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A Broken Teacup

Amanda Claybaugh

William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life by Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson
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At the end of his life, with his reputation already waning, William Dean Howells remarked that he would be remembered for the quantity of his writing, if not for its quality. He had published a hundred books: plays and poetry collections, memoirs and travel essays, novels and novellas. The plays are mostly undistinguished, the non-fiction writings good on the whole, the novels sharply divided between minor and major. The minor novels form a forgettable string of almost comically interchangeable titles (*An Imperative Duty*, *A Fearful Responsibility*, *A Foregone Conclusion*, *A Counterfeit Presentment*); the major ones include *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, one of the great novels of business, and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, one of the great novels of city life. These two books are among the very best works of US literature in the postbellum period (1865-1914), but even they are not consistently taught on university courses, and they are very rarely read for pleasure.

It is common enough for authors who were popular in their own era to be forgotten in the next. But Howells had been one of the most admired and highest-earning US novelists of the age, as well as an influential editor and critic, first at the *Atlantic Monthly*, the most prestigious literary magazine in the country, and later at the most popular, *Harper's Magazine*. In his double role as editor and novelist, he helped shape postbellum literary culture. But the generation of novelists that succeeded his came to dismiss Howells on the same grounds for which he had once been so highly praised. They accused him of formal timidity and political complacency; similar claims have been made since. Yet Howells had been a great advocate of cosmopolitan literary realism; and far from being politically complacent, he was one of the very few national figures willing to defy the anti-terrorism hysteria that deranged the United States in the mid-1880s.

A number of biographers and a handful of critics have long sought to restore his reputation; Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson are the latest. Vivid, judicious, sympathetic to its subject and sensitive to the historical context, their biography provides a compelling introduction to Howells. It also challenges those who think they know him well by revising the standard

critical account at crucial points.

Howells was born in Ohio, then the western frontier of the United States, and came of age working on the newspapers that his father tried and failed to establish in a number of small towns. With only meagre formal schooling, he read widely on his own, taught himself Spanish and German, and began writing poems in the style of Heinrich Heine, a few of which were accepted by the *Atlantic*. In 1860, he was asked to write a campaign biography for the largely unknown Abraham Lincoln. Drawing on his own boyhood memories as well as the facts of Lincoln's life, Howells made the story of a young man's rise from the frontier into a mythic tale.

With the money he earned from the Lincoln biography, Howells travelled to Boston, then the literary capital of the United States, a trip that marked the beginning of his own mythic rise. Knowing no one in Boston, he presented himself at the offices of the *Atlantic*, where he met the man who had accepted his poems, James Russell Lowell. Lowell questioned Howells closely to ensure that the poems were really his, then welcomed him warmly. He gave Howells a letter of introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne, who passed him on to Emerson and Thoreau with a note that announced: 'I find this young man worthy.' Lowell also invited Howells to a dinner with the editor of the *Atlantic*, James T. Fields, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of its chief contributors. It was Holmes who ratified the judgment that literary Boston had already passed. 'This is something like the apostolic succession,' he said. 'This is the laying on of hands.'

And so it proved. After spending the Civil War years as US consul in Venice, Howells returned to Boston and began working first as assistant editor and later as editor of the *Atlantic*; he would stay there from 1866 to 1881, publishing his first novels during those years. By now, however, the *Atlantic* had already begun its slow decline. It retained its prestige, but would lose more than two-thirds of its readers to the new illustrated magazines. As these came to prominence, Howells secured a place for himself on one of them. In 1885, *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*'s chief competitor, made him an extraordinary offer: an annual salary of $10,000 for writing one novel and one farce every year, and an additional $3000 for a monthly critical essay. At a time when it was still rare for US authors to be able to support themselves by their writing, Howells was assured of both prosperity and a large audience. The offer confirmed him as the era's pre-eminent man of letters, and he would stay at *Harper's*, in various capacities, until the end of the century.

