

The Howellsian



Pre-ALA Mini-Issue

Contents:

The 2013 Howells Essay Prize Winner:

Cristina D'Amico, "In Conversation with William Dean Howells'

A Traveler from Altruria (1894) 2

Howells Panels at the 2014 ALA Conference, Washington D.C. 8

Membership Information 9

The 2013 Howells Essay Prize Competition

The Howells Society Essay Prize is awarded each year for the best paper on Howells presented at the annual ALA conference. The winning essay may have been presented in any session on the program of the conference, including but not limited to panels sponsored by the Howells Society. Papers are judged by members of the Executive Committee, who have the option of appointing additional readers as necessary.

Congratulations to this year's winner, Cristina D'Amico (University of Toronto), whose essay appears in full below.

In Conversation with William Dean Howells' *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894)

© Cristina D'Amico

My interest in thinking about conversation as a formal device in William Dean Howells' *A Traveler from Altruria* started with a cursory remark I read about the novel in Amy Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism*. In her seminal work, Kaplan closes her chapter on Howells and realism with the following comparative comment:

A Traveler from Altruria does not wrestle with the conflicted social terrain of *Hazard*; it ingests the background as a subject for conversation rather than as a problem for realistic representation. In his Utopian writing, Howells displaces the unreal city – which exerts such a powerful force in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* – with the ideal landscape of Altruria.¹

The opposition between realism and Utopian writing creates a hierarchy of aesthetic practice in Kaplan's text. While realism struggles to represent

the social, Utopian writing reduces complexity to conversation via ingestion and displacement, and the reader only hears about social activity rather than see it firsthand. Certainly, Kaplan's initial insight into the novel is accurate, as talk between characters takes up the vast majority of printed text in *Altruria*. Yet the comparison between *Hazard* and *Altruria* does not do justice to Howells' later novel, and in this paper I want to press Kaplan's claims about conversation a bit further. More specifically, I argue that conversation in the novel performs both intellectual and formal work. If on the level of content the novel endorses a simplistic philosophy of history, the novel's conversations reveal a more complicated understanding of the relationship between social life, communication, and historical change. If I could borrow Jonathan Arac's words from his excellent 2007 article "Howells and the Language of American Fiction," I think that the dialogue in *A Traveler from Altruria* demonstrates that there's a "problem of communication in Howells' America,"² and this inability to resolve conflict through talk acts as a significant barrier to social and political development. *Altruria* stages this problem for us in the form of de-

railed, uncompromising, heated, but ultimately stagnant conversation – and I want to argue that these failed missives and abortive engagements formally mirror interruptions or detours in the dialectical movement of history.

First, there are at least two types of dialectics at work in the novel. At the level of content, the narrative provides an account approximates a Marxist, materialistic conception of history. The Altrurian traveler, Mr. Homos, describes Altruria's move from the Accumulation (another term for capitalism) to his nation's achievement of socialism in a narrative that sounds a lot like Marx's account of the movement of capitalism to communism. Frank Christianson corroborates this point, noting that "Howells offers a narrative of natural progression from the primitive self-interest that governs commercial capitalism to the altruism of a cooperative economy."³ Importantly, it is the internal contradictions and tensions in the economic practices of the Accumulation which produce Altrurian social principles. Later Marxists (like Dietzgen, Kautsky, Plekhanov) name this particular phenomenon dialectical materialism, emphasizing that even an economic system operating at maximal optimization contains internal weaknesses and contradictions that will eventually lead to its undoing. Of course, this quasi-Marxist narrative is supplied to us by the Altrurian traveler, yet it is unclear whether the novel itself endorses this position. If the text's content demonstrates an investment in Marxist dialectics, its form resists a reductive interpretation of historical materialism. More specifically, by looking at how conversation

functions in the novel we can unpack how the text thinks about social and political movement.

The second iteration of dialectics we see in the novel is in the actual form of the conversations themselves. The conversations use the structure of classical Greek dialectic: they are comprised of a dialogue of arguments and counterarguments, propositions and counter-propositions. The outcome or upshot of a dialectical engagement must be some kind of change or movement, be that a refutation of a relevant proposition or a synthesis of two opposing assertions. In dialectical terms, the conversations in the novel provide two different positions – the American thesis and the Altrurian anti-thesis – but never the twain shall meet, because the text consistently denies us the pleasure of a synthesis. The result is stalled, interrupted dialectics that cannot reach a resolution. Howells stages the challenges of conversation as a potential barrier to the easy march of materialist history.

