

ANDREW LAWSON

---

---

# DOWNWARDLY MOBILE

---

---

THE CHANGING FORTUNES OF  
AMERICAN REALISM



## **Downwardly Mobile**

*This page intentionally left blank*

# **Downwardly Mobile**

THE CHANGING FORTUNES  
OF AMERICAN REALISM

Andrew Lawson

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further  
Oxford University's objective of excellence  
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York  
Auckland CapeTown Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in  
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2012 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016  
www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,  
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lawson, Andrew, 1959 July 4-

Downwardly mobile : the changing fortunes of American realism / Andrew Lawson.  
p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-19-982805-0 (cloth : alk. paper) 1. Realism in literature.  
2. American fiction—19th century—History and criticism. 3. American  
fiction—20th century—History and criticism. 4. Economics in  
literature. 5. Financial crises in literature. 6. Social mobility in  
literature. 7. Social classes in literature. 8. United States—Economic  
conditions—19th century. I. Title. II. Title: Changing fortunes of  
American realism.

PS374.R37L39 2012

813'.30912--dc23

2011032039

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

For Debby and Michael

*This page intentionally left blank*

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

- 1. Introduction: A Hunger for the Real 1**
- 2. Rose Terry Cooke and the Roots of Realist Taste 19**
- 3. Rebecca Harding Davis and the Failed Genteel Father 41**
- 4. The Artist of the Floating World: William Dean Howells 62**
- 5. The *Rentier* Aesthetics of Henry James 86**
- 6. Hamlin Garland's Vertical Vision 112**
- 7. Coda: White-Collar Blues 128**

Notes 138

Index 187

*This page intentionally left blank*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research and writing of this book was supported by a Small Research Grant from the British Academy and a semester's research leave from the School of Cultural Studies, Leeds Metropolitan University. Part of chapter 4 appeared as "Perpetual Capital": *Roderick Hudson, Aestheticism, and the Problem of Inheritance*, *Henry James Review* 32.2 (2011): 178–191.

For their encouragement of this project and incisive readings of individual chapters, I'm grateful to Richard Godden, Stephen Shapiro, Peter Knight, Lori Merish, Brian Jarvis, Sandra Courtman, and Susan Brook. Thanks are also due to William "Gene" Aisenbrey of the Garland Memorial Society and Keith Newlin for answering my questions about Richard Garland's life in South Dakota, and to Richard M. Pope and Sharon Steinberg for their help in researching the family history of Rose Terry Cooke. At the Upper Ohio Valley Collection, Bethany College, West Virginia, I received valuable help from archivist Jean Cobb, and Felicity Ruggiero, Curator at Historic Bethany. Thanks also to Heather Ricciuti, Director of the T. W. Phillips Memorial Library at Bethany College, and to Phyllis Slater, Archivist of the Wheeling Collection at the Ohio County Public Library.

Colleagues past and present at Leeds Metropolitan have provided me with good advice, practical assistance, and daily reminders of how good it still is to belong to a community of scholars: I owe particular thanks to Emma Robertson, Mary Eagleton, Alison Oram, Ruth Robbins, and Susan Watkins. I'm grateful to the anonymous readers for Oxford University Press, to Christi Stanforth for her meticulous copyediting, and to Amy Whitmer at Oxford and her colleagues at Newgen North America for overseeing the process of turning manuscript into book. I am indebted, several times over, to Brendan O'Neill for his faith in this project: no one could wish for a better editor. My greatest debts are to my wife and son. When I felt like Howells's drowning man, they kept me afloat with their love, patience, and good humor. The book is dedicated to them.

*This page intentionally left blank*

## **Downwardly Mobile**

*This page intentionally left blank*

## Introduction

### A HUNGER FOR THE REAL

In 1852 Anna Bartlett Warner published a novel with the defiantly unsentimental title of *Dollars and Cents*. The novel's narrator, Grace Howard, the daughter of a wealthy Philadelphia family, begins her story by describing in some detail the material comforts of her home. These include Turkish carpets, damask curtains and sofas, "chandeliers, carved furniture, pictures, shells, and statues."<sup>1</sup> Grace is regularly taken on drives to Levy's, a fancy dry goods store on Chestnut Street, where "a scratch of [her] father's pen" sees her newly clothed in muslins and silks (2). All in the Howard household is cultivated leisure, refinement, and ease until an abrupt, unspecified "change" in the Howard family's "outward circumstances" occurs (2). This change is revealed to Grace when she notices that her new set of handkerchiefs "aren't near so fine" as her last, a shocking revelation that marks the beginning of a period in which her family's feet begin to "lose ground." Afraid to let themselves go, like children "slipping down hill" and "catching at every bush," the Howards become disoriented, turned around in social space (2).

