

## Pivots, Reversals, and Things in the Aesthetic Economy of Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*

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*And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way. (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*)*

Some 30 years after Melville's meditation on meaning and Boston landfills, the matter of moving dirt around Boston is taken up by William Dean Howells. The building of a mansion in the newly reclaimed land of the Back Bay is, as generations of critics have noted, a central metaphor in Howells's 1885 novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The house itself is a material thing around which Silas's fortunes pivot and reverse themselves. Howells's close focus on ordinary material things in this novel can be seen as moving beyond an effort to faithfully represent the everyday life of his characters. Although that effort is clearly central to Howells's understanding of realism, by marking reversals in the text—indeed participating in these reversals in a manner that contributes to their perceptibility—these ordinary things become infused with meaning.<sup>1</sup> This novel is full of pivots and reversals, and in the context of this essay, I would like to think in terms of how these pivot points—marked by ordinary things—allow readers to better perceive the links between aesthetics and the material environment. The aesthetic economy of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* proposes an aesthetics and ethics of connection and interrelation.

In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the title character is a newly wealthy paint manufacturer from the hinterlands of Vermont trying to break into Boston society. In its broadest strokes, the novel is about the shift

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in post-Civil War United States culture from an agricultural society to an industrialized nation, in Donald Pease's words, from "the restraint of self-made men to the unrestrained self-interest of laissez-faire individualists." "Restraint" is reversed; it becomes "unrestraint." Lockstep with this post-Emersonian shift, the market has begun to replace nature as the theater of self-reliance,<sup>2</sup> and as Silas, a Civil War veteran, mentions, "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."<sup>3</sup> Howells imbeds Silas Lapham in this profoundly uncomfortable transitional moment. The novel is, appropriately, composed of a pattern of reversals, some surprising some not, and even though Silas claims that the day of small things is gone, the structural pattern of the novel is stitched together by these ordinary things.

The major narrative pattern unfolds Silas's rise to wealth, his subsequent fall, and his ethical rise enabled by that fall. There is a pivot: reversal becomes gain. In short, Silas sacrifices his self-interest for the greater good. His reversal is paralleled by a subplot—the love triangle involving Silas's two daughters, Pen and Irene, and Tom Corey, the scion of an old, wealthy Boston family. Irene loves Tom to the extent that her identity is staked on that love, and both families assume her feelings reciprocated. It comes as a surprise when, following a crucial turning point in the narrative at a dinner party, Tom proposes not to the lovely Irene, who "With all her wonderful beauty, [...] had an innocence almost vegetable" (27), but to the less attractive, rather droll, intelligent daughter Pen. But the surprise is doubled. At the dinner party at the Coreys' house, Silas, unaccustomed to wine, becomes drunk and even more boastful than usual, embarrassing himself in his first foray into polite culture. Tom has come to work for Silas against his family's wishes, and the morning after the party, Silas calls him into his office and abases himself before the young man through an extravagant apology. Tom, at first disgusted, realizes that his revulsion grows from a sense of self-preservation, dependent upon his "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" (212). Tom comes to see the complicity of himself and his class in Silas's debasement, and he goes to the Lapham house "to see Lapham and give him an ultimate proof of his own perfect faith and unabated respect, and to offer him what reparation this involved for that want of sympathy—of humanity—which he had shown" (213). Here, too, is a reversal in which Tom's allegiances shift away from class and family identity.<sup>4</sup> Tom seeks to solidify this shift when, finding Silas away from home, he ends up proposing to his daughter, the unexpected sister from the Laphams' rather startled viewpoint. Tom seeks a union outside of his class parameters and further reverses family and class expectations that he naturally would choose the beautiful sister who, prior to this point in the novel, functions mostly on par with an ornamental kale.

Tom's declaration of love for Pen tears apart the tightly knit Lapham family. Exacerbating matters, Pen has been reading a sentimental novel called *Tears, Idle Tears*, which romanticizes maudlin self-sacrifice on the part of its heroine, and the normally rational Pen, who now recognizes her suppressed love for Tom, decides to follow suit and deny Tom out of devotion to her sister. This creates an untenable and unbearable situation within the Lapham family, and at this juncture Howells introduces his strongest advocate for realism, the Reverend Sewell, who is often seen as a mouthpiece for Howells's own views on the subject of novel writing and its cultural role.<sup>5</sup> In one of the most notable and often cited passages of the novel, Silas and his wife Persis—in their struggle for a way out of their family predicament—confide in the Reverend Sewell, who advises that Pen marry Tom because in that way only one person will suffer—Irene—and not all three. In Benthamian manner, Sewell calls this an "economy of pain" (241). Finally, in a reversal of Silas's situation, Pen acts in her own self interest, not against it, so that fewer suffer.

