

Interpretation

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William Dean Howells' "Poor Real Life": The Royal Road to the American Character

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I

Alexis de Tocqueville forecast *the* danger of modern individualism when he warned of the American withdrawing from society until he became, simply, self-concerned. "They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart" (p. 508). In the extended Tocquevillean sociology of *Habits of the Heart*, this apparent isolation of American existence has been elaborately chronicled (Bellah, pp. vii–viii, 306, 353).

How accurate is this view? What life is actually lived in the American polity? The abstract nature of modern political thought which equates the "good life" with degrees of freedom, per capita income, popular consent, worker participation, or social equality, seems less able even than a Tocquevillean-inspired social science such as Robert Bellah's—much less a merely quantitative one—to characterize American ethics properly. For example, the numerous American divorces suggest the end of the family or of its influence, although, looking at American society, there appears to be little basis of social experience, and particularly social ideal, absent the family.¹

Confronting Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's original question, "Who is this new man, this American?", one recognizes again the longstanding association between political theory and literature. Literature in most cases realizes classical political ethics in depicting characters produced by different types of political regimes or principles of the human good. Especially in the modern era, the contrast is most frequently drawn between the aristocratic gentleman and the middle-class or "mass man."

Literature, however, may be said to "complete" classical ethical regime theory politically by transcending classical typology to root characters in recognizable political or social situations. If in the modern era the most important nexus of human experience (next to the regime) is the nation—the reality of being an American, a Frenchman, or a Russian—where speech and deed are inextricably interwoven to make the fabric of life, then the nation is the signifi-

cant historical variable shaping human character. Thus as long as the regime and the nation exist together, its citizens' characters remain recognizable over generations.

This study will concentrate on the writings of William Dean Howells (1837–1920), an American author who attempted with a uniquely intelligent seriousness to present realistic American characters within a realistic American framework. Howells was the founder and chief supporter (as the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and later *Harper's Magazine*) of the literary movement known as American realism. He sought "to picture life just as it is, to deal with character as we witness it in living people, and to record the incidents that grow out of character." He was concerned with the most general and minute traits of individuals shaped by the American regime. Howells confronts, perceptively, the problem of both modern political thought and politics. How are the various modern theoretical principles translated into practice? In particular, in the "first new nation," as Tocqueville called the United States, how are the principles of modern rationalism related to personal and social experience?

In Section II I will outline the difficulty of seriously studying Howells' novels resulting from the accretion of opinions in which we find them encrusted. Since Howells is now a relatively obscure author, I will also discuss the relevant parts of his theoretical understanding to help clarify the overall tenor of his fiction. In Section III I propose to look at Howells as a social commentator, using categories and topics as clearly present in his major novels as they are in ordinary social theory. I will concentrate on the fragility of individual and family existence and the maintenance of social morality, especially the importance of religious practice. In the final part, Section IV, I will try to summarize Howells' contribution through a brief comparison of his work with that of his "dear, honored prime favorite, Jane Austen."

II

Studying Howells' American novels one first encounters H.L. Mencken—and many others of the Progressive era—who see in Howells a hopelessly sentimental, moralistic, and cautious writer: the Norman Rockwell of American Victorianism. "A study of Howells' work will show a long row of titles with no more original ideas than so many copies of *Ladies' Home Journal*, and no more contagious feeling than so many reports of autopsies," Mencken wrote in *Prejudices* (1916), while the "Dean" was still alive. However, the briefest encounter with Howells' work is sufficient to reveal his intricate reflections on the "solitude of the heart" and the host of other questions surrounding American character. Howells was himself a rootless man in many respects and personally knew whereof he wrote. Moreover, George Carrington, a major recent critic, categorically opposes the common view. Carrington finds Howells' sentimentalism totally ironic.

