

New Money, Slightly Older Money & “Democratic” Writing: A Response to Neil Browne*

ANDREW MADIGAN

In this essay I will respond to, elaborate on, and critique Browne’s provocative and sometimes astute article on the “Aesthetic Economy of Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*.” The first issue I will address is a commonplace in Howells scholarship, the author’s attention to everyday objects. Browne alludes to his “close focus on ordinary material things” (1), to which Howells, a theorist and champion of realism, was dedicated. By the accumulation of ordinary, judiciously-chosen physical elements—often called significant details—the writer can create and sustain a realistic atmosphere, decrease the aesthetic distance between reader and text, and therefore better enable the reader to suspend disbelief. Browne also mentions the role of books as realistic objects. He writes, for instance, that “Pen has been reading a sentimental novel called *Tears, Idle Tears*, which romanticizes maudlin self-sacrifice on the part of its heroine” (3). Howells is multitasking with this and other intertextual references. He is treating the book as object—indeed, Lapham’s interior designer comically decorates his home with texts—while also critiquing the melodramatic pre-realistic novel. Howells’s work is perpetually self-reflexive in this manner; *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is both an example of, and a theoretical meditation upon, the various aesthetic rules, techniques and values that he either helped establish or subscribed to. *Tears, Idle Tears*, he is suggesting, is unrealistic and therefore both aesthetically and morally inferior, while

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

Silas Lapham is realistic and therefore a corrective to such ostensible drivel.

One of the title reversals is the power shift, first economic and increasingly socio-cultural, from established families to arrivistes such as Lapham. The novel, as Browne writes, regards a newly wealthy manufacturer “trying to break into Boston society” and “the shift in post-Civil War United States culture from an agricultural society to an industrialized nation” (1-2). True, the novel centers on the conflict between old money and new, the frontier and the city. We witness Lapham’s gauche, bumbling, often bathetic efforts to buy his family’s way into the right circles and the unwillingness of Boston society to let him. Silas Lapham is historically situated, however, at the tipping point when old money could no longer resist the advances of new money. Browne refers to Tom Corey, “the scion of an old, wealthy Boston family” (2) who becomes engaged to one of Lapham’s daughters and, perhaps stranger still, accepts a job in Lapham’s paint business. Tom’s family, which has lost its money but is unwilling to acknowledge this change of status, even to itself, is appalled by such shocking behavior. As Thorstein Veblen, a contemporary of Howells, argued throughout *The Theory of The Leisure Class* (1899), status and especially the outward manifestation of status are more important than money to the elite class, and working for one’s money signifies low status.

The Coreys are epicene in every sense of the word; their privilege has rendered them almost entirely useless in the evolving market economy of late-nineteenth-century America. This is in contradistinction to Lapham, who is impeccably vigorous, valuable and practical, if also vulgar and unclubbable according to the very class he wants so desperately to be accepted by. Tom is the only Corey who sees the emerging paradigm shift from old money to new, from inherited to earned wealth, which enables him to overcome, to a certain extent, his snobbery and actually perform work, which is anathema to his class. He therefore redefines his social values, himself, and even his patrimony, symbolically adopting Lapham as his new father (cf. Madigan).

A problematically democratic America—it was always a synthetic system, a web, at different points in history, of aristocracy, oligarchy, socialism, etc.—was becoming more meritocratic and, at least in economic terms, more democratic.¹

We will return to this shortly—the meaning of "democratic," the market economy, realism and Howell's fictive agenda—because it is essential to Howells's work and to Browne's essay. First, though, let us continue to explore the issue of social mobility and, afterward, problematize the notion of "old money."

The issues of social class, new money and upward mobility, so poignant during the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, are also frequently represented in the work of Howells's contemporaries (Henry James, Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser most notably). Beneath the more obvious socio-economic conflict is another, and very closely related, question of race, nationality and religion. The putative aristocracy did not want to legitimize people like Lapham, who were uneducated and self-made, who dirtied their hands with work, and untenably down-market industrial work at that, but neither were they quick to embrace persons from, in their minds, questionable backgrounds. In James's *The American*, for example, Christopher Newman is socially untouchable in Europe because of his titular nationality, and in Wharton's *The House of Mirth* Simon Rosedale's Jewishness is a social handicap. In Howells's own *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Berthold Lindau is also disreputably Jewish.