Literary scholars have shown interest in how conversation functions in the novel genre. While they agree that communication is crucial for producing social cohesion, it also "involves an element of risk and even conflict in the process of making meaning in language."⁴ The OED tells us that the word 'conversation' in English originally intimated the idea of the broader social experience of making lives in conjunction with others. To converse was to be "living or having one's being in a place or among persons" and "consorting or having dealings with others;" the word also meant "living together; commerce, intercourse, society, intima-

cy.” The production and sustainment of forms of sociality was something Howells spent a lot of his literary career considering and it is a theme that reappears across his works. The most famous example comes from *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, when Conrad Dryfoos and Basil March meditate on the value of March’s New York sketches. The function of art for Conrad is to “make the comfortable people understand how the uncomfortable people live... Sometimes it seems to me that the only trouble is that we don’t know one another well enough; and that the first thing to do is this.”⁵ The narrative form of *Altruria* is compelling because it concretizes, through narrative form, the difficulty of producing the kind of communication which could eventually lead to social communion.

The following encounter is a group conversation between the narrator, Mr. Twelvemough, the Altrurian, a banker, a minister, a lawyer, and a manufacturer. The exchange is emblematic of the kinds of altercations we see in the novel, as most of the novel’s conversations follow a similar structural pattern. First, there’s a miscommunication or misunderstanding between the two parties; once the two participants apprehend the other’s position, a fervent disagreement follows; and finally, before the conversation can escalate, a timely interruption delays any further exchange. In this example, the manufacturer laments the unruliness of his workers and brags about his recent success in crushing the labour unions. The Altrurian interposes, asking what kind of systems and structures permit such inhuman behaviour. He explains how no one works for their own living in Altruria, but

everyone works for the living of others. The manufacturer initially agrees, thinking that his labourers should be working to support his living, and that their labour is a product he can rightfully appropriate! Once the Altrurian realizes the manufacturer’s meaning, he responds:

[Homos] “Perhaps they might not have found it such a hardship to work for your living if their own had been assured, as it is with us. If you will excuse my saying it, we should think it monstrous in Altruria for any man to have another’s means of life in his power...Do you really have it in your power to take away a man’s opportunity to earn a living?”

[Manufacturer] “It is in my power to take away his life; but I don’t habitually shoot my fellow men, and I never dismissed a man yet without good reason.”

[H] “I didn’t dream of accusing you of such inhumanity. But you see our whole system is so very different that, as I said, it is hard for me to conceive of yours, and I am very curious to understand its workings. If you shot your fellowman, as you say, the law would punish you; but if for some reason that you decided to be good you took away his means of living, and he actually starved to death –

[Twelvemough] “I found all this very uncomfortable, and tried to turn the talk back to a point that I felt curious about.”⁶

The text itself visually represents Twelvemough's interruption with a dash, and after his intervention the conversation takes a very different turn, as Twelvemough engages the Altrurian on more innocuous questions of art and labour. But what if the conversation hadn't stopped? What if the Altrurian and the manufacturer worked out their problematic? Very likely, they would come to the conclusion that although the law forbids murder, it sanctions the suffering and even death of the poor at the whims of profit-oriented capitalists; in other words, the men might have been faced with the fundamental immortality of their system of production. Even if the manufacturer disagreed with the Altrurian, there would have been some movement towards exposing the inner-workings of capitalism. Instead, the talk is hijacked and derailed before conversation can make this uncomfortable, unsettling turn.

While *Altruria* very explicitly endorses the dialectical movement of history on the level of content it questions and at times completely rejects it on the level of form. The novel makes a meta-commentary on the poor quality of conversation that takes place between characters. Towards the end of the text, the comic character Mrs. Makely, an unscrupulous society-woman, tries to raise money to build a new church in New England by having the Altrurian traveler give a lecture about his homeland. While trying to solicit Homos to give the talk, Mrs. Makely tellingly observes: "You have been so slippery about Altruria, you know, that I expected nothing but a point-blank refusal" (165). Makely's comment is only partly true,

as the Altrurian is never purposively reticent or unwilling to discuss his homeland with his American guests. Rather, as the previous interaction demonstrates, in the multiple conversations that structure the novel Homos is rarely given the opportunity to speak at length about Altruria. Makely playfully (and accurately) chastises Twelvemough and his compatriots for their garrulousness: "I do believe that you get so much interested in your own talk when you are with him, that you don't let him get in a word, and that's the reason why you haven't found out anything about Altruria from him yet!" (158). Makely's comments ring true, and only at the end of the novel does the reader get a mostly uninterrupted look at the forms of social and economic relations in Altruria.

