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The Novel and the Public Sphere: *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885)

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Although I shall refer to William Dean Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham* to illustrate a couple of points, I begin with a quote from Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* to remind us of some basic premises that must be assumed.

> No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public.[1]

What is at stake in thinking of William Dean Howells' novel as a voice in the American public sphere? My easy premise is simply an assertion that this period of liberal political and economic theory, with which Howells can be identified, is a classic instance of the importance of the concept of a public sphere. If we think of this idea as referring to a site where questions of the common good can be negotiated and perhaps decided,[2] as a site outside of the political sphere, then the dominance of liberal, or laissez-faire, or democratic political theory in the post-Civil War era necessitates the space of a public sphere, since, under this theory, so much is left for cultural life to debate and strive to settle, all of which would be, under 19th-century liberal theory, external to the political sphere. Crucial issues of everyday life in a democracy need to

have a forum. Howells, as an editor of two of the most important magazines of the period and as a novelist and playwrite, was a central figure in the cultural debates of the period.

To my mind, the concept of the public sphere helps to make the cultural scene more complicated, more subtle and historically accurate, than the practices of New Historicism, for instance, inspired primarily by the research and concepts of Michel Foucault. In the case of Howells, the kinds of debates that seemed appropriate to the public sphere help us to discern specific issues in his thinking, as well as his ambiguous sense, shared by many of his literary contemporaries, of the perlocutionary intention of his novel writing practices, his acutely informed knowledge of an actual cultural/historical context for his promotion of a certain kind of fiction writing which he (and we) referred to as realism. Howells also encouraged a wide variety of literary writing in the era, including marginal, i.e., ethnic and "regional," writers. With the aid of Habermas and others thinking in this mode, as readers, we are allowed to hold in abeyance the politics of the literary genre of the novel for a time, at least, and to ask what literary practitioners thought they were doing, in their historical/cultural context. We can gain a clearer sense of their pretentions as well as intentions. That is, the Habermas concept helps us to refrain from precipitous politicizing, holds in abeyance our postmodernist urge to see everything as political (which, of course, it is) so that we can strive, in our research, to find out just how literature might have been thought to be political or apolitical in a given historical period. The concept of the public sphere is a concept about the way a democratic/capitalist historical/social totality is organized in general, a phenomenology of the life-world of human experience. We might remember Habermas' critique of Foucault's theory of power as a "transcendental-historicist concept of power."[3] I think Habermas returns historicist research back to history.

There are a great many instances in post-Civil War American literary life of a claim to a certain kind of cultural/political debate. I will mention only a few examples. Albion Tourgee is interesting because in a novel like *A Fool's Errand*, he is making a direct political appeal to the Radical Republicans in Congress even as he novelizes the appeal in such a way as to understand that the appeal has totally failed. There is, of course, Henry Adams' *Democracy*, or Mark Twain's and Charles Dudley Warner's *The Gilded Age*, both of which express an intense revulsion from the literal post-Civil War political scene. And as Ross Posnock has recently argued, African American intellectuals of this period, and later, generate a phenomenon he refers to as the public intellectual: novelists like Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Charles Chesnutt enclosed within their novels explicit debates about the issues affecting the freed men and women and the emergence of serious "scientific" racism throughout the country.[4] I would be remiss not to recall Walt Whitman's "Democratic Vistas," one of the most explicit claims in the period for literary practice as a public sphere: "Our fundamental want today in the United States [. . .] is of a class [. . .] of native authors, literatuses [. . .] affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage [. . .]."[5]

As if to point to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, a fellow American novelist, Harold Frederic, reported in a letter to Howells from London that a group of English intellectuals at dinner expressed the view that the novel "marked a distinct advance step in fiction," even as Frederic claimed that he saw the novel more deeply as "the scrutiny of a master turned for almost the first time upon what is the most distinctive phase of American folk life."[6] Namely, the novel examined the character of the newly rich business man in the United States in the culture of industrial capitalism in this era in which, as Bromfield Corey says to his son, "money is to the fore now. It is the romance, the poetry of our age" (64).[7]

