no one is sure of not losing it. I may have my work taken away from me at any moment by the caprice, the mood, the indigestion, of a man who has not the qualification for knowing whether I do it well or ill. At my time of life—at every time of life—a man ought to feel that if he will keep on doing his duty he shall not suffer himself or those who are dear to him, except through natural causes. But no man can feel this as things are now; and so we go on, pushing and pulling, climbing and crawling, thrusting aside and trampling underfoot, lying, cheating, stealing; and when we get to the end, covered with blood and dirt and sin and shame, and look back over the way we've come to a place of our own, or the poorhouse, which is about the only possession

> we can claim in common with our brother men, I don't think the retrospect can be pleasing. (380)

March is in high sermon mode, and Isabel practically bursts forth from the pews: "I know, I know!" What is remarkable about the passage is its hodgepodge of ideas, all of which were circulating at the time, and its equivocation between endorsing and condemning those ideas. The full barrage of intellectual options that the urban middle class confronted is felt in this passage, as well as the concomitant despair and incomprehension. Though March invokes God only at the outset, and quickly turns to the secular concern of subsisting in a modern economy, his speech actually assumes throughout a particularly religious cast, a particularly modern religiosity, in fact, in the way it posits secular concerns in terms of absolutes that can only be achieved on an ideal plane.

Howells perhaps sees no irrationality in March's reasoning to ideals. After all, March is rationalizing from experience, his words at once reflecting Lindau's anarchist rants, his anger over his near-dismissal by Dryfoos for refusing to fire Lindau, the weight of Conrad's tragic death; the speech is a summary of the novel. And yet the philosophical insistence—"Nothing less ideal than this satisfies the reason"—indicates that March is conscious, on some level, of a paradox. The ideal of an inflexible law, as self-evidently necessary as March's economic reality makes it, is nevertheless a spiritual invocation: "What I object to is this economic chance world in which we live and which men seem to have created. It ought to be law as inflexible as in human affairs as the order of the day and night in the physical world, that if a man will work he shall both rest and eat. . ." March thinks that such a law does not exist in the world of human affairs

because they have created an artificial system that bars its existence, effectively barring from the physical world that which only God can create, a law as irrefutable as "the order of day and night." But the insistence—"What I object to. . . It ought to be law. . ."—as though he were divinely authorized to justify the ways of God to men, is merely the affirmation of a moral principle, not its universal realization. As such, it is also the cry of a frustrated man, who cannot find about him credible evidence of divine power.

Placing the blame on humans, then, March cannot fully convince himself that God's non-interference in history is not a kind of abandonment, or worse, perhaps, that God is simply a figure of speech for the imaginary anchor for his wayward moral certainties. Put more precisely, Howells posits God at the top of the passage, to insure the idea of an absolute, but as he writes the rest of the passage, he finds himself reasoning away from that absolute, into intellectual uncertainty, while yet retaining the absolute as the implicit aim of March's intellection. "And so we go on, pushing and pulling, climbing and crawling, thrusting aside and trampling underfoot. . ." This is the only literature March finally manages to produce in the novel, and the self-consciously literary eloquence reminds us that Howells, too, is searching for the significance in the passage. And he relies, yet again, on the promise of an absolute morality: "and when we get to the end, covered with blood and dirt and sin and shame, and look back over the way we've come to a place of our own, or the poorhouse, which is about the only possession we can claim in common with our brother men, I don't think the retrospect can be pleasing." This is certainly no millenarian vision, for the "end" is squarely worldly, historical, bereft of Christian grace. But the "sin and shame" are explicitly religious, and we are to be reminded of how far we have strayed from the original dispensation, from that ideal

realm in which Conrad moved, of how utterly depraved we, by our own doing, have become.

It is perhaps the hallmark of Howells's secular moralism that he plays fast and loose with religious concepts. But perhaps the philosophical power of these speculations does not lie in their conclusions but rather in their inconclusiveness. The middle class ingested a lot of ideological fare, and if the passages we have looked at reflect Howells's confusion and his attempts to rationalize his own morality, it also *represents* that confusion and rationalization; that is, as literary matter, it is central to Howells's exploration into the middle-class experience, the stuff of his historical analysis. March's middle-class mind is not coherently doctrinaire to attain spiritual certainty, but neither is he entirely independent of religious concepts. His religion could very well be a secular idealism, a paradox that makes him fitful, because what he wants—what Howells wants—is hard reality. Many of Howells's readers must have recognized these moral reflections; or at least they recognized March's contemporary relevance and identified with the moral cause, and with the malaise, March embodied.

They certainly would have understood that Howells was engaged in a larger discussion. By the time of *Hazard*'s serial publication in 1889, it had become a commonplace for writers to confront the spirit of laissez-faire economics with the spirit of Christ, in histories, tracts, and in novels. The sermon had diversified. In the December 1888 *Editor's Study*, Howells remarked that "Christ and the life of Christ is at this moment inspiring the literature of the world as never before, and raising it up a witness against waste and want and war. It may confess Him, as in Tolstoï's work it does, or it may deny Him; but it cannot exclude Him; and in the degree that it ignores His

spirit, modern literature is artistically inferior."[47] Howells was clearly throwing himself into the fray of liberal reformism's assault on capitalism, allying himself, at least in spirit, with novelists as various as E.E. Hale and Edward Bellamy, the latter whose *Looking Backward*, a utopian socialist novel, garnered him a following that called itself the Christian Nationalists. Howells was a charter member in Boston. The liberal Protestant clergy was at this time publishing its initial attempts at a coherent, practical theology that could engage in human history, in the lives of the laborer, the poor, the spiritually alienated of any class; though in the 1880s this Social Gospel movement, as it would call itself, was still the work of individuals and not yet a nationally recognized organization. Howells would have found in this body of work a primarily moral-theological focus, which superficially resembled his own position. To cite just one example, from a major figure in the movement: Washington Gladden, whose articles had appeared alongside Howells's work in the *Century*, proposed in 1885, predicting Basil March and echoing the unfulfilled ideal of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, that the problems of economic life were absolutely moral and within human control, and that Christ's doctrine of brotherhood was the stay against, if not the salve for, the intractable greed of the market.[48]

As *Hazard* shows us, it was Christian Socialism that appealed to Howells's imagination, for it steered a safe median between the extremes represented by Conrad and Lindau. But the ambivalence of Basil March's speculations suggests that some care must be taken concerning Howells's commitment to the intellectual options that were available to him, for the safe median seems to have been somehow unsatisfying. Perhaps Twain best identified the novel's ambivalence: "It is a great book; but of course what I prefer is the high art by which it is made to preach its great sermon without seeming to take sides

or preach at all."[49] Twain might be granting Howells a bit more control of the "sermon" than the novel achieves, but he nevertheless picks up on the implicit, and tentative, secular evangelism of the novel. Surely there is something going on here, Twain says, but he cannot say exactly where the didacticism lies, or if in fact the novel is fully committed to it. No stranger himself to ruffling religious feathers, Twain understood Howells's agnosticism as well as anyone did, and he identified the characteristic quality, the "high art," of his friend's work, as the endeavor into irresolvable intellectual and moral issues. There were more orthodox assessments: "You are writing what everyone else is thinking," Bellamy wrote, regarding *Hazard*, but he was emphasizing the novel's socialism, which made it a hit in intellectual circles. Twain, who knew his friend's temperament better and preferred to see its more basic motives, got at something fundamental.

In his first issue of the newly organized Society for Christian Socialism's *The Dawn*, Boston minister W.D.P. Bliss listed Howells's *Annie Kilburn* and Bellamy's *Looking Backward* among what he thought the "best books on socialism."[50] *Hazard* had not yet begun to appear, but we can imagine that Bliss would have shared in Twain's and Bellamy's assessments. Howells attended some of the services at Bliss's Church of the Carpenter in 1890, and he hung around for the after-service discussions and sing-alongs. But he never committed himself, doctrinally or otherwise; and as I will show in a moment, he rejected even the foundation of social Christian thought, its economic theory, which he found consistent with Conrad's historical naïveté. "The Christian Socialists are more to my mind than the Nationalists," Howells wrote to his father in April, 1890, "but I doubt if I shall openly act with either for the present. The C.S. have loaded up with the

creed of the church, the very terms of which revolt me, and the N. seemed pinned in faith to Bellamy's dream. But the salvation of the world will not be worked out that way."[51] Neither the formally religious terms of Bliss, nor the utopian romance of Bellamy, which Howells thought had "no allegiance to the waking world," were in themselves ideologically satisfying; and neither, as the experimental nature of *Hazard* suggested to Twain, were these approaches adequate to thinking through the problems of contemporary social economic history.[52] Howells's agnosticism, in any of its forms, was apiece with his increasing suspicion of knowledge that proceeded from theory rather than from the empirical immediacy of historical experience, which was the foundation of his aesthetic realism. For better or worse, he would take his chances with mere appearances.

March's epistemic poverty, so to speak, is the price he pays for his author's historical agnosticism, which in the years leading to the writing of *Hazard* put Howells at odds with the economic theories of his Christian Socialist peers. He had no real objection, for instance, to Laurence Gronlund's historical argument, that the deterioration of the popular revolution in France was the beginning of a "transition state" that characterized modern civilization, based on "the power of capital and the subjugation of men."[53] "[A]s ugly as it is," Howells writes, "it is not wholly unfamiliar to any of us." What he did object to was Gronlund's historical forecast. Gronlund translated Marx's teleology into social gospel millennialism, as it was proffered in Britain and, increasingly, in the United States. Monopolies, he thought, would eventually evolve into collectivism, or socialism. How this could come about in America, Howells complains, where things are done through legislation that only theoretically reflects the will of the people, Gronlund does not say. "It is not in revery that he prophesies the total change of

our polity, and the reconstruction of our society upon the broad principle that those who do not work shall not eat, and that no man who is willing to work shall starve," Howells writes approvingly. But: "Mr. Gronlund believes that this is implied by *the very facts and forces that seem to imply the contrary*" (my emphasis). Gronlund's narrative seems counterintuitive, finally *un*historical. Howells approaches with some apprehension the idea that history has any inherent shape. There is therefore no economic policy in Gronlund's thought, only historical idealism.

It was not always strident opposition. Howells was more often ambivalent, staking his position through style rather than through argument. The "scientific decorum" that Howells practiced in his criticism tended to leave the works he reviewed naked before the implications of their own content, particularly in his assessments of theoretical work, which he approached with measured skepticism anyway. At first, his delineation of the salient features of economist Richard Ely's *Social Aspects of Christianity* appear to be infected with the fervor of the original:

> This remarkable political economist denies that self-interest should be the ruling principle of life, and that all things shall be added unto us if we seek first the Kingdom of Mammon and his unrighteousness. He is terribly unsparing in his recurrence to chapter and verse; he will not allow us a moment's rest in the spoil of the stranger and the poor. He believes that Christ really meant the young man of great possessions to give up his worldly goods when he said so, and that He taught a political economy in no wise impossible or mistaken.[54]

Howells goes on to summarize Ely's social gospel exhortation to the Church to intervene in decrying the rich and promoting justice for the poor; indeed, Howells treats the historical theory that Christ was the first socialist sympathetically. The ambivalence becomes evident when Howells speaks from outside of Ely's text:

> One sees what confusion the practice of such precepts would bring about in the world; and the saddest reflection arising from the perusal of books like . . . Professor Ely's is not that the facts dealt with do exist, but that they *must* exist in the present frame of things. The legal right of one man to luxury through the misery of another is unquestionable; and it is comically, it is tragically, futile to tell people not to get gain, and take advantage, when even the wayfaring man can see that these are the very conditions of success, and of mere bread and meat, in society constituted as it is.