It is in the materiality underlying these patterns of stress, surprise, and reversal that the social concerns voiced in the novel—itsself an

appeal for the ethics and aesthetics of realism, which Howells clearly saw as counter to an emergent, unrestrained market capitalism and its moral vacuity—resonate with the economy of our own cultural experience.<sup>6</sup> Realism, of course, often depends on a relatively faithful reproduction of everyday life, but it is not its accuracy of representation—the power of mimesis—that creates the resonance. As it functions in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, realist attentiveness to everyday things enables a perception of relations essential to aesthetic experience. Mundane things, 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. Aesthetic value is not lodged then in the novel, but in a reader's relation to it, and the perception of that relation is the onset of aesthetic experience that has the potential to bridge past and present. Highlighting the ability of literature to work in this way, John Dewey argues that "Literature conveys the meaning of the past that is significant in present experience and is prophetic of the larger movement of the future. Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual."<sup>7</sup> In the texture and the patterns of the actual present—including the material environments that support them—is embedded the possible future. The relation between the actual and the possible is also the relation between the material and the abstract. The relation is made available through the book, itself both a material thing and a conveyor of possibility. This perception of relations between the actual and the possible drives the onset of aesthetic experience.

Aesthetics cannot be limited to thinking about the aesthetic object, but must instead focus on how that object is rooted in concrete relations and how the object may then resonate with the material, ordinary objects and circumstances of cultures separated by space and time. Art, aesthetic experience, can put in motion shifting values changing with time. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, these shifting values are marked by material objects that contribute to the patterns and texture of aesthetic experience. Instead of an "economy of pain," we

can begin to think about how the novel, often by focusing on the material things of everyday life, creates an economy of aesthetic experience and the ethics of connection it implies.

To William Dean Howells, literary realism exercised a countervoice to the dominant aesthetics of the post-Civil War United States. He advocated realism as a corrective to aesthetic elitism, as a radically democratic art. The novel as romance had become irrelevant because, according to Howells in the April 1887 installment of "The Editor's Study," "it is the conception of literature as something apart from life, superfinely aloof, which makes it really unimportant to the great mass of mankind, without a message or a meaning for them [...]." <sup>8</sup> Readers cannot perceive their relationship to an aloof art form, and for Howells, "Democracy in literature is the reverse of all this," <sup>9</sup> and, inevitably, "The arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art." <sup>10</sup> Although Howells can be accused of sloganeering, what seems to me of the utmost importance is his insistence on the connection between literature and life. Because life takes place within the patterns of the material environment, and because without this environment, both natural and built, life would cease, Howells's claim must extend to the linkage of the aesthetic and the material environment. For him this meant the realistic novel. And though I would not choose to defend realism as the only home for a more democratically interested literature, I certainly believe that the use of ordinary material objects to enhance the perception of relations is essential to both aesthetic experience as outlined above and democratic art.

Like William Dean Howells, John Dewey was deeply concerned about the role of aesthetic experience in sustaining democracy:

In order to *understand* the esthetic in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd—the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, throwing and catching red-hot bolts. The sources of art in human experience will be

learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants, and the intent interest of her goodman in tending the patch of green in front of the house; the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.<sup>11</sup>

Dewey's thought sheds philosophical light on Howells's practice of realism. This line of democratic aesthetic theory not only appeals to the "great mass of mankind," but it does so by rooting aesthetic experience in the material things and occurrences of everyday life, common things readily referenced by a large readership. It fosters a perceivable relation, previously elided because, according to Dewey, "the conditions that create the gulf which exists generally between producer and consumer in modern society operate to create also a chasm between ordinary and esthetic experience."<sup>12</sup> An economy of aesthetic experience, then, seems to temper a market ethos, is not elite but egalitarian, responds to changing conditions across cultures, and is rooted in everyday, material things. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, material things are granted extraordinary power, and Howells draws value back toward the things of every day life, away from the stock market and financial speculation. The novel attempts to reverse the focus of the reading public.