Life [for Howells] is seen largely as "unrelieved bondage," a hell on earth, as in *1984* and *In the Penal Colony*. There is no possible end to this hell for man in general, and no possible end (except for lucky accident) for man in particular. (P.23)

Characteristically too extreme, Carrington's interpretation does alert the reader that there is more to Howells' bonhomie than meets H. L. Mencken's eye. Carrington is more nearly correct when he writes:

Certainly, Howells had little of Fitzgerald's artistic feeling for the very rich (the second generation and after), or of Dreiser's for the very shabby, but he "felt" he knew the central American group, the middle-class administrators and professional men; he knew the central modern American situation: the endlessly renewed attempt to plug along with honor in a chaotic world. No other American author has ever done this so well as Howells. (P. 228)

It is only necessary to add that Howells' world is only apparently chaotic.

I think Howells' sentimentalism is indeed a facade, although not an ironic one in the way Carrington suggests. Guided by reason, sentimentalism diminishes the harshness of what Tocqueville called the "antipoetic daily life of the American." Imprudent sentimentalism, contrarily, is obfuscating and ultimately self-destructive. Indeed, Howells' reason is the core of the "realists'" war with literary romanticism. Reason is the essence of modern society, upon which both it and literary realism stand or fall. As with his "dear, honored prime favorite, Jane Austen," Howells sought to contribute to the true sentimental education of modern society. "[I] hoped I was making my people know themselves in the delicate beauty of their everyday lives, and to find a cause for pride in the loveliness of an apparently homely average."² What Howells meant by reason is indefinable, precisely. While clearly sympathetic to the scientific reason of the Enlightenment, he was quick to see the limits of science in matters related to individual character, social morality, and political life as a whole.

"No man, unless he puts on the mask of fiction, can show his real face or the will behind it," Howells wrote. What permits the separation of opinion or *nomos* from reality or nature is modern science. While creating an epistemological standard critically able to judge religious, political, or traditional opinions, science could not expect fully or finally to refute or replace those opinions. Therefore the human condition could never be reduced to theoretical propositions, even those produced by modern science. The dichotomy between human opinion and partial (scientific) knowledge should be interpreted moderately and humanely in Howells' view, not radically and cruelly as Friedrich Nietzsche suggested. Caught between "a partial knowledge of parts" and a number of absolute opinions, a writer should proceed cautiously and circumspectly. It is this self-conscious prudence and Platonic insight into the omnipresence of opinion which gives Howells a classical sophistication. But Howells had

learned from the major authors of the English Enlightenment that there is no principle of benevolence accessible to man other than the moderating effect of human reason, operating on a nature neither naturally virtuous nor saved, although reasonably amenable to reason. From this persuasion comes his realism.

While never losing sight of the realistic American world of the middle-class professional men, Howells studied the entire range of American social life and opinion. He sought to use his rationalism and true "sentimentalism" to support those institutions and opinions which, in his opinion, appeared natural, like the family, or at least supportive of a rational and moral society. Even in his radical period, from roughly 1887 to 1905, when he espoused a Christian socialism, Howells was free from the conceit that socialism in any form, including his own, was a serious political possibility for the middle class.

During those years the radicalized "Dean of American letters" came to believe that the social and economic problems of the Gilded Age could not be reformed using the political principles or political institutions of the original American natural-rights consensus. Howells was certainly not alone in the conviction that the Social Darwinist reading of modern natural right had so emasculated economic and political institutions that major, if not revolutionary, reform was necessary. With one of his literary heroes, Leo Tolstoy, Howells embraced a nonviolent, agrarian, Christian socialism. If immediately impracticable, Christian socialism served as a humane ideal, a moral counterweight to the materialism of the Gilded Age. But with the success of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, Howells appears to have regained his lost republican faith: popular consent based on the founding principles was a sufficient basis of American political life. (See Crider. No longer a radical, Howells sought to incorporate both the left and the right realistically in his fiction, while remaining a liberal Republican.)

Within his work, Howells does not openly speculate about the source of American morality. For the purposes of his realism it is sufficient to observe the effects of that morality on the characters living in American society. However, he was certainly aware of the basic source of American attitudes in the natural-rights philosophy of the Declaration of Independence, and the habits of political and economic liberty and equality that characterized the first seventy years of the Republic. Howells spoke warmly of the rural "Jeffersonian" egalitarianism of the southern Ohio of his youth, when his father, William Cooper Howells, worked as Whig Party newspaper editor and later held several consulships under Republican presidents (secured through his son's influence). William Dean Howells himself wrote Abraham Lincoln's campaign biography in 1860 and served as American consul in Venice.