It is difficult to tell whether Howells is lending his support to Ely's argument by expressing his own exasperation, or whether he is exasperated with Ely's project itself. The social conditions that Ely describes do exist and *must* exist: not only "success" but "mere bread and meat," basic subsistence, depends on society's constitution. Howells's articulation of such inexorable reality suggests almost no possibility for Ely's proposals to take effect, and the comedy and tragedy, it seems, is that Ely even took an approach as apparently futile as searching the scriptures in order to reform the economy or, indeed, to change the course of history:

> The trouble seems to be the trouble apprehended long ago from putting new wine into old bottles. Something came into the world once that was then and will be forever irreconcilable with the world as the world was and is: we will say a heaven-descended conscience, or we will say the Church, or we will say Christianity. This something has improved the world at points . . . but after all civilization has remained pagan, though it has been ever so obliging in calling itself Christian. Its ideals are pagan; its practices are pagan; as anyone may see who will go to an evening party, or a battle, or a grain or stock exchange. The confusion in the minds of reformers comes from finding so many Christians in pagan society, and so many pagans in the Christian church, and they break out into vain censure of appearances which are the inevitable expression of the very constitution of things.

Howells does not reject the idea of Christ as an ethical principle. He seems, however, to suggest in Ely's social gospel theory a fallacy of blurring the distinction between ethical principles and historical progress. Christ walked among men, Howells concedes—"Something came into the world once"—but somehow his example was taken amiss. That "something" "was then and *will be forever irreconcilable with the world as the world was and is*." But why? "[W]e will say a heaven-descended conscience, or we will say the Church, or we will say Christianity. This something has improved the world at points. . ." Emerson-like, Howells equalizes the icons, to reveal them as so many concepts to which we attach our faith; they become historical, and their application does not connect us to a transcendent realm, but rather finds its place, or ought to, Howells urges, at the "evening party, or a battle, or a grain or stock exchange."

The paradox with which Howells ends the passage, that Christians and pagans are the same, that is, that Christians in America are capitalists, is probably his sharpest criticism of the social gospel, because it is by its very formulation irresolvable. The spiritual and the historical had to, in Howells's mind, be intertwined. The example of his novels show quite clearly that Howells's most sophisticated thinking happened in the midst of writing, and the case of his criticism is no exception. Richard Ely was a friend as well as a colleague to Howells. As we saw in his reproach of Twain after the Whittier birthday dinner, Howells took even his friends' literary offenses as a moral offenses. The review of *Social Aspects* is not an obvious repudiation of Ely's ideals; but as its style demonstrates, it is taking the literary quality of Ely's book, which was for Howells inseparable from the ideas it manifested, as a serious matter. It was not even that Ely's ideas were wholly impractical, or that Christ's economics were "impossible or

mistaken,"—Howells makes neither objection. It was that Ely's writing assumed that its Christian typology was intrinsically practical, that the gap between historical action and scriptural interpretation was negligible. And as Howells's initial summary showed, this was an issue of literary presentation: the fault lay in the thinking.

Preceding the comments on Ely's book is a discussion of Charles Dudley Warner's novel, *A Little Journey In the World*, which Howells classifies as a "homily," "thoroughly modern and most American." "You go with no sense of violent transition from such a book as Mr. Warner's to such a book as Professor Richard T. Ely's," Howells writes, but one gets the feeling that Howells finds Warner's book a bit more reassuring, for Warner can "make [the novel] seem as really an affair of practical import as any of the matters discussed by Professor Ely." Fictional representation is a "means" to getting the reader "to think," an aid to reflection, which is entirely an un-theoretical endeavor, the primary concern of which is rather to maintain "an unerring sense of the importance and significance of the situation." The novel, that is, was written from within Warner's sense of historical reality, with perhaps "a slight strain of the autobiographical machinery to operate experiences beyond the narrator's observation." Warner's minor fault reveals the greater impulse: to take in the world as the writer understands it, to represent its empirical matter, to emerge from the historical imagination.

It was the endeavor of art to reach its truths through the examination of evidence, not to rely on the a priori belief of idealistic faith.[55] We can see how the literary is, for Howells, essentially an ontological issue; it has to do with how the artist relates to his world and his sense of its dimensions. He could follow spiritual claims, but only to a point. "Experience," he wrote in April 1890, "the whole of what we have known up to a

certain time, not the progress of logic, is what prepares us for the reception or rejection of this postulate or that."[56] Thus he responded to Henry Mills Alden's *God in His World*, an essay on the historical manifestations of the revelations. Only experience could prepare a reader to be convinced, or converted, by Alden's piety, and only a few months after Winifred's death, Howells imagined himself among this group, "those whom life has prepared for it, by loss, by trouble, by despair."[57] "[T]he heart must be touched before the brain can be reached," Howells goes on,

> but to those who have shuddered in the void and darkness of sorrow, this book, which has its foible as well as it strength, but which is so earnest and so brotherly, will bring hope, and may bring faith in a God who is always in His world, very near at hand, and so approachable that whenever we go wholly out of ourselves we can find Him, not only in every wretchedest fellow-being, but in the meanest thing He has made.

As usual, Howells walks a fine line between sympathy and skepticism. He leans toward sympathy here, but his demeanor as the literary critic—"this book, which has its foible as well as it strength"—represents that sympathy as possibly a mere paraphrase of the work itself. That is, there is enough critical distance here to consider spiritual matters as primarily literary ones.

If Howells insinuates his own spiritual longings here, his style keeps him a world apart from Alden, literally. The reference to "faith in a God who is always in His world" sounds like a common secularist appropriation of religious rhetoric, but Howells might have had something else in mind, namely what he learned from Tolstoy. True, Tolstoy often represented for Howells the epitome of *imitatio Christi*: "it cannot be denied that the life he is living in is literal fulfillment if the teachings of Jesus Christ. This is what

makes it impossible for one to regard it without grave question of the life that the rest of us are living."[58] But what Howells admired in Tolstoy was his realism, ontologically considered. When Unitarian Minot Savage dismissed as naïve Tolstoy's formulation of Christian ethics as an impractical reformism, Howells defended his hero's theology:

> Even [Tolstoy] does not accept the gospel *in toto*, as it is interpreted to us, for he doubts the immortality of the soul, while his bold critic [Savage] strenuously affirms it. Perhaps here lies the great difference: we can endure much that is wrong and hideous here if we believe that it is merely temporary and disciplinary, and that it will be all right and beautiful hereafter.[59]

Doctrine begins and ends on earth, and transcendent longings must be applied in this life, because there is no other.

The faith Howells entertains in a God who is always in his world is no mere piestism—Tolstoy convinced him that it was not—but neither is it tied to any spiritual reading of scripture, "as it is interpreted to us." The "experience" that made Alden's work available to Howells was not of a transcendent order but of the mundane, which presented trials that concealed no divine intention, whose meaning must be given by the humans who live it.[60] Howells chose Tolstoy as his spiritual mentor, because Tolstoy worked out from, and toward, historical experience rather than toward an anticipated spiritual realization. "[T]his latest of the apostles does not believe in the personal or individual life after death," Howells wrote.[61] Or again, "There was but one life upon the earth which was without failure, and that was Christ's,"

> whose erring and stumbling follower Tolstoï is. There is no other example, no other ideal, and the chief use of Tolstoï is to enforce this fact in our age, after nineteen centuries of hopeless endeavor to substitute ceremony for character, and

> the creed for the life. I recognize the truth of this without pretending to have changed in anything but my point of view of it. What I feel sure is that I can never look at life in the mean sordid way that I did before I read Tolstoï.[62]

Howells found that Tolstoy's "conscience is one ethically and one aesthetically," which meant that, in art, Tolstoy erred and stumbled toward the "truth" about life, the "revelation of human nature." Indeed, Howells found as much to believe in Tolstoy's methods of representing history and reality in *Scenes of the Siege of Sebastopol* and *War and Peace*, as he did in *My Confession* or *My Religion*. Literature was a way of thinking through the given reality, as limited, and as limiting, as that reality might have seemed.

In Tolstoy's work Howells found the religious motive behind his own morality, which is another way to say that he found an idealistic formulation of the tension between morality and historical reality that he discovered in writing *A Modern Instance* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. This was perhaps the most significant discovery in Howells's work in the years following *Silas Lapham*, and the philosophical problem that haunts and yet makes *Hazard* one of his best novels. In Howells's working out, the divinity of Christ that Tolstoy preached made an imperative of the moral enterprise, lending it the sanction of some idea of transcendent order; and yet, in the same stroke, that divinity was not posited as an essence on some spiritualized ontological plane, but rather as an idea held by humans, the patrimony of a historical Christ. It was a very fine line, and not without its contradictions, to be sure. Howells complained, for example, that William Salter's discussion of personal duty in *Ethical Religion* "seems to confine motive more to the life here and now," while the virtue of Tolstoy is that he formulates his ethics "with reference to its origin in Christ and its effect in eternity; and so we find greater support in it than when the same ideal of conduct seems to restrict itself to time and space."[63] The

language of divinity and eternity made it easy to figure his morality in absolute terms: he probably could not have thought otherwise. But a timeless ideal could very well be held within history. The very linearity and opaqueness of history made the ideal of transcendent timelessness necessary.

Here then is the crux of Howells's development as a writer in the 1880s. The philosophical advances he had made with the discovery of Tolstoy motivated the writing of three novels, *The Minister's Charge*, *Annie Kilburn*, and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Each of these, moreover, more than the previous one, shows that while Tolstoy's theology provided a new vocabulary and new formal possibilities for the novel,[64] it did so only by stoking the tension between ideology and history that was intrinsic to the earlier novels. And what was good for art was not necessarily a comfort to the writer, in life. "[T]he more I take thought of the Kingdom, the farther off from it I seem to be," Howells wrote to Howard Pyle in April of 1890.

> Sometimes I feel that I must live entirely on the earthly plane unless I wish to be an arrogant ass, and meddle with things above me; and yet I must meddle with them, both in my own defective conduct and in the imagined lives of others. . . Perhaps we can only suffer into the truth, and live along, in the doubt whether it was worth the suffering. It may be an illusion, as so many things are (may be all things); but I sometimes felt that the only peace is in giving up one's will. I own this is not victory, and one's will may be wise and right.[65]

The equivocation between the cold comforts of abstract philosophy and one's actual experience is an echo of Basil March, in the final chapters of *Hazard*. The novel had brought Howells a considerable distance from the anarchic letter he wrote to his father at the outset of writing *Silas Lapham*, in which he posed his soul searching in political terms.[66] Now he is explicitly, though tentatively, groping for the otherworldly;

and yet, as he was once unable to imagine giving up his wealth in order to fulfill his moral ideals, he is not ready now to relinquish his religious skepticism in order to posit that other world.

Art nevertheless had its consolations. We can see, in his letter to Everett Hale that I cited earlier, why Howells only half-regretted the "mere actualities" of *Hazard*: they were the fullest expression of what constituted a faith. Historical reality was no mere shadow of spiritual reality; it presented in its complexity, if the writer was attentive, the true gospel. The depiction of secular reality seemed hardly enough, as novelistic matter, to reform capitalist America or to quell his moral anxieties, but it was quite sufficient to formulating a response to that America with some intellectual force. The immediacy of the observable, as impenetrable and deceptive it proved to be for Conrad amid the riot, would in the novelist's hands yield the truth of historical experience. The "scientific spirit," Howells wrote, "denies nothing in wishing to prove all things; [it] neither grovels nor persecutes, and seeks only the truth."[67] Truth depended on the quality of the search, itself a kind of knowledge, the kind experience offered, and it was the novel, by virtue of the peculiar process of its writing, that made historical truth available.