As a result of the sudden and mysterious decline in the family's fortunes, the Philadelphia house is stripped of its adornments and put up for sale. Mr. Howard moves his family to the sanctuary of Glen Luna, his country estate. Once installed there, Howard launches into what his wife calls "a wild system of improvements" (32). He conceives a scheme to build "mills and mill-dams, roads and plantations," drawing up detailed plans with scribbled figures that look, to Grace, like "a long string of units and tens and hieroglyphics" (21). But the first mill is promptly burnt down by a rival landowner. Burdened by this, and by the countless lawsuits brought by his creditors, Howard sinks into a depression. When Grace asks what right his rival had to interfere with her father's business, he replies wearily that "my own rights are growing so misty and undefined that I know but little about those of other people" (85). Legal processes and financial instruments appear in the guise of catastrophic, inexplicable forces which constantly endanger the family's hold on the material supports of life. As the narrative progresses, the misty and the undefined begin to consume all that is tangible and real.

When the sheriff confiscates the family's treasured possessions, Grace is alarmed by how "strange" her room looks with its closed windows and empty spaces (232). "Were we ourselves," she wonders, "or were we somebody else?" (232). Inspecting the "dismantled" drawing-room, she finds only "a blank strip of plaster" in place of the "soft shadow" of the family's statue of Hebe (250, 242): "Shadowy enough

now! The things we had grown up among were wafted away into dreamland. Our Hebe—it was McLoon's; and that last stroke of our little fairy's wing had conjured herself away with the rest" (242–243). The Howards have been robbed of their identity as genteel people: they are no longer genteel because they no longer possess genteel things. "We almost wondered," Grace tells us, "whether we were not some family of Smiths, just waked up!" (243). The known and the familiar dissolve into vague, insubstantial shadows. All of Glen Luna, including Mr. Howard's improvements, his roads and cottages, lies under a kind of enchantment.

As Mary Templin has shown, Anna Bartlett Warner based *Dollars and Cents* on her own family's experience of steep downward mobility in the aftermath of the Panic of 1837.<sup>2</sup> Warner's father, Henry Whiting Warner, was one of many New York City lawyers who prospered from the city's real estate boom during the 1830s. Between 1833 and 1836, Warner acquired extensive holdings of land in Manhattan and bought a mansion on St. Mark's Place. The scale of Warner's ambitions is indicated by his purchase of Constitution Island in upper New York State, which he intended to develop as a summer resort. But rising land prices and construction costs increased the credit-dependency of property speculators like Warner, and many schemes were financed on borrowed money at high interest rates. The sudden contraction of credit in the Panic meant that overextended speculators were unable to meet their obligations. Forced to sell the family home, Henry Warner moved his family to the island (the Glen Luna of *Dollars and Cents*). There he became involved in a further series of unwise investments and lawsuits of the kind that beset the Howards in Warner's novel.<sup>3</sup> Like their fictional counterparts, Anna and her elder sister, Susan, found themselves on "a steady progress downhill," from "waiter and coachman and cook," and "dainty silks and laces," to "calicoes, fashioned by our own fingers."<sup>4</sup> Together, they endured a time of "[p]rivations not talked about, wishes in check," a time in which they struggled, in Mary Kelley's words, "to hold together the pieces of an existence that refused to coalesce."<sup>5</sup>

The 1837 Panic dramatically illustrated the ways in which individual lives were obscurely implicated in large-scale economic and political upheavals.<sup>6</sup> But 1837 also marks a moment in which the very nature of social reality becomes a pressing issue, a moment in which "reality" itself is put under a new kind of stress, and people are forced to ask new questions of it. Can I trust the world to look the same tomorrow as it does today? Do the things I own have any stable or enduring value? Does my identity depend on the things I own?