III

Probably the clearest example of Howells' insight into American society is found in *The Kentons*. "Judge" or "Colonel" Kenton is an American hero.

Nevertheless, his happiness is threatened by the instability of his family's social environment.

Kenton is a Civil War veteran, having been named by the Ohio recruits as their regimental commander. After the war, Colonel Kenton pursued a legal career and was elected a county judge. At the time of the novel, Kenton is retired, slowly writing his regiment's history, and trying to complete the education of his three youngest children.

Of these three, the one nearest Kenton's heart is his eldest daughter, Ellen. She has been an alter ego in his literary and personal pursuits, but she is also the shyest and most unworldly of his children. Despite Kenton's caring attention, her original suitor is a young parvenu, Bittridge, who wishes to use her affection for him as a stepping stone for his own social advancement.

Because of Ellen's continuing attachment, Kenton cannot use the family's considerable influence in their little town of Tuskingum, Ohio, to thwart the courtship. Moreover, as good Americans, both parents believe that marriage is a voluntary contract between equals in which free choice is the key to longevity. In order to cool the relationship, and with Ellen's consent, the Kentons decide to spend the winter in New York (p. 3).

The planned separation is thwarted when Bittridge, now with his mother in tow, follows them there. Kenton sees that his protection against Bittridge's suit has been even further eroded in the anonymous New York world where the family have themselves become estranged. Kenton finds his worst fears realized as he surveys "the crowd" in the hotel lobby.

He knew from their dress and bearing they were country people, and it wounded him in a tender place to realize that they had each left behind him in his town an authority and a respect which they could not enjoy in New York. Nobody called them judge, or general, or doctor, or squire; nobody cared who they were, or what they thought; Kenton did not care himself; but when he missed one of them he envied him, for then he knew that he had gone back to the soft, warm keeping of his own neighborhood, and resumed the intelligent regard of a community he had grown up with. (P. 18)

Like many Americans in a similar position, Kenton is convinced he is "valued merely for the profit that was in him." To the extent his family can be identified as upper middle class and midwestern, they will be easy marks for the various sharpers and pranksters they encounter. If commerce favors cleverness, the Kentons' simple decency makes them objects of prey, not of praise.

Finally, Ellen is persuaded by her family, and Bitteridge's extreme misbehavior, to reject his suit. Exasperated by this turn of events and by Kenton's unwillingness to accept his apology, Bittridge abruptly humiliates the elderly judge. Witnessing this outrage, the anonymous and passive "exiles" and the mercenary hotel staff ally on Kenton's behalf. Bittridge and his mother are dismissed from the hotel, and only Kenton's forbearance prevents Bittridge's arrest.³

This “gathering of the neighborhood about Kenton, where he had felt himself so unfriended,” angers George Carrington. In his judgment, Howells is not true to his experience of alienation or able to foresee the “modern fragmented and vulgarized urban crowd-society” (p. 50).

Tocqueville sometimes experiences a problem similar to Carrington’s in accounting for the preservation of virtue in a nation dedicated to the principles of modern individualism. What prevents the degeneration of American society into mass egoism is a question haunting his reflections (Tocqueville, pp. 671–74). Tocqueville suggests that a combination of individual utilitarianism and religious doctrine helps create the opinions which influence individual behavior. But it can be argued that he never identifies the most prominent manner in which opinions about virtue are transmitted in American life. Through general, rational images of respectability, and a continuing skeptical determination to learn the truth or reality of these images, the people maintain a general social morality, leaving for a greater familiarity the appraisal of more refined virtues. This is the positive, and largely unexplored (even by Tocqueville), dimension of “the tyranny of the majority.”⁴

The judge’s belief that his fellow guests are indifferent to him and the management only mercenary stems from an antique view of moral cognition. Kenton believes virtue is recognized within a small community capable of judging virtuous actions minutely, thus enabling the community to adequately praise or blame the actor. Although there may be indications of a virtuous character apparent to an observer in a mass society, mere appearance is always a suspect basis for judgment independent of a knowledge of the individual involved. Until one has lived in a community for some time, he is essentially invisible, Kenton believes. He does not realize that even among the “exiles” in New York he is still within the purview of the larger American community.