"The evolution of a believer in a God sensible to human need and in the life hereafter, from a metaphysician so purely scientific as Mr. John Fiske, is certainly one of the most interesting phases of Darwinism." So Howells skeptically introduced his review of *The Idea of God as Affected by Modern Knowledge*.[68] He did not omit the title of Fiske's previous book, which said it all: *The Destiny of Man as Viewed in the Light of His Origin*. Fiske's method was to adopt the evolutionary trope of perfectibility to posit the inevitable arrival of the Kingdom on earth. That science could be the vehicle for a

theology, and a history, that overturned the old Calvinist idea of an unknowable God, and replaced it with something a bit more human-friendly, Howells cannot let pass without humorous skepticism. As often, however, humor is a way to keep a safe distance from ideas Howells would like to entertain, if only the intellectual treatment could be more convincing.

Fiske's assertion that righteousness and Christian morality are built into a divine evolutionary progress "will not seem much to those who are accustomed to accept God from authority," Howells writes, "and who have always believed what they were bid (which is no bad thing, perhaps, and seems to save time); but it is a good deal as the result of reasoning that begins and ends outside of all authority except that of facts scientifically ascertained; and it is still more as an induction from Darwinian theory[.]" There is a level of amazement here that Fiske could seem to offer readers of different intellectual stripes such a seamlessly rational reconciliation of ideas. Perhaps there was too much order. Like Ely, Fiske easily assumes the correspondence between a theory based in science and one based in scripture, between the spatio-temporal world and its omni-temporal scriptural counterpart, and this confusion is for Howells intellectually suspect. Fiske's theory only has him arrive at the idea with which he started. "Throughout his essay it is interesting to find Mr. Fiske unable to language his thoughts of infinity at supreme moments except in the words of the old Book of those Semitic tribes so remote from Darwin; and it is remarkable that modern light and knowledge have no hope or type more sublime than Christ and His millennium." Howells prefers New Testament Christian ethics to the mysticism of Fiske's Old Testament, but he is careful to avoid Fiske's error of merely swapping one creed for another. Instead, he moves beyond

scripture to its practical manifestations. "At the moment when we were reading the argument which could culminate in nothing higher than a faith in [the Old and New Testaments], there came to us another book which we think others may find it well to read together with Mr. Fiske's." That book is Tolstoy's *My Religion*, the work of the true Christian who is also an agnostic about the reality of the other world. Fiske's religio-evolutionary theory, which amounts to the "hope" of a transcendent order that aligns or own, is a grand tautology, for it presupposes the reality it purports to discover in scientific truth. Thus faith obviates discovery.

Howells would have been among the first to welcome the Kingdom, but he did not see its imminence, or immanence, in history, and he was not so certain that even human effort to realize it was guaranteed of success. He was careful to praise Gronlund, Fiske and Ely for their science and economics per se, but he ultimately left these writers, on the evidence of their own methods, to seem proponents of a naïve progressivism, which perhaps would have been understandable among popular proselytizers like Henry Ward Beecher and their middle-class congregations, but which suggested, backed by all the authority of publication in elite journals and in the literary press, how inexorably lodged an empirically unfounded optimism, surely the mark of underlying despair, was in the culture.

The confusion of ontological commitments, whether the work to be done were aimed merely to the amelioration of the immediate social and economic reality, or toward the consummation of Heaven on Earth, necessarily produced a version of history that relieved the historian of the intellectual traction that seemed, to Howells, the only sane response to the lessons of history. Millennialism inadvertently justified the class system,

not to mention the hypocrisy and complacency it fostered in the middle-class mind, that Howells had, with some disillusionment, discovered with increasing clarity through his major novels of the Eighties. Millennialism smoothed out these historical tensions into a coherent narrative in which all comes out right in the end. The social gospel narratives were romances. In their different versions they all projected forward to an ideal state—seemingly realizing the ideal as already present through the very act of imagining it—and then looked backward, from the ending, from which everything seemed intelligible and inevitable. This kind of historicism went against Howells's conception of a limited, inductive understanding of the historical moment, the internal perspective from which he wrote his novels, and which provided him the intellectual force, against historical ambiguity, that motivated his writing. And the formal issue was a moral issue. If fiction were going to address Tolstoy's question, What is to be done?, it would have to promote a sense of traction against the immediately real, a commitment to this world, or there was nothing to be done, or worth doing, in life or art.

As Howells wrote, several years after *Hazard*, "The millennium, the reign of Christliness on earth, will be nothing mystical or strange."[69] He meant that altruism could only present an alternative to competitive capitalism and individualism through the fairness and sympathy of everyday social interaction. The title of the *Century* essay, "Who Are Our Brethren?", was rhetorically and sincerely religious, but it also forecasted the essay's secular piety, for an ameliorative approach to inequality that lay entirely on the earthly, social plane. The *Christian* in Christian Socialism still exerted a strong pull on Howells's imagination. He rejected its eschatology, but he still held on to its language, which is to say that he could not finally relinquish the promise of historical

abstraction. It does not seem that he was completely conscious of this; it was rather his writing that revealed the contradiction. The very assertion that the millennium would be neither mystical nor strange can itself only be spoken from the end point from which such knowledge can be true. The sentence, by extension the secular-minded Christian socialist argument that Howells promoted, was by his own terms a romance. This does not mean that a program of altruism was impractical in itself; it very well might have been. At issue here is the intellectual tension, the intrinsic paradox of Howells's thought, which made him anxious in his less guarded moments that any theoretical concern for inequality was mere utopianism, but which lent force to the historical discoveries that emerged from his fiction.

Mourning the death of his son, a wearied and contrite Dryfoos approaches Basil March, the man whom he had ordered to carry out his vendetta by dismissing Lindau from his post at the *Every Other Week*. He wants March to reinstate Lindau, and he is even willing to "take him into my own house. . . I'll wait on him myself. It's what Coonrod'd do if he was there. I don't feel any hardness to him because it was him that got Coonrod killed, as you might say, " Dryfoos goes on, "but I've tried to think it out, and I feel like I was all the more beholden to him because my son died tryin' to save him" (390). In his simplicity, Dryfoos speaks Howells's message: if you want to atone for your sins, or at least for your guilt before the world, you have to exercise forgiveness and humility as Christ preached it. He vaguely understands his son's saintly sacrifice and its Christly suggestions, but he reacts appropriately, sincerely.

But Howells has yet another lesson to teach, and he would sacrifice Dryfoos to teach it. Dryfoos's reparation is impossible: Lindau is dead. March knows this, but has not yet spoken it, out of perverse relish. "Something almost made him smile; the willingness he had once to give this old man pain," Howells writes March's thought.

> [T]hen he consoled himself by thinking that at least he was not obliged to meet Dryfoos' wish to make atonement with the fact that Lindau had renounced him and on no terms would work for such a man as he or suffer any kindness from him. In this light Lindau seemed the harder of the two, and March had the momentary force to say: "Mr. Dryfoos—it can't be. Lindau—I have just come from him—is dead." (391)

March assures himself that he need not be the broker of a reconciliation between Lindau's principles, which he believes in, and Dryfoos's overture of kindness, which is clearly an effort of self-forgiveness on the old man's part. But through the course of this reflection March cannot help but feel something for this man. It is the moment in which March places himself on Dryfoos's side—"In this light Lindau seemed the harder of the two"—that he has the "force" to reveal the truth of Dryfoos's situation: it can't be.

The lesson to act as Christ would act thus seems to be pressed as a kind of admonishment: Do it before it's too late. Indeed, this is how March presents it to his children in the very next chapter. "I suppose he was still carrying forward his plan of reparation in his mind—to the dead for the dead," March says of Dryfoos's insistence on arranging Lindau's funeral himself, as a consolation.

> But how useless! If he could have taken the living Lindau home with him and cared for him all his days, what would it have profited the gentle creature [Conrad] whose life his worldly ambition vexed and thwarted here? He might as well offer a sacrifice at Conrad's grave. Children [said March, turning to them],

> death is an exile that no remorse and no love can reach. Remember that, and be good to everyone here on earth, for your longing to retrieve any harshness to the dead will be the very ecstasy of anguish to you. (392)

March is in high homiletic mode, but his didacticism is driven by the ambivalence he felt in the previous scene. He cannot quite decide whether using Dryfoos as an example, and not without morally righteousness satisfaction, is a gesture of sympathy (we, like Dryfoos, seem destined to always act when it is too late); or whether his sympathy is in fact a way to convince and protect himself, to quell his own malaise. The moral framework that gives any didactic utterance its form could, in its very insistence, show the tenuousness with which it holds at bay the uselessness, or meaninglessness, it tries to occlude. The content of March's speech to his children is about the uselessness of atonement, for atonement is always after the fact. But he cannot persist in this vein, and so he proceeds to preempt the need for atonement by proffering an eschatology instead, which would give meaning to life: "be good to everyone here on earth." To obviate the need for atonement, however, March has also conceptually to preclude sin, or fallenness, and the momentary and mistaken choices that people make every day; the assumption of the latter as historical fact is the very basis of his lament. He falls into tautology: Children, he says, don't make the mistakes that history has shown people always make and that you too will make.

The secular lesson, that our efforts must direct themselves to the here and now, without hope of transcendent justification, does not seem to help. The mix of secular sense and basically religious ideals only confuses.

> "I wonder," he mused, "if one of the reasons we're shut up to our ignorance of what is to be hereafter isn't that we should still be more brutal to one another here, in the hope of reparation somewhere else. Perhaps, if we ever come to obey the law of love on earth, the mystery of death will be taken away."

March tries to justify his ontological commitment to the living by caustically treating the notion of afterlife as insurance policy against our worldly transgressions. But as he has done before, he finds himself proclaiming yet another "law," of "love on earth," that should be alternatively binding. Howells's terms for March's philosophizing, *wondering* and *musing*, suggest some doubt in the writing's commitment to absolute assertion. But the confusion might have a formal logic. March (and Howells) can very well understand that, however his philosophical morality might find itself historically contradicted, it does not lose its intellectual force or, indeed, its practical relevance. There is perhaps nothing unsound about March's realism. As his musing constitutes the progress of the scene, a scene that continues into yet more ambivalence, it presents itself as an attempt rather than as a statement. We are not to take March's word for it.

Howells does not, not quite. The scene has yet to resolve March's difficulties in some way, to find the solid rock at the foundation of his logic, if it can be plumbed.

> "Well"—the ancestral Puritanism spoke in Mrs. March—these two old men have been terribly punished. They have both been violent and willful, and they have both been punished. No one need ever tell *me* there is not a moral government of the universe!"
>
> March always disliked to hear her talk in this way, which did both her head and heart injustice. And Conrad," he said, "what was *he* punished for?"
>
> "He?" she answered in exaltation. "He suffered for the sins of others."
>
> "Ah, well, if you put it in that way, yes. That goes on continually. That's another mystery."

