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## Giving a Character: Howellsian Realism in *The Landlord at Lion's Head*

John W. Crowley

I find this young man worthy," attested Hawthorne to Emerson, thus giving Howells one of the best characters in American literary history. Decades after his New England pilgrimage of 1860, W. D. Howells still cherished the memory of Hawthorne as "without alloy one of the finest pleasures of my life." The postulant from Ohio, over dinner with James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and James T. Fields, had already been ordained by them into the apostolic succession of the New England clerisy. But the laying on of hands by these idols of Howells's youth was less signal an honor than his acceptance by Hawthorne, of whom the Bostonians had all spoken "with the same affection, but the same sense of something mystical and remote in him." Thinking perhaps of Lowell and the other Bostonians, Howells reflected that many great men "wittingly or unwittingly . . . propose themselves to you as an example, or if not quite this . . . surround themselves with a subtle ether of potential disapprobation, in which, at the first sign of unworthiness in you, they helplessly suffer you to gasp and perish."<sup>1</sup> Hawthorne, however, had exacted no subservience from his young admirer; he had declared Howells's worthiness unconditionally.

Howells, in turn, was to claim artistic filiation to Hawthorne. After borrowing from each of the New England romances in his early novels, Howells later played variations on *The Scarlet Letter* in *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890) and "A Difficult Case" (1900), on *The House of the Seven Gables* in *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904), and on *The Blithedale Romance* (which Howells always ranked above the others) in *The World of Chance* (1893) and *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897).

### I

*Landlord*, as its too few readers have long agreed,<sup>2</sup> is the imaginative climax of Howells's long career. The novel was written between April 1895 and March 1896, when he was about the same age Hawthorne had been in 1860. Composition went

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<sup>1</sup> *Literary Friends and Acquaintance: A Personal Retrospect of American Authorship* (1900), ed. David H. Hiatt and Edwin H. Cady (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 37, 51–52.

<sup>2</sup> For such early Howells critics as Delmar Cooke and Oscar W. Firkins, *Landlord* was (respectively) "the greatest of his novels" and one of two "really distinguished" late fictions. In support of his own judgment that *Landlord* is

"unquestionably first-class," Edwin H. Cady cites Owen Wister's report of Henry James's stammering affirmation: "'It's—it's—it's . . . Well, I think it's possible—yes, I'll go as far as possible—that—that—six-and-a-half Americans [Wister was the half] know how good it is.'" Kenneth S. Lynn excepts *Landlord* from his summary dismissal of Howells's late writing, praising its anticipation of twentieth-century naturalism. George N.

smoothly at first, but then Howells ran into trouble that forced him “to go back over it, and tear it all to pieces, and put it together again.”<sup>3</sup> This radical revision likely resulted from his changing conception of the main character.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Howells had begun with the idea of studying “the growth of a brute boy into a pretty good man” (SL 4:104), the “naughty boy” ultimately became a “mixture of good and bad” (SL 4:125n) in whom the bad prevails. The novel finds this young man *unworthy* in the eyes of an unwilling mentor.

The rise of Jeff Durgin, a rural Yankee more akin to Bartley Hubbard than to Silas Lapham,<sup>5</sup> dismays Jere Westover, a midwestern artist who has adopted the genteel values of Boston with the compensatory zeal of an outsider. In his western origins and in the eastward path of his career, Westover resembles his author. The son of emigrants to Wisconsin, Westover “lived in the woods, there, till [he] began to paint [his] way out.” Deeply impressed by some Bostonians he encountered abroad, he aspired “to live where that kind of people lived”; and the artist has, in fact, gained a foothold in their elite society.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Westover, Howells never forgot that he was only Boston-plated. Having come “Roundabout to Boston,” as he titled a reminiscence essay, Howells stood somewhat apart from the privileged natives among whom he circulated personally and professionally during his *Atlantic Monthly* years.<sup>7</sup> Aware in a positive sense of his western difference, Howells understood nonetheless the dread of social rejection betrayed by Westover—the precariousness of whose position is suggested by the stress that surrounds his tea party for Mrs. Vostrand, the charming but nouveau riche American emigrée whose Italian salon he once admired. The artist’s friends are “some of the nicest people in Boston . . . in both the personal and the social sense,” and his faith that “they would not hesitate to sacrifice themselves for him

Bennett calls it “one of the finest novels” Howells ever wrote. See: Cooke, *William Dean Howells: A Critical Study* (New York: Dutton, 1922), 251; Firkins, *William Dean Howells: A Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 181; Cady, *The Realist at War: The Mature Years 1885–1920 of William Dean Howells* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1958), 224, 229; Lynn, *William Dean Howells: An American Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 311; Bennett, *The Realism of William Dean Howells 1889–1920* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1973), 130.

<sup>3</sup> *Selected Letters of W. D. Howells*, ed. George Arms, Christoph K. Lohmann, et al. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979–83), 4:119n. Other quotations are identified in the text by the abbreviation, SL. In his “Bibliographical” preface to the Library Edition, Howells remembered “a very becoming despair when, at a certain moment in [the writing of *Landlord*], I began to wonder what I was driving at.” His grip on his characters was so strong, he added, that he “need not have had the usual fear of their failure to work out their destiny.” *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* (New York: Harper, 1911), viii.

<sup>4</sup> On 27 July 1896, soon after the novel had begun its serial run in *Harper’s Weekly*, Howells wrote to a friend: “I hope you will find Jeff justifying the pains I have taken with him.” *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, ed. Mildred Howells (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), 2:70.

<sup>5</sup> For George C. Carrington, Jr., Jeff is “as it were, the son of Bartley Hubbard; he has the strengths, greatly increased, and lacks the weaknesses. He has energy,

charisma, malice, social smoothness, humor, intelligence, and flawless powers of perception; he never loses control and he never forgets.” *The Immense Complex Drama: The World and Art of the Howells Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), 121.