Rooted in his rural community, Kenton fails to perceive the significance of images or symbols in a mass society. More perceptive, his creator Howells recognizes that social consciousness is determined by more than a utilitarian calculus (described by Tocqueville) or a personal experience of others sought by Kenton. It results from the rational images of virtue and vice within the consciousness of the intelligent population. The qualities of Kenton’s life making him a leader in a small Ohio community are easily recognizable, even in New York. His conscientiousness, his fine family, his comportment and attire, (not to mention his age, in comparison with Bittridge), identify the judge, making him a character worthy of admiration and respect because of what he is—what he has accomplished. Based on his own experience of the competitive nature of American society, the intelligent observer knows what it takes to attain Kenton’s condition. Insofar as these images represent standards of human perfection, and the populace maintains its commonsense realism (inherited from an enlightened, scientific rationalism) in judging them, the citizens act responsibly and morally toward one another.

The substitution of appearance of respectability for knowledge of character, necessitated by the mass society, may threaten to produce both conformity and confidence men, although, as long as the standard is a decent one, it is reasonable to believe these images will contribute to a benevolent result. Thus, while the judge may not be able to replace the depth of human feeling possible in his Ohio community, the true basis of a moral society remains even in New York, among "exiles," as long as the opinions of the majority are based on decent standards of behavior.

Kenton is tested once more after the family continues its self-imposed exile on a voyage to Europe. When the Reverend Breckton emerges as a shipboard suitor, all of Kenton's doubts are revived. Breckton appears of the Bittridge mould: witty, light, and jesting. Moreover, he is accompanied by a woman and her daughter, not themselves the souls of modesty. Once again, as he had with the "crowd" in the hotel lobby, Kenton considers them strangers and thus probably hostile. However, Breckton is friendly to Kenton: he sees who Kenton is.⁵ By the end of the novel Breckton and Ellen are married and living in New York.

This short encapsulation of a part of *The Kentons* illustrates what is perhaps Howells' most familiar theme. Even though the Kentons are an unusually strong family and "certainly richer than the average in the pleasant county-town of the Middle West," they cannot escape the constant turmoil of American life.

Of course, the turmoil of that life, and its rationality, are of a piece. The openness produced by free political institutions operating in a large country requires and produces competition in all forms: in economic, educational, social, as well as political institutions. However, the turmoil that openness encourages disguises an inner core of rational expectations. For example, a comparative stranger may marry into a prominent family or be hired by a distinguished company, but if the bright and well-educated stranger fails to fulfill the obligations he has sought, his "chance" may be more than withdrawn. Therefore those who attempt to live in the space defined by that openness, such as Bittridge, are eventually controlled by those rational expectations. The society that results from these various competitive and rational economic, political, and social situations is fair, in most instances, even if it enforces a certain degree of conformity. But for those like Kenton who are persevering, if unperceptive, the overall stability and rationality of American society have, Howells once said, a smiling aspect.⁶

Perhaps two other examples may further elaborate and clarify Howells' view of the individual's relation to society. In *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904), the son of the title after graduating from Harvard returns to the town which has reaped the generous rewards of his late father's beneficence. Out of filial piety, and a desire to assert himself in his "ancestral home," he decides the town should do more to honor the memory of Royal Langbrith. After meeting unaccountable resistance to his plan to erect a commemorative plaque to his father,

he discovers the secret and unpleasant truth. Although Langbrith was the most successful man in his community, he was the least liked or respected. Langbrith defrauded and broke his partner, his boyhood friend; he similarly cheated his own brother. However, the crowning act was his bigamous decision to keep a second family over the futile objections of his first wife, the protagonist's mother. Royal Langbrith's son is visited by the sins of the fathers. Through the harm Langbrith inflicted on his own, and now the next generation, his financial success appears less magnificent than it apparently once did. The American experience remains, for Howells—even in its most individualistic period, the Gilded Age—social in character.

