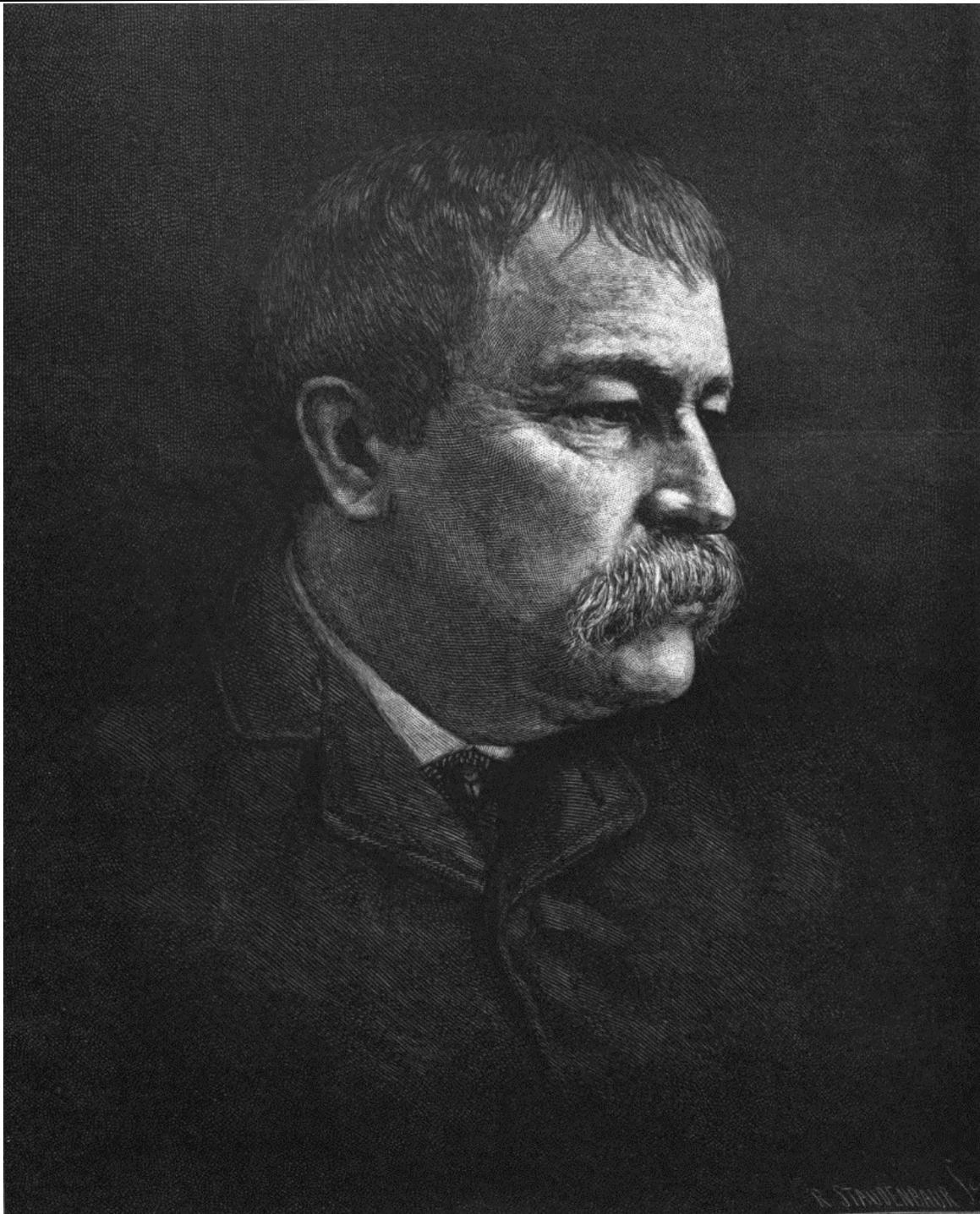


The Howellsian

Published biannually (with occasional lapses) by the William Dean Howells Society for the information of its members and interested others.



Cover Image, *Harper's Weekly Magazine*, 19 June 1886

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Howells Essay Prize

The Howells Society Essay Prize is awarded each year to the writer of 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 WDHS Executive Committee, who have the option of appointing additional readers as necessary.