The architecture of reversal in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is reflected in the houses that figure prominently in the novel. The Laphams live in a house abominably furnished, for example, with

statues, kneeling figures which turned their backs upon the company within doors, and represented allegories of Faith and Prayer to people without. A white marble group of several figures, expressing an Italian conception of Lincoln freeing the slaves,—a Latin negro and his wife,—with our Eagle flapping his wings in approval, at Lincoln's feet [...]. (215)

The Corey house stands in stark contrast to the cluttered Lapham home. Not packed with geegaws, it is graceful and classical, and "the simple adequacy of the architectural intent had been respected" (187). But "the place looked bare to the eyes of the Laphams when they

entered" (187). The materiality of the houses and their furnishings marks a gaping social distinction between the Lapham family and the Coreys that no amount of money can bridge. Blind to this fact, once he learns that his neighborhood is less than fashionable, Silas proposes to leave their house in Nankeen Square, and he proceeds to build a mansion in the Back Bay, at that historical moment when it is in the process of being reclaimed from swampland. The Back Bay is a landfill; to paraphrase Melville, it is cartloads of earth used to fill a morass. The *OED* defines "morass" not only as a swamp but also as "A complicated or confused situation which it is difficult to escape from or make progress through" (1.b.). Certainly Silas finds himself in this complex, unpleasant predicament, just as does his house: "It was found necessary to dig for the kitchen; at that point the original salt marsh lay near the surface, and before they began to put in the piles for the foundation they had to pump. The neighborhood smelt like the hold of a ship after a three years' voyage" (43). The foundation for Silas's ambition is literally sunk in unstable, malodorous, intractable ground.

A convoluted piece of this house, a tiny object planed from pine lumber and, like Silas, a remnant of the North Woods displaced to Boston, traces the reversals in the novel. The material object connected with these reversals makes the pivot point more tangible; it contributes to the perception of a material, sensual aesthetic experience.<sup>13</sup> The object participates in the texture of the actual in which the aesthetic experience is rooted. The simplest object becomes a node for the perception of relations, contributing to aesthetic experience understood in Dewey's terms as that which "at its height [...] signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events."<sup>14</sup> This interpenetration entails a full ethical and aesthetic engagement with the material environment. The wood shaving is introduced as the house in the Back Bay is under construction:

They had not begun to lath and plaster yet, but the clean, fresh smell of the mortar in the walls mingling with the pungent fragrance of the pine shavings neutralized the Venetian odor that drew in over the water. (51)

At this stage in the narrative the fresh smell of pine—of the forest—promises to temper the foul odors of the Back Bay. 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. So, 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. The shaving makes perceivable the relation between the actual and the imaginative in both aesthetic and ethical realms, if, indeed, these can be seen as separate in this novel.

It also traces the love affair. Tom and Irene sit on a saw-horse in the unfinished house and discuss *Middlemarch* and books that would be appropriate for the library in the Laphams' new house. She—in this case representing the whole Lapham family—is out of her depth, and, clearly with other things on her mind, her discourse is distracted: "She followed the curl of a shaving on the floor with the point of her parasol" (111). The shaving then becomes the focus of an awkward moment. She continues the conversation, "Still intent upon the convolutions of the shaving" (112), while remaining oblivious to the real and many folds, twists, and turns of the world immediately surrounding her. Howells next intensifies his focus on the shaving, transforming it into as close to a sexual metaphor as we find in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*:

She 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?" (115)

While Tom takes all this as a flirtatious game, Irene seems to take it with all its potential overtones intact: "She bridled, and bit her lip for pleasure" (116). And, when Silas shows Tom around the unfinished house and points out where the daughters' bedrooms will be, Irene becomes flushed (54). She is delighted when Tom presents her with the shaving, which she understands as intent, and she arrives home with it in her belt. Her sister taunts her: "I didn't know it had got to be the fashion to give shavings instead of flowers. But there's some sense in it. They can be used for kindlings when they get old, and you can't do anything with old flowers" (121). Later they will become exactly that: kindling. After Irene learns of Tom's love for Pen, she walks into her sister's room, and "She had a pine shaving, fantastically tied up with a knot of ribbon, in her hand. She held it a moment; then, looking deliberately at Penelope, she went up to her, and dropped it in her lap without a word" (244-45). Irene's romanticizing the shaving, signified by its fantastic decoration, is bound to fail in the context of Howells's realist aesthetics. In what seems a surprising choice for a powerful symbol, the shaving makes sense in an aesthetic economy embedded in the common materials of life. It serves to track the entire subplot of the novel. 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.

