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# *William Dean Howells's America and What Went Wrong*

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March 1, 2012, will mark the 175th anniversary of William Dean Howells's birth. Experience has disgraced my prophetic abilities more than once, but I will venture this cautious prediction: the date will pass unnoticed. Such disregard is regrettable, and was not the case in 1912, when 400 eminent writers, journalists, editors, social reformers, university presidents, and public men, including William Howard Taft, who had altered his schedule to attend, crowded Sherry's restaurant in New York City to celebrate Howells's 75th birthday. From England, Thomas Hardy and Henry James were only the most eminent of Howells's contemporaries to send letters of congratulation. The gala event received front-page coverage in the *New York Times* and was extensively recounted in other publications, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*.<sup>1</sup> At that moment, Howells was, the *Times* reported with perhaps an intentional pun, "the Dean of American letters."<sup>2</sup> As an acclaimed novelist, critic, and editor, Howells understood his place in the history of American literature. In his prepared remarks, he observed that

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<sup>1</sup> "Taft Joins in Praise of W. D. Howells," *New York Times*, March 3, 1912, 1, 8, and *Saturday Evening Post*, March 6, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, March 3, 1912, 1.

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he had known all those “in whom the story of American literature sums itself,” except for Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allen Poe, and William H. Prescott.<sup>3</sup> Howells’s roll of literary acquaintances included George Bancroft, William Cullen Bryant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Julia Ward Howe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, Francis Parkman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, and many others. He was a living bond to the past and the revered embodiment of the American literary tradition.

Not only did the assembled guests know one another and share a common literary history and culture; they also embraced a common set of ideals and values. In *The End of American Innocence*, which, like many of Howells’s novels, has suffered undue neglect, Henry F. May investigated these principles in careful detail. To condense them to the essentials, they were: first, belief in the existence of an objective, universal morality; second, belief in the inevitability of progress; third, belief in the importance of manners and refinement. This creed was the gravitational force around which the intellectual cosmos of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America cohered.

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Such agreements did not prevent discord. Many of the number commemorating Howells’s literary achievements and stature objected to his politics, which were often controversial. Yet, as gentlemen, they could disagree without becoming disagreeable, understanding that reasonable men could debate contentious subjects in civil tones. Whatever their differences with Howells, he was still one of them, perhaps the best of them. He shared their convictions and spoke their language. “Everything he has written,” said President Taft, “sustains the highest standard of social purity and aspiration, of refinement and morality and of wholesome ideals.” He, like the others in attendance, could still regard Howells as an unalloyed “force for good.”<sup>4</sup>

Although continuing to embrace the myth of American exceptionalism, Howells was critical of American foreign policy. His faith that America was fundamentally different from, and better than, the other nations of the world, in fact, became the basis of his critique. In a public letter, for instance, he had once written

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. See also Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Time, 1912-1917* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1960), 3.

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American exceptionalism meant holding America to a higher standard than other countries.

"This free Republic has killed five men for their opinions."

that "when our country is wrong she is worse than other countries when they are wrong, because she has more light than other countries, and we ought somehow to make her feel that we are sorry and ashamed of her. . . ." ashamed, as he wrote during the Spanish-American war, of the "era of blood-bought prosperity" that the United States seemed intent to bring about, punishing Spain "for putting us to the trouble of using violence in robbing her."<sup>5</sup>

Howells was also far from an exemplary conservative in his opinion of domestic politics. He advocated a version of Christian socialism and was consistently sympathetic to the working class in the labor disputes of the Gilded Age. Earlier generations, he explained, could dream "of human perfectibility through one mighty reform. Now long ago the slaves were freed, but . . . the faces of the underwaged women and overworked children stare at us."<sup>6</sup> The Haymarket Affair, which took place in Chicago on May 4, 1886, and its aftermath marked a crucial turning point in Howells's intellectual and moral life, jarring him from his complacency.<sup>7</sup> Never again did he quite believe in the inherent justice and goodness of American society. The summary judgment and execution of men whose guilt the state had not proved, Howells informed Francis F. Browne, founder and editor of the *Dial*, was a "thing forever damnable before God and abominable to civilized men." To his father he wrote in anguish that "the historical perspective is that this free Republic has killed five men for their opinions."<sup>8</sup>

Yet not even the riot in Haymarket Square transformed Howells into an unthinking partisan of labor. Following the Homestead Strike of 1892, which had been marked by violent clashes between workers and Pinkerton detectives, he wrote to his father on July

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<sup>5</sup> Howells's public letter is quoted in *Ibid.*, 8. For his comments on the Spanish-American War, see Howells to Aurelia Howells, April 3, 1898, and Howells to Henry James, July 31, 1898, in Mildred Howells, ed., *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, & Co., Inc, 1928), Vol. II, 90, 95.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> See Sender Garlin, *William Dean Howells and the Haymarket Era* (New York: American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1979), Robert L. Hough, *Quiet Rebel: William Dean Howells as Social Commentator* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), and Vernon L. Parrington, "William Dean Howells and the Realism of the Common Place," (1930), reprinted in Edwin H. Cady and David L. Frazier, eds., *The War of the Critics over William Dean Howells* (Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson and Company, 1962), 155-56.