The argument I want to make here is that, in the nineteenth century, these questions were asked with the greatest vigor and intensity by those downwardly mobile and precariously located members of the middle class who were closest to both the promises and the risks inherent in American life. The further claim I make is that this questioning of reality results in the demand for a new, mimetic literature, a literature which presents the solid world of fact as a counterweight to the misty and the undefined. But in order to make my case that the origins of literary realism lie in the moment of 1837 and its dematerializing

and destabilizing effects, that moment and its prehistory require more detailed examination.

\* \* \*

Economic expansion in the early republic depended on the credit system, described by economic historian Edward Balleisen as “an intricate tangle of obligations,” extending throughout the country.<sup>7</sup> A New York “jobber” might send \$1,000 worth of goods to an Ohio storekeeper and receive his note promising to pay in ninety days. In order to maintain his own cash flow, the jobber would take the storekeeper’s promissory note to a bank and exchange it for \$950: his \$1,000 less the percentage, or “discount,” charged by the bank.<sup>8</sup> If a customer failed to pay for the goods bought with the note, the merchant was liable to the bank for the payment of the sum exchanged. Another financial instrument, endorsing, allowed debtors to gain access to loans by offering intangible property such as mortgages, stock certificates, or promissory notes as collateral. A third party—a business partner, patron, or relative—would then “endorse” the loan, assuming responsibility for the debt. Discounting and endorsing, together with the wide circulation of paper money, formed the so-called credit system that underpinned American economic expansion. But this was less a secure foundation than a set of paper promises on which the entire economic structure rested. The system worked well in good times, when enough obligations could be met to sustain the smooth running of the economy. But it was vulnerable to the kind of jolting, external shock that occurred in the spring of 1837, setting off a disastrous sequence of events.

In 1835 and again in 1836, Britain experienced poor wheat harvests, and its economy went into recession. Alarmed at the depletion of specie reserves caused by the flow of investments into American canals and railroads, the Bank of England raised interest rates and cut off the supply of credit to merchants engaged in the American trade. Suddenly, British merchants began pressing their American counterparts for payment. When American merchants sought money from their own banks to meet their obligations abroad, short-term interest rates climbed steeply. At the same time, British orders for cotton declined abruptly: in April 1837, prices fell by a calamitous 30 percent. Lacking an affordable supply of credit, and receiving drastically reduced prices, New Orleans cotton merchants rapidly became insolvent. Intricate networks of mutual indebtedness meant that when one concern failed, another quickly followed. The failures of southwestern mercantile firms brought huge pressures to bear on their northeastern creditors.

The New York brokerage house of J. & L. Joseph & Company was owed over \$1 million by the New Orleans cotton brokerage firm of Herman, Briggs & Company. On Friday, March 17, 1837, the failure of this firm forced Joseph & Co. to cease payment to its creditors. Business confidence collapsed and the supply of credit dried up completely. Debtors attempted to liquidate assets in order to meet payment claims, but sellers of real estate, stocks, and furniture were faced with a sudden dearth of buyers as nervous consumers held onto their cash. The combination of

an increased supply of assets for sale and a fall in demand resulted in plunging real estate prices. Propertied Americans like Henry Whiting Warner watched helplessly as the value of their assets was eaten away by the savage deflation that followed hard on the heels of the Panic. Money literally disappeared as panicked patrons rushed to the banks to exchange banknotes for specie, draining them of their reserves. “[I]mmense fortunes,” the merchant Phillip Hone observed, simply “melted away like snows before an April sun.”<sup>9</sup>

The lesson of the Panic was that all fortunes, and indeed all things, are in essence fungible. In Marx’s famous phrase, all that is apparently solid is capable, through some kind of malign magic, of melting into airy nothingness.<sup>10</sup> It’s as if a paradox in the constitution of money itself—its division into a physical component (cowries, shells, gold) and a fiduciary one (promises to pay)—has become generalized into an ontological and epistemological problem, one that is woven into the very texture of reality, so that one can never be sure whether one is dealing with substance or shadow, real presence or ghostly apparition: the thing itself, or a vague and mutable simulacrum.<sup>11</sup>

Two problems emerging from the 1837 Panic find their way into the fictional world of *Dollars and Cents*. First, there is the problem of a dematerializing reality, a hazard that seems an insuperable aspect of life in the floating world of antebellum capitalism. Then there is the problem of a radically destabilized social structure, where individuals are vulnerable to the vertiginous downward pull exerted by business failure. The larger argument I want to make in this book is that the two problems are linked, in that it is the downwardly mobile who are the most exposed to the ontological disturbances wrought by panic and depression. It is these distressed and disoriented individuals who seek to resist the derealizing effects of market turbulence by inventing realism: a fiction that seeks to counter the malign magic of the market revolution by creating a world in which things and people are legible, tangible, enduring, and real.