As editor of the *Atlantic*, Howells had done a great deal to further the careers of two young writers who became his closest friends, Henry James and Mark Twain. He published much of their early fiction and reviewed them in other magazines. He opened the *Atlantic* to Southern writers in the aftermath of the Civil War; and at *Harper's*, where his power was even greater if less direct, he promoted women writers (Sarah Orne Jewett, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton), African-Americans (Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar) and

immigrants (Abraham Cahan). He also introduced US readers to foreign literature. British literature was already widely read in the cheap reprints that proliferated before the passage of an international copyright law, but Howells's critical essays for *Harper's* take in the Italian theatre, the Spanish novel and the contemporary revival of interest in Norwegian folktales. He was more cosmopolitan in his reviewing than even James, and Goodman and Dawson are the first biographers to do justice to this aspect of his career.

Howells championed this mix of authors in the name of a single cause: literary realism. It is difficult to imagine a definition of realism capacious enough to embrace James, Twain and Cahan, but Howells applied the term 'realist' to them all. Goodman and Dawson argue that 'realism' was simply Howells's name for writing he liked. But even if his critical writings don't associate realism with a specific set of novelistic practices, they do associate it with an aggressive stance towards existing models. Like Cervantes, Howells thought of realism as the perpetual unmasking of literary convention, the continual reinvention of literary codes. He celebrated as realist anything new, whether it was James's truncated endings, Twain's use of dialect or Cahan's use of fables. And he was similarly obliged to attack as anti-realist everything old. His usual generosity to other writers failed him when he was fighting what he called 'the realism war', and he confessed, a few months after beginning to write his essays for *Harper's*, to his great enjoyment in 'banging the babes of Romance about'.

In Howells's own novels, however, realism was associated with something more precise: a commitment to the everyday, the ordinary rather than the extraordinary, the middle not the extreme. Less interested in rising young men than in men who have already succeeded or failed, he is the great novelist of middle age. *The Rise of Silas Lapham* traces a businessman's gradual awakening to something other than financial success, while *A Hazard of New Fortunes* describes a would-be writer who has all but acknowledged that he will never fulfil his talent. Howells is also less interested in courtship than in marriage. His married couples drift in and out of arguments that are never very serious and never fully resolved. They have become increasingly rigid with age, but each has adapted to the other with an unacknowledged grace. And they have found, despite periods of quiet disappointment, that their marriage is the most meaningful thing in their lives. Finally, Howells is fascinated by those paramount bourgeois concerns, the finding of the right apartment and the building of the perfect house, both of which he describes with a nice mixture of irony and sympathy.

Howells promoted all the leading novelists of the generation that followed his, even those whose work differed greatly from his own, such as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris. Yet all of them, with the exception of Crane, ultimately turned on him and dismissed his work. It was inevitable that they should do so. They had learned from Howells himself to describe and defend their own realism by exposing the conventionality of what had come before it – in this case, what they described as Howells's adherence to the narrowest of social codes. Norris dismissed Howells's novels as concerned merely with 'the drama of a broken teacup', and, a generation later, Sinclair Lewis made a similar attack in front of an

even wider audience. The first American author to be awarded a Nobel Prize, Lewis devoted his address to listing the difficulties with which US literature had to contend. Chief among them was the influence of Howells. 'Mr Howells was one of the gentlest, sweetest, and most honest of men,' Lewis said, 'but he had the code of a pious old maid whose great delight was to have tea at the vicarage.' For Lewis, as for Dreiser and Norris, Howells's choice of subject-matter was a sign of political complacency as well as formal conventionality. Howells's novels, in Lewis's account, portray a world in which workers are grateful to their employers and beggars exist to be smiled at for their quaintness.