And the shaving also bridges the subplot and the main narrative. Shortly before Silas's final descent into bankruptcy, he stops by his house, which is nearing completion, and "the whim seized Lapham to test the chimney in the music room," so "[h]e gathered some shavings and blocks together, and kindled them [...]" (311). Later he and Pen are returning from the theater, when they pass a crowd of spectators watching a house burn down, and "Lapham had no need to walk through the crowd, gazing and gossiping, with shouts and cries and

hysterical laughter, before the burning house, to make sure that it was his" (313). All he can utter is "I guess I done it, Pen" (313). His aspirations, symbolized by the house, become the material of ridicule, and the shaving is clearly part of Silas's downfall. The most striking material evidence of Silas's rise is his new house, from which a small shaving has traveled through the narrative. The love story contains within it its own contradiction; it is predicated on a mistake, one symbolized by Tom and Irene's flirtatious play with the pine shaving. This entire affair grows out of Silas's desire to rise, again, symbolized by the house of which the shaving is literally a part. That Silas kindles his own house from its own material is also a metaphor for his conduct throughout the novel. His rise has caused him to fall, his dreams to go up in flames, kindled by the material from which they are made. The tiniest wood chip, a remnant of the woods, ignites the symbol of the speculative market. Again, this complex pattern of reversals, of love lost and gained, of fortune lost and gained, and of ethical integrity lost and gained, is attended to by the smallest, seemingly most insignificant material thing imaginable—a wood shaving. The shaving then is shot through with meaning, instantiating within itself our perception of these reversals and of the relations among them. The wood chip sets aesthetic experience in motion. And this returns us to the Deweyan idea that aesthetic experience—the perception of relations—depends on the things of everyday life and, ultimately, on nature. The aesthetic economy of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is most powerfully realized at points of reversal, at which points material things are effused with meaning, by both Howells and the reader. Great importance inheres in the material environment and in our ethical relation to it. It enables our perception of relations and connections upon which aesthetic experience, ethical and moral responsibility, and democratic citizenship depend. The material world participates in the larger community.

All things, art, novels, houses, money, are at their lowest common denominator themselves rooted not only in material culture, but also in the physical world. The material source of Silas's wealth is his

paint, a product of nature. Just as Silas's journey begins with the paint, so too is aesthetic experience materially grounded in the natural world. Dewey writes that:

It is a commonplace that we cannot direct, save accidentally, the growth and flowering of plants, however lovely and enjoyed, without understanding their causal conditions. It should be just a commonplace that esthetic understanding—as distinct from sheer personal enjoyment—must start with the soil, air, and light out of which things esthetically admirable arise. And these conditions are the conditions and factors that make an ordinary experience complete.<sup>15</sup>

Admirable things arise from nature, and the perception of the relations among these things helps complete aesthetic experience. The originary source of Silas's wealth is literally the earth: "My father found it [the paint] one day, in a hole made by a tree blowing down. There it was, laying loose in the pit, and sticking to the roots that had pulled up a big cake of dirt with 'em" (7). Silas's wealth and success are literally rooted in a material, ordinary place, in the ground of his family farm. His life rises from the soil. At base, his paint drives Silas, and he nearly loses sight of the value of his and his paint's common origin. He even goes so far as to coat the landscape with his paint: "In less'n six months there wa'n't a board-fence, nor a bridge-girder, nor a dead wall, nor a barn, nor a face of rock in that whole region that didn't have 'Lapham's Mineral Paint—Specimen' on it in the three colors we begun by making" (14). Silas's painting over the landscape is a metaphor for how his desire for market success covers up the fact that his success is rooted in everyday natural occurrences and things. Before his fall, Silas believes that the land "was made for any man that knows how to use it" (15). But Silas forgets how to use the paint that derives from the land. He reverses the relation between his paint and the landscape of his family home: the paint no longer arises from the land but obscures it. His success takes him away from his source, into the reclaimed land of the Back Bay, and during the newspaper interview that functions as a masterful overture to the novel, the reporter asks Silas if he had tried his paint on the human conscience.

Silas replies, "I guess you want to keep that as free from paint as you can, if you want much use of it" (12). Silas's reversal is caused largely because he has in fact coated his conscience with paint, just as he has painted the landscape. He can no longer see through the paint, because the paint now occludes any relationship to family and place. The label on every container of paint bears both his father's and Silas's initials, and the date his father found the paint in a hole in the ground (10). His high-end product is called the "Persis Brand" after his wife (13). But as Silas climbs, the paint represents for him not these relations but financial success and the possibility to rise socially. As the meaning of the source of his well-being is obscured by his misunderstanding of the material thing extending that meaning, his paint, Silas fails to recognize his reversal.