The Altrurian's speech, delivered outdoors in a pulpit-like arrangement, lasts for nearly three chapters. Despite being the most sustained and clear explanation of Altruria in the text, the speech is peppered with little digressions and comments from the audience. Nearly all of these queries are designed to undermine the Altrurian and to deter meaningful exchange: "You must expose him when he gets through!"⁷, the professor whispers to the banker several times throughout the speech. At the very end of the novel, Twelvemough reflects on the effects of the speech on the New England residents. His description highlights stasis and uncertainty, as opposed to resolution and movement:

I think he remained very popular with the classes he most affected . . . he left large numbers of such admirers in our house and neighbourhood devout in the faith

that there was such a commonwealth as Altruria, and that he really was an Altrurian. As for the more cultivated people who had met him, they continued of two minds upon both points.⁸

We get a sense of an elemental class struggle in this passage, as the middle class representatives are not convinced of Homos' propositions and they question the existence of *Altruria* and the authenticity of the Altrurian up until the very end of the text. The ending is not necessarily pessimistic; even though it presents us with indecision and uncertainty it also poises the narrative on the threshold of decision. Who is to say that the cultivated people won't turn towards Altruria? If there's a Classical Marxist investment in dialectical materialism in the novel, there is also a strong skepticism and even anxiety about the possibility of political change; in other words, Howells were testing the viability of a certain narrative of social progress against a distinctly American social sphere. How much of social and political change depends on mutual recognition of systemic ills? Can the machinery of history actually overrule the need for mutual agreement? In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville writes that: "Society can only exist when a great number of men consider a great number of things in the same point of view; when they hold the same opinions upon many subjects, and when the same occurrences suggest the same thoughts and impressions to their minds." *Altruria* modifies Tocqueville's claim by adding a class dynamic to his social analysis – it is people of the same means and interests that hold the same opin-

ions in Howells' New England and class division prevents the creation of a new community. The sameness of impression and opinion, when articulated in class terms, functions as a serious threat to both revolutionary and reformist politics in *Altruria*.

Finally, conversation in the novel challenges our assumptions about the text's generic classification. Most scholars have labelled the text a "Utopian romance," but it is tricky to maintain this appellation if we consider the ways in which the text's form represents the difficulties, impasses, and barriers to utopian living. A spattering of critics in the last twenty years – chiefly George Uba and more recently, Glen Love – have argued for different generic classifications for the novel (for example, Uba sees the text as fundamentally allegorical, resembling a medieval psychomachia, and Love suggests that we could as easily call the text dystopian as utopian). My own inclination would be to point out that the Altrurian's description of the end of the Accumulation much more closely resembles scientific socialism – the form of critique and historical analysis that Marx and Engels explicitly pit against utopian socialism. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels lambast the Utopian Socialists for their unwillingness to designate to the proletariat an active role in the production of socialism: "The proletariat, as yet in its infancy, offers to them the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement."⁹ Such a description to me sounds decidedly un-American, and what Howells gives us is the most American version of proletari-

an revolution that you can imagine – the working class poor in Altruria vote the offending propagators of the Accumulation out of power. Homos' discussion of the end of the Accumulation is deeply invested in the activity of the proletariat. In its representation of working class struggle, the text adheres more closely to the doctrines of scientific socialism than Christian or Utopian socialism.

I want to conclude my paper with some thoughts on the literary or intellectual value of revisiting *A Traveler from Altruria* in our contemporary moment, since the critical consensus seems to be that the text has exhausted its literary and political utility. In "Howells and the Language of American Fiction," Jonathan Arac, like Kaplan, ends up gesturing towards Altruria in his reading of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*:

Utopian writing tries to bring us toward a world radically different from the one we know and that has formed our sensibilities. As a result, utopian writing may seem barbaric, off-scale, or even just boring. Howells, in his next major novel, wrote a full-scale utopia, *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894). In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* I find a small utopia in Howells's anti-capitalist social critics who speak languages that baffle our eyes and jar our ears even as they open our minds by affirming different social principles.¹⁰

Here, Arac wants to find the Utopian in the real, or to locate the germ of utopian thinking in the formal, realist project. One could use these forces as the basis for rethinking social and political rela-

tions in America. The lesson we take from *Altruria* is similar, in that the tension the novel presents between dialectical materialism and interrupted dialectics suggest that even the most charitable utopian fantasies have to remain in conversation with the real. While Howells' novel does not reject a materialist conception of history, the text complicates a reductive reading of historical materialism as a force entirely divorced from the realm of human activity. Howells' investment in the complexities of social life remains deeply encoded in the novel's formal attempts to represent dialectical movement through stunted conversations. *A Traveler from Altruria*'s formal achievements contribute to contemporary Marxist attempts to think through the relationship between social agency and structural necessity.