Anna Bartlett Warner was not alone in making these connections. As we shall see, many other Americans in the antebellum period complained of what Jean-Christophe Agnew calls the “fugitive and abstract social relations of burgeoning market society.”<sup>12</sup> They protested the increasing abstraction and alienation of a social life based on paper promises, they worried about the collective instability and personal risk of essentially speculative enterprises, and—in quieter tones—they lamented the insolvency and loss of social position that market upheavals brought them. But if the 1837 Panic was a defining moment of the antebellum period, it was also an episode in a longer-term dispute over the nature of social reality in the Atlantic world.

\* \* \*

As J. G. A. Pocock shows in his magisterial history of republican thought, *The Machiavellian Moment*, the critique of the spectrality of the commodity, exchange value, and the money-form had its origins in Great Britain’s Financial Revolution

of the 1690s. Shares in Britain's newly created national debt entitled their owners to a repayment from the public funds. Since the value of these shares fluctuated according to public confidence in the state's handling of its financial and political affairs, speculative dealings in them proceeded from the moment of their first issue, as investors began to make profits from trading in commercial paper. The spectacle of fundholders and stockjobbers living off the national debt drew a range of principled and outraged critiques.<sup>13</sup>

Classical republican values of autonomy, self-sufficiency, and frugality were seen by opponents of the new financial system to be menaced by luxury, superfluity, and interdependence: combined forces of corruption summed up under the heading of "credit." Whereas gold represented stable and enduring value, credit was seen to be "in constant flux, elusive, independent, and uncontrollable."<sup>14</sup> Deriving from the Latin *credere*, "to believe," "credit" implies an act of belief, one that sets people afloat on a tide of conjecture. It follows that the objects of credit's knowledge are, in Pocock's words, "not altogether real."<sup>15</sup> The republican citizen, by contrast, is "the independent man of virtue, secure in the self-respect that comes from enjoying his real property."<sup>16</sup> Whereas the freeholder is "anxious to improve his estate for inheritance, engaging in civic actions which relat[e] his private good to the public good," the *rentier* is "constantly engaged in increasing his wealth by exchanging fictitious tokens."<sup>17</sup> The new credit system produced what Pocock calls "a conflict of social epistemology," subjecting a previously stable, knowable reality to "fantasy, fiction, and social madness."<sup>18</sup> Paper money and credit had dissolved the social framework into "a shifting mobility of objects that were desired and fictions that were fantasized about."<sup>19</sup> A similar epistemological conflict broke out in the post-Revolutionary period in America.

The pattern was set in 1792, when, after Alexander Hamilton had established both a funded national debt and the first Bank of the United States, a period of "scriptomania" ended in a financial panic.<sup>20</sup> In 1819, an inflationary boom based on speculation, credit expansion, and the issue of private bank notes resulted in another financial collapse.<sup>21</sup> The Philadelphia banker Stephen Girard blamed the 1819 crisis on "the great facilities which our Company Chartered Banks have afforded to several of merchants, traders, and mechanics, who with their fictitious capital have acted imprudently."<sup>22</sup> As Marx later argued, value in the form of credit, shares, debt, and speculation constitutes "fictitious capital" because it represents only a claim to capital, rather than capital really existing in the form of labor, money, or a commodity of some kind.<sup>23</sup> Fictitious capital multiplies in its extent and variety during periods of business expansion, when confidence in economic growth inflates the number of notional claims. In times of financial crisis, once inflationary and speculative bubbles have finally burst, the illusory nature of these claims becomes all too evident.