The passage does not necessarily repudiate the idea that there is an absolute judgment in the universe, as opposed to human philosophical morality, but it resists Isabel's lack of intellectual rigor in presuming moral certainty on the faith in an absolute and unseen judge. March wants at least the accountability of his own morals. This commitment to philosophical effort can perhaps exonerate him, and the novel, should it occur to the reader that Lindau and Dryfoos have indeed been punished in order that the novel progress at all, so that Howells could find the moral frame through which to construct his plot and its consequences. In order to reject one absolutist approach, Howells courts the contradiction of his own, its reliance on implicit morality. But his, unlike Isabel's, has the virtue of the intention to discover rather than to explain, and so we bear with the contradiction, and perhaps we are even willing to learn, if not from Isabel's doctrine, from her piety. There is something salvageable there.

"But Conrad—yes, he had some business there [at the riot]" March says, to corroborate his wife's religious epiphany,

> it was his business to suffer there for the sins of others. Isabel, we can't throw aside the old doctrine of the Atonement yet. The life of Christ, it wasn't only in healing the sick and going about to do good; it was suffering for the sins of others! That's as great a mystery as the mystery of death. Why should there be such a principle in the world? But it's been felt more or less dumbly, blindly recognized ever since Calvary. If we love mankind, pity them, we even *wish* to suffer for them. That's what has created the religious orders of all times—the brotherhoods and sisterhoods that belong to our day—as much as to the medieval past. That's what is driving a girl like Margaret Vance, who has everything that the world can offer her young beauty, on to the work of a Sister of Charity among the poor and dying. (393)

Atonement has a place in human affairs after all, but it is the kind with a capital A that March entertains, not the pitiful brand in which Dryfoos deals. Departing from his

casual use of religious terms in previous chapters, March is explicitly doctrinal here, exceeding even Tolstoy's good works and charity, and proposing the Christian's last full measure of devotion to the well being of others. The passage comes up against the epistemological vacuum that Conrad's death scene presented to the novel, and Howells intends to bring March farther along than he had managed to go before by rhetorically raising the stakes.

This perhaps accounts for March's confusion. The doctrine of suffering ought once and for all resolve the question of Conrad's presence at the riot and the significance of his death. Conrad was, as I have said earlier, a principle of goodness by negativity in the novel: he was what everyone and everything else in his social and economic environment were not. But he was not much more. He had no positive content, and he was rather held in reserve, as a potential for good. Something Howells is looking for is clearly lost when Conrad is killed. Howells does not therefore think March's pious effusion is wasted in considering Conrad.

But at the moment Howells tries to push beyond the kind of knowledge about history that he discovers in Conrad's death scene, he finds himself without resources. He cannot be historical and doctrinal at the same time, for the doctrinal does not hold any knowledge for history; it rather negates history. Reaching to validate Conrad as a symbol of the goodness that might have existed in the world, Howells finds that the only language that can do this is finally unconvincing. March's exclamation ("it was suffering for the sins of others!) seems to be rushing straight toward a discovery, and he can hardly hold it in. But the propulsion does not achieve a breakthrough. He gets tangled in his own sentences and examples. "That's as great a mystery as the mystery of death," he

says, and we remember that he had a moment ago dismissed this mystery as a false ontological supposition of an afterlife. What status does his suspicion of mysteries confer onto Atonement? "Why should there be such a principle in the world? But it's been felt more or less dumbly, blindly recognized ever since Calvary. If we love mankind, pity them, we even *wish* to suffer for them." Is this piety, an assertion of the enduring viability of the principle of Atonement? Or, in the face of events such as Conrad's death, is this a sociological observation, a complaint that no one has ever questioned the viability of the idea? The invocation of Ms. Vance suggests the latter, though does not rule out the former. Rich girls with big hearts are unfulfilled by society and throw themselves headlong into self-sacrifice for those whose poverty supports their wealth. For such restive souls, the idea is overwhelming.

March had already said that Ms. Vance had "the potentiality of several kinds of fanatic" (377), and now, amid his own doctrinal investigations, perhaps he is attempting to understand rather than dismiss her enthusiasm. But the understanding is not of conviction but of intellect; March's brief history of religious orders testifies to his distanciation of mere curiosity and interest, therefore to his hopeless separation from any sort of belief of which Ms. Vance is capable. Whatever explicitly religious rhetoric he assumes, March is always external to the faith that would make those words real and transform his world.

This was an unbridgeable gap, and it finally separated Howells from the example of Tolstoy, which would have showed him that agnosticism about the reality of spiritual being was not, for the religious mind, incompatible with the striving for God. But Tolstoy's capacity for irrational discovery was beyond Howells. He subjected every

option of faith to the scrutiny of form and history. If the middle-class Basil March could not conceive a philosophy adequate to the historical conditions of America, which exceeded his need for a mere personal happiness, then no faith in invisible realities was going to suffice. One needed both the philosophy and the faith, but for Howells the one precluded the other. Therefore, what he does in *Hazard* is to try to write himself into a sustainable alternative to Tolstoy's faith. For whatever March's failures, the mere fact of his speculations compels us to take them seriously, to be troubled by them.

William James, who greatly admired *Hazard*, probably understood March's peculiar dilemma.[70] In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* he quotes a passage from *My Confession*, in which Tolstoy writes that when he contemplated suicide, a stronger impulse overrode his "intellect":

> Alongside of all those movements of my ideas and observations, my heart kept languishing with another pining emotion. I can call this by no other name than that of a thirst for God. This craving for God had nothing to do with the movement of my ideas—in fact, it was the direct contrary of the movement—but it came from my heart. It was like a feeling of dread that made me seem like an orphan and isolated in the midst of all these things that were so foreign. And this feeling of dread was mitigated by the hope of finding the assistance of some one.[71]

Howells certainly identified with the despair amid prosperity and fame that Tolstoy describes in his confession. But the affinity ran at a deeper level: both men experienced a tension between the intellect and spiritual craving, the former pulling the thinker toward the world and self-consciousness, the latter alleviating the stress of intellection and giving rise to a vividly felt experience of transcendence. The difference, as James would have pointed out, is that Tolstoy was *convinced* by his felt experience.

March's dead-end suggests that Howells was unwilling to grant the validity of mere instinct, that while he did want to write his way toward the validation of something larger, he could not finally turn the longing into a conviction. It was, as James calls it, "the idea of God" that Howells lacked, the first principle or predisposition from which Tolstoy worked to the recovery of purpose in his life. Whereas Tolstoy came to rest in the assurance of divine assistance, Howells's novel shows that only a tentative assurance can be attained, and it must moreover be consciously, even obsessively worked for.

Thus in its final scenes the novel works toward conclusion by confronting the bleak historical knowledge it discovered in its pivotal scene. Howells intended Conrad's death to produce the recognition that the immediately empirical world held no immanent morality. The narration withheld judgment and precluded moral evaluation. The death exploded the complacency of the other characters, and in its aftermath sent them in search of order without a stable philosophical basis, except their own inadequate moral devices. This was not an argument for amorality: the realism was itself moral. In its knowledge of the limitations of moral idealism, realism would force an ethic to emerge, built on the commitment to the immediately apprehensible, on selfless engagement in the social world; *selfless*, because there was no commitment to an external order. Morality would emerge of its own, in practice, obviating idealism.[72]

But Howells finds that this ethics of social responsibility is unrepresentable in his novel. One problem is that he will not write a utopian novel that imagines history as it might be; he is morally and aesthetically committed to the conditions of the present, and there is no model there for such an ethic, unless it is Conrad; but his scant representation suggests that Howells is not interested in exploring this historical type. The bigger

problem is that, without the firm transcendent framework, which Tolstoy assumed, and which structurally held *Silas Lapham* together in the end, there is no obvious logic in *Hazard*, after Conrad's death, that would lend a clear purpose to the scenes. Committed to history, Howells finds himself saddled by it. Forcing his characters to piece together an ethic from scratch, Howells must write from scratch as well. As a result, the novel seems to falter, to run out of ideas, and Howells confronts the limits of his realism.

If March finally fails to become a writer, it cannot be said that he did not try, for he tries everything. It is not so much the content of his reflections as the style that gets him through Lindau's wake at the Dryfoos home, which in his religious disillusionment he sees as a useless charade. The scene begins in irony. Lindau, who probably would have been an atheist, is given an Anglican burial service, because to the naiveté of Dryfoos "it seems the refuge of all the homeless dead" (394). Mrs. Dryfoos tries to believe in her husband's redemption: "Coonrod was a member of the 'Piscopal Church; and Fawther's doin' the whole thing for Coonrod as much as for everybody. He thought the world of Coonrod, Fawther did." But despite his skepticism, or perhaps to quell it, March is willing to entertain the humble solemnity of it all and extract some value from it.

> March felt all the grotesqueness, the hopeless absurdity of Dryfoos' endeavor at atonement in these vain obsequies to the man for whom he believed his son to have died; but the effort had its magnanimity, its pathos, and there was a poetry that appealed to him in this reconciliation through death of men, of ideas, of conditions, that could only have gone on warring in life. He thought, as the priest went on with the solemn liturgy, how all the world must come together in that peace which, struggle and strive as we may, shall calm us at last. He looked at Dryfoos and wondered whether he would consider these rites as a sufficient tribute, or whether there was enough in him to make him realize their futility, except as a mere sigh of his wish to retrieve that past. He thought how we never

> can atone for the wrong we do; the heart we have grieved and wounded cannot kindle with pity for us when once it is stilled; and yet we can put our evil from us with penitence; and somehow, somewhere the order of loving-kindness, which our passion or our willfulness had disturbed, will be restored. (395)

Had March shed a single tear, we would not be surprised. The "poetry" of Dryfoos' eulogy, its poignancy to March's middle-class sensibility, is precisely in its "futility." The hopelessness is irresistible to March's penchant for sentimentality, which is compelling because it is itself futile: it cannot make real the content of its own longings, except as self-conscious language, and March has plenty. There is nothing new here philosophically, as March has before posited an ideal of universal morality ("It ought to be law as inflexible as in human affairs as the order of the day and night in the physical world"). What is different now is that he is not insisting or musing: he is wholly convinced of the truth of his idealization, for once with something of the confidence of Tolstoy's faith. He is magisterial on death: "*all* the world," he pronounces, "must come together in that peace which, *struggle and strive as we may*, shall calm us *at last*." He is melancholy: "we never can atone for the wrong we do; the heart we have grieved and wounded cannot kindle with pity for us when once it is stilled." Finally, rising from the dust, he is inspirational: "and yet we can put our evil from us with penitence; and somehow**,** somewhere the order of loving-kindness**,** which our passion or our willfulness had disturbed, will be restored," that "somehow, somewhere" retreating into tantalizing imprecision. The language is self-serving, reassuring in its claim to human connection through tragedy. It contradicts the novel's characteristic skepticism, but it has to. The scene must advance beyond March's ambivalence in order to move the novel toward resolution, and Howells finds recourse in baldly stating his meaning.

Howells is not unconscious of his tenuous hold on the denouement. March's reflection on the "poetry" of Dryfoos' predicament is only one of the many reminders that he is always in some sense writing, and once again, though he is productive, March reveals his literary shortcomings. But these are, in this case, the shortcomings of the novel's realistic form. The worse (or, if you like, the better) March's sentimentality gets, the more beautiful it becomes, because it hints at the truth about Howells's art, which he is himself discovering, that the insights of art are neither practical nor practically moral, that exactly where art becomes didactic it loses its intellectual traction on the contemporary historical reality it seeks to reform. In such moments the writer insists on what he already knows, or hopes to be true, his aim not to discover or understand reality as it presents itself but to assert it. A writer only comes to this realization, however, if it matters to him. For Howells, the novel was malleable enough to tease out such problems.