<sup>6</sup> *The Landlord at Lion’s Head* (New York: Harper, 1897), 300–301. Other quotations are identified in the text. The novel is currently available in a paperback facsimile of the first edition (New York: Dover, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Soon after he had begun *Landlord*, Howells was urged by Charles Eliot Norton, his oldest Bostonian friend and patron, to write a biography of James Russell Lowell, who had died in 1891. Howells pleaded lack of time and then admitted that he felt “some most serious disqualifications in myself. Chief and irremediable of these is that I am not a New Englander, and no mere lover or witness of New England could portray such a character as Lowell’s, or express the full meaning of his life” (SL 4:107). With sly tact, Howells suggested that Norton himself was singularly equipped for the job. It is not surprising that Norton later objected to *Landlord*—and specifically, we may infer from Howells’s reply, to the portrait of the Lyndes. Seeming to give ground while really conceding nothing, Howells professed: “The pleasant people *are* more familiar to our experience; you are entirely right; and I do not know why I should have made so many unpleasant ones, unless it is because they are easier to do. . . . the best I can say . . . is that it seems to me a good piece of work in places. But it is also very disagreeable in places” (SL 4:152).

in a good cause" makes him "all the more anxious that the cause should be beyond question" (124). As Westover secretly fears, however, Mrs. Vostrand and her daughter Genevieve fail, despite their Italianate polish, to attain the rarefied standards of his other guests, the young ladies who are also his art students—and, after all, his patrons.

Westover's social anxiety implicates him unwittingly in Jeff Durgin's rise; for Durgin achieves success not merely in spite of Westover's (and Boston's) authority, but also by means of its hidden instability. Installed at the end as landlord of the chic, Europeanized hotel that has risen from the ashes of his mother's country inn, Durgin seems destined to complete his Franklinesque ascent from obscurity and poverty to wealth and some degree of reputation in the world. That Durgin has managed to reach this point—and reach it so easily—signals the dawn of a new social order in which the old ways of Bostonian ladies and gentlemen will provide no moral bearings. Perhaps the most vital of Howells's characters, Durgin has, to Westover's thinking, no character at all.

Westover has been read as Howells's *raisonneur*: not only the vehicle for his judgments on Jeff Durgin but also the locus of his deepest moral convictions and social values.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, Howells himself disapproved of Durgin to a degree. Writing to Henry Blake Fuller in 1904, he promised that James Langbrith (in *The Son of Royal Langbrith*) would not be "the outright brute that Jeff Durgin was" (*SL* 5:71). But in his retrospective preface to *Landlord* in 1911, Howells confessed to an abiding fondness for Jeff: "I myself liked the hero of the tale more than I have liked worthier men, perhaps because I thought I had achieved in him a true rustic New England type in contact with urban life under entirely modern conditions." While this "aesthetic success" may have mitigated his author's severity toward Jeff's "ethical shortcomings," Howells did not expect "others to share my weakness."<sup>9</sup> His reaction to Durgin, then, was as mixed as the character himself. Although he acknowledged Jeff's demerits, he did not align himself uncritically with Westover's harsher view of them. Howells's distance from Westover evokes *Landlord's* intertextual relationship to *The Blithedale Romance*; for although Westover, like Coverdale, may resemble his author in some respects, he is subjected to narrative irony throughout the novel. What Coverdale and Westover have most in common is a propensity to voyeurism that compromises their reliability. (Westover is not, like Coverdale, a first-person narrator, but Howells makes him the center of consciousness for much of the novel.) Both characters are also shown to be deeply fearful of sexuality, especially their own, such that in his covert desire for a demure Puritan maiden, each remains blind to the bias he harbors against a rival. But Westover does not live to regret the loss of Cynthia Whitwell; instead he marries this counterpart to Hawthorne's Priscilla. Hollingsworth and Zenobia correspond, roughly, to Durgin and Bessie Lynde, the vampish society girl by whom Jeff is enthralled. Such parallels are finally less significant than Hawthorne's and Howells's overriding concern with the relationship of perception to moral judgment in giving a character.

<sup>8</sup> Firkins, for example, argues that Westover is deputized to formulate Howells's "convictions and hesitations" (*William Dean Howells: A Study*, 184). For Cady, Westover is a Jamesian observer: "Howells lets him represent civilization and stand at the end as the one character who can incarnate values which really call Jeff Durgin's success into doubt" (*The Realist at War*, 226). Susan Allen Toth, while recognizing Howells's distance

from Westover, still finds the portrait "blurred at the edges, because although Howells seems to condemn Westover's delusive self-confidence and his narrowness, he finds it hard to divorce himself entirely from Westover's social attitudes" ("Character and Focus in *The Landlord at Lion's Head*," *Colby Library Quarterly* 11 [1975]:123).

<sup>9</sup> "Bibliographical," viii.

Near the close of *Landlord*, Westover is thrown into a quandary by a request from Mrs. Vostrand for a character: a letter vouching for Jeff Durgin's fitness to marry the widowed Genevieve, who has been victimized by a "noble" Italian adventurer. "I cannot bear to risk my child's happiness a second time," writes Mrs. Vostrand in a letter so fatuous that it withers Westover's "youthful ideal" of her. "I told Mr. Durgin quite frankly how I felt, and he agreed with me that after our *experience* with poor Gigi we could not be too careful, and he authorized me to write to you, and find out *all you knew* about him" (429–30).

Declining to make formal response to such "sentimental insincerities" (431), Westover writes directly to Durgin, detailing all his reservations about the young man's character and leaving it to him to show the letter or not. "I have told you the worst things I know of you," Westover concludes, "and I do not pretend to know them more than superficially. I am not asked to judge you, and I will not." Instead, Durgin himself must decide "whether these and other acts of yours are the acts of a man good enough to be intrusted with the happiness of a woman who has already been very unhappy" (433).