The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885) opens with an interview of Silas Lapham by a journalist for a Boston newspaper. Bartley Hubbard wants Lapham to tell his life story as a rags to riches narrative. The discourse of popular culture creates a reading public interested in this "character" who has become a local millionaire. Hubbard asks some leading questions in order to get Lapham to respond with the "regulation thing," the stereotypical and conventional sense of a New England life, an ordinary male from rural Vermont who has risen to great financial success in Boston. Hubbard's interest in the story of Lapham's life is in the way it conforms to the stereotype of the self-made man, as if his newspaper audience is not expected to read anything that does not conform to the conventions of the "regulation thing" of American "self-making." Hubbard strives to gain from his conversation only that information that fits the conventions of a common stereotype. As the novelist notes, Hubbard's write-up adds some conventional details that Silas might have overlooked in order to construct a story of a life that has always already been read many times. The newspaper narrative is designed to seduce its readers with the fantasy of self-madeness through an actual example, distorted and reduced as it may be.

Michael Robertson, in *Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern American Literature*, points out that, whereas Howells may be critical of the journalist, the novelist is encroaching upon the very ideas of the journalist.

> The story of a businessman's financial success could attract both reporters looking for a celebrity interview and novelists searching for material. And although Howells emphasizes the two discourses' differing appeals—Bartley offers melodrama, Howells moral drama—even the most serious of Howells's original readers must have been drawn to his fiction by its ability to satisfy one's curiosity about the dramatic changes in individual fortunes, business practices,

> and urban life during the Gilded Age—the same topics that formed much of the daily newspaper's fare.[8]

The journalist brings Lapham into the open for the first time, that is, out of the private into the public. Once he is brought out of his private life, once he has achieved the interest of the journalist, sort of representing the public, the novelist can then take over the Lapham drama, which does not belong to the newspapers. And, thus, the journalist launches Lapham into the public in general and into the novel. It is as if Howells is saying, if the journalist is interested in Lapham, then the novelist may be interested also, especially the realist novelist who wishes to follow the headlines of the day. Both the journalist and the novelist compete with each other for the public sphere. The journalist is an invader, but once the invasion has taken place, the novelist can take over and finish the story, because he is capable of finding out and narrating the further story that the journalist is not interested in. Bringing Lapham into the open, into the public, is a kind of exposé of what is most interesting to contemporary readers.

For the journalist, Silas Lapham may be one more instance of the self-made man, a model, of sorts. For Howells the novelist, Lapham is, rather, a model of a husband, a loving and involved father, a Civil War veteran, a jack of all trades who stumbles into becoming a very successful paint manufacturer. Lapham's role as a business executive does not distract him from an engagement with the ethical issues of a human being who was raised in rural Vermont with a puritan religious background, who is at all times aware that another human being took the bullet aimed at him by a confederate sniper, and, in the end, who has a moral sense that prevails over his economic self-interests with the result of financial ruin.

This might look like a novel written in opposition to *Daisy Miller*, with Irene as the version of Daisy. Bartley Hubbard's reference to "Daisy Millerism" (21) might just be

journalistic superficiality, seeing Daisy merely as an American rich spoiled brat. Lapham's family is, thus, presented in a significantly different version from that of Henry James' Millers. Tom Corey might even be a version of Winterbourne who refuses to live in exile, as his parents did and are tempted to do again. The Coreys must have decided that they could not get their daughters married in Europe, and so they live in Boston instead of Europe. Howells could be saying that James' sense of the newly rich Americans is only one version of the new American bourgeoisie. Perhaps Howells is working here on the basis of what he takes to be the more probable way in which the American newly rich are behaving. Actually, Howells has split Daisy into the two girls, since Pen is said to be "everything that's unexpected" by Tom to his mother (160), while Irene is "perfectly innocent and transparent" (159).

Another point to think about is that Howells has characters who, like Henry Adams' Ratcliffe, do not know how to live in "society." Tom mentions to his father that the Laphams drink water with their dinner, a sign to Bromfield Corey that the Laphams are totally outside society. It seems that the idea of "society" is fairly well spread about in the culture. W. E. B. Dubois might worry about "culture," which is a British tradition, but Howells seems worried only about "society." And he suggests a very narrow notion of culture, namely the reading of novels, as if this were all that is at stake in a cultivated life. As Bromfield Corey notes to his son, "All civilization comes through literature now, especially in our country […] I suspect that the pulpit counts for much less now in civilizing" (118). The Laphams go to plays, but the theater seems to exist somewhere beneath the notion of cultivation, as if plays were of a much lower cultural order than novels.