At this point, what Howells cannot understand assumes validity in the novel it did not have before, as it is supported by the narration itself and not just through March's speculations. Howells tries to put firm ground under the closing scenes, in order to resolve his various plots. The young socialite and social worker Margaret Vance, whom March characterized as having "the potentiality of several kinds of fanatic," comes in the end to confirm the abstract goodness the novel held in reserve with Conrad, and in the last scene in which she speaks, we can see Howells writing in explicit terms the novel's conflict with itself.

Appropriately it is Beaton, the most successful artist in the novel, who is sent on this errand. Not so good at seeing himself, despite his narcissism, Beaton sees everyone else quite well, gleaning everything from appearances. He has gone to see Ms. Vance, to

make sure he is not in love with her, and at the very sight of her black dress and the "spiritual exaltation in her look," he knows she is destined for the nunnery. "At the sight of her, the vague hope he had never quite relinquished, that they might be something more than aesthetic friends, died in his heart" (406). What dies, actually, is the novel's aesthetic hold on the supernatural good that Vance represents. That goodness simply exceeds the novel's capacity to reconcile it to moral realism. When her angelic nature overcomes the concern for society and art she once had, she loses her value for Beaton. She was more interesting to him when she struggled with the tension between art and ideality.

In is skepticism of spiritual things, even Beaton had found that tension overwhelming. He tells Vance that he has refused Dryfoos's commission to paint Conrad's portrait. "I couldn't do such a thing," he says. "It isn't in my way. I told him so. His son had a beautiful face—an antique profile, a sort of early Christian type, but I'm too much of a pagan for that sort of thing." Exactly. The artist who is primarily concerned with the things of this world finds himself inadequate to giving form to the transcendent, which any representation of Conrad would deserve. "He was a singular creature," Beaton goes on, "a kind of survival, an exile in our time and place. I don't know; we don't quite expect a saint to be rustic, but with all his goodness Conrad Dryfoos was a country person. If he were not dying for a cause, you could imagine him milking." One can imagine the painting Beaton might do, of the farm hand gazing abstractedly upward toward the light, amid his touchingly squalid surroundings. There is no convincing depiction of such saintliness to the aesthetic imagination. "Beaton intended a contempt that came from the bitterness of having himself once milked the

family cow." He is reminded of the squalor of his own social reality, its utter lack of transcendent possibility.

Beaton's secularism cannot penetrate Vance's aura. She is impervious. "He died for a cause," she says. "The holiest."

> "Of labor?"
> "Of peace. He was there to persuade the strikers to be quiet and go home."
> "I haven't been quite sure," said Beaton. "But in any case he had no business there. The police were on hand to do the persuading."
> "I can't let you talk so!" cried the girl. "It's shocking! Oh, I know it's the way people talk, and the worst is that in the sight of the world it's the right way. But the blessing on the peacemakers is not for the policemen with their clubs." (408)

Howells has already undercut Beaton's reliability in the scene, and so Beaton's response to Vance's insistence against the novel's agnostic handling of Conrad's death scene is meant to ring of inadequacy:

> Beaton saw that she was nervous; he made his reflection that she was altogether too far gone in good works for the fine arts to reach her; he began to think how he could turn her primitive Christianity to the account of his modern heathenism. He had no deeper design than to get flattered back into his own favor far enough to find courage for some sort of decisive step.

What he wants is for Vance to help him decide whether he should profess his love for the vulgar Christine Dryfoos, and he tries to bring up the subject by pretending to regret that he could not comfort her father. But his opportunistic impiety is out of its league, morally speaking, in the face of Vance's conviction. "There is no comfort in ourselves," she says, dismissing his mundane concerns. "It's hard to get outside, but

there's only despair within. When we have done something for others by some great effort, we find it's all for our own vanity." We are back in the didacticism of March's funeral reflection, and once again we sense that Howells is making room for idealism he cannot quite justify philosophically. Vance's doctrinal fervor is articulated here as a moral conviction, and Beaton is no qualified foil. The narration offers no comment, one way or the other. These might be the ravings of a fanatic, but they perfectly express the ethics that the novel's historical accuracy has been unable to achieve.

Howells perfectly articulated the central problem of his method when he said uncharacteristically that the virtue of Tolstoy's ethics was that it did not "restrict itself to time and space."[73] For if *Hazard* makes a claim to being a history, it would lie in the discovery that the writing of history requires abstraction, that the moral dimension of history is not intrinsic to events but is rather the product of form, the historian's working out of his material. The scientific approach to Conrad's death might have been an accurate representation of the experiential side of modern history, but the philosophical essays that followed demonstrate the inevitable intellectual response, which instead of achieving understanding of the scene itself constructs an alternate meaning, removed from the scene, nevertheless serving as understanding.

Creed necessarily fills the space left by any instinct for the discrepancy. The "scientific spirit," Howells wrote after *Hazard*, "denies nothing in wishing to prove all things; [it] neither grovels nor persecutes, and seeks only the truth."[74] But one must be cautious against fundamentalism, of any kind: "With science as with revelation, it is the spirit which giveth life, and the letter which kills." Truth is a matter of continuous thinking, of form: "the very errors of science teach wisdom, and the effect of the rising

and falling waters of theory is to [permit the mind to work] in the untrammeled search for truth." Experience and belief must coexist, but they must not be confused: "[T]o enjoy this precious privilege one need not abandon any belief that truly comforts or shelters him. Some dogmas indeed we must hold passively, till science. . . declares finally and forever that the world is round and moves. Till she does this. . . we may keep our creeds intact, even those of us who find consolation and moral support in a personal devil."

Indeed, at the end of *Hazard* the ideal is not required to intervene merely to reassert moral order onto historical messiness, as it did in *Silas Lapham*. Now Howells has learned that the novel interested in testing, rather than confirming, its morality must work within its contradictions in order to end at all. Neither skepticism nor creed wins out, but the point is not to determine their relative values but to move between them. To this extent, the tendency to self-contained epistemology of romantic form, which implicitly determines plot and character beforehand, is at work even in Howells's inductive realism. The difference, however, is that Howells is aware of the divided consciousness of his novel, which he takes to be a historical problem, the resolution of which is an ongoing process.

Thus the idea of imperfection, in character or in ideas, can be explored to its fullest. Dryfoos was regretful, painfully so, about the way he treated his son, but March denies that Dryfoos will suffer any significant change through this grief. "We're brought up to think so by the novelists," he says, and Howells means him to refer to the providential narratives of romance. But there is no conversion, March suggests, no moral transformation that indicates the interpenetration of the next world into ours. Smelling heresy, Isabel demands to know, "Then what *is* it that changes us?"

> Well, [says March,] it won't do to say, the Holy Spirit indwelling. That would sound like cant at this day. But the old fellows that used to say that had some glimpses of the truth. They knew that it is the still, small voice that the soul heeds, not the deafening blasts of doom. I suppose I should have to say that we didn't change at all. We develop. There's the making of several characters in each of us; we *are* each several characters, and sometimes this character has the lead in us, and sometimes that. From what Fulkerson has told me of Dryfoos I should say he had always had the potentiality of better things in him than he has ever been yet, and perhaps the time has come for the good to have its chance. The growth in one direction has stopped; it's begun in another; that's all. The man hasn't been changed by his son's death; it stunned, it benumbed him, but it couldn't change him. It was an event like any other, and it had to happen as much as his being born. It was forecast from the beginning of time and was as entirely an effect of his coming into the world— [.] (422)

March borrows the trope of predestination at the end, but to situate Dryfoos all the more in history. Grief has not changed Dryfoos; it has merely "stunned" and "benumbed" him, that is, it has offered no transcendence, rather a reminder of the banality of grief. When Isabel accuses him of fatalism, March resorts to the extra-historical only to provoke her: "Then you think that a sparrow falls to the ground *without* the will of God?" Against her doctrine, March is trying to pose the discussion not in terms of eschatology but of history. The formation of the self does not occur as a progress toward the reconciliation of the self with God's plan; in fact there is no progress: simply, "We develop." In the face of contingency, which is all Conrad's death is to history ("It was an event like any other") Dryfoos, like a fungus looking for shade, stops growing in one direction and resumes in another. It was "an effect of his coming into the world," a product not of design but of causes and effects. There is no certain knowledge at the end, only worldly perseverance.

Nevertheless, March's comparative terminology keeps Isabel's piety in play. Her preference for reading Dryfoos's experience as a morality tale is not fully discounted but offered as another version of historical construction. "*I* don't know what it all means," March says, qualifying his imperious secularism, "though I believe it means good. What did Christ himself say? That if one rose from the dead it would not avail. And yet we are always looking for miracles!" He is not willing to go so far as to admit to miracles, but Isabel is not deterred. Dryfoos has agreed to sell the *Every Other Week* on terms favorable to March and Fulkerson, and she thinks there has been, indeed, a heavenly repentance at work. "She knew [her husband] was enamored of the literary finish of his cynicism and that at heart he was as humbly and truly grateful as he was for the good fortune opening to them." If not exactly a miracle, to Isabel's mind Dryfoos's sudden magnanimity is surely a sign that people change for the better. Her husband is only spinning yet another of his "literary" speculations. Form, which forever seeks, Isabel seems to know, will not achieve the final statement. She prefers the epistemology of the romance, and hers are the last thoughts in the scene.

The conflict between March's ever-unfolding self and Isabel's perfectible self was a historical problem, for it meant that altruism could offer little appeal to people who needed an ideal to insure that ethical self-making was worth the effort. "[W]e have to ask whether Dryfoos has done us the good, or whether it's the blessing of Heaven," March says, drawing the distinction between an effort of conscience and of God. "If it's merely the blessing of Heaven I don't propose being grateful for it." He wants good deeds to be a matter of will, with no goal other than the good result. But his grouchy stubbornness

just shows how little faith he has that such an ethics can fully satisfy anyone who needs a more solid creed to justify continuous worldly effort.

Howells found the problem of ethical self-formation in history confirmed when, in 1891, he read William James's *Principles of Psychology*. He was particularly impressed with a passage on ideals and the will, where he read:

> [M]oral knowledge, always there, grumbling and rumbling in the background—discerning, commenting, protesting, longing, half-resolving—never wholly resolves, never gets its voice out of the minor into the major key, or its speech out of the subjunctive into the imperative mood, never breaks the spell, never takes the helm into its own hands.[75]

What for James is a pragmatic description of reality, for Howells is a problem. He approaches the difficulty of maintaining a consistent self-conception amid the flux of experience with ambivalence. "[F]or good or ill, and much or little in life," he paraphrases, "we are creatures of our own making." Howells cannot decide whether he can fully subscribe to the pragmatist's healthy-minded embrace of flux:

> In fact, the will of the weak man is *not* free; but the will of the strong man, the man who has *got the habit* of preferring sense to nonsense and "virtue" to "vice," is a *freed* will, which one might very well spend all one's energies in achieving. It is this preference which at last becomes the man, and remains permanent throughout those astounding changes which everyone finds in himself from time to time.

Howells of course would like to be the strong man, but he knows the truth of the first passage, that the strong and the weak are the same man at different moments. He calls James's description of the ethical construction of a *habitus* "admirable," but what

particularly intrigues him is James's insight into the discontinuity of experience and consciousness, the notion of contingency rather than will as the basis of character. "When the identical fact recurs" amid the flux of experience, Howells quotes James,

> we must think of it in a fresh manner, see it under a somewhat different angle, apprehend it in different relations from those in which it last appeared. And the thought by which we cognize it is the thought of it-in-these-relations, a thought suffused with the consciousness of all that dim content.