The 1819 Panic produced a set of mordant republican critiques of the immateriality and abstraction of the paper economy. To Thomas Jefferson the nation was in the hands of "penniless and ephemeral interlopers" who had created a vast stock

of “fictitious capital” entirely through the “floating medium” of paper money.<sup>24</sup> Jefferson mocked the notion that “legerdemain tricks upon paper” could “produce as solid wealth as hard labor in the earth.”<sup>25</sup> Thomas Niles, editor of *Niles Weekly Register*, professed to be appalled at the spectacle of “wise people” caught up in a speculative frenzy, “embracing phantoms for realities” and creating “paper gold, and paper land, paper armies and revenues; a paper government and a paper legislature.” Niles came to the conclusion that Americans lived “in a mere enchanted island,” an extended Glen Luna, where “an individual may almost doubt, from the strong propensity towards paper, whether he himself is made of any better materials.”<sup>26</sup> In the aftermath of the 1837 Panic, this established republican critique acquired a new political force.

“Hard-money” Jacksonian Democrats like William Leggett protested against paper money and credit because these instruments, they said, reinforced the corporate privileges of capitalists and bankers, those “knot[s] of speculators” who, having obtained bank charters “by certain acts of collusion, bribery, and political management,” gain the power to control prices and the money supply.<sup>27</sup> But, even worse than this, the “scrip nobility” were tampering with the very fabric of the real.<sup>28</sup> Each new loan of bank credit “gives rise to new projects of speculation, each wilder and more chimerical than the last,” but this is, Leggett warns, an “unreal prosperity.”<sup>29</sup> An external shock to the credit system, such as a financial panic, causes a “wider derangement,” bringing the speculator’s “airy castle of credit” crashing to the ground and burying vast numbers of ordinary citizens in its ruins.<sup>30</sup> Many more see their fortunes “slip from their grasp and melt away, who had thought that they held it by securities as firm as the eternal hills.”<sup>31</sup> If men would only curb their speculative habits, and banks issue notes capable of being “redeemed in silver and gold,” then American society might rest on secure foundations rather than on an “unsubstantial fabric of presumption and pride.”<sup>32</sup>

Reality had blurred dangerously into fantasy by the time of the 1837 Panic, amid a proliferation of “fictitious representations of value.”<sup>33</sup> Venturing into Wall Street, the hero of Charles Frederick Briggs’s novel *The Adventures of Harry Franco* (1839) finds the “walls of houses, the trunks of trees, the fences, and the lamp posts” plastered with “innumerable plans of lithographed towns and cities,” none of which had actually been built.<sup>34</sup> Maps produced by speculators showed nonexistent “towns” that amounted, in Leggett’s words, to “a stick of hewn timber and a blazed tree.”<sup>35</sup> It was therefore not fanciful of the Jacksonian economist Theophilus Fisk to interpret the aftermath of the Panic as a return from “hallucinations to the sober realities of life.”<sup>36</sup> Less partisan Americans drew similar conclusions. Benjamin Tilton, a New York clerk, wrote in his diary that “[r]eality” had been “abandoned” for “dreams of immediate wealth.” Speculators had “rushed” onward, in wild pursuit of “townlots” and “mulberry trees,” until, “too late, they discovered they’d been pursuing a shadow.”<sup>37</sup> One way or another, since the foundation of the republic, Americans had been chasing shadows.

What were the alternatives? Was there a way to replace shadow with substance? Christopher Clark has described in detail how Connecticut Valley households in the late eighteenth century were driven toward independence from the market by the lack of a viable staple crop for export out of the region. Well into the nineteenth century, these households “cobbl[ed] together a living out of a range of skills and slender resources,” constantly trading with each other or “juggling goods for labor.”<sup>38</sup> Wheat, rye, or barley could be consumed at home, used to fatten swine or cattle, exchanged locally, sold at the store, or shipped to market. Luxury imported items such as rum and sugar might be paid for in cash, or via “the sum of five cords of pitch pine wood cut and split” and delivered to the storekeeper’s door “by the first of October.” Householders thus saw their ordinary transactions in concrete rather than abstract terms, focusing on issues of need, ability to pay, and reciprocity rather than questions of price, profit, or loss.