Congratulations to the 2015 Howells Essay Prize Winner:

Jeremy MacFarlane

(Queen's University)

For his essay

"Dere iss no Ameriga any more": Unintelligible Subjects in William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*

As Arthur Schlesinger points out, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is a title that operates on two levels simultaneously. On one, it speaks directly to the novel's central plot, which has familiar characters Basil and Isabel March "moving from Boston to New York to make a hazard of new fortunes," gambling on the success of the fledgling literary magazine, *Every Other Week*; on another, however, the title also alludes to what is perhaps the novel's dominant theme: the idea that an unrestrained capitalist class represents a conspicuous threat to the nation at large (xiii-xiv). Through March's meanderings in the city, first in search of an apartment and then in search of picturesque material for his sketches, the novel represents the urban environment as structurally unbalanced and suggests that the uneven development of city space engenders a form of attritional violence against its impoverished populations. The sights and sounds of Howells's city all conspire to convey that the capitalist-oriented production of city space means urban garrisons of excess, where the rich absorb virtually all resources, and vast expanses of desolation surrounding them, where the masses of humanity are left wondering how to support a body on air. In short, the modern American city is shown by Howells to be ironically similar to the spaces of early modern feudalism in England, with aristocratic enclaves surrounded by a land of peasants, mired in intractable poverty as far as the eye can see.

However, while it is the object of the novel to communicate this idea through its narrative, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is also simultaneously a meditation on the *challenge* of communicating this idea to Americans, who may truly believe that their democracy precludes the pauper. Throughout the nineteenth century in particular, as Gavin Jones explains, the concept of Americanness (at least for whites) signified immunity to permanent abjection, despite the fact that the nation was persistently haunted by a stable underclass; the chronically poor were merely aberrations of the system and their presence explained by the idea that they must somehow be personally to blame for their own poverty (38). Howells's novel uses realism to try and displace this epistemology; however, it also contends with the fact that, regardless of whether or not a 'common sense fact' actually holds up to scrutiny, it can often be incredibly difficult to challenge, because, in the words of Luciano Floridi, "good codification is modestly redundant" (43). According to the mathematical theory of communication (MTC), redundancy "can help to counteract *equivocation* (data sent but never received) and *noise*," which "extends the informee's freedom of choice in selecting a message" (43). In short, redundancy of one particular message ensures that it gets received and registered as information, but it also drowns out alternate or contradictory messages, relegating them to the realm of

(Continued on page 3)

unintelligible noise. Thus, the idea of a just and unproblematic capitalist system occupies a privileged position as positive knowledge, simply because it has been repeated steadily through time and space. Meanwhile, the counterpoint that the status quo is criminally violent becomes unintelligible noise to be tuned out – or, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, an instance of information that is actually too pure to be comprehensible, “a total surprise and an utter disordering of the code, or a highly unlikely combination” that is like “screams [and] sobbing, which are ultimately inarticulate” (70). Howells’s project of alerting the nation to its own reality is, thus, a tall order indeed.

It is, therefore, appropriate that Howells literally disrupts the orthographic codes of standard English when the German-born socialist, Lindau, speaks throughout *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. In *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Amy Kaplan suggests that Lindau “embodies the countermovement in realism that voices the conflicts silenced in the background” and “is represented as a translation, an amphibious figure who speaks both English and German” (56-57). However, I would argue that, through the use of non-standard spellings in Lindau’s dialogue, the text underscores his inherent unintelligibility as a speaking subject in a space dominated by capitalist ideology and, thus, suggests that Lindau is not so much a translation as he is a text in need of translation by others, who are not necessarily adept at doing so. In my estimation, Lindau is, first and foremost, an epistemological problem, literally representing the noise that is unintelligible against the monolithic wall of common ideas. However, what is perhaps most interesting about the idea of Lindau as a text in need of translation is that, as the novel progresses, repeated exposure to Lindau has a way of making the foreign familiar. The novel demands that a reader become immersed in the language of the ideological Other, and the process allows the radical ideology he expresses to first exist alongside the commonplace “knowledge” represented by figures such as Fulkerson and Dryfoos, and (at least potentially) supersede it. The experience allows readers to reg-

ister as coherent information the claim that, under conditions of capitalism, “Dere iss no Amerika any more” and, by extension, exposes the bitter irony that civic assaults on figures such as the Haymarket anarchists are not affirmations of national ideals but, rather, a service to a new aristocracy masquerading as patriots.