For Westover, who has always wrapped himself in a subtle ether of potential disapprobation in regard to Durgin, it is a foregone conclusion that Jeff will neither gasp nor perish. Rather, he will ignore the directive implicit here and marry Genevieve. How could he do otherwise?—since a man of sufficient character would not need to be told he lacked it, and a man without such character would perceive no lack. "What you have made yourself you will be to the end," warns Westover (434), with a conviction that derives from his notion of character as the accretion of individual acts of will, something solid and real, a basis for reasonable predictions concerning future actions.

## II

This incident in *Landlord* had a basis in Howells's own experience: the tragedy of his sister Victoria's marriage to John H. Mulholland of Toronto. A year younger than Howells, Victoria was the intellectual soul mate of his youth, the only family member with whom he could share his vaunting ambitions for a literary career. Although she had her own literary aspirations, they were stifled when she resigned herself to "those bounds where her duty lay," as her brother said—that is, to caring for their brain-damaged brother Henry within the family home.<sup>10</sup>

Once engaged to a surgeon who died soon afterward in the Civil War, Victoria Howells was forty-five when she agreed to marry John Mulholland, but only on the condition that she continue to live with Henry on her father's farm in Virginia. Of the Mulhollands' married life almost nothing is known. After their wedding, on October 3, 1883, they remained together just two years. Then, as Victoria's father remembered, Mulholland "left us, on a pretended business trip into Alabama, which was the last we saw of him, and all communication between us was dropped in a few months; which closed an unhappy episode in her life."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Years of My Youth* (1916), in *Years of My Youth and Three Essays*, ed. David J. Nordloh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 108.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of William Cooper Howells to Lucretia R. Garfield, 7 January 1887 (Howells-Fr  chette Papers, Herrick Memorial Library, Alfred University). This letter, which William Cooper Howells set in type and then

apparently sent to family friends who had expressed their condolences, recounts Victoria's final day in harrowing detail and refers to Mulholland's desertion in the last paragraph. The elder Howells's dating of that event ("early in October, 1885") seems to be contradicted by a letter of 4 April 1886 from Victoria to the children of her sister Annie, in which "Uncle Hal" is mentioned as present on

In fact, life itself was soon to close for Victoria. Within months of her husband's disappearance, she contracted malarial typhoid; and after tortuous weeks of rally and relapse—and an arduous journey to the family homestead in Jefferson, Ohio—she died on December 3, 1886. Howells himself had rushed from Boston to join the death watch at Victoria's bedside. Perhaps the novelist remarked the uncanny resemblance of Mulholland's flight to Bartley Hubbard's in *A Modern Instance*, published the year before Victoria's marriage. He may well have wished, in any event, that life would imitate art to the degree of visiting upon Mulholland a fate at least as ignominious as Bartley's being gunned down in the streets of Whited Sepulchre, Arizona. But justice, poetic or otherwise, was not to be for the betrayer of Howells's favorite sister.

Less than two years after Victoria's death, Mulholland resurfaced. He now was seeking the hand of another (younger) woman, whose mother, through her minister, solicited Howells for a character. Howells replied that the family had "no wish concerning Mulholland except to forget him," and he refused to "re-open the painful chapter of his life in our family," adding that he "should profoundly pity any woman who married him." Contradictorily, Howells then urged his father to denounce Mulholland to the clergyman. "The poor fool of a girl will probably marry him anyway," he ruefully predicted (*SL* 3:178n).<sup>12</sup> Whether or not this was true in fact, Howells made it so in his fictional use of the incident. In *Landlord*, Westover is in the same position with Durgin as Howells had been with Mulholland: helpless to stop a cad's progress in a world where character seems to be worth no more than the paper a character is written on.

### III

So far, I have deliberately mixed usages of this word in order to suggest the linkage of "character" as a stamp of individuality to "character" as a letter of reference to "character" as an element of fiction.<sup>13</sup> The pivotal usage is the obsolete middle one, in which the root meaning of "character" as something inscribed—a written sign—bears directly on human subjectivity. To give a character is literally to figure a person in words—the goal, in Howells's view, of the realistic novel as well.

the farm (Howells-Fréchette Papers), though if Mulholland had truly disappeared the previous October, Vic might still have been covering it up to the Fréchette children.

<sup>12</sup> The Mulholland mystery is thickened by a letter from Howells to his sister Aurelia, 2 July 1905, written soon after he attended the wedding of Thomas Nelson Page's daughter: "It seems so strange to connect him [Page] with poor Victoria's sad story; you know he wrote me the lawyer's letter which the mere sight of caused Mulholland's flight" (The Houghton Library, Harvard University). Either Howells or his father had evidently discovered something so disreputable or even criminal about Mulholland that the hint of exposure was enough to prompt his flight. That Mulholland's "desertion" may have been, in effect, a banishment is suggested by Howells's allusion, in January 1887, to a letter from the miscreant's sister: "It is most gratifying for us, and leaves father in just the right position; but it comes too late to 'soothe the dull cold ear of death' " (*SL* 3:178). This may

well have been, as the editors of *Selected Letters* speculate, "a letter of sympathy to the Howells family upon the occasion of Victoria's death" (*SL* 3:178n). But Howells's sense of justification and his quotation from Thomas Gray's "Elegy" seem to imply that Mulholland's sister had also expressed support for whatever actions the family had taken against her wayward brother.

<sup>13</sup> Howells uses the word in all of these senses in *Landlord*, as well as in one other: a "character" as a person who is eccentric or unaccountable by familiar standards. For example, some city travelers who meet Mrs. Durgin at the beginning of the novel "are not sure of covert slant" in her deadpan responses to their foolish chatter; "the ladies left her with the belief that they had met a character" (3). Jeff later adopts this usage in his first conversation with the Vostrands, when he is eager to impress them with his sophistication. Nodding toward Whitwell, he remarks, "Well, nothing's queer to me in the hill country. But you see some characters here" (107). In both instances, "character" enforces the social hierarchy.