What maintains continuity amid this endless negotiation is habit, the "preference" for virtue over vice. But for Howells, the work of "preferring" must surely depend on an implicit faith in abstract ideas, "vice" over "virtue" (in quotation marks), which are continually negotiated themselves. Howells cannot help but to see the darker side of pragmatism, to construe the flux of experience not as the ever-present possibility for good, but as the possibility for error. What James described was essentially an inductive method of self-making, which Howells understood perfectly. But as his assessment of Dryfoos has shown, Howells also understood that historical events more often impelled people into desultory, and not constructive, habits of development.

"[N]othing seems further from psychology than theology," Howells wrote, in the same essay on James. Indeed, James was a secular writer who, at least here, attempted to understand human character without reference to metaphysical frameworks. Howells appreciated this effort:

> It is necessarily inconclusive in many ways, and very likely Psychology can never be a science as some other sciences are, but must always remain a philosophy. If this is so, it can change its mind with less confusion to the unlearned than they feel when they are told that all they have been taught by the highest scientific

> authorities is mistaken. It can so continue the possession of all who love wisdom, however far off, however wanting in the self-knowledge where all wisdom centers.

What Howells appreciates, in other words, is the *form* of James's psychology, which ever approaches its conclusion without reaching it, which can "change its mind," because it works without the rigid theoretical or teleological commitments to which contradiction and irresolution are anathema. Its insights are born of a tension between the psychologist's thinking and the fluid reality he seeks to know. Not science, but "philosophy" is the proper term, for as it deals with secular human character, psychology is a practice of unfolding knowledge, which imitates the unfolding of experience and of history.

This process is actually closer to science than Howells acknowledges, for inductive method is what in his critical essays he calls art,[76] and he must have felt confirmed in is own art by James's method of construing character. In fact, the passages Howells cited from James's book, on the failures of moral knowledge and on the strong and the weak man, are noticeably similar to Howells's writing of Beaton at the end of *Hazard*.

> Beaton was at his best when he parted for the last time with Alma Leighton, for he saw then that what had happened to him was the necessary consequence of what had been, if not what he had done. Afterward he lost this clear vision; he began to deny the fact; he drew upon his knowledge of life, and in arguing himself into a different frame of mind he alleged the case of different people who had done and been much worse things than he and yet no such disagreeable consequence had befallen them. Then he saw that it was all the work of blind chance, and he said to himself that it was this that made him desperate and willing to call evil his good and to take his own wherever he could find it. There was a great deal that was literary and factitious and tawdry in the mood in which he went to see Christine Dryfoos. . . He knew what the drift of his mind was, but he

> had always preferred to let chance determine his events, and now since chance had played him such an ill turn with Alma, he left it the whole responsibility. Not in terms, but in effect, this was his thought as he walked. . . [His thoughts were] inchoate, floating, the stuff of an intention rather than intention, an expression of temperament chiefly. (424)

Whereas the narration comes to identify itself with Basil March in the novel's last fifty pages, as his ruminations begin to unfold the bulk of the matter in those pages, it maintains its distance from Beaton until the very last. Here, Beaton is analyzed objectively, speculatively, as the psychologist might do it, working not directly with empirical evidence, but inferring from experience the invisible workings of the mind. Howells describes the actual work of Beaton's rationalizations ("he began to deny the fact; he drew upon his knowledge of life, and in arguing himself into a different frame of mind he alleged the case of different people"), as well as the particular cast of his imagination, which is secular. Beaton is not without his metaphysical tendencies, but he resolves these in terms of circumstance and the will: ("Then he saw that it was all the work of blind chance, and he said to himself that it was this that made him desperate and willing to call evil his good and to take his own wherever he could find it. . . he had always preferred to let chance determine his events"). Howells offers an interpretive framework for all of this ("Beaton was at his best when. . . he saw then that what had happened to him was the necessary consequence of what had been, if not what he had done. . . There was a great deal that was literary and factitious and tawdry"), adding to the scientism of James's thought a moralistic aspect.

We might recognize something of the treatment of Bartley Hubbard in this passage; he was also a moral rogue, whose selfish intentions seemed always to retard his

sense of the relations, as James called them, that bound his character. But in Bartley Howells was mainly interested in accounting for guileless immorality, in a realistic depiction of the split between intention and will. With Beaton, the stakes are higher, for *Hazard* has exceeded the aspirations of *A Modern Instance* and has concerned itself, if quixotically, with ethical renewal. March's essayistic search for a combinative spiritual and secular ethics has proven to be limited, but in the process that search has gained insight into the middle class's ideological bind. The more conventional, objective depiction of Beaton's mind inherits the burden of this knowledge. This objectivity is more consequential in light of March's failures, for its realism must take into account the social reality March has uncovered.

Narratorial omniscience therefore becomes a comparative epistemology in this passage, a formal response (whether remedy or resignation) to March's essayistic mode. This could be why the writing becomes explicitly self-conscious. The statement, "Not in terms, but in effect, this was his thought," is not only characterological, it is obviously formal. Howells could have remained silent and let the passage stand as an approximation of Beaton's thoughts, but he is not intent on recurring to the usual suspension of disbelief, by which the reader willingly imagines access, through the writing, to a character's mind. Howells is more ambitious by seeming less. The narration in fact intimates the absurdity of representing the mind: "Not in terms, but in effect, this was his thought. . . [His thoughts were] inchoate, floating, the stuff of an intention rather than intention, an expression of temperament chiefly." If this is psychologically realistic, that the contents of the mind cannot be captured in "terms" because it is "inchoate," —that is, if Beaton's mind is *typical*—then the appropriate task

for the novelist is not to represent the mind, because it cannot; it is rather to approach the mind from without, to observe the way it works instead of simulating its working. The writing may not have access to what we normally cannot observe, but it can postulate knowledge nonetheless. If a sense of skepticism lingers around March's speculations, here is the more confident investigations of scientific-realistic form.

The difference made in this passage is between a conventional omniscience, in which the novel's access to knowledge about extra-literary reality is implicit, and an explicitly formal-psychological approach to gathering knowledge. Such explication is actually unusual even for Howells, who thought the novelist should never call attention to his technique but let the characters appear as if unmediated. But here, the formal quality of the writing indicates that, in this novel, character is a matter primarily of language, of philosophy, not of an implicit correspondence with reality but of the endeavor of writing to know. The writing takes up the directly intelligible, human social behavior, as Beaton exemplifies it, and from there works to the inferable, in this case, a theory of the mind. In March, the method was different, for there Howells took up the directly intelligible of Conrad's death scene and confused it with the mysterious, trying to leap-frog over knowledge and into the promised land. March's theory therefore has little purchase on the world we directly experience, the social-historical world that concerns Howells. The treatment of Beaton's confusions is an attempt to resolve March's.

This is not the self-consciousness of Thackeray, however, Howells's favorite example of the writer who called attention to the fictional quality of his novels and thus interrupted the "illusion" of reality that was the novel's reason for being. Thackeray was more whimsical in his observations of the historical-epistemological limitations of the

novel, which he anyway thought was as good a representation of reality as any other.[77] Howells is not interested in such irony, for the point of his formalism is not to reflect on fiction's access to truth, but to discover more fully this access. The problem of Beaton's ethical formation is obvious: the mind is incoherent so as to preclude a discipline, even a coherent conception of what lies just outside of the directly encountered (Beaton's calculations of his chances with any of his three romantic interests, Alma Leighton, Margaret Vance, and Christine Dryfoos, are all flawed by his misalignment of ego and reality). The ethical problem is thus a social one. This is also to say that Beaton is fully engaged in history, the discontinuity of his mind a direct counterpart to the secularist's intrinsically unstructured temporality. What Beaton needs is to be more scientific and less solipsistic: he needs a coherent theory of what he cannot know otherwise. But that is the novelist's advantage. The writing is itself engaged in this flux, as its marshalling of scientific and moral discipline shows, but it can by virtue of this detachment intervene in its depiction of reality, in order to induce what structure it can. The writing is just one degree of consciousness beyond Beaton.

The disjuncture between doctrine and secular experience that March worried over is now taken up as a problem for the purely secular-minded. Beaton, whom we saw use Margaret Vance's religion as so much material for his own construction of reality, is shown now to exist in an opaque medium of awareness, without a framework through which to devise a consistently ethical self, preferring—or perhaps thrown back upon—randomness as an alternative to the responsibility of free will. For Beaton there is no supernatural order, not even the next best thing, an internalized discipline. But while the narration is morally superior to Beaton, it also displays its own secular limitation,

projecting its morality from inside human history. With March, Howells could explore the possibilities of religious yearning for the secular imagination, toward the formulation of a hybrid ethics. He was not so successful, because he discovered that ethics, which to be effective had to confront history, was in the American mind rather complicated by the baggage of idealism and belief. This paralyzes March, for he is really another version of Beaton, more philosophically inclined, more willing to cast beyond himself and his meager reality, but like his author just as fully immured by a secular imagination.

In the switch from the dialogic philosophy of March to the psycho-description in Beaton's passage, the novel realizes the relation between the two artists, two aspects of Howells's imagination, the one that works within the problem of unbelief, but striving toward it, the other just removed enough to understand the impossibility of that striving, its embeddedness in history. The limitation of Howells's form, that it cannot produce an ethics that rises above history so as to see more clearly the path to salvation, turns out to be precisely its power, to discover the texture of reality as the middle class might have conceived it, as a welter of elusive doctrinal confidence, moral uncertainty, and inadequacy before the social conflict in the streets of its neighborhoods. In one sense, the aim of realism has been fulfilled: Howells has come to the impasse of idealism and knowledge, where he gains both historical insight and an understanding of the limits and possibilities of art.

It is an admittedly modest, and ambivalent, claim on behalf of art, and it therefore gets to the fundamental contradiction in *Hazard*, perhaps in Howells's thought more generally. "The supreme art in literature," Howells wrote of Tolstoy's work, "had its

highest effect in making me set art forever below humanity[.]"[78] Howells wanted *Hazard* to serve humanity, perhaps to be a guide to practical ethics; at times it seems to be a spiritual exercise. We can understand these high aspirations in the context of Howells's understanding that his own wealth, and that of his class, depended on the labor of others, and that he was therefore complicit in the material and spiritual discontentment that produced real antagonism and physical violence, an indication that the country was moving away from its cherished ideals rather than fulfilling its promise.[79] The novel as he practiced it took up historical conflict; such conflict was imbedded in the novelist's own thinking as a historical being, and it manifested in the formal unfolding of experimental novel writing. The introduction into this experiment of the social gospel ideas, and the serious consideration of middle-class religious belief, which Howells had treated with more skepticism in *Silas Lapham*, was grist for the philosophical mill, an increased possibility for discovering, not so much the affirmative moral statement, but an intelligent, comprehensive ethics that could fill the void left by the onset of moral relativism and the quasi-scientism of naturalistic amorality. If there was potential for ethical renewal, and if the novel, as a mode of historical analysis, could play any role, it would have been to get to the bottom of the various approaches circulating through the culture, to discover what lay beyond their facile formulations, unexamined premises, and the conflicts between them.

