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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 21, no.1, March 1985, p.34-44
The Search for Sermons in Stones: 
The Pastoral Journey 
in A Modern Instance
by FLEDA BROWN JACKSON

IT is understandable that Howells looked to the pastoral play *As You Like It* for a title for *A Modern Instance*. For Howells, as a representative of the Victorian consciousness, the pastoral mode provided a particularly useful vehicle to help reconcile a deeply felt split: the desire for a "natural" (instinctual) and irresponsible life, in daily conflict with society's fierce demands for respectability. The speech by Jaques, the cynical, melancholy raider in Shakespeare's play, is an incisive piercing "through the body of the country, city, court, yea and this our life," a critical assessment of the sort I find Howells attempting in his novel of modern life.

What is generally considered pastoral is always based on a change in perspective. The structure of the pastoral is three-part: a withdrawal to a still place which offers a perspective on sophisticated life, a reassessment of values and reorientation toward society, and a return to the active world. The most potent aspect of the withdrawal from the everyday, civilized world is its containment. The world of nature is seen as cut off, isolated (thus requiring a journey to reach it) inside the density of woods or the haze of memory. Ambiguities are reduced. There is much sensuous concreteness of detail. The traveler is able to see more clearly those issues which have been muddied in the larger world. He experiences revelation and renewal. Often, as in Shakespeare's pastorals, retreat offers an unmasking and revealing of true identities. Robin Magowan, referring specifically to the pastorals of Fromentin and Jewett, sees the nineteenth century pastoral as often less a vehicle for social criticism than "a journey for each man to make within himself."

Kermit Vanderbilt has made a solid case for the pastoral nature of *The Undiscovered Country*, Howells's novel just previous to *Modern Instance*. In the late summer of 1875, Howells wrote to Charles Dudley Warner that he wanted to write a story about the Shakers at Shirley, Massachusetts. He was apparently unable to come up with a plot at that time, but he did write a non-fiction account for the *Atlantic* in June 1876. Soon after, he began to plan *Modern Instance*, which he quickly put aside to work on *The Undiscovered Country*, the story of the Shakers and spiritualism. It began serialization in the *Atlantic* in January 1880, and in 1881 he again took up and completed *Modern Instance*.

The earlier novel, *The Undiscovered Country*, Vanderbilt calls "the pioneering version of American pastoral in the post-Civil War novel." As its heroine Egeria Boynton begins to recover from her unnaturally intense association with her father, she is "reborn into the natural world." Howells describes her as an awakened "Ceres"; her lover Ford attempts to keep her "in the full sunshine of our common day."

The similarities of this novel to *Modern Instance* are strong: (1) references to Emerson, Thoreau, and *Walden* appear in both; (2) the Boyntons, like Marcia and Bartley, are emigrants to Boston from a small, deteriorating Maine village; (3) Ford, like Bartley, writes articles for a Boston paper. Some of his articles are on changes in rural New England, as is Bartley's logging camp story; (4) Egeria, like Marcia Gaylord, is crippled by an intense relationship with her family (Egeria's mother is dead; Marcia's mother is emotionally and spiritually dead); (5) Howells's temporary title for his *Modern Instance* manuscript was *The Light of Common Day*, which echoes Ford's pledge in *The Undiscovered Country*.

Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, in two essays, assembles plenty of evidence that in *Modern Instance* the village is neither idyllic nor a retreat, but a decayed pocket of exile and isolation, and finally, at the end of the novel, a place of execution for Bartley and of live burial for Halleck and for Marcia. On this basis, the novel may be thought to have no pastoral qualities other than the echo of regret for a past era. However, the pastoral nature of the novel, as I find it, lies not in the village-city opposition, but in its repeated pattern of movements, both physical and psychic. For Howells's characters, the retreat into the natural world (not necessarily found in the village) offers glimpses of dark Pan behind the bushes, and the opportunity for revelation. Howells sends his characters back again and again to this instinctual world, hoping it will illuminate the "daylight" world. But in *Modern Instance* the two remain essentially separate and unable to communicate with each other, and it is this separation that is responsible for disaster in the novel.