He would have seen little difference, in fact, between giving a character for Durgin and giving one for Mulholland. Either in literature or in life, an individual's actions were read as signs of moral soundness or the lack of it. As Amy Kaplan says, "Character for Howells and his contemporaries implied more than a neutral descriptive term for a structural element in a novel; it carried the moral connotations of personal integrity—to have character." Thus knowledge of character was "inseparable from the communal judgment of character as morally good or bad."<sup>14</sup>

Whatever its moral valence, character was assumed to be integral to identity, to self-sameness. Howells understood the building of character in much the same terms as did William James. In his enthusiastic review of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), Howells endorsed James's view that good character results from the discipline of good habits:

It would be hard for us, at least, to find a more important piece of writing in its way than the chapter on Habit; it is something for the young to read with fear and hope, the old with self-pity or self-gratulation, and every one with recognition of the fact that in most things that tell for good or ill, and much or little in life, we are creatures of our own making. It would be well for the reader to review this chapter in the light of that on the Will, where the notion of free-will is more fully dealt with. In fact the will of the weak man is *not* free; but the will of the strong man, the man who has *got the habit* of preferring sense to nonsense and "virtue" to "vice," is a *freed* will, which one might very well spend all one's energies in achieving.

Later in the same "Editor's Study" column, Howells praised H. H. Boyesen's depiction (in *The Mammon of Unrighteousness*) of a character similar to Jeff Durgin. Boyesen's ruthless young man "in his miserable success" remains "always himself, not with that mechanical singleness which a weaker art conceives, but with that mixture of motive yielding to the prevalent tendency of his character which it is the expression and the proof of mastery in an artist to render."<sup>15</sup> However mixed a character, its "prevalent tendency" could be discerned and a judgment of it rendered. If "we are creatures of our own making"—a formulation echoed by Westover in his letter to Durgin—then a person lacking good character has failed to develop a "freed will" and to exercise it consistently.

In *Landlord*, the narrator intrudes at one point, filling a gap in Westover's experience in order to distinguish between "character" and "type": "He did not know [because he had never been to college] that a college man often goes wrong in his first year, out of no impulse that he can very clearly account for himself, and then when he ceases to be merely of his type and becomes more of his character, he pulls up and goes right" (86–87).<sup>16</sup> At issue here is Jeff Durgin's drunken escapade as a Harvard freshman, the penalty for which is rustication for one semester. The narrator suggests that Durgin's adult character (which constitutes his individuality) has yet to emerge fully from his type (which comprises his hereditary and social background).<sup>17</sup> Type is innate; character is acquired.

<sup>14</sup> *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 24.

<sup>15</sup> "Editor's Study," *Harper's Monthly* 83 (July 1891), reprinted in *Editor's Study* by William Dean Howells, ed. James W. Simpson (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1983), 324, 327.

<sup>16</sup> Howells also had never been to college. In his preface, however, he alluded to the knowledge about Harvard he had obtained vicariously through his son John, a student there during the early 1890s, and he asserted that he "had

not lived twelve years in Cambridge without acquaintance such as even an elder man must make with the undergraduate life." Nevertheless, he offered "to stand corrected by undergraduate experience" ("Bibliographical," ix).

<sup>17</sup> Cynthia is snobbishly labeled "The New England type" (110) by Mrs. Vostrand, who is pilloried, in turn, by one of Westover's students for her social pretensions: "she laughed and said she knew the type." When Westover protests that Mrs. Vostrand is "not the type," the student

The distinction appears, in slightly different terms, in Westover's letter to Durgin. Recalling how Jeff bombarded him with apples during his first visit to Lion's Head, Westover remarks, "I never greatly blamed you for that, for I decided that you had a vindictive temperament, and that you were not responsible for your temperament, but only for your character" (432). Should good character remain undeveloped, however, and "vindictive temperament" prevail by default, then moral responsibility *would* be incurred—not for what is "natural," but for a failure to tame or civilize it.

In the crucial debate between Westover and Durgin, in which Howells dramatizes the unbridgeable gulf between their theories of character, Jeff attacks the root assumption of willful choice in human behavior:

"You believe that everything is done from a purpose, or that a thing is intended because it's done. But I see that most things in this world are not thought about, and not intended. They happen, just as much as the other things that we call accidents."

"Yes," said Westover, "but the wrong things don't happen from people who are in the habit of meaning the right ones."

"I believe they do, fully half the time," Jeff returned; "and as far as the grand result is concerned you might as well think them and intend them as not." (278)

For Westover, as for James, the habit of meaning right constitutes "freed will." For Jeff "freed will" is illusory; character, if it exists at all, arises from accident at least as much as from will.

Calling Jeff a "brute" and a "blackguard" for giving liquor to the already inebriated Alan Lynde, Westover wonders at Durgin's "patience under his severity." He thinks, "It was of a piece with the behavior of the rascally boy whom he had cuffed for frightening Cynthia and her little brother long ago, and he wondered what final malvolence [*sic*] it portended" (279). Like all of Westover's judgments on Jeff, this one seems excessive.<sup>18</sup> Durgin's offense against Lynde is far less literally "brutal" than Lynde's own later whipping of Durgin. But Westover's theory of character, which is embedded in the class privilege that authorizes *Lynde's* malevolence, predisposes him to think the worst of Jeff, even as he unconsciously envies Jeff's attraction for Cynthia Whitwell. Although they share a belief in the moral efficacy of "freed will," Westover is not Howells's narrator, who entertains doubts that Westover willfully denies.