<sup>8</sup> William Dean Howells to Francis F. Browne, November 11, 1887, and Howells to William Cooper Howells. November 13, 1887, in Mildred Howells, ed., *Life in Letters*, Vol. I., 402.

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10: "I suppose that you have been as excited as I have been, by the Homestead affair. . . . It is hard," he noted, "in our sympathy for the working class, to remember that the men are playing a lawless part." Strikes and violence, he concluded, offered no redress for the problems of labor. They served only to remind Americans that "trouble must go on as long as competition goes on. . . . [and that] every drop of blood shed for a good cause helps to make a bad cause."<sup>9</sup> The demands of labor were just, but the methods of labor were foolish, shortsighted, destructive, and wrong. Howells, by contrast, espoused a democratic remedy, wholeheartedly convinced that if they had the political will members of the working class could vote themselves a new world. Writing again to his father two weeks later, on July 24, Howells lamented that the working class had "the majority of the votes and can *vote* the laws it wants, and it won't, but prefers to break the laws we share."<sup>10</sup>

Cynics may ridicule Howells's naive faith in democracy, until they compare it to the more flamboyant and irresponsible statements of other contemporary men of letters, such as Howells's friend Mark Twain. By that measure, Howells's vision appears the essence of political decorum and good sense. Writing to Howells in 1887, Twain identified himself as a "Sansculotte!—And not a pale, characterless Sansculotte, but a Marat."<sup>11</sup> Two years later, in 1889, Twain wrote again to extol the French Revolution as, "next to the 4th of July and its results . . . , the noblest and holiest thing and the most precious that ever happened in this earth. And its gracious work is not done yet—not anywhere in the remote neighborhood of it."<sup>12</sup> Howells demurred. Revolution against civilized social order only made a bad situation worse. He was convinced that, whatever its momentary lapses, American society was tending in the right direction, moving toward material and moral progress and greater social justice. The disturbances that had occurred in France and throughout Europe thus did not need to be repeated in the United States.

Howells, though, was not entirely sanguine about American prospects. Much of his fiction belied the dictum that happiness

*Mark Twain  
admired  
the French  
Revolution,  
Howells did  
not.*

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<sup>9</sup> Howells to William Cooper Howells, July 10, 1892, in *Ibid.* Vol. II, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Howells to William Cooper Howells, July 24, 1892, in *Ibid.*, Vol II, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Twain to William Dean Howells, August 22, 1887, in Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, eds., *Mark Twain—Howells Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), Vol. II, 595.

<sup>12</sup> Twain to Howells, September 22, 1889, in *Ibid.*, 613.

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and contentment, what he had called “the smiling aspects of life,” were more prevalent in the United States and were more characteristically American than were suffering, hardship, and injustice. Howells also concealed a dark side that rivaled Twain’s, even though in 1917 a young scholar named Alexander Harvey could ridicule Howells as the cheerful prophet of the “sissy school” of American literary criticism. More than a decade earlier, Gertrude Atherton had accused Howells of making American literature “the most timid, the most anemic, the most lacking in individualities . . . that any country has ever known.” H. L. Mencken asserted that Howells “was a first-rate journeyman, a contriver of pretty things, a clever stylist—but it will also show a long row of uninspired and hollow books, with no more idea in them than so many volumes of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*.” The sad truth was, in Mencken’s view, that as a novelist Howells simply “had nothing to say . . . . His psychology was superficial, amateurish, often nonsensical; his irony was scarcely more than a polite facetiousness; his characters simply refuse to live.” As he grew older, Howells found it increasingly difficult to maintain his cheerful serenity and his optimistic repose, a struggle that Sinclair Lewis missed when, in his contemptuous Nobel Prize Speech of 1930, he denigrated Howells as having “the code of a pious old maid whose greatest delight is to have tea at the vicarage.”<sup>13</sup>