The novel suggests that the capitalist tendency to produce of spaces of excess entails a simultaneous production of violent spaces of poverty in a number of ways, but the effect is perhaps never so fully realized as when March first visits Lindau’s home. Whereas, at the millionaire Dryfoos’s home, an Irish serving man greets guests at the door, at Lindau’s, March is instead greeted by “A woman with a tied-up face of toothache opened the door for him when he pulled, with a shiver of foreboding, the bell knob, from which a yard of rusty crape dangled” (187). The ailing woman immediately aligns the space with illness and infirmity, and the crape signifies that this is, both literally and figuratively, the house of the dead. It is, of course, not Lindau but, rather, a neighbor who has died, yet the crape still seems to speak for him, as well, communicating that the space he occupies is inevitably too desolate to sustain life. When March gets inside, “he found himself in a kitchen where a meagre breakfast was scattered in stale fragments on the table before the stove. The place was bare and cold; a half-empty beer bottle scarcely gave it a convivial air” (187). The food – literally, the nutrition that sustains a body – is neither ample nor fresh; the décor is demoralizing; and even the temperature of the room hints at death, as cold naturally slows one’s heart rate. In fact, when March finds Lindau, he is lying in bed, as though he was dead and lying in a casket, because “Idt’s jeaper to stay in pedt sometimes as to geep a fire a-goin all the time” (188). Lindau’s home is really the antithesis of everything nineteenth century domestic ideology suggests it ought to be. Instead of a warm hearth, it represents a locus of slow violence that draws those who dwell within into death.

While a ‘common sense’ logic of poverty and its sources would have it that Lindau and the other people in this tenement are somehow per-

sonally to blame for the conditions in which they find themselves, Lindau's story conveys something quite different: the idea that it is systemic and not personal flaws that force people to live in buildings such as this and that he himself occupies the position of the poor voluntarily, because it is the only life one can lead without oppressing someone else, the only way one can be an American without hypocrisy. As Lindau tells March, he used to live in a much nicer room in Greenwich Village but left when he realized he was "beginning to forget the boor" (190). He says, "I was begoming a ploated aristograt. I thought I was nodt like these beople down here, when I gome down once to look aroundt; I thought I must be somethings else, and zo I zaid I better take myself in time, and I gome here among my brothers – the beccars and the theifs" (190). What Lindau's position essentially boils down to is that capitalism creates an ironic disjuncture between one's actions and one's identity as an American: an American is supposed to be, if nothing else, a democrat; yet, in systematically establishing socioeconomic standing over others through exploitation and/or dispossession, a person, in practice, becomes "somethings else," replicating the patterns of aristocracy that have supposedly been expelled from the land. Thus, the only acceptable position within the existing sociospatial framework is that of the poor. He reinforces this point further when, from another room, the sounds of "Liddle thiefs, that gabture your breakfast" are heard (190). In short, while March and Lindau are talking, hungry children enter the apartment to sneak scraps from Lindau's table – a regular occurrence that Lindau not only allows but describes as "one of our liddle chokes" (190). This incident is interesting on one level, as it is an act of giving and nourishing that contrasts with the self-interested accumulation that characterizes the everyday and is, therefore, disruptive. However, Lindau's way of describing the exercise as instructive is also significant. He explains to March that he maintains the illusion of theft because the children "mosn't go and feel themselves petter than those boor millionaires that hadt to steal their money" (191) – a statement that not only disrupts the usual utopian conception of the capitalist system but, quite radically, aligns capitalist practice with criminality. For all Lindau's talk in

this scene, however, he remains somewhat unintelligible to March, who reflects on Lindau's words "with amusement as the chimeras of a rhetorician run away with his phrases" (194). March can see beauty in Lindau's words but no truth, because his immersion in the urban-capitalist paradigm causes him to relegate potentially disruptive rhetoric, at the very best, to the realm of idle amusement.

As unintelligible as Lindau may be to March, however, when Howells puts Lindau in conversation with the syndicate man and marketing wizard, Fulkerson, one gets the sense that Lindau is not just as an unintelligible subject but an untranslatable one. In a casual conversation between these two characters at the *Every Other Week* office, the issue of money arises, and Lindau suggests that, ironically, the possession of money in respectable quantities almost invariably signifies impropriety – i.e., the exploitation of another human being. Lindau says, "If you hat inherited your money, you might pe innocent, but if you hat *mate* it, efery man tat resbectedt himself would haf to ask *how* you mate it, and if you hat mate moch, he would know—" (318). Fulkerson objects on the basis that Lindau's ideas are un-American. Fulkerson is immersed in the capitalist paradigm, and so he references what one might say is the *de facto* definition of "American," but Lindau refers to the ideal, the original significance of the term. Realizing this, Lindau attempts to bridge the distance between them and explain to Fulkerson how the capitalism he holds in one hand is incompatible with the Americanism he holds in the other. He says,