The farthest point of Howells' experiment with individualism is seen in *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897). Here the protagonist, Jeff Durgin, makes himself into a successful "grand" hotel owner and succeeds in marrying a woman of "respectability." All this he accomplishes through a determined and entirely prudent pursuit of his economic interests, ignoring any consideration of family, general social obligation, or the opinion of the woman he originally wished to marry. The price of success on his terms is near-perfect social isolation, which Durgin seems to accept with entire equanimity. What will become of his young daughter raised in such perfect isolation is another matter, unless in the highly unlikely event, she is able to imitate her father's self-absorption.

If the reality of the American experience is the economically and socially competitive middle class, founded politically on modern natural right and economically on the new science of nature, Howells was persuaded the nexus connecting modern natural right and economics with sociability was more than merely a rational consciousness. It was also constituted by an almost universal religious ethic. Perhaps a greater rationalist than Tocqueville, Howells believed with "the lively Gaul" that the almost universal social presence of religion prevented American moeurs from becoming massively troubled.⁷

In his last major work of fiction, *The Leatherwood God*, Howells experimented with one of his several millenarian themes. Here he gives a fictional portrayal of Joseph Dylks, a man who did, indeed, proclaim himself God and attempt to call down the New Jerusalem in the little town of Leatherwood, Ohio, in the 1820s. However, unlike his contemporary Joseph Smith, Dylks was unwilling to organize a militia to protect the faithful, and this reluctance to shed blood led to his eventual downfall, in Howells' view (p. 157).

Howells' foil is Matthew Braile, who can see or decipher the falsity of Dylks' godhead where others are blind. Braile is an Enlightenment figure, a lawyer who has been elected justice of the peace despite his sarcastic skepticism about the intemperate spiritualism of his neighbors. They ignore his reasoned appeals to morality, to "Blackstone," and to the "statutes of the state of Ohio," and so Braile is unable to drive the faithful from the new and more potent threat presented by Dylks. Moreover, having the opportunity to keep Dylks under arrest, Braile releases him, arguing that although Dylks is a source

of evil, he has broken no law. Proclaiming oneself God and announcing the New Jerusalem are not indictable offenses in the State of Ohio.

Justice Braile's defense of modern reason, natural right, and the rule of law legislated by free citizens is vindicated when Dylks drowns himself attempting a miracle. This prudent outcome may be said to indicate Howells' awareness that the regime had a permanent character capable of sustaining itself even against the powerful spiritual challenges of the Second Great Awakening. While unsympathetic to the millenarian Christianity represented by Joseph Dylks or Joseph Smith, Howells described with characteristic realism the American social conditions encouraging this kind of religious fervor (pp. 3, 156).

Howells' interest in the American religious question was extensive, embracing Roman Catholicism and black Protestantism, among others (*A Foregone Conclusion*, 1874; *Suburban Sketches*, 1870; *An Imperative Duty*, 1891). For his own reasons, Howells was deeply attracted to anabaptist utopianism, while recognizing the inevitable social influence of liberal Protestantism. We will discuss these latter two religious-social experiences as part of our guide to Howells' view of social morality.

For a major part of his life Howells was fascinated by the Shakers' radical Christian socialism. Although embodying his idealistic principles, the Shakers' strict celibacy confirmed the utopian, unrealistic aspect of their existence. Nevertheless, Howells was captivated by their spirituality and their benevolence, both among themselves and toward their neighbors. Indeed, in his most extended treatment in *The Undiscovered Country* (1880), Howells portrays the life of an elderly Shaker community as one of great harmony and as a kind of salvation for the protagonist and his daughter.

The primary or original theme of *The Undiscovered Country* is the spiritism of the late nineteenth century. The essential problem is the protagonist, Dr. Boynton's, inability to accept the childbirth-related death of his wife, resulting in a determination to reestablish contact with her. This motivation Boynton masks, even from himself, with his stated desire to develop a scientific basis for spiritism. In his pursuit of the "undiscovered country," he chooses as his medium his only child, Egeria. This remarkable "method" is scientific in the doctor's eyes because he exercises an absolute and predictable control over her. However, the greater the doctor's determination to "recapture" his wife and create a new science of spiritism grows, the greater the strain placed on Egeria, bringing about her collapse.