Amy Kaplan points out that Howells worried about the "radically competing claims"[9] of different groups and classes and interests in the 1880s and 1890s that tended to obscure the

common reality of the world. And she also notes that Howells came to realize that the real is created by fiction, that the expansion of journalism and mass culture, especially novels, in general creates a reality effect from its fictions. Thus, for Howells, the role of the realist novel is "to construct the quotidian out of and against the forces which make it inaccessible" (Kaplan, 21). At its best, Howell's fiction reduces, in the philosophical sense, the natural or cultural world around him in order to discover the elements of the foundations for the real world. Since, for Howells, the critical issue of the public sphere is fiction itself, novel writing is the means of conveying the fundamental world human beings live in. It must be that, because he is so committed to the conventional liberal political theory of the era, Howells rarely bothers with the political sphere. He was not, like Albion Tourgee, a Radical Republican. But such a political theory and ideology and practice generate the importance of the public sphere, as Whitman also indicates brilliantly in "Democratic Vistas."

Of course, Howells then moves on to create the novel we know in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, with a Lapham who does not conform to the journalist conventions and stereotypes, who especially does not conform to the morally shady business practices so notorious in his era. Howells understands that there can be different public spheres, so to speak, a contest of public spheres in which he believes and hopes that the realist novel will prevail. And, in this novelistic movement, Howells enters into a debate within the literary public sphere, the struggle against the popular novel, "Tears, Idle Tears." All of this is to note that Howells not only posits that the novel is a phenomenon of the public sphere. He thematizes the idea of something like a public sphere within the novel.

Howells presents Silas as an ignorant, boastful, egotistical man whose traits are somewhat alleviated by his wife, Persis, and his daughters. The novelist has to figure out a way

to see how these character traits that are not admirable can become transformed in such a way as to uncover his rigorously ethical behavior in his business dealings, behavior that can be praised by the aristocratic Corey family as admirable. As we see earlier, Silas is deeply dependent upon his wife for moral or ethical guidance, but he also resists her again and again, resents her interference, her constant moral haggling. In the end, his pride will shut Persis out while he acts on her principles as if they were his own. Howells is always committed to fine gradations of issues rather than perfectly clear ethical questions, especially in terms of who is the source of ethical authority in these matters. He presents what I take to be a profound study of a marriage, and looks at the way in which the partners share and resist each other's points of view. Indeed, the cultural interest in marriage and divorce becomes increasingly important for the late 19th century and the early 20th century.

The character of Silas himself is allowed to present us with what we might take to be a basic structural insight into the course of the novel when he says to Tom Corey, "'I don't suppose it was meant we should know what was in each other's minds'" (80). And then there is Tom's mother speaking to her daughters about Tom and their fears of his relationship with Silas' daughter, Irene: "'It's always a mystery what people see in each other,' observed Mrs. Corey, severely" (157). There is always the question as to whether human beings in marriage can overcome the gulf of mystery and obscurity within any individual human subject in trying to know other human beings. In a sense, the issue over who is the object of Tom Corey's romantic interests offers a characteristic example of the inability of a person to understand the motives and mental workings of another. Both the Laphams and the Coreys mistake Tom's interest. On the other hand, Silas seems to have a much better understanding of Rogers than Persis, since Rogers

keeps on failing in his business ventures. But here also, one might take Persis' view that it was Silas' initial injustice to Rogers that brought him, and Silas, to disaster.