Of course, Silas's rise into the elite social world precipitates his crisis. When we are first introduced to him, Silas pounds an envelope closed "with his great hairy fist" (3). "He put out his huge foot and pushed" shut his office door (4). He has massive shoulders, a large head, red hair and beard, and he prides himself on his horsemanship. He rose to Colonel and suffered a wound in the Civil War. But when he attends the dinner party at the Corey's, the event that marks his reversal in fortune, he finds himself helpless:

He perspired with doubt as he climbed the stairs, and while he waited on the landing for Mrs. Lapham and Irene to come down from above, before going into the drawing-room, he stood staring at his hands, now open and now shut, and breathing hard. (188)

Arriving at the place he so desired to attain, this powerful man reduces himself to a nervous wreck. He suffers a profound reversal. In a marvelously constructed set piece, Howells again employs images of everyday things in the aesthetic economy of the text. After worrying for a week over appropriate attire, Silas fidgets on the landing in an ill-fitting suit and formal gloves, which "when he had them on, and let his large fists hang down on either side, they looked, in the saffron tint which the shop-girl said his gloves should be of, like canvassed

hams" (188). His power, instantiated in his hands, is contained by the tinted accoutrements of wealth; Silas has become a specialty ham, an upscale commodity waiting to be consumed by the elite society he so wished to join. Like Irene, whom Howells has already aligned with a vegetable, Silas—indeed all the Laphams—are about to be gobbled up.

The instantiation of meaning in material things encourages us to perceive the relations in the novel and between the novel and its readers. The aesthetic economy of the novel resonates across time, vibrates among the material things and social concerns of our own environment. In the end, not the symbols of wealth, but the materials of everyday life lend their power to Silas. Not until he returns to the landscape that nurtured him, until he returns to the Vermont farm where the earth yielded up the paint in the first place, can Silas see where the things he values reside. He tells the Reverend Sewell, met by chance in Vermont, that it "seems sometimes as if it was a hole opened for me, and I crept out of it" (365). Silas realizes that, like his paint, he too is born from the soil of his family's farm. Although he has not crept back into his hole in the earth, he has moved closer to it, to the source of his gain, of his reversal of fortune, and of his ethical rejuvenation. His engagement with the market values represented by urban culture ends in his sacrificing his ethical standing, and he winds up where he began, on his family farm in Vermont, more restrained, but more powerful and peaceful in his understanding of himself. Through Lapham, his family, and the things around them, Howells attempts to disarticulate, or at least neutralize, an emergent market ethos.

Like the aesthetic economy of Howellsian realism, Silas thrives closer to ground, in a place that enables him not to discard entirely the ethos of the market, but to temper it with values that call for more restraint. His Vermont farmhouse's "original ugliness had been smartened up with a coat of Lapham's own paint and heightened with an incongruous piazza" (8), and the Laphams abide "no luxuries, unless the statues of Prayer and Faith might be so considered" (363).

Just as the pine shaving with a trace of the woods finds its way to Boston, some of Boston finds its way back up to the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. In the most obvious instance of the joining of two sides of the culture, Tom Corey and Penelope Lapham do indeed marry, merging the two classes. For us in the early 21st century, perhaps what resonates most powerfully is a potential accommodation between classes and between the demands of the environment and the market. The novel, through its powerful focus on the material things of common life, aids in the perception of relations between otherwise conflicting interests and groups. Aesthetic experience for John Dewey is put in motion by the perception of relations between the actual and the possible. For Dewey the aesthetic encompasses all arenas of human life, especially the moral and ethical. In fact, Dewey resists separating these categories. At the close of *Art as Experience*, he writes:

The moral office and human function of art can be intelligently discussed only in the context of culture. A particular work of art may have a definite effect upon a particular person or upon a number of persons. The social effect of the novels of Dickens or of Sinclair Lewis is far from negligible. But a less conscious and more massed constant adjustment of experience proceeds from the total environment that is created by the collective art of a time. Just as physical life cannot exist without the support of a physical environment, so moral life cannot go on without the support of a moral environment.<sup>16</sup>

The aesthetic and the moral are both interrelated parts of the same environment, and that environment is ultimately sustained by the physical environment. There is again, in its largest sense, an interrelation between the actual and the possible, between the world of material things and the possibility of aesthetic and moral experience. The perception of this connection and interrelation initiates the process of aesthetic experience that I see underwriting the power of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Both Dewey and Howells understood that the key to putting that aesthetic experience in motion was the idea that the aesthetic in its largest sense is dependent upon the world of material things in all its seeming insignificance. A very little thing, a wood shaving, for instance, bears the meaning of a very large novel.