It is clear, however, that in giving challenge (through Durgin) to the very idea of character, *Landlord* also confronts the social implications of such doubts. Howells perceived an organic bond between character and culture, a mutual dependence of personal qualities and moral conventions, such that the decay of individual character could only mean, as Thorstein Veblen wrote in a book that Howells also reviewed warmly, a "derangement" of the social order:

The code of proprieties, conventionalities, and usages in vogue at any given time and among any given people has more or less of the character of an organic whole; so that any appreciable change in one point of the scheme involves something of a change or readjustment at other points also, if not a reorganisation all along the

rejoins that types are never typical. Later, after meeting the Vostrands, the young lady "would not allow that the mother was not the type when Westover challenged her experience" (128).

<sup>18</sup> As Firkins suggest, Westover's indignation over the

Lynde incident strikes Jeff as "irrational" and the reader as "a trifle overstrained" (*William Dean Howells: A Study*, 182). More forcefully, Lynn indicts Westover for his "Prufrockian rectitude" (*William Dean Howells: An American Life*, 309).



line. When a change is made which immediately touches only a minor point in the scheme, the consequent derangement of the structure of conventionalities may be inconspicuous; but even in such a case it is safe to say that some derangement of the general scheme, more or less far-reaching, will follow.<sup>19</sup>

## IV

Jeff Durgin catalyzes such a derangement through his effect on those characters most deeply invested in the “structure of conventionalities.” These include not only Westover, whose chastisement of Jeff becomes increasingly ineffectual, and the Lyndes, whose corruption confirms Jeff’s worst imaginings about elite decadence, but even minor figures in the novel.

In the early scene, for instance, in which Jeff is snubbed by Mrs. Marven, the (mainly female) witnesses are “petrified” by embarrassment and uncertainty. “What did they expect?” sniffs one lady, as if in accord with Mrs. Marven’s drawing of a class line between herself and the common country boy. “But the question was so difficult,” says the narrator, “that no one seemed able to make the simple answer” (75). It is no less difficult when Mrs. Durgin later retaliates by publicly banishing Mrs. Marven from Lion’s Head. The other guests may agree that this “brutal” expulsion is an “outrage,” and they may share an impulse to pack their own bags in solidarity with Mrs. Marven. But none of them does so, and their talk veers “round to something extenuating if not justifying Mrs. Durgin’s action” before they weakly rally behind its object, only to settle into round-robin irresolution:

“And yet,” another lady suggested, “what could Mrs. Marven have done? What *did* she do? He [Jeff] wasn’t asked to the picnic, and I don’t see why he should have been treated as a guest. . . . And besides, if there *is* anything in distinctions, in differences, if we are to choose who is to associate with us—or our daughters—”

“That is true,” the ladies said, in one form or another, with the tone of conviction; but they were not so deeply convinced but they wanted a man’s opinion, and they all looked at Westover. . . .

“Ah, it’s a difficult question,” he said. “I suppose that as long as one person believes himself or herself socially better than another, it must always be a fresh problem what to do in every given case.” (77–78)

This subtly comic passage bears on several major themes in the novel: the collision of country and city mores; the gap between the illusion of American classlessness and the reality of invidious social distinctions; the centrality of marriage to the perpetuation of upper-class privilege; the gendering of code enforcement whereby women and feminized men such as Westover,<sup>20</sup> with their cultivated moral sensitivities, are charged with resisting offenses to propriety but

<sup>19</sup> *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1967), 201.

<sup>20</sup> When Westover challenges Durgin to test his mother’s and Cynthia’s reactions to his behavior toward the Lyndes, Jeff acknowledges that “They’d judge it as you do—as if they’d done it themselves. That’s the reason women are not fit to judge.” He then defies Westover to tell them anyway. “Bah!” he retorts. “Why should I want to? I’m not a woman in everything.” Westover’s uncertainty about his “manliness,” which reflects the larger crisis of gender at the turn of the century, has been echoed

in the criticism on the novel. Cooke calls him “the ‘Howells young man’—the insipid and somewhat feminized creation that Howells employed to typify the Boston culture, the nice young man” (*William Dean Howells: A Critical Study*, 250), whereas Firkins regards him as “the manliest of Mr. Howells’s travelled Bostonians” (*William Dean Howells: A Study*, 183). Both Cooke and Firkins were writing in the 1920s, when the redefinition of “manliness” was still in flux. Half a century later, Lynn finds Westover to be decidedly “effeminate,” the “artist as middle-aged prig,” who lacks the “masculine

remain ultimately dependent on patriarchal force to uphold the social law. Most significant, however, is the failure here of the class and gender systems to reaffirm the power relations on which they are constructed.<sup>21</sup>

If there *is* anything to “distinctions” as markers of social (and, by implication, moral) difference, if elite daughters are to be preserved for socially commensurate mates, if the Jeff Durgins of the world are to be kept in their place, then Mrs. Marven’s actions must be sanctioned by those who profess to share the values she is defending. Was it not right, after all, for her to rebuke Jeff’s presumption? Should any daughter be put at risk to marry him? That both the ladies and Westover equivocate on these questions is subtle proof that none is secure in the beliefs that underwrite their privilege—in part because the equation of social with moral superiority seems somehow dubious, in part because the idea of caste is itself inimical to American democratic ideals. Hence Westover’s appeal to the principle of taking every “case” on its merits, as possible grounds for relaxing social exclusivity. But “what to do” is a purely pragmatic concern; Westover never challenges, as Durgin does, the presuppositions of class distinction.