Howells was not the “incurable optimist” that even his friend and confidant Henry James thought him to be. Describing to James his birthday celebration, Howells declared that “It was all, all wrong and unfit: but nobody apparently knew it, not even I till that ghastly waking hour of the night when hell opens to us.”<sup>14</sup> To Twain he had earlier written: “You always rather bewilder me by your veracity, and I fancy you may well tell the truth about yourself. But *all* of it? The black truth, which we all know of ourselves in our hearts, or only the whitey-brown truth of the pericardium, or the nice, whitened truth of the shirtfront? Even

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander Harvey, *William Dean Howells: A Study of the Achievement of a Literary Artist* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1972), 178-80, 199, but see chapter XV; Gertrude Atherton, “Why is American Literature Bourgeois?” (1904), reprinted in Cady and Frazier, eds., *The War of the Critics*, 100; H. L. Mencken, “The Dean” (1919), reprinted in *Ibid.*, 128; Sinclair Lewis, “The American Fear of Literature” (1930), reprinted in *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>14</sup> William Dean Howells to Henry James, March 17, 1912, in Mildred Howells, ed., *Life in Letters*, Vol. II, 317.

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*you* won't tell the black heart's truth."<sup>15</sup> If in his fiction Howells ignored the "black heart's truth," it was not because he imagined that it did not exist.

Then why, and what does his omission reveal about his concerns for the life of the mind in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America? Howells's aesthetic and ethical precepts were closer to classical standards than to romantic sensibilities. Like Dr. Johnson, he believed that every life had its story and its lesson, that every life could amuse and instruct, if told with a regard for truth on the one hand and a decent reserve on the other. A writer must tell what he knows, but not all that he knows. He must tell the truth, but never the whole truth. The exposure of human infirmity and malevolence that would result would disgust, not gratify. Even the truth must be enveloped and tempered by modesty, judgment, and taste.

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Howells recognized the emotional turmoil, the psychic anguish, and the moral chaos that he was excluding from his fiction, and he knew why he did so. His complaints about the poetry of Walt Whitman were indicative: "He has told too much," Howells wrote. "Whitman goes through his book, like one in an ill-conditioned dream, perfectly naked, with his clothes over his arm."<sup>16</sup> Howells's alternate purpose was to create a vision of society in which men and women could be refined, humane, and compassionate. Already in his own time, he sensed American life and literature inclining toward the extremes: the private, the excessive, the aberrational, the strange, the isolated, the alienated, the disorderly, the perverse, the violent. Howells knew better than those who promoted the new aesthetic and the new morality the destructive volatility that the unfettered spirit could inflict. Aware, as Lord Tennyson had written, of the "filmy shapes that haunt the dusk," Howells nonetheless deemed man "a creature of light." "Tragedy is darkness," he explained. "In its presence he stands before the unknown, before the night, and the result is not revelation, but impenetrable darkness."<sup>17</sup> Howells thus embarked on a willful and

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<sup>15</sup> Howells to Twain, February 14, 1904, in Smith and Gibson, eds., *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, Vol. II, 781.

<sup>16</sup> William Dean Howells, "A Hoosier's opinion of Walt Whitman" (1860), reprinted in Edwin H. Cady, ed., *W. D. Howells as Critic* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 14-15.

<sup>17</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "In Memoriam A. A. H.," Canto XCV (95) in G. Robert Strange, ed., *The Poetical Works of Tennyson* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company,

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at times a desperate search for the light, knowing how precariously men teetered on the edge of the dark abyss.

In his art Howells attempted to create and sustain an order that kept at bay the tumult lingering beneath the surface of life in the modern world. He often depicted a world that was gentle, decent, honest, just, and benevolent in the hope that it would become more so. Simply put, through his craft, Howells wanted to make the world seem better and thereby, perhaps, to become better than he knew it was. That quest, of course, compromised his art, particularly his insistence on literary realism. His major characters always behave themselves. Most are untroubled souls who never lose their tempers or their composure, who never fall passionately in love, and who never seem to have a bad day. Edith Wharton probably had these characteristics in mind when she lamented the “incurable moral timidity” that disfigured even in Howells’s best work, such as *A Modern Instance*. Although Wharton acknowledged that Howells was the first American novelist to glimpse “the tragic potentialities of life in the drab American small town,” her charge against him was warranted.<sup>18</sup> Such a verdict, however, says at least as much about our perspective as it reveals about Howells’s limitations as a writer.

