

The Conditions of the Field Imagination: Realism and William Dean Howells

Against the backdrop of a renewed interest in the institutional conditions of contemporary literature (cf. Casanova, English, McGurl), my book project positions the closing decades of the nineteenth century as the moment when the nexus between literature and institution first surfaces as a concern in the U.S. I identify the emergence of a field imagination and I argue that it centers on the shifting signifier “realism” and the signature “William Dean Howells.” Reading three formats of criticism (interview, editorial, review), the first part of the project explores the conditions of this field imagination, as it constitutes itself from within an accelerated and diversified industrial print capitalism that necessitates its imagination in the first place. Looking at three literary genres (novel, one-act play as farce, novella), the second part examines the consequences of reading for a field imagination; it redefines the poetics of Howells’s realism as a self-archiving one, which manifests itself in the iteration of characters across the confines of individual works. While the first part offers an analysis of the sociology of literature, or the social and institutional dimensions of literary production, the second part probes the conditions of a literary sociology, or the literary dimension of the social.

The interventions of my research project are multilayered. In regard to the sociology of literature, I continue the work of bringing Pierre Bourdieu to the study of the U.S. context in the late nineteenth century. While questions of distinction and prestige have been foregrounded (cf. Barrish, Glazener), I place “Howells” and “realism” at the center of an entire field imagination, the gesture of which is maximal inclusivity (even if early on ostensibly vis-à-vis constructions of idealism and romance). This gesture is contingent upon both notions of the contemporary and epistemologies of difference that regulate U.S. literary history until today. While many studies explore the economic, medial, and technological conditions of advanced industrial print capitalism around 1900, I shift the focus to several formats of criticism (interview, editorial, review), all of which are at the command of the versatile professional publicist and are crucial to negotiate different aspects of the field imagination (formats of criticism are of no concern to Bourdieu, too). With regard to a complementary literary sociology, I intervene in histories and theories of the novel. Prevalent models of reading literary realism either emphasize with Foucault social control and surveillance (cf. Bender, Miller, Seltzer), or they stress the contractual and the dialogic (cf. Fluck, Ickstadt, Thomas, Trachtenberg). Focusing on iterations of characters across Howells’s novels, I conceive both models contingent upon “the novel” as a self-contained entity—an assumption that in the U.S. context goes back to Henry James’s New York edition, its prefaces, and their modernist reception. By contrast, reading sequentially for iterations (which we find in Howells but not in James) requires thinking both scripted mechanics of the social and moments of experimental spontaneity, expressed in the shifting hierarchies of characters across novels. Including one-act plays as farces, I also destabilize the novel as the privileged genre of literary realism to the point of arguing that the staging of these plays by amateur theater groups makes them into scripts for an embodied social praxeology. And in tracing the passing figure throughout Howells’s writings, I also show, against common belief, the centrality of the legacy of slavery for his sense of American literary history. Finally, conceiving Howells as a signature, I intend to rewrite the genre of the monograph on a single author: instead of reproducing the biographical illusion (cf. Bourdieu) associated with it, I argue that since the moment of “Howells” singling out writers implicitly always means writing about their field position.

The first part of my book project puts Pierre Bourdieu’s theses on the literary field in dialogue with selected critical writings by Howells and his contemporaries. Two aspects in particular result from this confrontation. First, for Bourdieu who brackets literary periodization, the inaugural moment of the field in France is contingent upon the production of aesthetic autonomy, including concepts such as the genius author, an art for art’s sake, an individual masterpiece, and the invention of the bohemian as a social class. For Howells and his contemporaries, with the possible exception of Henry James, the international novelist endowed with the credentials of European high culture, this is not the case. Literature in the late-century U.S. field imagination is inextricable from changing configurations of the social, inscribed in the shifting signifier realism. Second, resulting from the claim to aesthetic autonomy, Bourdieu describes the relation between economic and literary capital as inverse. Howells does not assume such inversion. For him a certain degree of economic success is the precondition for