Westover nevertheless can envision an ideal society in which no person would believe “himself or herself socially better than another.” Just before the picnic scene, in fact, he indulges the fancy that life at Lion’s Head may already have evolved to this point:

But when the farm became a boarding-house and called itself a hotel, as at present with Lion’s Head House, and people paid ten dollars a week, or twelve for transients, a moment of its character was reached which could not be surpassed when its prosperity became greater, and its inmates more pretentious. In fact, the people who can afford to pay ten dollars a week for summer board and not much more, are often the best of the American people. . . . Such people are refined, humane, appreciative, sympathetic; and Westover, fresh from the life abroad where life is seldom so free as ours without some stain, was glad to find himself in the midst of this unrestraint, which was so sweet and pure. He had seen enough of rich people to know that riches seldom brought the highest qualities, even among his fellow-countrymen who suppose that riches can do everything, and the first aspects of society at Lion’s Head seemed to him Arcadian. (69–71)

Although Westover goes on to wonder “just what part in the picnic Jeff was to bear socially,” given his ambiguous status as “neither quite host or guest,” he complacently rests assured that “in the easy play of the life, which Westover was rather proud to find so charming, the question would solve itself rationally and gracefully” (73–74). Howells’s irony is plain. Westover, whom Jeff shrewdly labels an “idealist” (281), will soon discover that Lion’s Head provides no escape from the vexing problem of social difference.

assurance” to propose to Cynthia (*William Dean Howells: An American Life*, 309).

<sup>21</sup> Later in the novel, when Jeff spends his Harvard vacations at home, he often entertains the daughters of the increasingly affluent guests at Lion’s Head. Whereas it becomes a “convention” among the parents “to treat his attentions somewhat like those of a powerful but faithful vassal,” the young ladies themselves, although questioning whether Jeff is “quite what you would call a gentleman,” are notably less steadfast than their elders: “It is true that this

misgiving attacked them mostly in the mass; singly, they were little or not at all troubled by it, and they severally behaved in a unprincipled indifference to it” (184). Howells suggests the attenuation of social and moral rigor among the elite. At its extreme, “unprincipled indifference” becomes the destructive “flirtation” of Bessie Lynde, whose seductive attentions to Jeff imperil not only her reputation but also her sense of herself as Jeff’s superior.

Irony is also at play in the narrator's inventory of "the best of the American people," which includes middle-aged maidens, young mothers, college professors, promising writers, clergymen and their wives, agreeable bachelors, and "hosts of young and pretty girls with distinct tastes in art, and devoted to the clever young painter who leads them to the sources of inspiration in the fields and woods" (70). Here, as throughout this passage, the point of view is loosely tied to Westover's perceptions, in which one may sense an admixture of authorial concurrence. Howells was never a Jamesian purist about technique, and the blurring of point of view in limited third-person narration is common in his work.

In *Landlord*, the result is a thematic indeterminacy that matches the elusiveness of Durgin's character. Does Howells agree or not with Westover's high estimate of those solid middle-class types—types who represent, after all, his own reading public? Does he share or not in Westover's vision of a classless society? From Howells's Altrurian romances it is clear that his own answer to the conflict of the masses and the classes was not Marxian revolution but rather Spencerian evolution, which would dissolve social distinctions by collapsing the lower and upper classes into a universal middle. Westover's ideal is not so different; and in undercutting it, Howells mocks his own utopian tendencies. The logic of such irony finally redounds to realism itself by eroding its epistemological foundation, the idea that character is both determinate and determinable.

## V

Let me reconsider, in more detail, the debate on character between Westover and Durgin. Having tongue-lashed the young man for his supposed offense against the Lyndes, the artist finds himself relenting. He feels "a return of his old illogical liking for him" (280). Westover even permits himself to see things, for once, as if from Durgin's point of view:

He perceived that in this earth-bound temperament was the potentiality of all the success it aimed at. The acceptance of the moral fact as it was, without the unconscious effort to better it, or to hold himself strictly to account for it, was the secret of the power in the man which would bring about the material results he desired; and this simplicity of the motive involved had its charm. Westover was aware of liking Durgin at that moment much more than he ought, and of liking him helplessly. In the light of his good-natured selfishness, the injury to the Lyndes showed much less a sacrilege than it had seemed; Westover began to see it with Jeff's eyes, and to see it with reference to what might be low and mean in them instead of what might be fine and high. (281)

The word *sacrilege* locates the magnetic pole of Westover's moral compass. He persistently conflates the interests of an elite class with the divine order itself, and he regards any fall from grace as a threat to both. But seen from Jeff's point of view, the Lyndes hardly qualify as keepers of any sacred flame. Addicted respectively to alcohol and sexual passion, Alan and Bessie substantiate the "lurid" gossip that Jeff has heard about elite Boston (84), notions of "good" society that, as Westover charges, "would have disgraced a Goth, or a gorilla" (278).

This phrase reflects the Social Darwinian assumptions that permeate *Landlord*. Westover habitually thinks in evolutionary terms, and he resists Jeff's reading of the Lyndes for fear of atavism. Whatever their lapses from the "fine and high," even when they descend to the "low and mean," Alan and Bessie still represent the vanguard of evolution toward a civilized ideal. Westover desperately upholds

this ideal by labeling as “Goth” or “gorilla” not the Lyndes, who are socially degenerate, but rather Durgin, who presumes to perceive their slide into barbarism or devolution. Through such a projection, the elite class is protected from recognizing its moral degradation. Thus Westover fails at first to notice his own moral slippage, which results from his giving Jeff the benefit of his (self-concealed) doubts:

The fellow who could accuse him of being an idealist, and could in some sort prove it, was no longer a naughty boy to be tutored and punished. The revolt latent in him would be violent in proportion to the pressure put upon him, and Westover began to be without the wish to press his fault home to him so strongly. In the optimism generated by the punch, he felt that he might leave the case to Jeff himself; or else in the comfort we all experience in sinking to a lower level, he was unwilling to make the effort to keep his own moral elevation. (282)

Notice the intervention in the final sentence: as Westover succumbs to moral devolution, the narrator hastens to uphold civilized standards by deploring such moral vagrancy and, thus, enforcing a harsher judgment of Jeff than Westover is, at this moment of weakness, capable of sustaining. The narrator also identifies the agent of Westover's lapse: the alcoholic punch that he has been freely imbibing, with Jeff's solicitous encouragement, as a remedy for a cold.<sup>22</sup> In the earlier passage, too, in which Westover slackens his rigor about Jeff's “sacrilege,” the narrator introduces the artist's reflections with the observation, “and now either the punch had begun to work in Westover's brain, or some other influence of like force and quality” (281). Westover doubles Alan Lynde as Jeff replays his earlier role, humoring a man whose punch-drunk affection will turn to detestation in the sober morning light.