Her breakdown occurring in the neighborhood of a Shaker community, father and daughter are taken there. Under the Shakers' care and instruction, Dr. Boynton is persuaded their spiritism is a truer alternative to his scientific variety, while Egeria is nursed back to health by the old Shakers and reunited with an early love.

Influenced by Tolstoy's Christian socialism, *The Undiscovered Country* is

profoundly skeptical of the psychological theories of its time (which are parodied to some extent in Howells's hands. In this context see his great homosexual novella *The Shadow of a Dream*, 1890.). Conversely, *The Undiscovered Country* presents an equally sympathetic treatment of the Shakers' Christianity in a realistic, American setting.

A perhaps more "Tocquevillean" approach to the "religious question" in America can be seen in the several novels featuring the Reverend Sewell. He is the protagonist in *The Minister's Charge* (1886), and appears in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). A Congregationalist minister, Sewell is the embodiment of the ethical Christian, one who wishes to use Christian love both charitably and rationally. If Sewell desires to heal the wounds of society and self, *The Minister's Charge* shows the limits of his charity in a real social situation. In the novel Sewell finds it difficult to undo the evils produced by his well-intentioned flattery of a poor and inexperienced young poet. In *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, contrarily, Sewell is used to defend realism against the sensational romanticism of a popular novel, *Tears, Idle Tears*, and at the conclusion he helps Silas appreciate his ethical rise, enabling Lapham to accept the near-impoverishment resulting from it. More than any other religious character, Minister Sewell embodies Howells' recognition that within the modern democratic experience religion could promote individual happiness and defend the rights of man as the earthly task of God's revelation.

So pervasive is this association in America between modern natural right and a universalized, ethical "Christianity" that any theoretical movement divorced from them, whether spiritism, a socialist materialism, or anarchism, is sufficiently foreign that a serious adherent courts social ostracism or worse. Howells suggests that Christianity, if not simply subordinating itself to the ethical demands of modern society, thus becoming simply a civil religion, will avoid direct confrontation with it. The Reverend Peck in *Annie Kilburn* (1888) is a socialist taken seriously, who loses his position and his life. The same fate awaits the anarchist Lindau in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890).

IV

If many of Howells' observations seem Tocquevillean in character, this similarity appears to result from their similar subject. Although Howells knew Tocqueville's work, there is no hint that he was guided by it in any respect.⁸ Indeed, even though Howells might be understood as a "literary companion" or "fictional guide" to the American regime, Tocqueville thought such an effort futile. Because "nothing is more petty, insipid, crowded with paltry interests—in one word, antipoetic—than the daily life of an American," Americans are uninterested in their social life except in the form of caricature or melodrama, where the reader's innermost and strongest longings and aversions can be viv-

idly represented (Tocqueville, p. 485). Given the salience of Tocqueville's view, it is impossible to imagine Howells' literary career in any milieu other than that of American Victorianism, when the existence of a large, leisured, feminine readership encouraged the serious examination of social conventions.

All in all, Howells' "dear, honored prime favorite, Jane Austen" provides the best mirror for Howells' art. Although the American professionals lack the near-total leisure, and some of the refinement, of the country squirearchy peopling Jane Austen's novels, the playful but serious inquiry into domestic life is carried on apace in the works of both authors. If anything, Howells' work is significantly broader, carried as it is to the range of social issues I have tried to epitomize in this paper. For both authors, however, the family hearth provides the setting where personality and social reality can be disentangled and examined so that the inquisitive are able "to know themselves better in the delicate, (or not so delicate), beauty of their everyday lives" (*My Mark Twain*). Presumably, as long as the democratic American regime survives, this knowledge will remain green.

If this is the case, those searching for a realistic view of the human experience in the great continental republic should seek beyond the theoretical deductions of critical Marxism or liberal orthodoxy—the "one-dimensional man" or the "lonely crowd"—and look at the work of the most serious of the American realists. Although not free from certain peculiarities and anachronisms, Howells continues to attract our interest for the reason an earlier commentator gave. "In the years to come he who would know what American life was [is] really like, and would peer into our social complexities, can do nothing better than to give his days and nights to the study of William Dean Howells."⁹

NOTES

1. This is Tocqueville's understanding, e.g., pp. 507, 587–89. "Democracy loosens social ties, but it tightens natural ones. At the same time as it separates citizens, it brings kindred closer together" (p. 589). William Dean Howells wrote about divorce and the "ideal" of the family in *A Modern Instance* (1882).