On-Amerigan? [...] What iss Amerigan? Dere iss no Ameriga any more! You start here free and brafe, and you glaim for efery man de righdt to life, liperty, and de bursuit of habbiness. And where haf you entedt? No man that vorks vith his handts among you hass the liperty to bursue his habbiness. He iss the slafe of some richer man, some gompany, some gorporation, dat crindts him down to the least he can lif on, and that rops him of the marchin of his earnings that be might be habby on. (318)

Essentially, the argument Lindau makes is that, originally, America made everyone noble, but, under

capitalism, there necessarily exists a distinction between the noble rich and the poor, who can only exist as their slaves – basically, that the “city upon a hill” has become a site of social violence. However, the foreignness of this idea, relative to commonplace discourse, makes it completely impenetrable to Fulkerson. Thus, he responds in a way that seems to pathologize Lindau’s radicalism, saying, “Well, [...] I wish I was a subject of suspicion with you” (319). He then proceeds to mock Lindau, mimicking his accent to deliver the infantilizing warning, “You bite yourself mit dat dog some day” (319). It is not that Fulkerson dismisses Lindau for his own convenience as a businessman, and it is not even that he does not want to understand what Lindau is trying to say. It seems the words simply do not make sense to Fulkerson. It seems the syntax is amiss, and he simply cannot see the order in it. For all intents and purposes, Lindau’s is a foreign tongue.

Similarly, the text suggests that Lindau’s speech is also untranslatable to the millionaire, Dryfoos. At a dinner party celebrating the success of *Every Other Week*, the conversation turns to politics, and Lindau proposes that, when unjust American capitalism inevitably falls, the American promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness will finally be fulfilled in earnest through socialism. He says, “The men who voark shall have and shall eat; and the men that will not voark, they shall sdarfe. But no man need sdarfe. He will go to the State, and the State will see that he haf voark and that he haf foodt. All the roadts and mills and mines and landts shall be the people’s and be run *by* the people *for* the people. There shall be no rich and no boor” (344). And he suggests that the removal of the distinction between the rich and the poor will ennoble everyone. Dryfoos, however, seems to fail in parsing Lindau’s speech, and, failing to understand its underlying logic, he concludes that Lindau is nothing but “a red-mouthed labor-agitator” (347). Dryfoos says, “He’s one of those foreigners that come here from places where they’ve never had a decent meals’ victuals in their lives and as soon as they get their stomachs full they begin to make trouble between our people and their hands” (347). Of course, it is very conspicuous, what he claims to be “our people” (the capitalist class), “their hands” (possessions and not quite people, but only

parts), and the foreign (someone who does not accept this normalized framework). And also conspicuous is what Dryfoos misses: although Lindau is German-born, he has been living in America for at least thirty years by this point, and, although he clearly references Marx, his ideas are not imports from elsewhere, but conclusions that emerged out of sensitivity to the suffering within America’s borders. Yet, Dryfoos cannot recognize any discourse other than that which is common: the one that glosses over the contradiction between capitalism and the American ideal.

While the epistemological impasse between Lindau and others can be interpreted as a source of tension within the inner circle of *Every Other Week*, they ultimately resonate with the larger world created by Howells, as they provide the lens that clarifies the fictionalized Haymarket that takes place toward the end of the novel. The exchanges reveal that for Dryfoos and Fulkerson, who are immersed in the utopian capitalist paradigm, demands for a living wage translate into unreasonable greed, while the commonplace greed that drives the system is irrationally assumed to be universally beneficial. They are firm in their adherence to a particular system of knowledge, and they cannot accommodate any contradictory information. This dynamic gives us the framework with which to interpret negotiations happening in the background of the novel – namely, those between capital and labor. Thus, the novel becomes a meditation on the way in which people who become sensitive to the violence that is inflicted upon them occasionally find that the status quo stops making sense and engage in some kind of direct challenge, but, because the commonplace logic of the status quo – i.e., ideology normalized as knowledge and concretized in space – is so solid, measured negotiation proves ineffective, leaving people with seemingly no other choice but to speak what Martin Luther King Jr. once called “the language of the unheard.” The novel comes together in such a way as to suggest that when the plain speech of the abject fails to deflect the violence of space, the abject will likely reflect it back onto the built environment in the form of a riot.