Having caught himself “sinking to a lower level,” Westover finally makes an effort to “save himself”:

“You can't get what you've done before yourself as you can the action of some one else. It's part of you, and you have to judge the motive as well as the effect.”

“Well, that's what I'm doing,” said Jeff; “but it seems to me that you're trying to have me judge of the effect from a motive I didn't have. As far as I can make out, I hadn't any motive at all.”

He laughed, and all that Westover could say was, “Then you're still responsible for the result.” But this no longer appeared so true to him. (282)

To be sure, Westover is still under the influence of punch, but the novel never escapes from the philosophical dilemma implicit in his momentary doubt; for the more complex and inscrutable are motives, the less legible is character and the less certain are any moral judgments based on reading results.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Throughout his fiction, Howells consistently associated alcohol with moral corruption—as when drinking wine at Bromfield Corey's dinner party leads Silas Lapham to humiliate himself, or when Bartley Hubbard's love of Tivoli beer presages his desertion of his wife. In *Landlord*, there is an equivalence drawn between Alan's inebriation and Bessie's fascination with Jeff. Both are figured as “addictions,” differentiated along gender lines, to what Bessie calls “excitement.” See my essay “Paradigms of Addiction in Howells' Novels,” *American Literary Realism* 25 (Spring 1993): 3–17.

<sup>23</sup> Glen A. Love demonstrates that the opening scene of *Landlord*, in which the mountain shifts its shape in accord with the sensibility of the observing consciousness, foretells the novel's epistemological crisis. *Lion's Head*, like

Jeff's character, is finally “a hieroglyphic Darwinian volume, tattered and virtually unreadable, a warning of the ‘blotted’ and ‘deformed’ text, ‘wandering and uncertain,’ which—when one puts aside the comfortable, ready-to-hand conventions of meaning-making—remains perversely resistant to interpretations of any sort.” Howells seems to repeat “the compulsions of his Swedenborgian antecedents in seeking to interpret a now post-Darwinian, cryptic universe, to attempt once more to wrest significance from an otherwise chaotic randomness of matter, even while at the same time seeming to sense the folly of such efforts.” “*The Landlord at Lion's Head*: Howells and ‘The Riddle of the Painful Earth,’” *The Old Northwest* 10 (1984): 111, 112.

It is telling that as the novel draws to a close, the mystery of Durgin's character only deepens. Even his most "brutal" act, the assault on Alan Lynde in the woods near Lion's Head, does not provide definitive proof of a malevolence that would confirm Westover's expectations. Why does Jeff desist from killing the man who has earlier beaten and humiliated him? "I can't make it out," Westover concedes to Whitwell (421). Neither character has witnessed the event, but the reader has no better vantage point because of the narrative indeterminacy about Jeff's state of mind at the moment when he releases Lynde from a stranglehold.<sup>24</sup> The text carefully elides this critical instant: "He glared down into his enemy's face, and suddenly it looked pitifully little and weak, like a girl's face, a child's. . . . He took his hands from Lynde's throat and his knees off his breast." What comes in the ellipsis between these passages is a paragraph, set in time *after* the fact, in which Jeff retrospectively ponders an event that is literally a mental blank in the act itself. He alternates between two readings of his motives: (1) he forbore because he had seen Jombateeste approaching from the woods; (2) "his action was purely voluntary, and . . . against the logic of his hate and the habit of his life, he had mercy upon his enemy." Consistent with his own theory of motive, however, Jeff gives himself no moral credit: "He did not pride himself upon it; he rather humbled himself before the fact, which was accomplished through his will, and not by it, and remained a mystery he did not try to solve" (414-15).

As Whitwell speculates, referring to the mysterious message from the planchette, it may be that Jeff has simply changed for the better: "the broken shaft is the old Jeff that he's left off bein'— . . . Why couldn't the broken shaft be his unfulfilled destiny on the old lines?" (451-52). Westover, of course, has no patience with such meliorism; he falls back on stern biblical authority:

"A tree brings forth of its kind. As a man sows he reaps. It's dead sure, pitilessly sure. Jeff Durgin sowed success, in a certain way, and he's reaping it. He once said to me, when I tried to waken his conscience, that he should get where he was trying to go if he was strong enough, and being good had nothing to do with it. I believe now he was right. But he was wrong too, as such a man always is. That kind of tree bears Dead Sea apples, after all. He sowed evil and he must reap evil. He may never know it, but he will reap what he has sown. The dreadful thing is that others must share in his harvest." (452)

Whether Westover will be proven a prophet remains unclear because the novel ends well before Durgin's harvest has fully ripened. The ferocity of Westover's rhetoric expresses a puritanical will to believe in the final triumph of rectitude and the punishment of evildoers. But such vehemence seems finally irrelevant. Even should Jeff suffer the fate of reaping Dead Sea apples without knowing it, will anyone care? Will Westover's standards of judgment still exist?

