

“Mundane Things”: Response to Neil Browne*

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Neil Browne’s essay, “The Aesthetic Economy of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” asserts that the most ordinary things serve as the book’s most crucial elements—what he calls “pivot points” (1)—that shape not merely the novel’s plot structure but its overall aesthetic design. Inspired by the aesthetic philosophy of John Dewey, Browne argues that our aesthetic experience of the novel is contingent upon our recognition of its material forms. “Mundane things,” he claims, “recognizable to us all, are able to mark for us, to make more real, points in the fictional narrative where our lives and concerns intersect with the ones patterned in a novel” (4). As such, Browne might almost be said to be offering a kind of material corollary to Howells’s theory of realism, corroborated by the text of *Silas Lapham* itself.

Browne offers an ingenious—and wholly persuasive—reading of the novel, focusing particularly upon the most mundane of its material forms: a curled pine shaving, planed by an unseen carpenter in Silas Lapham’s new Back Bay mansion, still under construction as the book unfolds. Like Silas, Browne reminds us, this simple object is “a remnant of the North Woods displaced to Boston” (7); the lumber from which it has been derived has come to stand in the most unnatural of places, the back-filled tidal estuary of the Charles River, now transformed into the most desirable real estate in the Hub. (How fitting that the Athens of America should be built upon a swamp of

*Reference: Neil Browne, “Pivots, Reversals, and Things in the Aesthetic Economy of Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*,” *Connotations* 15.1-3 (2005/2006): 1-16.

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pecuniary speculation!) As Browne aptly points out, the fresh aroma of the planed wood framing, redolent with sap, disguises what Howells drolly calls the “Venetian” stench of the brackish fens (51): “the shaving retains traces of its origin, its woody scent, which at this point seems able to mitigate the odor caused by the displacement of nature for the sake of development and land speculation” (8). The shaving, then, both embodies and signals one of many “reversals in the text” (1); and this pattern of reversal—Silas’s economic fall and moral rise; the Back Bay house rising and then reduced to ashes; the romantic subplot’s switcheroo—structures the entire work. “So,” as Browne suggests, “in the largest sense, the shaving traces the broadest social concerns of the novel, the actual displacement of nature by the market, and the market as the emergent imaginative construct in the popular imagination” (8).

Close analysis of this passage from the novel allows Browne to posit the shaving as a potent sexual symbol, too:

[Irene] found another shaving within reach of her parasol, and began poking that with it, and trying to follow it through its folds. Corey watched her awhile.

“You seem to have a great passion for playing with shavings,” he said. “Is it a new one?”

“New what?”

“Passion.”

“I don’t know,” she said, dropping her eyelids, and keeping on with her effort. She looked shyly aslant at him. “Perhaps you don’t approve of playing with shavings?”

“Oh yes, I do. I admire it very much. But it seems rather difficult. I’ve a great ambition to put my foot on the shaving’s tail and hold it for you.”

“Well,” said the girl.

“Thank you,” said the young man. He did so, and now she ran her parasol point easily through it. They looked at each other and laughed. “That was wonderful. Would you like to try another?” he asked.

“No, I thank you,” she replied. “I think one will do.”

They both laughed again, for whatever reason or no reason, and then the young girl became sober. To a girl everything a young man does is of significance; and if he holds a shaving down with his foot while she pokes through it with her parasol, she must ask herself what he means by it. (115)

When Tom Corey finally presents the shaving to Irene as a kind of trophy (in place of a romantically conventional flower), its erotic implications—at least to her—are complete. The thin sliver of pine wood thus serves as a working emblem in each of the novel's parallel plot structures. Browne then rightly concludes: "That Howells is able to invest so much in a pine shaving is testimony to the power of an aesthetic rooted in mundane, everyday things, things that also retain a trace of their natural origin" (9). Within the framework of the novel itself, the effective use of the realist symbol (a signifier whose field of reference is wholly self-contained within the work itself) has long been recognized as one of Howells's narrative strengths. But while most critics have been content to assess the more obvious examples (such as Lapham's Back Bay house itself), Browne's focus on something presumably more trivial serves his purpose well.

Less convincing, perhaps, is the logic of the broader aesthetic generalization that Browne advances. Is our specifically aesthetic understanding of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* really contingent upon our immediate apprehension of the novel's material details? How many people today have ever seen or touched (let alone *smelled*) a pine-wood shaving? (A more ubiquitous source these days might be the swaying "Little Tree" car deodorizer, a piece of cardboard cut in the shape of a generic pine tree, impregnated with artificial scent.) Who today owns a parasol? Are these "mundane things" truly "recognizable to us all"? Certainly they would have been to Howells's contemporaneous audience. But positing such absolute parallels between the realms of novelistic and readerly experience might, in the end, be rather misleading.

The pine shaving, after all, is not just a symbol. It is also a thing in itself. It is waste. And *that*, too, might profitably be considered a central theme of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Howells's novel is full of discarded (or used-up) things: the Lapham's house in Nankeen Square; the broken-down horses that one has to imagine Silas has sent to the glue factory (he only wants sprightly animals in his stable); the yesterday's novels that the Lapham girls only now are reading; the ghosts

of Jim Millon and Rogers, one wasted by war and the other by Lapham's greed. Reverend Sewell's memorable articulation of "the economy of pain" (241) is also a kind of sermon against waste, an utterly utilitarian imperative for the management of human feeling and the avoidance of the false necessity for self-sacrifice.

If we connect, then, to *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, we do so not merely (or exclusively) through its smallest material realities but also through its most abstract dimensions. Real estate speculation and housing bubbles, the threatened disgrace of personal bankruptcy, the perfidious behavior of those most eager to exploit the pecuniary potential of the media: any reader of today's century will recognize—and inevitably respond to—those aspects of Howells's novel, too. They might even seem more "real" than a fragrant sliver of Northern pine.

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WORK CITED

Howells, William Dean. *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. 1885. Intr. Kermit Vanderbilt. New York: Penguin, 1986.