The narrative moves back and forth between (1) the community vision (law/order/morality) and the effort to make passion conform to this vision, often including a patterning or coding (for example, the courtship scene with its lectures, letters, and poetry) in the effort to contain passion; and (2) the world of the instinctual (dominated by images of nature and/or food), where

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3. Ibid., p. 655.
4. Ibid., p. 646.
restrictions are lowered and truths more readily revealed, either to the characters or to the reader. This movement is followed by a return to community, with the irreconcilable separation accentuated by some guilt or lingering pain (Bartley has a headache the next morning).

The swing from daylight to the instinctual world occurs first in the movement from the courtship scene to the hotel stable scene, which occurs on the same night. On that night, Marcia's parlor with its blazing fire, haven of light in a dark and sleeping world, seems a likely retreat for the expression of passions. Marcia and Bartley, however, engage in a series of symbolic actions which are important in their containment and lack of emotional truthfulness. The event of courtship is neatly staged by the two lovers to deny all that is overtly assented and to assent to all that is overtly denied. Their repartee contains a greatly exaggerated number of negative statements, yet each wishes to be desired by the other. The theatrical quality of the scene is enhanced by Bartley's twice reading romantic poetry, his concocting an imaginary trip to Chicago which would force Marcia to write him a letter, his discourse on the formation of his character modeled on a lecture they had recently heard, and the creation of the letter of invitation to the sleigh-ride ("That looks well, and it reads well. It looks very natural and it reads like poetry—blank verse" [12]), to which he forces Marcia to respond "yes." The letter is not an expression of real emotion or desire, but is simply a game. All the "games" of words (poetry, lecture, letters) in the scene (pages 6–15) help regulate and contain the lovers' instinctual desire, fixing the two firmly in the daylight world.

**Journey into the Instinctual**

The narrative then travels from that world to the hotel stable scene, an unmistakable underworld vision where the relaxation of societal restrictions allows Bartley's true character full play. It is the final hours of the final day of the week, Saturday (with its echoes of Saturnalia). Heat is frequently mentioned. The lamp smells "rankly," and the lantern contributes a "rival stench to the choking air." The fire is reduced to low smouldering embers. "Low" objects are emphasized—"feet," "boots," "shoe," "legs," and "pantaloons" (16–18). The ostler has been asleep on the floor. Movement is associated frequently with feet: "stomped," "clubbed," "shuffled," "stumped." Howells's club footed, Hephaestus-like ostler, shuffling, and inarticulate, reinforces the hellish nature of the passage.

Food images control the scene. Bartley's "grand good time" (16) with Marcia has "left him hungry," and he attempts to fill whatever physical or psychological void is indicated by that hunger. It is difficult for Bartley to get food: the table had been "barrenly put there" for the landlord's friends, but "nothing to eat or drink had ever been set out on it." On the shelves, the jars are empty. His midnight supper is "irregular" and not genuine "meat pie," but

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7. William Dean Howells, *A Modern Instance* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1976). All further references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in my text by the relevant page number(s).
“mince pie,” heated on a coal shovel. As it begins to emit a savory odor, the thawing ostler begins to smell more and more like the stable, spoiling the pleasant odor. Bartley defines his choice of milk or water to drink as a “choice of evils” (18).

Bartley is characterized by his hunger. When the pie (which he does not offer to share) is gone, he fears “that he has thrown away his hunger on one dish when he might have had something better” (18). And he longs for the non-nourishing stimulants tea or coffee, but is forced to settle for the nourishing staples, milk and cheese. These incidents serve as a fairly obvious index of his innate dissatisfactions and his preference for the unhealthy, the “irregular.” The scene provides a descent into Bartley’s instinctual being, and what is revealed there is wanting, hungry.