A Hazard of New Fortunes is the novel in which Howells describes workers and beggars most fully, along with wounded veterans, violent strikes and urban slums. His depiction of these things is hardly complacent. On the contrary, the novel submits the state of complacency to close scrutiny. In earlier novels, Howells had criticised people who failed to see the inequalities of US society, but *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, by focusing on those who could see them but nonetheless failed to act, is an anatomy of political bad faith. The novel is viewed largely from the perspective of Basil March, a would-be writer who prides himself on his refined political and aesthetic sensibilities. March imagines that his own attention to the sufferings of the poor and his willingness at least to consider revolutionary ideas are as much a mark of his cultural distinctiveness as his library and his taste in music. He holds himself superior to the crude capitalists and decadent society matrons he visits in New York because they do not sympathise, as he does, with the striking workers, nor think about the teeming slums. But March's sympathy and knowledge translate into nothing useful. He strolls through the slums, and visits the scene of the strike, jotting down impressions that he intends to work up into literary sketches. Speaking for Howells, the narrator offers a damning summary of March and his wife: 'If it had ever come into their way to sacrifice themselves for others, they thought they would have done so, but they never asked why it had not come their way.'

March embodies the bad faith to which artists and intellectuals are all too prone, and Howells set out to examine it in the aftermath of his own brave but futile involvement in the Haymarket Affair, the first 'red scare' in US history. It began with an eruption of violence during a national strike for an eight-hour day. The strike, which began on 1 May 1886, was immediately joined by revolutionary socialists of an anarchist bent. It was particularly fierce in Chicago, where earlier strikes had been broken by the use of armed force, and hundreds, perhaps thousands of workers had formed militias in order to counter the state's own. At the same time, anarchist newspapers published articles on how to manufacture dynamite, and some anarchists concealed a few sticks on their person – to prevent the police from coming too close.

On the third day of the strike, the police killed a worker. In response, the anarchists called a protest meeting to be held the next night in Haymarket Square. At the end of the meeting, someone threw a bomb at the police, prompting them to fire wildly into the crowd and at one

another. Eleven people were killed, and more than a hundred were injured, most by police bullets rather than the bomb. In response, the police rounded up all known anarchists and put eight of them on trial for conspiracy to murder. There was no evidence that any of the defendants had any connection at all to the bomb. Nonetheless, all were found guilty, and seven were sentenced to death, with the vociferous support of the public.

This was the first time that ordinary civil liberties, such as free speech and free assembly, were retroactively revoked in response to a perceived socialist threat. But from the perspective of our own era, it is clear that the public was responding not only to the threat of socialism, but also to the protesters’ use of dynamite. People were terrified by the thought that there were anarchists among them with explosives concealed under their clothes.

Howells was the only literary figure of any significance to resist this hysteria. He was horrified by the trial: ‘It has not been for one hour out of my waking thoughts,’ he wrote in a letter to a friend. ‘It is the first thing when I wake up. It blackens my life.’ He was horrified even though he, too, was afraid of anarchy; indeed, he was horrified even though he was convinced that these particular anarchists had been conspiring to overthrow the US government.

At first, Howells hesitated to take a public stand. He had recently signed his contract with *Harper’s*, whose sister magazine, *Harper’s Weekly*, ran several editorials calling for the defendants to be hanged. But once the guilty verdicts came down and the legal appeals were denied, Howells felt compelled to act. He published an open letter in the *New York Tribune* in which he catalogued all the injustices of the trial and pleaded with the governor of Illinois to pardon the defendants. He was excoriated for doing so in newspapers across the country, and lost a considerable number of readers. He managed to keep his position at *Harper’s*, but his own writing was permanently transformed. It was in the light of these events that *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *Annie Kilburn*, another novel, addressed the question of what ordinary people can do in response to extraordinary suffering. He then abandoned realism for a utopian mode, writing a pair of novels that argue for a Tolstoyan Christian socialism.

By the turn of the century, Howells had already written his most important works, but he would live until 1920, suffering the loss of his daughter and wife, watching his own generation die out and the next turn against him, protesting as his country embarked on an imperialism he abhorred. This last period of his life is given significantly more pages in Goodman and Dawson’s biography than his family history, childhood, youth and young manhood combined: an unusual decision, but a fitting one.

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