Not exempt from these conflicts itself, however, Howells's method proved to be more of a problem than a solution. *Hazard* did not contain within its very methodological premise the possibility for a definitive ethics, one that transcended the ideological commitments, the real class interests that bogged society down in apparently

irresolvable differences. There is a part of the novel, that which considers seriously the doctrinal or otherwise religious idealism of Margaret Vance, Conrad, and both Marches, that is looking for this transcendent principle. That longing is an element in Howells's formal search for an ethics, because he can only take it seriously by taking seriously its millennial aspirations, or at the very least, its viability as an approach to coping with the seemingly endless conflict of secular life.

But from this limitation comes the insight. Ethics need not be transcendent; its very practicality, its realism, is precisely what puts it within our grasp. The inductive method of realism cannot prescribe an ethics or a creed. March's essays never achieve their goals, because they work with ideas that are not within his ken. His resolutions are necessarily irresolutions, for they depend on an ever receding knowledge, the "mystery," as instinctively he refers to it. His speculations sally forth into the unknown, but toward a dead end; at the bottom of his method is a deductive logic, even if he reasons from vague doctrinal yearnings. But his speculations are part of the novel's formal unfolding nonetheless, and as such they represent a broader effort, an historical analysis; and thus as the very historical matter with which the novel works, these speculations manifest not a prescriptive ethics (the very confusion of their content would preclude this anyway) but the novel's attempt at a historical truth that incorporates March's confusion into a philosophy that can sustain that confusion without seeking to resolve it. Method precludes and obviates prescription: Howells never had a chance at moral confirmation, but his scientific instinct at the outset of writing *Hazard*, developed from the formal discoveries of *A Modern Instance* and *Silas Lapham*, and the subsequent theoretical

essays, along with a temperamental skepticism, had already outpaced his expectation for a grand synthesis.

If *Hazard* seems compromised, it is the compromise of Howells's realism, as a project and as a view of life. There was no science of ethics, none that he could discover. There was the closest thing, philosophy, which seemed to offer at least an inferable approach to an ethics. When, in the closing scene of the novel, the Marches run into Margaret Vance, now a member of the Sisterhood of Mercy, they "felt that the peace that passeth understanding had looked at them from her eyes" (431). Inspired, March attempts a final equation between Conrad and Christ: he was there, that day of the riot, "to die for God's sake, for man's sake." But he is not willing to swear by it on any Bible, not yet: "Well, we must trust that look of hers." The novel ends on something just short of Faith, but it is a kind of faith nonetheless, resignation rather than optimism, perhaps, but resignation earned. March's profession of "trust" is a feeling, we notice ("they *felt* that the peace that passeth understanding"), but we are to take that feeling, which reminds March of Christ's sacrifice, as the reasonable next step in the novel's philosophy. Given the evidence of our condition, the novel suggests, this is the only reasonable thing to do.

The novel thus proffers a modest social theory, which can certainly be dismissed because of a lack of proof, but at the peril of having no better theory in its place. This ending is a considerable development from those of the previous novels, in which Howells's scientific method of working through historical material led him into conflict with his ideals and produced endings that were forced and ambivalent. Ambivalence is present at the end of *Hazard*, for sure; however now the ideal has attained a credibility that is not entirely a matter of moral conviction, but of a philosophical truth. And it is not

surprising that Howells never takes quite the same approach to novel writing again, for *Hazard* seems to bring him to the very limits of his ethical thinking, and to the extreme of his formal experimentation.[80]

Notes

Chapter 1

[1] Evolution was as controversial a concept for Howells as it is for us. "[S]cience is still conjectural," Howells wrote in November 1890. The "missing link in the Darwinian chain is missing still. The bases of knowledge are not the rocks of fact in all cases, but are often the shifting sands of speculation" (*Editor's Study by William Dean Howells*, ed. James W. Simpson, Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing, 1983, p. 286). Howells applauded the scientific method of gathering evidence, "the spirit which denies nothing. . . which neither grovels nor persecutes, and seeks only the truth." But he was solicitous of theoretical fundamentalism, in particular of the "brutalization" of Darwin's naturalism to mean "survival of the fittest," a justification of social and economic inequality. Howells considered the solutions offered by radical socialism and Christian gospel, even when temperately formulated by Laurence Gronlund, Richard Ely and John Fiske, equally literal in their evolutionism; their goals were nothing less than Utopian. Howells's ambivalence about evolutionary theory is apparent in the way March's natural and political images overlap within a single sentence without producing any clear idea.

Chapter 3

[2] All references to *A Modern Instance* are from the Library of America Edition, *Novels, 1875-1886*, ed. Edwin Cady (New York, 1982).
[3] "Mark Twain." *Selected Literary Criticism, Volume I* (Indiana University Press, 1993).
[4] "William Dean Howells," *Harper's Weekly* 30 (19 June 1886): 394-95. Reprinted in Michael Anesko's *Letters, Fictions, Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 249-55.
[5] Howells to Mark Twain, 21 July 1885.
[6] Alan Trachtenberg, Richard Brodhead
[7] *Criticism and Fiction*, Chapter II, pp. 4-5, 8.
[8] Ibid. 69, 75
[9] ibid. 93

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[10] ibid. 12
[11] *My Literary Passions*, 46
[12] *Criticism and Fiction*, 97-98.
[13] Arthur Tilley, "The New School of Fiction," *National and English Review* I (April 1883): 267.
[14] Howells to Twain, 9 August 1885.
[15] *Criticism and Fiction*, 9
[16] ibid. 96.
[17] "Henry James, Jr." *Century Magazine* 25 (November 1882): 25-29. Reprinted in Michael Anesko's *Letters, Fictions, Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[18] *Criticism and Fiction*, p. 57.
[19] ibid. p. 29
[20] It was Carl Van Doren who read the ending as "meaningless," a charge inspired in particular by Bartley's offering his wife to Ben Halleck in their final confrontation. The absence of intelligible meaning is apiece with Van Doren's own moral convictions, which the scene violates. Those convictions are, of course Howells's, as well, and it is the apparent weakness in Howells, in the face of amorality, and so a failure of imagination, that disturbs Van Doren and informs his evaluation of novelistic form. See *The American Novel, 1789 to 1939* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1940). Contemporary critics felt the same, and it has often been overlooked just how morally deviant Howells appeared to his first readers. J.M. Robertson (*Westminster Review* CXXII, October 1884, pp. 347-375) wrote that Howells "would fain be regarded in this case as the artist who reproduces what he sees, and disclaims responsibility as to the verdict; but he cannot escape the consciousness that the very process of selecting details for us implies that these particular details lead to certain conclusions; and he backs out with a protest that it is difficult to say what the conclusions are." The insistence on authorial intention here assumes that novelistic form reinforces or instantiates ideological commitment, which Robertson further assumes cannot be ambivalent. Of course, given the reformist thrust of the sociological literature of the day, and the scientific imperative, it is hardly surprising that readers would demand useful "conclusions" from their novels. Even Howells wondered about the ways the novel could be useful, and in 1899 he decided, in rhetoric significantly toned down from that of the 1880s, that the novel was "a moral stimulus without being a moral influence; it reaches the mind, and stops short of the conduct." Howells appears to my reading to be reaching for the idea that the novel is intimately linked with its objective social reality, yet still its own mode of thought. See "Novel-Writing and Novel-Reading: An Impersonal Explanation," reprinted in *Selected Literary Criticism, Volume III, 1898-1920* (Indiana University Press, 1993: p. 227).
[21] To Charles Waldstein, 2 September, 1882.

Chapter 4

[22] August 10, 1884

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[23] August 22, 1884
[24] *Years of My Youth*, ed. David J. Nordloh, Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1975.
[25] Dec. 23 and 25, 1877, respectively
[26] June 22, 1882
[27] Review of *A Foregone Conclusion*, North American Review 120 (January 1875): 207-14.
[28] July 31, 1884; quoted in Meserve, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*
[29] Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005, p. 257.
[30] In "Puritanism in American Fiction," Howells writes that Puritanism "survives in the moral and mental make of the people almost in its early strength. Conduct and manner conform to a dead religious ideal; the wish to be sincere, the wish to be just, the wish to be righteous are before the wish to be kind, merciful, humble. A people are not a chosen people for half a dozen generations without acquiring a spiritual pride that remains with them long after they cease to believe themselves chosen. They are often stiffened in the neck and they are often hardened in the heart by it, to the point of making the angular and cold, but they are of an inveterate responsibility to a power higher than themselves, and they are strengthened for any fate."

Chapter 5

[31] Citations are from the Meridian edition, 1994.
[32] April 5, 1888; in *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, edited by Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1960: 599.
[33] May 17, 1890; in *Letters, Fictions, Lives*, edited by Michael Anesko, Oxford University Press, 1997: 276.
[34] Quoted in Henry David, *The History of the Haymarket Affair*, New York: Collier Books, 1963, p. 252.
[35] See David, 391.
[36] It makes no difference if we are discussing the novel of multiple storylines and protagonists: the principle still obtains. In *Daniel Deronda*, for example, the primary plots of Gwendolyn Harleth and Daniel Deronda are intertwined, but Eliot works each out in turn, careful at every step to organize their respective stories in order to fulfill the immanent moral program that is anyway apparent on the surface, in the mostly predictable virtues and shortcomings of the protagonists, and in the stock-formulaic supporting cast. It is worth considering whether what we call novelistic perfection is rather a pageant, or class-bound performance, the moves of which are predetermined, and not at base an epistemological concept. Unless, of course, by epistemology we mean the affirmation of our previous, cherished ideas, and not the progress into unsettled territory.

Of course, I am not suggesting that Eliot, or any other novelist, is necessarily limited to discovering what she already thinks. It is perhaps inherent in the process of writing that the endeavor to impose order on a welter of historical and ideological data

will reveal its own shortcomings, those moments when the order becomes evident as an artificial means to understanding. These are precisely the moments of discovery. What I am trying to describe, on the other hand, is the immanent tendency, or habit of thought, in the novelist, the logic of his progress, not the total result.

[37] *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is probably not the only novel to deploy this ambiguation of narrative distance. But given differences of history, biography, and aesthetic program, the different uses to which this ambiguity has been put cannot be subsumed under a single concept. My point is not to say that Howells invents narration anew. It is to say, however, that he invents a particular style of middle-class narration, which will probably not be found elsewhere, and to such ends. Writers invent variations on the conventional forms of narration, depending on their various needs and formal acuities, and these inventions are what distinguish one work from another, one author from another. Novels must be examined in their particularity, as peculiar events in themselves. Of course, some writers will be found to be more variously peculiar than others.

The novel most resembling *Hazard* is, to my mind, *Moby-Dick*, whose first-person narration seems to make it possible for Melville's own epistemological obsessions to make it to the page in a form, and in a style, that holds them together as a narrative, and which sacrifices none of their urgency. Indeed, Basil March's reflections have a similar first-person effect, and like Ishmael, the problem of knowing for certain is more interesting than knowing itself, precisely because to know is one and the same with the search to know. Knowledge exists to be made, not located. Both therefore voice their respective novel's unfolding, the novel a record of the thought process and not a final statement, which is impossible. The other novels that make a virtue of such searching and experiment with narration to similar effect come later, in James's major phase.

[38] To William Cooper Howells, February 2, 1890, *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* 2, ed. Mildred Howells, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928, p.1. Howells continues, "But it is a comfort to be right theoretically, and to be ashamed of one's self practically."

[39] *Daniel Deronda*, Oxford World's Classics, 1998, edited by Graham Handley.