## VI

The deepest dread in *Landlord* lies in the possibility that Durgin's career may herald the arrival of a post-moral age in which the idea of good character will be obsolete. Oscar W. Firkins suggests that Howells intended to create in Jeff "a scoundrel

<sup>24</sup> Rarely does the narrator of *Landlord* enter the consciousness of any character other than Westover. When Westover is offstage, as in chapters 21 through 24, Howells relies primarily on the dramatic method, with

occasional narrative intrusions. Jeff is seen from the "inside," however, for a few pages in chapter 50, just before and during his encounter with Lynde.

incognito, so to speak, without the particular deeds which attract that unseemly label. The *stigmata* were to be excluded." In his good-natured but calculating way, Durgin becomes "in a sense the unprejudiced eye; what it sees is actually extricated from moral preconceptions"—because his "inactive moral sense" has been "replaced, and, in its way, effectively replaced, by a cool estimate of the degree to which good is useful and evil practicable in a society tethered to laws and usages."<sup>25</sup> As Glen A. Love remarks, "If Jeff is a representative new man, then the existence of civilization itself may be threatened."<sup>26</sup>

In exploring the threat to "civilization," however, Howells also questions its meaning. Is civilization the flower of social evolution, the outcome of Spencerian "progress"? Or does Social Darwinism mystify the embeddedness of civilization in historically specific social practices? If, as Robert K. Martin says, "civilization" is taken as a system of repression that continually disguises its own source of power, then Westover may indeed speak for it, and for Howells' own ambivalences."<sup>27</sup> The ambivalence consists in Howells's not merely grieving the eclipse of Westover's world but also subjecting that world to the critique of Durgin's "unprejudiced eye." What the reader sees, as a result, is the inseparability of "civilization" from class privilege.<sup>28</sup>

But what did Howells himself see? Surely not this much, according to one line of thinking, in which Howells is cast as a dupe of bourgeois hegemony. Alan Trachtenberg, for instance, asserts:

For the sake of the moral order he assumed realism would disclose, it was essential that characters reap their just rewards, that good come to the good and bad to the bad—even at the cost of plausibility. Too often Howells contrived devices—chance encounters, changes of heart, sacrificial acts—to ensure a relatively benign outcome, if not exactly a happy ending, then at least a morally pleasing one. Thus, Howells resorted often to "romance" to preserve the moral assurances of his "realism."

Realism, then, brings Howells to the point where, in spite of himself, his fictions of the real disclose the unresolved gaps and rifts within the traditional world view he wishes to maintain, to correct and discipline.<sup>29</sup>

Not only are such gaps and rifts conspicuous in *The Landlord at Lion's Head*, they are also shown to be irremediable—well beyond correction or discipline. Westover's desire to ensure that characters reap their just rewards is ironically subverted. There is neither a happy nor a morally pleasing ending. Even the future of Westover's marriage to Cynthia Whitwell remains problematical.

<sup>25</sup> William Dean Howells: *A Study*, 185–86.

<sup>26</sup> "The Landlord at Lion's Head: Howells and 'The Riddle of the Painful Earth,'" 108.

<sup>27</sup> "Hercules in Knickerbockers: Class, Gender, and Sexuality in *The Landlord at Lion's Head*," *American Literary Realism* 20 (1988): 66n. Martin, stressing the erotic subtext of Westover's fascination with Durgin, reads *Landlord* as "a major work in an American pederastic tradition" (55). In this view, the artist's rivalry with Jeff for the love of Cynthia Whitwell masks his desire for the young man; the romance subplot thus serves to displace a homosexual theme that was literally unspeakable in 1897.

<sup>28</sup> This was the point also of "The Midnight Platoon," published in *Harper's Weekly* on 4 May 1895, soon after

Howells had begun work on *Landlord*. In this sketch, a Howellsian narrator reports the experience of an affluent friend, a Westover type, who has braved the winter chill (in his warm carriage) to observe homeless men line up to receive a dole of bread from a New York mission house. Self-conscious of his voyeurism and pricked by guilt, the observer comes to the sudden realization of his own "representivity" in the eyes of the midnight platoon: "He was Society: Society that was to be preserved because it embodies Civilization. He wondered if they hated him in his capacity of Better Classes." *Literature and Life*, Library Edition (New York: Harper, 1911), 160.

<sup>29</sup> *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 192.

Thus whatever Howells's desire to maintain "the traditional world view," this novel confronts, more directly and more deliberately than Trachtenberg allows, the lack of moral assurances and the decline of Western "civilization" (West-over). Jeff Durgin, like the Dreiserian characters he prefigures, exemplifies what Jackson Lears has called a new and "ever more chimerical" type of "self-made manhood" in which "personal magnetism" began to replace character as the key to advancement.<sup>30</sup> As "conventional definitions of 'will power' began to seem oversimplified and familiar feelings of selfhood began to seem obsolete," the disintegration of Victorian "character" produced "the modern sense of unreality."<sup>30</sup>

The birth of modern "unreality" meant the demise of realism insofar as it depended on the reality of "character" as autonomous selfhood.<sup>31</sup> Beginning in the 1890s, Howells turned to other kinds of narrative, including "romance" and "psychologism," to assess Durgin's challenge to "character" by seeking the roots of human motivation—a quest that led him to an increasing awareness of its occult, unconscious operations. *The Landlord at Lion's Head* was Howells's last important realistic novel perhaps because it was a novel about the death of realism itself.

<sup>30</sup> "From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880–1930," in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 8–9. To exemplify the emergent idea of a "self that was neither simple nor genuine, but fragmented and socially constructed," Lears quotes from *A Boy's Town*: "As Howells wrote in 1890, the human personality seemed like an onion, which was 'nothing but hulls, that you keep peeling off, one after another, till you think you have got down to the heart at last, and then you have got down to nothing.'"

<sup>31</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, in his provocative reading of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, places "character" within the "economy" of realism: "Character resists fluctuation;

never 'the prey of mere accident and appearance,' it goes 'for something.' The value of character is like the 'values' of contrast in pictures—'rents, stocks, real estate—all those values shrink abominably,' but 'you never hear of values in a picture shrinking.' In contrasting Howells to Dreiser, Michaels argues, "Where Howells identifies character with autonomy, Dreiser thus identifies it with desire, an involvement with the world so central to one's sense of self that the distinction between what one is and what one wants tends to disappear." (*The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987]), 40–41.) Although Michaels does not discuss *Landlord*, Jeff Durgin conforms to this description. Like Carrie Meeber, he may be seen to exemplify the emergent "self" of consumer capitalism.