The emergent market culture involved long-distance trade between strangers, who countered the risk involved by demanding short-term credit or cash. The household economy, by contrast, was based on local exchange between neighboring freeholders, who bartered their own produce and labor instead of using cash, and settled accounts over long periods of time in informal networks of mutual indebtedness. The transition to capitalism in the Northeast produced clashes and compromises, not just between contrasting modes of production but between sharply diverging ways of life.<sup>39</sup> To live in the household economy under an ethics of local exchange was to acquire a detailed knowledge of concrete particulars. Under such conditions the particular event or object becomes a source of value. What counts are *these* particular pieces of pitch pine wood, *that* particular table, each of them “circumstantial, accidental, and temporal,” and not requiring translation into the abstract, universal equivalent of the money-form.<sup>40</sup> Such particulars are stubborn and recalcitrant. Offering the material resistance of the here and now, they provide a kind of refuge from the abstractions and panics of the market.

With its densely woven practices of local exchange, the New England household linked republican virtue to the political economy of the freehold. According to the tradition of civic republicanism described by Pocock, only “real property” is “stable enough to link successive generations in social relationships belonging to, or funded in, the order of nature.”<sup>41</sup> Unreal property, in the form of credit and the manifold paper instruments of financial capitalism, produces nothing tangible, only the delusions of luxury and speculation. The practice of republican virtue in an agrarian way of life therefore allows “the cognition of things” as they really are.<sup>42</sup> It’s no accident, then, that the first literary genre to adopt an embryonic but recognizably realist aesthetic should emerge from the household economy in the troubled period of the transition to capitalism.

\* \* \*

Written in the form of a series of letters addressed to a distant friend, Eliza Buckminster Lee’s *Sketches of a New England Village, in the Last Century* (1838)

features two stories that foreground the ethics of local exchange. In the first, a poor widow supports herself and her disabled daughter by spinning flax and wool, bringing the articles she makes to the narrator's house. "We never refused anything," the narrator recalls, "paying them as we were able, in small quantities of tea, sugar, meal, and other necessaries."<sup>43</sup> The close affinity between the households involved in reciprocal exchange rather than cash transactions is suggested by the fact that the narrator's father receives a salary of only five hundred dollars, which is "seldom paid" by his parishioners (132). Money is as "scarce" for the genteel but impoverished family of the village pastor as it is for the family of the village poor (132).

The story of another widow, whose son drowns at sea, pits the ethics of local exchange against the cold abstraction of cash. When the boy's coffin is brought to the widow's house to be paid for, the carpenter, who is new to the village, will take "nothing but silver" (133). "He was a hard-hearted man," the narrator continues, "to whom she offered, in vain, her stores of yarn, and her bay tallow" (133). The widow breaks down and tells the carpenter that if her son were alive, "he would work for you, or fish for you, and soon pay the debt" (133). The paradoxical offer underlines the new economic vulnerability of women, whose losses, instead of being eased by customary practices, are made even more insurmountable by the logic of monetary exchange.

Lee evokes the threatened world of the household economy by immersing the reader in the rural scene through the accumulation of telling details, or what the narrator calls "oft-repeated descriptions" (85). First, and other necessaries,<sup>43</sup> there is the "dear old parsonage" in which the narrator spent her girlhood, "a tolerably large, dark, unpainted house, two stories in front, full of windows, to admit all the genial influences of the south, while on the north it sloped down so that one might lay his hand on the roof" (85). The reader is invited, not just to picture the oddly asymmetrical shape of the house, but to imagine that its tactile immediacy has been placed within his or her grasp. We are next offered a series of descriptions of objects of use, not just weighted with associations, but marked by the imprint of their handling: the "long well-pole, with its 'mossy, iron-bound bucket'" (85); the doorstep, "a block of unhewn granite, worn smooth, and even hollow on the surface" (85); the spinning-wheels in the hall, "hung all around with skeins of linen and woollen yarn" (86). This is avowedly a scene of "rural and domestic labor" (86), from a time when "all the linen and cotton for the use of the family were spun in the house," when "[w]e lived on the produce of our dairy and our garden" (106).

Realistic detail here serves to evoke the contours of a vanished world, and also to give a concrete sense of the diurnal rhythms of life within the household economy. Lee practices what Clifford Geertz famously called "thick description," the patient delineation of the "piled up structures of inference and implication" inhering in "small, but very densely textured facts."<sup>44</sup> This is "[a]nother country heard from," in Geertz's description of ethnography, and, like an ethnographer, Lee gives her readers "bodied stuff on which to feed." Thick description produces