But Howells is working out, in the character of Silas's personality, the unknowability of this person, as he does also with the stolid Persis becoming jealous, going into that pique, for instance, as he does with the daughters and even members of the Corey family. As readers, we are not necessarily prepared for these emotional or irrational swerves. For his contemporaries as for himself, these issues about the ambiguity of character were Howell's strong points, what he really believed in. Everyone will, in the end, act in a fairly noble way. Still, the major test is the transformation of Silas, or what looks like it, in his willingness to take his financial interests down to defeat and return to the family farm. We might say that the characters of Silas and Persis were composed on the farm—that the stubborn pride of Silas was generated by this background and his experiences, and that the personality of Persis developed out of her mid-century puritan background and her education plus the cultural phenomenon of the feminization of American culture. And they really do not know what to do with the wealth that comes to Silas with his business success. What a reader might like from Howells is some sense that there is an economic environment that is responsible for Silas' success, that there is luck and a market involved, forces outside of Silas which he usurps to feed his pride, with the self-made mythology supporting this usurpation. Howells simply falls back upon a basic protestant common sense that pride is bad and can only lead to bad results. The critique of Silas' business dealings derives from this ideology. Of course, Howells could ask, where would Silas get his ethical principles, if not from his protestant culture? There would be only this quasi-religious vocabulary as an explanation of this ethical behavior. In the crisis with Tom's proposal, Persis and Silas also come up with the idea that all of their efforts have been for the girls (236). They cannot imagine any other

intention or motive. They can't think about their rise in social class or some role they have to play in civilization. And, of course, they can't think merely egotistically about their goals, even though that mixture seems to have been there with Silas all along. After all, Howells knows that parents tend to displace their egos onto their children. We have seen that Persis has identified with Irene in her relationship with Tom. Perhaps Penelope has been most important for her father, as she will be later. Children and parents interact and inter-identify all together; Howells understands that this projection creates a certain intensity of loyalty within the family. He admits that there is an "unselfish will for their children's good" (237), even though such a motive can disorient all of the family members, for a time, at least.

The rationale for these issues is that Howells is striving to create his realist novel as the authentic public sphere for American culture, or at least he is trying to find the proper sphere for the novel as cultural authority. In his depiction of the Corey dinner party, Howells even echoes a version of the salon, a space where issues such as class barriers, politics, literary reflexivity, can be mulled over in what appears to be an inconsequential manner. The novel becomes the site for a debate among private people who are always on the verge of representativeness, a synthesis of sorts between the public and the private. For Howells, the novel is the proper mode of expression for this democratic striving of the private toward the public sphere, toward what we might refer to as recognition.

Howells as a realist author understood himself as a mirror held up to the public so that it could view itself. Although he allows the Reverend Sewell to offer the authoritative moral position on the issues facing the Laphams, Howells the novelist is appropriating civic morality from theology, as it seems that even the Reverend has taken over a low level version of utilitarianism instead of resorting to the ethical thinking of the protestant American past. Boston

is the appropriate setting for an updating of a protestant ethic, a rather old-fashioned ethic, since, as Howells dramatizes, a fundamental authority lies in the prestige of self-sacrifice. This is a protestant ethic that leads to economic collapse and ruin rather than wealth.

Nancy Cohen, in *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism 1865-1914*, quotes extensively from an essay Howells wrote in 1874 for the *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Politics,” in which he claims that all of the liberal reforms being proposed for the government are strictly administrative.[10] Such an idea conforms closely to Habermas’ separation of the public sphere from the political sphere. For Silas Lapham, there is little to negative recourse to legal institutions in his business dealings with Rogers or with the new young men whose paint company competes with Lapham. There is never a hint that he might ask for help from a congressman to save his business. Such a liberal position places all the more weight on moral decisions. According to Howells, “the most perfect state is that in which moral self-control is substituted for the sanctions of government” (quoted in Cohen, 112). And such is the drama for Lapham in the novel as he strives to save himself financially from the falsities that Rogers has thrust upon him, without, however, compromising his integrity, his moral uprightness. For Howells and his contemporaries, there was an important role for the literary public sphere to play in the nation: it was a cultural force to give direction to an American public often confused and at a loss as to what was going on in the industrializing culture of the era.

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[1] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 90.
[2] Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “The Public Sphere: Models and Boundaries,” *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 101.
[3] Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 267.
[4] Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998).

[5] Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. James E. Miller, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Riverside Editions, 1959), 457.
[6] William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, ed. Don L. Cook (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 391.
[7] All references to the text of Howells novel, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, are to the Penguin Books edition, edited with an introduction by Kermit Vanderbilt (New York: Penguin, 1983). Page references will be included in the essay.
[8] Michael Robertson, *Stephen Crane, Journalism, and the Making of Modern American Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 27.
[9] Amy Kaplan, *The Social construction of American Realism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988), 21.
[10] Nancy Cohen, *The Reconstruction of American Liberalism 1865-1914* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002), 111.