So, perhaps in our attentiveness to the novel, to the commonality we share in material things, and to our own reversals, we can perceive across time the resonances of the book in our own particular place and time. Perhaps we can set in motion an aesthetic economy that can put in gear the process of moving the possible along the way toward the actual, of making art of our lives and the things in them.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Bill Brown's excellent study of the relationships between things and ideas in late nineteenth-century American literature, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003). Brown argues that modernity has denied things their full meaning, relegating them to the status of commodity fetish. Things carry far more powerful meaning in our lives. In his analysis of *The American Scene*, Brown argues that when Henry James gives voice to buildings, "Within the illogic of projection and introjection, the animate and the inanimate, like subject and object, become indistinct. And this lack of distinction can be cast as an elaborate obstruction of that modernity which insists on an ontological distinction, arbitrary and artificial, between inanimate objects and human subjects" (187). Granted, to a lesser extent, things loom large in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and they play a vital role in breaking down artificial distinctions between things and thought, between the actual and the possible.

<sup>2</sup>Donald E. Pease, "Introduction," *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) 1-28, 15-16.

<sup>3</sup>William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885; New York: Penguin, 1986) 16; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup>See John Seelye, "The Hole in Howells / The Lapse in *Silas Lapham*." *New Essays on The Rise of Silas Lapham*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) 47-65, especially pages 51-53. Seelye argues that Tom Corey's double reversal—of family allegiance and choice of sister—is more attuned to romance than realistic fiction, but that this "lapse" in Howells marks the beginning of Howells's own advocacy within the novel for the aesthetics of realism.

<sup>5</sup>John Cyril Barton's "Howells's Rhetoric of Realism: The Economy of Pain(t) and Social Complicity in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Minister's Charge*," *Studies in American Fiction* 29.2 (2001): 159-87, takes issue with near critical consensus that Sewell is Howells's "rhetorical mouthpiece." Barton argues for a more dialogic understanding of Howells's work, for a more textured interlacing

of voices that leaves the issue of realism intentionally unsettled. Realism thus remains productively contested.

<sup>6</sup>In *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987), Walter Benn Michaels aligns Howellsian realism, specifically in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, with an agrarianism hostile to rampant capitalism; see especially pages 35-41. Wai-Chee Dimock, in "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112 (1997): 1060-71, argues for the ability of literature to resonate across cultures and times, defending literature "not as a timeless entity but as a class of objects that fail to shut up, fail to restrict their resonance over time" (1066). In "Literature for the Planet," *PMLA* 116 (2001): 173-88, she also claims that texts are objects able to encourage aesthetic experience through their amplifying "environmental background noise as a generative force in literature" (179). Literature here clearly belongs to a "class of objects," a collection of material things, that amplify, reflect, prolong, and synchronize meaning across the space between their creation and the present.

<sup>7</sup>John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, vol. 10 of *The Later Works: 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, 17 vols (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987) 9-352, 348.

<sup>8</sup>William Dean Howells, *The Editor's Study*, ed. James W. Simpson (Troy, NY: Whitson, 1983) 74. "The Editor's Study" ran in *Harper's Magazine* from January 1886 through March 1892.

<sup>9</sup>*Editor's Study* 96.

<sup>10</sup>William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction and Other Essays* (1891; New York: New York UP, 1959) 67.

<sup>11</sup>Dewey 10-11; the emphasis is Dewey's.

<sup>12</sup>Dewey 15.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Gilmore, in "Romantic Electricity, or the Materiality of Aesthetics," *American Literature* 76 (2004): 467-94, also posits aesthetic experience as an extraordinary force: "Because the aesthetic is described as a material experience that transcends formal definitions of art, it provides the possibility of connecting different groups of people through shared sensual experience rather than common economics or political interests. The aesthetic's universalizing claims imply a kind of egalitarianism that might be translated to the political sphere, where it can offer a starting point for building coalitions and communities across the lines of race, class, and gender reified by identity politics" (472).

<sup>14</sup>Dewey 25.

<sup>15</sup>Dewey 18.

<sup>16</sup>Dewey 347.