Sunday’s daylight does not bring Bartley’s retribution, only ineffectual regret. At its onset, the engagement scene is the reverse side of Bartley’s midnight reverie before the fire. Now it is noon, bright sunlight, during and after church. The energy of the night has dissipated into Bartley’s immobilizing sense of sin. Bartley’s sin of overindulgence (lack of control) the night before is punished by dyspepsia. This enervation of Bartley is demonstrated in the “slumbrous heat from a sheet-iron wood stove” (35), the depth of the feather cushions, the monotonous ticking of the clock, the regularity of the knitting and sewing.

This aura of sleepiness can be interpreted mythically. Patricia Merivale discusses interpretations of Pan the Goat-god in early modern prose fiction as the logical development of the whole pastoral, Arcadian tradition in English literature. She describes the “Theocritean silence of noon” which hides a (Panic) significance—beauty, or death and terror—that lurks below the surface: “The loss of vision [by day] is terrible enough, but the mercy of the god mitigates the punishment by sending [those mortals who look on Pan] forgetfulness. They are gently lowered into their real lives again.”

The reversal into daylight extends to food images. Now Bartley is to take as a cure plain tea with no milk. Howells extends the breadth of the seriousness of Saturday night’s relaxation of control by having Mrs. Gaylord suggest that simple overindulgence in meat-pie and cheese should not have caused digestion problems. The “irregularity” of the midnight hour and of the rich meal becomes a deeper moral infraction, the cure for which is, somehow, the simplicity of plain tea.

The second journey into the instinctual in the novel occurs in the sleigh-ride scene, which portrays in miniature Marcia’s and Bartley’s move away from safety and structure toward chaos and disintegration. The scene provides insight, and focuses and clarifies the jealousy issue which eventually precipitates the couple’s separation. The numerous nature images reflect an unstable and strange world. In this “white waste” (55), the lovers are released from community commentary or censorship to their own devices: the houses are “blind,”

9. Ibid., p. 142.
looking into a “lifeless world” and the village is in “close siege” as nature cowers “helplessly” (54) against the winter. Although it is daylight on the white snow, the “release” of the lovers is into a world darkly blotched by “strange bluish shadows” and “irregular grayish blurs” (54). The road shows “dark” (55) and plunges into a “darkly wooded gulch” (53). Nothing is stable. Wind (mentioned five times) is like “steel” (56), and its power is compared to a “tornado” (55) flattening the waves. Even the sun is “slanting” and there are “wreathed lines of smoke wavering upwards from the chimneys” (54).

In this instinctual world, Hannah Morrison, with whom Bartley flirts, appears as “a wild thing out of a trap.” And once again, Bartley wakes the next morning with “that dull headache” (68), the consequences Howells allocates for confrontation with the natural world. In the glare of day, his striking the innocent Henry Bird causes him to be confronted squarely with the twin codes of legality and morality: the verdict is grave. Marcia is “like a gray shadow” (78). The judge’s scornful agreement to help Bartley legally is countered by Marcia’s “retroactive legislation” (80), which breaks off the engagement.

Kinney: The Vision of Pan

Bunyan’s Christian wishes to flee the City of Destruction to live forever in the Celestial City. He is not able to see the wicket gate, but Evangelist tells him to follow the Light, which will lead him to the gate. Similarly, Bartley, fleeing the destruction he has brought upon himself, travels with the guidance of Kinney into the “blindingly sunny” (98) morning, through the “glistening street” in the most significant pastoral retreat of the novel. Singularly bursting with food and nature images, the episode offers not a Way-of-Life, but the nurturing spirit of nature, a “benevolent Pan”10 of helping and healing which is available only to those who are innocent or who can achieve a Blakean higher innocence.