Fin de siècle social mobility is even appropriated by Thomas Pynchon in *Against the Day* (2006), his own turn-of-the-century novel written at the turn of a subsequent century. One of the numerous subplots involves the possibility of marriage between the old-money Yashmeen Halfcourt and the nouveau riche Cyprian Latewood, "his family only a generation on from socio-acrobatic aggrandizement" (549). When the topic is broached, a character answers: "'As in Latewood's Patent Wallpaper? Surely not'" (548). Pynchon is obviously revisiting Howells. Silas Lapham becomes the linguistically-similar Cyprian Latewood, and paint is transformed into patent wallpaper

(both are used to cover and decorate walls). Of course, Pynchon twists the signifiers into his own peculiar and amorphous shapes. The relevant characters' genders are reversed, and their ethnic backgrounds are murky; he also complicates matters by referring, with respect to the characters' physical relationship, to bestiality, sodomy and the man's ambiguous sexuality. Ironically, and comically, he injects greater realism (albeit peppered with absurdity) into Howells's urnarrative, though Howells was of course obsessively devoted to realism. Pynchon is suggesting that, despite Howells's apparent dedication to a new kind of fiction detached from its romantic antecedents, "realism" had a long way to go before it became convincingly real. The fiction of Howells's day was overly genteel, he is suggesting, with much of the important, realistic action (sex, for instance) taking place off the page or not at all. Pynchon is portraying the discrepancy between a writer's ideals and his books, an issue I will also explore in greater depth momentarily.

One crucial issue Browne neglects is that the old money simply was not very old. As Ronald Story points out in his very Laphamian study of New England social, economic and residential changes between 1800 and 1870, Boston's upper-crust "Brahmins" insisted on clinging to the erroneous belief that their special status was based on long tradition when in fact their wealth and social standing had only emerged over the preceding half-century and, in some cases, sooner. There was very little old money; there was, properly speaking, new money and slightly older money. Therefore, for a Corey to look down on a Lapham for the newness of his money is not only shallow but also shortsighted and fallacious. It is not inexplicable, however, particularly from a socio-psychological perspective. Their hypocritical and seemingly paradoxical resistance to new money and its concomitant vulgarity and lack of education betrays their own insecurity as relatively new members of the upper class; this insecurity would have been exacerbated on their invariable tours of Europe, in which the more definitively old and cultivated families would have looked down upon *them*. As Betty Farrell notes, the Boston Brahmins, who

were incredibly insular and closed off to "new money," had made their own money, in the not-too-distant-past, from textile manufacturing, fishing, naval stores and other disreputable enterprises. The real-world analogues of the Corey family, then, would have only been a generation or two away from the merchant class, and they would have made their fortune in whale blubber or some other not-terribly-respectable business.

Browne discusses, at great length, ordinary objects and their significance to Howells and his novel. He pays particular attention to Lapham's house and the earth itself: "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" (11). True, as Lapham moves from the organic, concrete and quotidian (farm, soil, paint, authenticity) toward the constructed, abstract and rarified (new house, affectation, society), his family suffers; he loses his grounding in a literal and figurative sense. Howells—like so many nineteenth-century fictionists in the U.S., England, Continental Europe and Russia—is juxtaposing agrarian virtue and cosmopolitan decay, is bemoaning the ills of urbanization and industrialization. "In the end," Browne correctly writes, "not the symbols of wealth, but the materials of everyday life lend their power to Silas" (13).

Browne's analysis of the novel's fine detail is often acute and articulate, but he does not adequately situate and understand these details within their larger conceptual framework. In particular, he misreads Howells's "democratic" aesthetic and fails to challenge Howells's paradoxical "anti-capitalism." Let us begin with the issue of capitalism. Howells's disgruntlement with the Western economic model is well known, and in a trilogy of utopian novels² he critiques it. Browne alludes to "the ethics and aesthetics of realism, which Howells clearly saw as counter to an emergent, unrestrained market capitalism and its moral vacuity" (4). What 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.