Our current predisposition may enable us to comprehend what Yeats termed “the mad abstract dark” that emanates from within the mind and soul and gathers around us, but it is inadequate to an appreciation of the healthy-minded equilibrium to which Howells aspired. Howells’s image of the human condition did not penetrate as deeply as that of Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Émile Zola, or Anton Chekhov, to cite but a few examples, who recognized that tragedy can happen to a man who is walking down a familiar street on an ordinary morning. But Howells also recoiled from the notion that life becomes meaningful only at the extremes. He sensed that such a conviction would lead to the breakdown of external reality and the collapse of objective norms,

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1974), 186. The passage from Howells appears in Tony Tanner, “Introduction” to *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), xxxii. For Tennyson’s influence on Howells, see William Dean Howells, *My Literary Passions* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1910), Chapter XXIII, and John W. Crowley, *The Black Heart’s Truth: The Early Career of W. D. Howells* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 29, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934), 148, 147. See also Crowley, *The Black Heart’s Truth*, 146.

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standards, and values. It was not, after all, he thought, very wise to embrace madness at the expense of the everyday, the mundane, and the uneventful, which give to life its dimension, order, and substance. Howells never regarded the commonplace as too trivial a subject for literature. As he had one of the characters in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* say: "Commonplace? The commonplace is just that light, impalpable, aërial essence, which they've never got into their confounded books yet."<sup>19</sup> As early as 1886, Henry James had reached a similar conclusion in his assessment of Howells's qualities as a novelist. James affirmed that Howells

is animated by a love of the common, the immediate, the familiar and vulgar elements of life, and holds that in proportion as we move into the rare and strange we become vague and arbitrary; the truth of representation, in a word, can be achieved only so long as it is in our power to test and measure it. He thinks scarcely anything too paltry to be interesting, that the small and vulgar have been terribly neglected, and would rather see an exact account of a sentiment of a character he stumbles against every day than a brilliant evocation of a passion or a type he has never seen and does not even particularly believe in. He adores the real, the natural, the colloquial, the moderate, the optimistic, the domestic, and the democratic; looking askance at exceptions and perversities and superiorities, at surprising and incongruous phenomena in general.<sup>20</sup>

Despite his talent for "imparting palpitating interest to common things and unheroic lives," James wrote, Howells exhibited a "small perception of evil."<sup>21</sup> Perhaps James was right, but his evaluation does not imply that Howells had no larger concerns, that he believed evil did not exist, or that it could be ignored. Howells feared that the inward turn of mind and the acceptance of private excess as the sole means of personal expression would end in a solipsism that destroyed any idea of objective reality and common meaning. Under those circumstances, no one could again take for granted the stability of everyday life.

Howells wanted to show Americans to themselves, to present a coherent and comprehensive image of American life, to explore what James called "his unerring sentiment of the American

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<sup>19</sup> William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1884), 284-85.

<sup>20</sup> Henry James, "William Dean Howells" (1886), reprinted in Kenneth E. Eble, ed., *Howells: A Century of Criticism* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1962), 46-47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

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character."<sup>22</sup> Many of his novels, especially his mature work of the 1880s and the 1890s, depict just the opposite: a society in which men and women are insecure, bewildered, alone, and subject to forces that they do not understand and cannot control. Lurking always in the background is the merciless anonymity of the city. Although Howells's perspective was often critical, he compelled Americans to survey and to respect their own land and their own kind. He knew his time was over when younger writers turned to what he called variously the "psychological" or "mystical" novel, which probed the depths of the unconscious in search of private meanings that were all but inaccessible to others. By 1930, ten years after his death, Howells had fallen completely out of critical favor. In addition to Sinclair Lewis, Vernon L. Parrington expressed the prevailing sentiment when he wrote that in "rejecting the unusual and strange and heroic" Howells "reduced his stories to the drab level that bores so many of his readers, and . . . in elaboration of the commonplace, he evades the deeper and more tragic realities that reach the heart of life."<sup>23</sup> Howells had known that the game was up fifteen years before Parrington wrote, when he told Henry James in 1915 that: "I am comparatively a dead cult with my statues cut down and the grass growing over them in the moonlight."<sup>24</sup>

Since the 1930s, neither popular nor critical interest in Howells's fiction has revived. By adhering to the premise that meaning could be gathered from the surface of life, Howells undoubtedly missed much, not least the appreciation that human beings understand reality as much from the inside out as from the outside in. At the same time, by rejecting Howells's viewpoint we have lost much, not least the notion that the everyday matters and that literature and life do not find meaning only in sensationalism and violence. Our apparent preference for, and our deep intimacy with, the extremes have led us closer to the abyss, just as Howells predicted they would, and have, in the process, exposed the illnesses and wounds of the contemporary mind that Howells long sought to moderate and to restrain, if not to heal.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Parrington, "William Dean Howells and the Realism of the Commonplace," in Cady and Frazier, eds., *The War of the Critics*, 157.

<sup>24</sup> William Dean Howells to Henry James, June 29, 1915, in Mildred Howells, ed., *Life in Letters*, Vol. II, 350.