[40] In a review of *Middlemarch*, in 1873, James noticed with some impatience Eliot's penchant for hyper-organization. "We can remember how keenly we wondered, while its earlier chapters unfolded themselves, what turn in the way of form the story would take—that of an organized, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with a sense of design and construction, or a mere chain of episodes, broken into accidental lengths and unconscious of the influence of a plan. We expected the actual result, but for the sake of English imaginative literature which, in this line is rarely in need of examples, we hoped for the other." (*Henry James: Essays, American and English Writers*, edited by Leon Edel, Library of America, 1984, p. 958.)

[41] *Years of My Youth and Three Essays*, ed. David J. Nordloh, Indiana University Press, 1974.

[42] To John Mead Howells, July 27, 1894. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, volume 2: 52-53.

[43] See note 38.

Chapter 6

[44] All references to *A Hazard of New Fortunes* are from the Meridian edition, New York, 1994.
[45] Edwin Cady's summary of the scene is interesting in light of my analysis, for he represents it as much more dynamic than even Howells writes it.

> Coming down the street-car tracks, he finds, as he was almost sure to find that day, a horse-car driven by a scab surrounded by a mob of stone-throwing strikers.
> The mob swarms the car. A squad of policemen begins to club the mob. And old man, it is Lindau, screams provocative taunts at the policemen. One lifts his club to strike Lindau down. Conrad offers to intervene and is shot dead by a policeman from inside the horsecar. (*The Realist at War*, 110).

Cady's rewriting seems to clarify Howells's ambiguities. "Stone-throwing strikers" is more specific, and gives the "men" and "rioters," as Howells calls them, an organized purpose. It is also not clear from Howells's writing that the mob swarms.

Most interesting, however, is Cady's apparent misreading, which injects order into the scene where Howells seems intent on denying it. The last two sentences above suggest, in their sequence, that Conrad "offers to intervene" on Lindau's behalf *upon* seeing the policeman raise his club. Further, Cady then suggests, with the "and" that joins the clauses of the second sentence, that Conrad is shot dead *because* he intervened. But in Howells's passage, none of this is suggested. Conrad, in fact, never "offers to intervene" (the thought never materializes, if we can even say that Conrad has the thought); and so the shot that comes from the car is not clearly intended for him; in fact, contrary to Cady, the shot *precedes* Conrad's impulse to cry out.
[46] Howells to Edward Everett Hale, October 28, 1888. Reprinted in Howells, Mildred, ed. *Life in Letters by William Dean Howells*, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928, pp. 418-19.
[47] *Harper's* magazine, Vol. 8, No. 463 (Dec., 1888), pp. 158-160. Reprinted in *Editor's Study of William Dean Howells*, ed. James Simpson, Troy, NY: Whitson Publishing, 1983, p. 169.
[48] For the history of the Social Gospel, I am indebted to Charles Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel*.
[49] February 11, 1890, in *Mark Twain-Howells Letters Volume 2*, ed. Henry Nash Smith and William Gibson, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960, p. 630.
[50] See "Howells and the Church of the Carpenter," Clara and Rudolph Kirk, *New England Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Jun., 1959), p. 191. The issue of *The Dawn*, in which this notice appeared, was that of May 15, 1889, six months before *Hazard* appeared in *Harper's*.
[51] To William Cooper Howells, April 27, 1890, in *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells Volume 2*, p. 3.

[52] Howells makes this comment about Bellamy's *Looking Backward* in the Editor's Study, June of 1888. See Simpson, 140b.
[53] Howells discusses Gronlund's *Ça Ira* and *The Co-operative Commonwealth* in the Editor's Study, April 1888; Simpson, 128a-129b.
[54] Editor's Study, February 1890; Simpson, 239b-240b.
[55] See Chapter 1for my discussion of Howells's theory of literature's truth. But we might consider that theory a bit more here.
[56] Editor's Study, April 1890; Simpson, 248a.
[57] Winifred died on March 3,1889. On the 21st, to Twain, Howells wrote that he had visited "Winny's grave, beside which I stretched myself the other day, and experienced what anguish a man can live through." See Smith and Gibson, *Mark Twain-Howells Letters Volume 2*, 603.
[58] Editor's Study, July 1887; Simpson 87b.
[59] Editor's Study, August 1887; Simpson 92a-93a.
[60] *My Literary Passions*
[61] Editor's Study, April 1886; Simpson 17a.
[62] *My Literary Passions*,
[63] Editor's Study, August 1889; Simpson 208b-209a.
[64] Critics usually attribute Howells's concept of "complicity," introduced in *The Minister's Charge* (1886), to his reading of Tolstoy. As the Reverend Sewell presents it, complicity is another version of Christ's teachings of meekness, poverty, charity and self-denial. The mere coincidence of Howells's reading of Tolstoy and the writing of the novels of the late Eighties suggests a connection, though there is no reason to think that Tolstoy's ideas translated easily into Howells's fiction.
[65] Howells to Howard Pyle, April 17, 1890; *Life in Letters by William Dean Howells*, 11. The similarity in tone with Basil March is appropriate: Howells's next work after *Hazard* was *The Shadow of A Dream*, in which Basil assumes the first-person narration. It is in the context of that work that this letter was written.
[66] See Chapter 3, note 1.
[67] Editor's Study, November 1890; Simpson 286b-287b.
[68] Editor's Study, April 1886; Simpson 16a-17a.
[69] "Who Are Our Brethren?" *Century* LI (April 1896), 935b.
[70] "Ah! My dear Howells, it's worth something to be able to write such a book, and its so peculiarly *yours* too, flavored with your idiosyncrasy. (The book is so d-----d humane!). . . The year which shall have witnessed the apparition of your 'Hazard of New Fortunes,' of Harry's 'Tragic Muse,' and of *my* "Psychology' will indeed be a memorable one in American Literature!" August 20, 1890; *The Letters of William James, ed. by his son Henry James I* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), pp. 298-299.
[71] *William James: Writings 1902-1910*. New York: Library of America, 1987, p. 146.
[72] My observations contradict a scholarly tradition that understands Howells's work as the uncritical confirmation of his moral ideas. Over sixty years ago, Everett Carter stated nicely the implicit assumptions that have persisted to the present. He writes, "the realist did not start out with myth [transcendent ideas, verities] and end up with life, but tried to start with life; and if the hypothesis be true that the myth expresses the actual pattern of things, then it must follow that these patterns of living, if caught truthfully through the

impressionistic technique, may yield correspondences with those verities symbolized in the 'myth'" (*Howells and the Age of Realism*, Philadelphia: Lippincot, 1954; p. 220).

This is perhaps a better description of Emersonian transcendentalism than Howellsian realism. While Carter wants to say that Howells wrote in order to test out the American mythology, the balance of his claim weighs on the side of Howells's *confirmation* of those myths ("these patterns. . . if caught truthfully. . . may yield correspondences"). This underlying assumption leads to tautology. If Howells did, in fact, suspect that the "myth" was immanent to American reality ("the actual pattern of things/living"), then it follows that if this reality were "caught truthfully" in fiction, then Howells would necessarily find the myth in his fiction, simply by the law of correspondence. As Carter formulates Howells's method, there is no possibility for Howells to do anything *but* discover what he suspected all along.

This tautology has been damaging to Howells's reputation as a novelist, for it has presented only two possibilities for evaluating his work. The first is to observe that Howells *fails* at making the myth and historical reality commensurate, so that his novels, indeed, his theory of realism, are incoherent and naive. This is the argument, for example, of Michael Davitt Bell's *The Problem of American Realism*. The second possibility, which has perhaps been more damaging, is to observe that Howells *succeeds* at his task; his novels achieve the moral statement, even if Howells has implausibly to impose it. By this reading, not only Howells's theory of realism, his sense of history appears naïve. This argument is put forward by Richard Brodhead in *The School of Hawthorne*.

[73] See note 60.

[74] Editor's Study, November 1890; Simpson 286b-287b.

[75] Editor's Study, July 1891; Simpson, 323a-325a.

[76] See Chapter 1.

[77] Howells writes, in *My Literary Passions*, that Thackeray "rails at the order of things, but he imagines nothing different, even when he shows that its baseness, and cruelty, and hypocrisy are well-nigh inevitable, and, for most of those who wish to get on in it, quite inevitable. He has a good word for the virtues, he patronizes the Christian graces, he pats humble merit on the head; he has even explosions of indignation against the insolence and pride of birth, and purse-pride. But, after all, he is of the world, worldly, and the highest hope he holds out is that you may be in the world and despise its ambitions while you compass its ends."

What Howells takes issue with here is Thackeray's bad-faith depiction of social reality. Clearly Thackeray thought that he was getting at a truth about English, or modern capitalist, society, but in his work he condescends to any of its ethical underpinnings, without which, Howells thinks, society cannot be conceived truthfully. The truth must, after all, be conceived in order to be true; that is, we must see the truth in or about something, and to trivialize the ethical is to diminish one's capacity to formulate such a truth. Primarily evident in Thackeray's work, therefore, is his "character," the gentlemanly ideal through which society operates on the rules of "reputation", which are hierarchical, rather than on morality, which would seek universal fairness.

For Howells, Thackeray was thus detached from reality in an important sense; he was "imbued with literature, so that when he speaks it is not with words and blood, but

with words and ink." Style was a display, form a matter of performance. This was, in the worst way, art for art's sake.

[78] *My Literary Passions*

[79] On October 10, 1888, Howells wrote to Henry James: "I'm not in a very good humor with 'America' myself. It seems to me the most grotesquely illogical thing under the sun; and I suppose I love it less because it wont let me love it more. I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of optimistic content with 'civilization' and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality. Meantime, I wear a fur-lined overcoat, and live in all the luxury my money can buy." See Anesko, 272.

[80] The commitment to socialist ideas becomes more explicit over the next few years, in a series of articles, "Are We A Plutocracy?" *North American Review*, 163 (Feb. 1894); "True, I Talk of Dreams," *Harper's* 90 (May 1895); "Equality as the Basis of Good Society," *Century* 51 (Nov. 1895); "The Nature of Liberty," *Forum* 20 (December 1895); and "Who Are Our Brethren?" *Century* 51 (April 1896).

The fiction is also more explicit, the ideas, whether Howells means to endorse them (it is never clear), are more clearly formulated and distributed among the characters. As a result the interesting tension that *Hazard* produces is lost. "But practically, I don't follow [Tolstoy]" says the publisher Chapley, in *The World of Chance* (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1893). "We shall never redeem the world by eschewing it. Society is not to be saved by self-outlawry. The body politic is to be healed politically. The way to have the Golden Age is to elect it by the Australian ballot. The people must vote themselves into possession of their own business, and intrust their economic affairs to the same faculty that makes war and peace, that frames laws, and that does justice. What I object to in Tolstoï is his utter unpracticality" (91). Or from the same novel, the author Kane: "No, David, when you take man out of the clutches of ["brute"] Nature, and put Nature in the keeping of man, we shall have the millennium. I have nothing to say against the millennium, *per se*, except that it never seems to have been on time. I am willing to excuse its want of punctuality; there may have always been unavoidable delays; but you can't expect me to have much faith in it as if it had never disappointed people" (100).

The utopian romance, *A Traveller from Altruria* (1894), would seem the logical development. Howells presents a series of dialogues, at a middle-class resort hotel, between various Americans identified only by their professions. The visiting Altrurian listens intently and, obviously the more civilized of the group, shares with the skeptical Americans the virtues of socialism. That the Altrurian hails from a country no one can find on a map seems to suggest (literally) the outlandishness of socialism in the United States, or at least the limits of socialist philosophy.

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