Kinney, although a minor figure in the novel, plays an important role as Pan/Evangelist. He lives among the trees, the primary emblem of the Pan-world. Even to the “stem of timothy projecting from his lips” (101), he suggests the figure of Pan. His head is “shaggy” (106), and he “never had a suit of clothes to fit” him (101). He keeps the “imagination goin’ ” in his men with his meat-pie, which makes them “dream” (103), and he calls them to dinner by blowing “a long, stertorous note” on his “tin horn” (108). Bartley tells him that he “ought to be a deacon in the First Church of Equity” (104) because his laissez-faire religious attitudes match theirs (Pan has also been characterized as a “tolerant god”). Tavernier-Courbin sees Kinney as “the embodiment of all the romantic illusions of the village as human community.”11 But Kinney’s “village” is not, as she seems to suggest, the village of Equity; it is whatever assemblage he happens to attach himself to—whether it is the Border Ruffian War of Kansas or the logging camp. And in his romantic idealism, he is not,

10. Merivale, p. 135 (see entire Chapter IV).
as she claims, “almost always mistaken,”12 or as William M. Gibson claims, “amusing and pathetic,”13 if his role within the total ideology of the novel is examined in terms of the imagery associated with him.

Even though the ground is covered with snow, the woods and the logging camp are overwhelmingly fecund. The scene is initially filled with images of moisture: the snow is “packed moistly under their runners” (98); Kinney’s past careers include a bout “at sea,” a “rainy season at Panama,” a “tidal wave during an earthquake season” (99); when he returned to the woods, he settled down near a summer hotel “on the shore of the beautiful lake” (100).

Bartley and Kinney enter a world cut off by mountains, in which the air is “perfectly still” and sparkles “as if full of diamond dust” (98), in which the “sun shone and shone with dazzling brightness” (101)—certainly a Celestial City in its intensity and its remove from the everyday. In the stillness, Bartley finds Kinney’s voice “strange and alien” (101). Kinney calls it “terribly peaceful” there (101), and it is terrible in its impact on Bartley, which he finds he must eventually escape.

It is a mistake to take Howells too seriously in his narrative description of Kinney as a “gross and ridiculous” optimist (99) who finds or carries adversity wherever he goes. The fact remains that he is surrounded by a far greater proportion of “growing” and “nurturing” images (eighty food references in this episode alone) than any other character in any other scene in the novel. His life follows the rhythm of the seasons, “four months in the winter woods, with no coming out at all till spring” (100). His profession, that of a cook, is a nurturing one. In his three appearances in the novel—here, at Marcia’s and Bartley’s house in Boston, and in the train station in Indianapolis—he brings help, gifts, and encouragement. The form that his efforts take is sometimes undeniably foolish—he calls coffee a “brain-food” for travelers—but his foolishness acts as a protective covering for his intense grip on reality. After all, the core of Pan’s nature is a paradox—he is half goat and half god.

Within the cabin in the woods, expansiveness and nurture are offered on a grand scale. It is “dark,” “caulked with moss,” a “brooding warmth.” The cooking utensils with which Kinney composes his “favorite works” (103) are “huge” (102), of “mighty mass” (103), “great” in size. Howells cut from this section a longish paragraph in which Bartley, watching Kinney roll dough, is reminded of his mother singing as she made pies in their kitchen at home,14 and certainly the womb-like associations of the passage are clear enough without such an addition. The food that Kinney prepares is especially heavy, rich and basic—meat-pie, beans, potatoes, cabbage, strong tea with molasses—and the cook’s concern for the loggers’ well-being, misguided as it may be, is intensely maternal.

Merivale notes that Pan-as-creator is particularly Emersonian, barely distinguishable from Emerson’s “creating, ordering, infusing, and inspiring

12. Ibid.
'oversoul,'" and it seems to be this Pan that dictates Howells's imagery surrounding the character of Kinney. Merivale also notices that Emerson gives Pan "qualities more appropriate to Proteus than to the pastoral piper: 'the eternal Pan / Halteth never in one shape' ('Woodnotes II,' 1841)." Howells similarly describes Kinney as having been "over pretty nearly the whole uninhabitable globe" (99), frequently associated with the sea, and always changing jobs.