However, while Howells’s representation of the riot itself may unfold in a way that unquestiona-

bly favors the rioters over the capitalist class and the police that defend it, what follows in the aftermath problematizes a straightforward reading by highlighting an important contradiction in the politics of rioting. As many critics acknowledge, Howells spent most of his career writing domestic novels that were fairly gentle in their criticisms and appealed more or less to a conventional American middle-class sensibility. However, as American capitalism became more and more paradigmatic – and, consequently, more unapologetically violent – it became apparent to Howells that the status quo was antithetical to anything like a “greater good.” As Timothy Parrish notes, the sight of a well-dressed man eating from a garbage can on New York’s Third Avenue like a “famished dog” (an incident March also experiences in *Hazard*) caused him to rethink his place in the world: “When he saw America as a subject he did not see what he imagined every other American to see. In fact, the thought of America very nearly made him sick” (24). However, as understandable as the rioters’ anger may be, the novel implores that rioting cannot be endorsed as a proper response. Howells’s riot solves nothing and leaves nothing but dead bodies in its wake – including Dryfoos’s son, who was there as a broker of peace, and Lindau, who was there to express solidarity with the workers. Consequently, March concludes that rioting is an espousal of chaos, and chaos is an invitation to tragedy. He concludes that “men like Lindau, who renounce the American means as hopeless, and let their love of justice hurry them into sympathy with violence, [...] they are wrong, and poor Lindau did die in a bad cause” (451-52). Thus, the conflict between capital and labor that runs throughout the novel becomes an issue that, at least for the moment, is unresolvable, and we are denied a clear sense of closure.

However, against this lack of closure, it is worth dwelling on the fact that Lindau’s unintelligible language actually links him with Dryfoos, who actually has fairly modest roots in the rural Midwest. His father was Pennsylvania Dutch, and, while presently Dryfoos “can’t keep it up with a regular German,” he was at least once familiar enough with Lindau’s mother tongue. Moreover, we have evidence that Dryfoos not only shared a common language with Lindau but, apparently, a common sensi-

bility as well. There was a time long before when Dryfoos vehemently opposed the Standard Oil Company’s colonization of his part of the country, and it is only after he is forced to sell his farm that “He resolved upon a meaner ideal than that of conservative good citizenship, which had been his chief moral experience,” and “began to honor money, especially money that had been won in large sums” (263). Dryfoos himself is, therefore, an unfortunate kind of translation – a newcomer to the language of the capitalist paradigm from a place that was seemingly more conducive to social justice.

Yet, in the same way that, in the novel, it is possible to forget the language of the ideological Other and “resolve upon a meaner ideal,” the novel also suggests that this language may be learned, as evidenced through March. Even at the end of the novel, when March seems to be distancing himself from Lindau, saying that the man died in a bad cause, he mirrors his sensibilities. He says,

what I object to is this economic chance world in which we live, and which we men may seem to have created. It ought to be law as inflexible in human affairs as the order of day and night in the physical world, that if a man will work he shall both eat and rest, and shall not be harassed with any question as to how his repose and his provision shall come. Nothing less ideal than this satisfies the reason. (437)

It seems as though, in spending so much time with Lindau throughout the novel, March becomes adept at translating the translator’s words. Initially, March is not unlike Fulkerson and Dryfoos in his adherence to the status quo, but it seems as though sustained immersion in the unintelligible noise that flows from Lindau allows the radical to stand alongside the commonplace in March’s mind, then supersede it. And I think the text works in a way that encourages a similar process in the reader – for, in reading the text, we too are immersed in the jumbled code that is Lindau’s radical speech, and the immersion allows us to recognize the coherence of his utterances, which is something that may help circumvent the seeming inevitability of rioting in real life and point us toward more peaceful futures.

—Jeremy MacFarlane, Queen’s University

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ALIA 2016

Friday, May 27, 2016

3:40 – 5:00 pm

Neglected Works of William Dean Howells

Chair: Dan Mrozowski, Trinity College

1. "Howells's Grief: Continuing Bonds with Winny and the Neglected *Stops of Various Quills*," Harold K. Bush, Saint Louis University
2. "William Dean Howells's Altrurian Trilogy and the Crisis of Urban Planning," Tara C. Foley, Baylor University
3. "A Portrait of the Artist as a Future Radical: Howells' Memoirs of a Swedenborgian Boyhood," Andrew Ball, Lindenwood University
4. "Howells' *Republic*: Justice, Mimesis, and the Intersections of Plato and American Literary Realism," Jeremy Land, Baylor University

Friday, May 27, 2016

5:10 – 6:30 pm

Business Meeting: William Dean Howells Society

We can't reach you!

With the demise of university funding for direct mailing, this newsletter and other Howells Society communications come to you via email. But the Society's email address list is woefully out of date, with many bad addresses and quite a few members with no addresses at all. If you haven't done so already, would you please take a minute to update or confirm your email address by contacting the Society's secretary, Professor Mischa Renfroe (mischa.renfroe @ mtsu.edu)? WDHS officers' ability to communicate with members is vital to the Society's continuing existence.

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