literature to become the privileged space of generating sociality. This is most visible in his conception of the author as an entrepreneurial craftsman, a trained publicist who has a variety of formats and genres at his command. Since literary capital is not contingent upon aesthetic autonomy, the field imagination in late-century North America rests upon the convertibility of literary capital: For Howells ethnic and regional differences mark the distinct literary and concrete sociocultural capital of the United States as a nation of immigrants—a notion that is heavily contested in the xenophobic closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Assuming that the emergence of a field imagination is contingent upon an accelerated and varied industrial print capitalism, I focus on three formats of criticism that are of particular relevance to the late-century. I open with the first detailed reading of the 1894-interview that Stephen Crane conducted with Howells. Crane's text showcases an awareness of the conventions of the format, which developed from the 1860s onward. As I argue, this specific author-author-interview is a literary performance structured by the principle of competitive alliance. In contrast to the prevalent narrative, which casts Crane as the one naturalist writer not to have turned on Howells, I hold that Crane uses Howells's field position to draw attention to himself as the legitimate successor of a different generation. His text also stages the shift to a different variety of realism by endowing the journalistic with literary capital, by making the underclass its topical concern, but mostly by seizing the contemporary, the representation of which are the prime stakes in the late-century field imagination.

Second, I analyze several of Howells's editorials: the first column of the "Editor's Study" series, the preface to Paul Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, and the preface to the anthology *Different Girls: Harper's Novelettes* (with Henry Mills Alden). While the Crane-Howells interview dramatizes the shifting positions in the field and exposes its progressive contemporaneity, Howells's self-presentation in the "Editor's Study" column, which culminates in a plea for the vernacular, is that of the critic as a collector. The critic taxes literary genres and forms against the backdrop of varied discourses of difference: a Euro-American competitive alliance, U.S. regionalisms, and epistemologies of gender and race. All of these classifications, I hold in extension of Barrish's point, are subject to the rubric of vernacular, here conceptualized not just as linguistic speech acts but also as differential habitual scripts.

Third, while the editorials establish realist criticism as an archival project of charting the field according to differential taxonomies, and while the interview grants attention to regulate field positions, the format of the review, in a sense, expresses both. Assembling a range of texts by and about Howells, I argue that the review is crucial to the field imagination because it expresses the competitive alliance of writers, creating attention by repetition and positionality by mutual address and citation. Taken as a whole, the scores of late-century reviews establish a conundrum: They are readable as a self-archiving technique, an indexical attempt to shape the field by repetitive selection. At the same time, though, they constitute an expansive, insurmountable pile of texts, which can only be sorted by recognized and recognizable authorial signatures. The symbolic capital of these signatures hinges less on high realism, as Glazener holds, than on epistemologies of difference.

The inclusive yet contingent openness, in turn, implements Bourdieu's own claim that the literary field marks one of the uncertain sites of the social where new positions can emerge. This assumption of uncertainty marks a key component for complementing the sociology of literature with a reading practice that aims at a literary sociology, which is the purpose of my second part. Bourdieu himself poses a problem for literary scholars because in *The Rules of Art* he limits his readings to a societal cross-section analysis. While such readings are in line with realism's insistence on referentiality, they tend to obscure the importance of intertextual citations but also the engagement of other art forms such as painting and photography (cf. Byerly), which result in privileging visual perception (cf. Brooks). Not least, there are the representations of the scenes of reading (cf. Brodhead) and the conditions of publishing—a thematic obsession in many novels of the late-century. As Bourdieu himself contends: access to the field is preconditioned by demonstrating knowledge of conventions and developments of artistic representation, the citation of which is structured by the principle of competitive alliance.