The tone changes abruptly in Chapter X, which begins with the lethargy we learn to expect following a dip into the instinctual. Bartley dozes for an hour. Kinney feels that his guest is a "failure" (109), and the dinner is here described as having been "gross and heavy" (109). With the arrival of guests, the switch to ritualizing, coding, of emotion takes place. Among those with civilized manners, Kinney now comes "hulking forward" (113), animal-like. Spontaneity disappears: Kinney "observes the decorum of not going to the door until someone knocks" (111); he goes to the door "very deliberately" (116). Rituals—flirtation, Kinney's modest "lecture," eating, singing, and dancing—organize and contain the powerful threat of primary emotion.

Although Kinney makes a meal of carefully prepared, fancier foods for the group ("very exclusive sardines and peaches," "newly fried dough-nuts," and an "entirely fresh pot of tea" [115]), the meal does not signal a communion of spirits. With the prevalence of the dishonest emotion of coquetry, there is no communion among the disparate social levels. The dance itself is forced and patronizing.

Bartley's escape—and it is virtually that—from the logging camp in the cold night is from the "floury paws" (120) of the nurturing Pan who offers him hospitality, forgiveness, respect and even money: it is the unmasking of his own nature through the revelatory pastoral retreat, not the community, from which he has the most to fear.

**Boston: Dead Passion and Empty Ritual**

The early Boston episodes present a deadening of the passions. The "natural" world begins to be suppressed too deeply to be felt: Marcia and Bartley attempt to deny their instinctual nature for the sake of stability. Howells signals the shift particularly with food images.

When the newlyweds arrive in Boston, they have dinner, but the only actual reference to food is that the meal begins with soup and goes to black coffee. Howells thus indicates that the meal brings no real nourishment or communion between the two. And later as they look for rooms, the landlady Mrs. Nash explains how they might eat out cheaply every night at a restaurant by ordering one meal and dividing it. In this way, they could rent a room without board for a lower rate. The inaccessibility of home-cooked food and the need to order only enough for one suggest the possibility for hunger—the psychic

15. Merivale, p. 91.
16. Ibid., pp. 91-92.
as well as physical hunger which Bartley now begins to share with Marcia. At one of the "cheap eating houses" Howells describes the food as "a great show" (152). Marcia's and Bartley's own meal is buried beneath the catalog of foods to choose from, and the long descriptions of table setting. The "noisy clacking" and "confused smells" (153) de-emphasize the nourishment itself.

Similarly, Bartley's acceptance into the newspapermen's club is characterized by "bad dinner" but a "good time" (170). All references to nourishment in this scene are to alcoholic drinks, as the action moves farther still from the fertile world.

Again, a few chapters later, the meal Marcia prepares for Bartley, Halleck, and Atherton is mostly the "glitter of new crockery." Food becomes merely part of the decor as "the guests praised the oysters and then they praised the dining room and the parlor" (216).

Clara Kingsbury's party is the epitome of the absence of passion and relationship in the novel. Clara invites her "unfashionable" friends to have tea with the Hubbards, and the result is a "humbug" (225) of no communion and no physical or spiritual nourishment. Clara's tea and "thin, ascetic cake" (225) leaves the Hubbards "half-starved" (228), and her friend Olive Halleck pitilessly mocks her vain efforts with "Why didn't you give them something to eat?" (227).