2. William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain*, p. 15. "Jane Austen was the first and last of the English novelists to treat material with entire truthfulness" (WDH to Brander Matthews, p. 168, n.22). "We are still only beginning to realize how fine she was; to perceive after a hundred years that in the form of the imagined fact, in the expression of personality, in the conduct of the narrative, and the subordination of incident to character, she is still unapproached in the English branch of Anglo-Saxon fiction." Her fiction is characterized by "its lovely humor, its delicate satire, its good sense, its kindness, its truth to nature" (*Heroines of Fiction*, I, 32). Cited in Bennett, whose introduction to Howells' work is the best currently available.

3. Kenton's forbearance is not shared by everyone in his family. When Bittridge returns to Tuskingum, he is met at the station by the Kentons' eldest son, Richard. "Bittridge, with his overcoat hanging on his arm, advanced towards him with the rest, and continued to advance, in a sort of fascination, after his neighbors, with the instinct that something was about to happen, parted on either side of Richard, and left the two men confronted. Richard did not speak, but deliberately reached out his left hand, which he caught securely into Bittridge's collar; then he began to beat

him with the cowhide wherever he could strike his writhing and twisting shape. Neither uttered a word, and except for the whir of the cowhide in the air, and the rasping sound of its arrest upon the body of Bittridge, the thing was done in perfect silence. The witnesses stood back in a daze, from which they recovered when Richard released Bittridge with a twist of the hand that tore his collar loose and left his cravat dangling, and tossed the frayed cowhide away, and turned and walked homeward. Then one of them picked Bittridge's hat and set it aslant on his head, and others helped pull his collar together and tie his cravat.

"For the few moments that Richard Kenton remained in sight they scarcely found words coherent enough for question, and when they did, Bittridge had nothing but confused answers to give to the effect that he did not know what it meant, but would find out. He got into a hack and had himself driven to his hotel, but he never made the inquiry which he had threatened" (pp. 69–70).

4. General opinion in Tocqueville is always presented negatively because it is necessarily "mass" opinion and hence inferior to aristocratic sensibility and learning. For this reason, he does not explore sufficiently the commonsense rationalism which is neither a purely self-interested calculus of utilitarian advantage nor rooted in religious opinion. In *On Liberty*, Tocqueville's friend John Stuart Mill captured his suspicion of middle-class or mass opinion and sought to protect the radical individualism of the (aristocratic) genius through an absolute liberty.

5. Breckton's recognition and the question of images or symbols are brought together in a clarifying remark of the author's: "In the mean time he had seen that these Kentons were sweet, good people, as he phrased their quality to himself. . . . He did not know, as a man of an earlier date would have known, all that the little button in the judge's lapel meant; but he knew that it meant service in the civil war, a struggle which he vaguely and impersonally revered, though its details were of much the same dimness for him as those of the Revolution and War of 1812" (pp. 85–86). Since Breckton does not meet the expectation, or image, of a "good person," and the judge is not a very perceptive man, it takes longer for him to gain confidence in Breckton. He does so, as one might expect, through Breckton's acceptance by those members of his family in whom he does have confidence.

6. In a review of Dostoevsky, Howells commented: "It is one of the reflections suggested by Dostoevsky's book that whoever struck a note so profoundly tragic in American fiction would do a false and mistaken thing. . . . Whatever their deserts, very few American novelists have been led out to be shot, or finally expelled to the rigors of a winter in Duluth. . . . We invite our novelists, therefore, to concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and to seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests. It is worthwhile even at the risk of being called commonplace, to be true to our well-to-do actualities." This was meant to be a plea for realism, but as Gore Vidal points out, "He [Howells] rather absently dynamited his own reputation for the next century" (p. 45).