While the insistence on referentiality and the simultaneous awareness of inevitable mediation constitute a well-known conundrum of late-century realism in general, much of Howells's oeuvre has a distinctive and overlooked characteristic: recurring characters across novels and plays. With respect to

theories of the novel, this has profound consequences because it undermines the individual novel as a unit of analysis in a different way than the tension between either serial installments (cf. Lund), or anthological excerpts (cf. Price), and the bound book does. To be sure, the iterations, which I trace by reading *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) and *The Minister's Charge* (1886) as a sequence, partly have pragmatic considerations. They are an effect of Howells's enormous literary output, and they are a concession to brand recognition as one of many principles regulating the literary market (cf. Borus, Gilmore). But I argue that they also generate a poetic effect. The poetics of iteration, resulting from industrial print capitalism yet traversing the telos of the individual novel, positions Howells's realism as a testing ground for configurations of the social, rather than a mere solidification of ideologies of bourgeois sociality (cf. Jameson): on one level, iterations establish a continuity of a literary universe that may correspond to the habits and habitual scripts regulating society, but they also foreground the random recognitions structuring daily social encounters; on another level, iterations displace the hierarchies of characters, exposing the contingencies of how and when characters are considered major or minor (cf. Woloch), which enacts a notion of the social as a permanent process of adaptation and transformation. On yet another level, the focus on iteration as a distinctive feature of a poetics of the field also erodes the grounds of comparison critics assume throughout the twentieth century when they discredit Howells as the minor writer vis-à-vis Henry James (cf. Mencken, Trilling, Anesko). Such a comparison only holds if one assumes the individual novel and the criteria of composition laid out in James's prefaces as a common ground.

The device of iteration also characterizes Howells's rarely discussed plays, which are the subject of the second chapter of this part. Here my focus is on selected one-act plays, specifically his farces, which, I contend, are proto-modernist. Complying with genre conventions, Howells's farces expose their constructiveness and subject their characters to a mechanistic succession of comic events, which often border on the absurd; as one-act plays, they privilege the social situation (cf. Szondi), which is often created by modern technologies. Taken together the farces with recurring characters produce a notion of the social as a fragmented sequence of encounters both accidental and mechanistic, where individuals are mere types, yet thrown into comic relief by the self-referential plays. At the same time, since it were predominantly amateur theater groups that staged these plays, these plays become scripts for an enacted praxeology of the social, manifesting itself in episodic scenes that radicalize the scenic composition ascribed to many realist novels.

The epilogue traces the recurrence of the passing figure in Howells's writings, including: an early prose poem he presents in an autobiographical essay as his point of entry to the Boston literary circles, his novella *An Imperative Duty* (1890), and a review of Charles Chesnutt's work. Chesnutt poses a problem for Howells's field taxonomy: his in-between position requires a different category that is neither black vernacular nor universal Euro-American literary capital. In *An Imperative Duty*, the disclosure of a mixed-race identity becomes "the extraordinary event" (Goethe) that establishes the specifically American novella form. At the same time, the novella ends with relocating the interracial marriage in Europe to the effect that the problem of mixed-race identity is externalized but not resolved. In Howells's oeuvre, the recurring passing figure destabilizes his own taxonomies of ordering the literary and the social field. It represents that which needs to but cannot be safely contained. It is important to note that Howells's realism takes a psychological turn when the passing figure reappears in the novella, representing a tormented individual character that cannot be easily accommodated in the typologies of either the literary or the social.

Arguing that the field imagination accorded and according to "Howells" hinges on notions of the contemporary and epistemologies of difference (gender, region, race), I position the late nineteenth century as the inaugural moment for twentieth-century sociologies and histories of U.S. literature. Both notions of the contemporary and epistemologies of difference can be constructed as signifieds of the signifier realism, which, as a mode of placement, structures the literary field until the current cultural moment. The literary sociology emerging from the poetics of iteration destabilizes the assumption the individual novel as a unit of analysis. It also cuts across periodization and opens a trajectory reaching from Balzac to Howells to Faulkner, possibly Richard Ford and Philip Roth, with "realism" archiving and historicizing itself through continuous literary world-making.

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