The experience of the city decisively turns Marcia and Bartley each toward excesses which are ultimately destructive: Marcia toward emotional and moral rigidity and Bartley toward emotional and moral laxness. The Halleck's garden provides the ingredients of a pastoral retreat for Marcia: it is bursting with nature images, warmth, silence, and "vivid sunshine" (245). But it proves to be more than warm; in fact, it is enervatingly hot, a suggestion of lurking damnation in Eden. The emphasis is on beginnings: it is spring, and Marcia cares for her new child under the new blossoms of flowers. And indeed, in the well-ordered garden, Marcia attempts the beginnings of religious order from her "chaos" (255) of mind. Halleck, too, is in mental confusion, and his having taken "a day off from the law school" (245) is counterpart of that disorder.

A mythic battle takes place within the garden. Marcia is for Halleck a serpant, with her "sidelong" glances, her "setting her head on one side," and he flushes, "ashamed of the wrong his thoughts, or rather his emotions, had done" (247). He breaks off a branch of the blooming pear for the baby, an act which resonates with mythic suggestions of self-castration, especially in light of his extreme self-disgust at his fascination for another man's wife. His mother accuses him of being a "stumbling block" of Marcia's faith (254); thus, he too is a serpent. Howells leaves the signals mixed: there is revelation as the original sin of Halleck's crippling is explained, and Halleck becomes a hero in the process. But in the battle for Marcia's soul against the forces of "chaos," Howells makes sure that we see this chaos as a source of native wisdom that Mrs. Halleck's tightly structured True Church is unable to match:

"It is very important to believe the truth, my dear," said Mrs. Halleck.
"But the truth is so hard to be certain of, and you know goodness as soon as you see it." (252)
Marcia’s scene in the garden is parallel to the bar-room scene: her discussion of religion parallels Bartley’s of journalism morality, and the intense natural imagery of the garden provides a physical retreat for Marcia, as does the intense food and drink imagery of the bar for Bartley.

Both Bartley and the theater-manager claim that the public wants “spice” and, therefore, that is what they should have. The cold-blooded crustaceans served at the bar are similarly spiced. The chicken is also “cold,” and other food—cheese and crackers and “Welsh-rabbit”—is meatless and makeshift nourishment. The many alcoholic drinks referred to provide no nourishment, and in fact are harmful. Howells creates here a dead world, devoid of nature, of proper nourishment, and of moral strength, in which Bartley can abandon himself to the instinctual with a “sense of release” (259). But that release, as always, brings on a powerful headache the next day and the necessity of dealing with the judgmental world—in this case, Ben Halleck.

The Picnic

Marcia’s vacation stay in Equity leads to one of the most significant retreat episodes of the novel, the picnic, which prompts revelation so painful that it cannot be endured without later denial or fantasy. As Marcia’s and Halleck’s looks meet at the top of the hill, it is the closest emotional connection they will make before each turns to aberration—Marcia to her false idealization of Bartley and Halleck to his excess of guilt.

In spite of the abundance of nature images, which creates an idyllic setting, the picnic causes much discomfort. The guests “disarranged” (296) the seating plan. Halleck “doesn’t know how to drive,” Mr. Macallister “doesn’t know the way” (197). There is difficulty in keeping the buggy in sight. The hill is appropriately named Devil’s Backbone: when Marcia reaches its top, her own and Halleck’s understanding of the awfulness of her situation is stripped to the bone in the “anguish of intelligence” (299) they share. Furthermore, there is a second “intelligence”—that Marcia is the girl in Halleck’s photograph—which immediately follows the picnic.

These revelations are intensified by the reappearance of Kinney. The flux or eternal process that Emerson emphasized in his poems of Pan is evident. Kinney’s first appearance is in the early spring; now it is autumn. His men at the logging camp fell tall trees; he is now going to do work connected with a coal mine, where long-dead trees, buried under the earth, have been transformed to black fuel. (Thus he is associated with spring-growth, winter-death.) He brings Bartley to the camp in the morning amid bright sunlight; now he shows up in the rain and evening time. He is simply dressed in the logging camp; now he wears fancy but ill-fitting clothes. The rhythm of Kinney’s life is the natural rhythm of the seasons, and his unease in the Hubbards’s world is the lack of affinity of the natural for the meretricious. And although this is also the autumn of the Hubbards’s marriage, it is not attuned to eternal rhythms, and it will not revive again in the spring.
Kinney explains his inability to get the loggers to eat health food as a failure to “bring those fellows out in the spring physically vigorous and mentally enlightened” (301). In his self-proclaimed role as nurturer and enlightener, he is not successful with them as he was not successful with Bartley. But his lack of success does not mar his good intentions. The gold nugget he gives Flavia awakens in Marcia the same clear perception of Bartley that she had gained during the picnic; hence, Kinney once again functions as a gateway to enlightenment. But once again, the enlightenment has no lasting effect.

