

The Perception of Relations: An Answer to Andrew Madigan and Michael Anesko*

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First of all, let me say that I am flattered that Professor Madigan spent so much time on my essay on William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Madigan makes some trenchant comments, and his close reading of my text encourages me to be more aware of some of the slippage in my terminology. However, Madigan's determination to keep intellectual "categories" rigidly intact runs counter to the Deweyan underpinnings that I am trying to assert in my elaboration of aesthetic experience and its possible role in a democracy. For one, Madigan takes issue with the fact that

[w]hat Howells did not seem to realize, however, and what Browne does not take into account, is that Howells may have despised market capitalism but he was intimately connected to it. He prospered because of it, in fact, which calls into question not only his commitment to these ideals but also makes the "anti-capitalist" label highly dubious. (267)

For all my looking, I do not see in my article a place where I call Howells "anti-capitalist," so I am not sure why Madigan includes the quotation marks around the term here and elsewhere in his response. In large part, the conclusion I work toward is stated pretty clearly, I

*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; Michael Anesko, "'Mundane Things': Response to Neil Browne," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 259-62; Andrew Madigan, "New Money, Slightly Older Money & 'Democratic' Writing: A Response to Neil Browne," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 263-70.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbrowne01513.htm>>.

think: "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" (13; emphasis added). This is hardly anti-capitalism, and Madigan's choice of phrasing such as "despised market capitalism" (267) seems to misinterpret the argument I am making. Further, because Howells profited by capitalism does not mean that a work of fiction written by him does not seek to curtail the excesses of the market or to urge restraint.

I would like to address the notion that there is a slippage in terms between "realistic" and "democratic." Madigan complains that "Howells strove to write with realistic dialogue, characters and incidents, and he foregrounds his work with concrete, ordinary, representatively-selected objects. By doing so, Howells makes his narrative appear more realistic and ordinary, but of course this has nothing to do with making it 'democratic'" (269). Madigan points to evidence that Howells's contemporary audience was the educated, affluent classes, hence undemocratic which assertion itself seems to beg the question. I suppose rich, educated people can be democratic. However that may be, the argument I am attempting to make in this article is geared toward audience in a diachronic sense. It is a theoretical argument about the potential present aesthetic experience of reading Howells. I state perfectly clearly that Howells overstates his case for democracy: "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" (5). I am less concerned with what is in the literature than I am in the idea of connection itself. Again, I do say that Howells linked realism and democracy. And I add that "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 [...] and democratic art" (5). The argument here rests not on the ordinary things themselves but on "the perception of relations" (5). The perception of relations is critical

for democracy or a democratically interested literature, in fact, for the very existence of any kind of community at all. The argument is that ordinary material things provide a tethering point or a pivot point for that perception in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. That the working classes of Howells's time would rather have read fantasy than realism as Madigan claims is certainly interesting but does not really get to the point of the article, which is that everyday things can provide a recognizable site on which to anchor and initiate a perception of relations that is key to putting aesthetic experience in gear. Again, I do not claim that realism is the only form that can do this but that realism can do it well. The link here is that the perception of relations seems to me central also to a democratic community. The perception of relations then is the common link between aesthetic experience and a democratic community. Dewey's aesthetics can help us understand and Howells's realism can elicit this perception of relations.

Madigan raises the issue of race on his third page, and then lets that drop. I am not sure what to say in response to that in the purview of my article, which does not raise the issue of race, which is perhaps a fault on my part. Madigan also spends a page talking about Thomas Pynchon, which, though fascinating and informative, does not seem to have much to do with either my article or his response to it, unless it is to highlight again the discrepancy between Howells's "ideals and books," which, as I mentioned earlier, seems of little import. I would argue that there is always and already a discrepancy between ideals and acts. That discrepancy is apparent in the meaning of ideal itself. But that does not necessarily discount the importance of the ideal. Madigan shows an astute awareness of the social strata of nineteenth century Boston, and I defer to him on that point. The nuances he points out between new and old Boston money thicken the meanings of the novel, and I appreciate both his expertise on the matter and his insistence that I more assiduously historicize the assumptions contained in the novel.

Certainly Madigan is correct also in asserting that the real democratization of literature came on the heels of the great economic gains

following World War II. I wish to influence an audience in the first decades of the century following, in which that same capitalism—intemperate and loosened of its restraints—is this very moment undermining the very democratic institutions Madigan celebrates, such as “the creation of more public libraries, and the emergence of better-equipped public schools” (269). John Dewey writes that “Literature conveys the meaning of the past that is significant in present experience and is prophetic in the larger movement of the future” (348). I may be a bit out of style, idealistic even, to think, even if I sometimes fail to live up to my ideals, that through a perception of relations to the characters and things in a novel there arises aesthetic experience that is useful for the present and for a more democratic future. My argument centers on the idea that material things in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* often provide a site that facilitates such a connection. That we perceive our relations to others at this point in history seems to me imperative, and the common experiences we share with everyday things can move us along this road. It is not the inclusion of things but how the things enable an audience to perceive its relation to the work of art that seems central to me. It is that moment of perception—that moment in which, according to Dewey, we catch a glimpse of the possible in the actual—that sometimes seems to contain the inception of democratic value. It is not realism, not everyday things, not intellectual categories, not Howells, not Dewey—it is that moment.

Michael Anesko has also written a generous and productive response to my article. While he applauds my analysis of the mundane things in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, he is skeptical of the parallels I draw “between the realms of novelistic and readerly experience” (261). Once again, I attempted to draw a *relation* between novelistic and readerly experience, not necessarily a parallel, and I should have pointed this out more clearly. However, Anesko has a solid point—the relation of contemporary readers to the material things of nineteenth century New England are not self-evident. This is certainly a place for me to heed Madigan’s call to more fully historicize my argument. Anesko goes on to claim that the contemporary reader may

well better connect to abstract dimensions in the novel—real estate bubbles for example. I could not agree more, and I am again tempted to think in Deweyan terms in which the ideal is defined as understanding the actual in terms of the possible—a movement from the concrete to its possibilities and their consequences. I would suggest that the tie to material things enhances the reader's movement to the abstract.

I especially thank Anesko for his suggestion to better explore the issue of waste in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. This seems to me a most productive route. He rightly points out that the pine shaving is waste. Which makes me think about all those other pine shavings Silas swept up and used to kindle the fire that burned down his dream house. His ideal is actually consumed and destroyed by the detritus generated through the realization of the ideal. This seems a very salient point for future thinking about American culture. Certainly we can perceive the relation between the past and the present in this idea.

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