7. The following examples show Howells' belief that rational, middle-class opinion can survive effectively without constant reference to religious opinions. Middle-class opinion is nourished by a political and social education resulting from the American founding and experience. At the personal and political extremes, however, at those periods and for those individuals for whom an American "consensus" does not exist or is not adequate, religious opinion is a necessary (if dangerous) handmaiden to "Americanism." Nevertheless, because modern reason is both instrumental and progressive, it constantly requires a theoretical grounding it finds difficult to articulate or recover. Dr. Boynton's turn to spiritism, to be discussed below, demonstrates a typical instance of scientific "progress," as do the various professional, psychological theories of Howells' time. The theoretical tenets of Christianity provide a bulwark against this kind of scientific theorizing.

8. "A lively Gaul, who travelled among us some thirty years ago, found that, in the absence of political control, we gratified the human instinct of obedience by submitting to small tyrannies unknown abroad, and were subject to the steamboat-captain, the hotel-clerk, the stage-driver, and the waiter, who all bullied us fearlessly; but though some vestiges of this bondage remain, it is probably passing away. The abusive Frenchman's assertion would not at least hold good concerning the horse-car conductors, who, in spite of a lingering preference for touching or punching passengers for their fare instead of asking for it, are commonly mild-mannered and good-tempered, and disposed to molest us as little as possible. I have even received from one of them a mark of

such kindly familiarity as the offer of a check which he held between his lips, and thrust out his face to give me, both his hands being otherwise occupied; and their lives are in nowise such luxurious careers as we should expect in public despots" (*Suburban Sketches*, p. 109).

Howells is thinking of *Democracy*, Volume I, Part II, 5. "Nowhere has the law left greater scope to arbitrary power than in democratic republics, because there they feel they have nothing to fear from it. It can even be said that magistrates become freer as voting rights are wider spread and the duration of office shortened" (p. 206). Tocqueville is speaking here of public officeholders, but I don't think Howells distorts his meaning by extending it to quasi-public officials like the horsecar conductors.

9. Schwartz, p. 232. In an earlier passage Schwartz says, "For years the world has been looking for a truly American novelist and the great American Novel. It has found neither, principally because the search has been carried on by aid of preconceptions which overlook the fundamental quality of our American life. . . . Whatever European critics may say, we native born Americans ought to know that in Mr. William Dean Howells we have had a great American novelist with us for more than eighty years, and that in the long list of books he has written we have, not one, but many great American novels" (p.266).

"If we imagine Howells and Henry James, as they paced the Cambridge streets, to be competing in setting forth 'the true principles of literary art,' we must admit that James won the race. His titles thrive in paperback; in the orotund oddity of his sentences and the passion of his increasingly abstract pattern-making, he looms as the first great American modernist . . . Yet, as we look about, could we not say that James has many academic idolaters but few imitators . . . whereas Howells' faith in 'poor Real Life' . . . is everywhere put to the test, and 'effectism' banished to the drugstore racks and the best-seller lists . . . Today's fiction, the modernist vein of formal experimentation exhausted, has turned, with an informal—a minimalist—bluntness, to the areas of domestic morality and sexual politics which interested Howells. . . . It is, after all, the triumph of American life that so much of it should be middling. Howells' agenda remains our agenda: for the American writer to live in America and to mirror it in writing, with 'everything brought out.' In 1903, I know not why, Charles Eliot Norton showed Howells some letters that Henry James had written him, likening Howells, with his fine style, to 'a poor man holding a diamond and wondering how to use it.' Howells' response was patient, brave, and defiant: he wrote Norton, 'I am not sorry for having wrought in common, crude material so much; that is the right American stuff. . . . I was always, as I still am, trying to fashion a piece of literature out of the life next at hand.' It is hard to see, more than eight decades later, what else can be done" (Updike [1987], p. 88). One wishes that Updike shared Howells' concern with the moral character of modern society as well as his "agenda." Howells never sought to have "everything brought out" in quite the same way as John Updike has achieved in the four novels featuring "Rabbit" Angstrom. Caricaturing American life in bringing, or hanging, everything out, Updike does not aid, in fact destroys, the realistic sentiment Howells saw in the American life next at hand. Cf. Updike (1990).

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