Silas Lapham was first published serially in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, beginning in 1884, and was subsequently printed as a complete novel in 1885. Howells made a good living as a world-renowned novelist, editor, theorist and critic. What enabled him to make this living was the great historico-economic shift from the hardscrabble agrarian subsistence mode to the much more affluent mode of industrialized market capitalism. This is the thesis of Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* and a well-documented fact of economic history. Because of the unprecedented economic growth and stability of the Western economy—because, quite directly, of capitalism—Howells did not have to labor with his hands, but rather could enjoy a more mediated, soft and well-paid profession. Without capitalism, Howells would not have had the education, money or leisure time to become a professional novelist, and he would not have had an audience with the time, money and education to buy and read his books. Howells may indeed have seen himself as anti-capitalist, but capitalism filled his pockets.

The issue of realism and democracy is also oversimplified by Howells and Browne. Browne argues that Howells “advocated realism as a corrective to aesthetic elitism” and quotes Howells’s statement that “[t]he arts must become democratic” (5). Browne asserts 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” (5). He also contends, citing Dewey, that Howells’s “line of democratic aesthetic theory [...] appeals to the ‘great mass of mankind’” (6). For the most part, Browne is merely repeating what Howells and Dewey have said and agreeing with them, so in a sense the error is not his but theirs. In any event, the fallacy in these, and other, statements about Howells and his democratic aesthetic is a formidable one. Browne et al. are guilty of a category error in distinguishing certain fictive and theoretical practices/notions as “democratic.” Browne’s argument floats from “ordinary” to “realistic” without

major problem, but it also lunges from "realistic" to "democratic" without sufficient evidence, which is the root of his argument's weakness. Browne continually conflates "realistic" (1, 3, 4, 5, 10, 13, 15, 16), "ordinary" (1, 2, 4, 5, 11) and "democratic" (5, 6, 10), but there is of course a wide gulf between these words.

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." "Demotic" would be a plausible adjective, but not democratic. Browne's failure is, once again, in missing the larger socio-economic picture. Howells did not write democratic books that appealed to the great mass of mankind; he wrote realistic³ novels that were read and enjoyed by the educated affluent classes. The working class had neither the leisure, education, money or possibly the interest to read much fiction (see Leah Price, Richard Altick, David Vincent and Jonathan Rose, for example, on nineteenth-century reading habits), and they would have been no more likely to read and enjoy a text simply because, on the surface, it reflected the ordinariness of their external reality. In fact, they might very well have been more likely to enjoy a romantic story that provided an escape from the grim drudgery of their external reality. If anything made fiction more democratic, ironically, it was the twentieth century's continued economic growth following World War II, which led to increasingly high literacy, affluence and leisure time, not to mention the capability of producing cheaper books, the creation of more public libraries, and the emergence of better-equipped public schools. Capitalism, then, which Howells ostensibly opposed, was in fact the very force that allowed him to prosper and which enabled his agenda—the democratization of fiction—to be realized.

United Arab Emirates University
Al-Ain

NOTES

¹Whit Stillman explores this theme in his first film, *Metropolitan* (1990). The wealthy, hyper-literate, hyper-self-conscious characters are obsessed with the decline of their upper-class social circle (which they refer to as HUB, “haute urban bourgeoisie”). Interestingly, the rising social class is embodied in a character, so gauche he does not own a proper overcoat, named *Tom*. Stillman reverses the nomenclature (Howells’s aristocratic Tom becomes the socially-inferior Tom) and makes his Tom slightly better educated than his old-money peers. In the 1990s, compared with the 1880s, it would have been much more likely for someone to be better educated than his social superiors, so Stillman’s “realism” is not in question on this point.

²*A Traveller from Altruria* (1894), *Letters of an Altrurian Traveller* (1904), and *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907).

³Even this term is questionable, as suggested earlier with regard to Pynchon. Early realist novels no longer seem as realistic as they once did.

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