Notes

¹ Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, (Chicago UP: 1988), 64.

² Jonathan Arac, "Howells and the Language of American Fiction," *boundary 2*, 34:2 (Summer 2007), 12.

³ Frank Christianson, "William Dean Howells's 'Altrurian' Aesthetic in the Modern Marketplace," in *Philanthropy in British and American Fiction* (Oxford University Press: 2007), 187.

⁴ Jon Mee, "Introduction: Opening Gambit," in *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762-1830* (Oxford UP: 2011), 13.

⁵ William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, (Penguin: 2001), 147.

⁶ William Dean Howells, *A Traveler from Altruria*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1894), 88.

⁷ Howells, *Altruria*, 197.

⁸ Howells, *Altruria*, 216.

⁹ Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Ed. Robert C. Tucker (London: Norton, 1978), 497.

¹⁰ Jonathan Arac, "Howells and the Language of American Fiction," *boundary 2*, 34:2 (Summer 2007), 17.

Papers to be Presented

at the ALA Conference, Washington, DC,
May 2014

Thursday, May 22, 2014

Session 4-J William Dean Howells & Ethical Values

1:30-2:50 p.m.

Chair: Dan Mrozowski, Trinity College

1. "A Hazard of New Entitlements: The Politics of Pensions in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*," Daniel Graham, University Connecticut-Storrs
2. "Redemptive Realism: Liberation Soteriology in the Novels of William Dean Howells," Andrew Ball, Lindenwood University
3. "Howells' Christian Faith in 'A World Come of Age'," Thomas Wortham, UCLA

Session 5-G William Dean Howells in the 1890s

3:00-4:20

Chair: Dan Mrozowski, Trinity College

1. "William Dean Howells, a Realist Poetics, and the Limits of 1890s American Democracy," Patricia Chaudron, University of Buffalo
2. "William Dean Howells's Failed Utopia from the Feminine Narrative View," Margaret Jay Jessee, University of Alabama-Birmingham
3. "Our 'Imperative Duty': Why Teach Howells's *Novella Now*," Charles Baraw, Southern Connecticut State University

Session 6-L Business Meeting: William Dean Howells Society

4:30-5:50

S U B S C R I B E !

to the

HOWELLS-L DISCUSSION LIST

Easy instructions on the Howells Society website:

howellsociety.wordpress.com

NEW ADDRESS!

Full-text of works by Howells, web resource links, reviews, scholarship, back issues of *The Howellsian*, and more . . .

William Dean Howells Society Executive Committee

President:

Lance Rubin, Arapahoe Community College

Vice President & Program Chair:

Daniel J. Mrozowski, Trinity College
(Connecticut)

Secretary / Treasurer:

Mischa Renfroe, Middle Tennessee State
University

Webmaster:

Donna Campbell, Washington State University

***Howellsian* Editor:**

Paul R. Petrie, Southern Connecticut State
University

CALL FOR 2013-14 MEMBERSHIP DUES

Annual membership in the William Dean Howells Society remains a bargain at \$15 / year.

New memberships and renewals are payable . . .

Online via PayPal under the “Membership” link on the Society’s website (<http://howellssociety.wordpress.com/>),

By check payable to The William Dean Howells Society, mailed with the form below to:
Mischa Renfroe, Middle Tennessee State University, English Department, Box 70, 1301 E. Main
St., Murfreesboro, TN 37132

Graduate students working on Howells may join the Society for free for two years. Apply now.

Name:
New Membership or Renewal?
Mailing Address:
Email Address:
Amount Enclosed:

Thank you for your continued support of the William Dean Howells Society.

The Howellsian is published twice yearly (with occasional lapses) by the William Dean Howells Society for the information of the Society’s members and others interested in the life and work of W.D. Howells.

This issue marks the second electronic-only publication of the newsletter. It was distributed originally via email to all Howells Society members for whom an email address was known at the time of publication.

If you did not receive your copy via this email distribution, please update your email address by sending it to the Society’s secretary, Professor Mischa Renfroe, at this address:

mischa.renfroe @ mtsu.edu