Ben Halleck, as well as Bartley, is representative of Kinney’s opposite—one of Howells’s inherently crippled, urbane people who cannot find their way back to the natural rhythms. Halleck proposes to go to South America, but he assures his family that he will be where there is “no yellow fever nor earth­quakes” and “they have not had a revolution for six years.” His seeking a “perfectly safe” (350) place is directly antithetical to Kinney’s past life in Peru during “earthquake season,” “a yellow-fever season at Vera Cruz,” and his participation in “the Border Ruffian War of Kansas” (99). Not willing to take the risks of real life, Halleck allows man-made rules to direct his life-forces inward upon himself, and makes himself ill with guilt.

The Prison of Mechanism

The trip West to Tecumseh in pursuit of the deserter Bartley is the last glimpse Howells gives of a creator/destroyer primal world where revelations are possible. The train, gradually shaking off the slag and cinders of civilization, moves deeper and deeper into springtime, piercing the natural world with its deathly mission. Outside its windows appear even more and richer nature images than in the logging camp scene, but the images are poetic, behind the glass of windows, no longer reachable, now serving as reminders of the redemption that the travelers have passed by. (The divorce trial itself is the fruition of long-sown seeds, and appropriately, yet paradoxically, takes place in the full-leaved density of what has become virtually summer.) The plowing farmers they pass are a “transformation of man’s old-time laborious dependence into a lordly domination over the earth” (428), a sharp contrast to the travelers, who are dominated by natural impulses transformed into deathly obsessions because they are suppressed and misunderstood. Squire Gaylord becomes more “predatory” (421), and Olive Halleck tells Ben of Marcia’s looking “at Clara Atherton as if she could kill her” (422).

The lush nature imagery is a reminder of a broken connection with the rhythms of life, and Kinney’s reappearance at this time is a reminder of the lost possibility for human connections based on that natural rhythm of life. He gives love and food (coffee) to the emigrants, and he unwittingly gives renewed life to Marcia’s desire for vengeance against Bartley. He is, again, an avenue for truth. He reveals to Marcia that Bartley has declared her dead, and she is forced to admit that “He must have wished it” (433).

Marcia’s withdrawal to Equity is a further retreat into rigidity, depicted in
terms of food. The meat-man and the fish-man are the only ones who can speak authoritatively concerning her appearance and behavior. Since she must open her door to them, they represent her last possibility for emotional "opening." And just as Marcia accepts nothing from her neighbors, turning a cold shoulder to the community in her rigidity, Halleck accepts everything, drowning himself in his unconditional reliance on the Bible. Bartley himself has obviously been spiritually dead inside long before his actual death. His death, authorial contrivance that it is, allows Howells's characters to squarely face the issue of naturalness (instinctiveness) versus law (the control of civilization). For as long as Bartley remained alive, there was at least a Biblical (law) response to the question of Marcia's remarriage. But with his death, there is no law except an internal one to govern her or Halleck's emotions. But, instead of trusting the natural, internal life-force, Halleck flees again to the law in his letter to Atherton, promising to abide by his decision. Atherton's response, "Ah, I don't know! I don't know!" is beside the point. And the reader cannot depend upon his earlier declaration that "implanted goodness, . . . the seed of righteousness treasured from generation to generation" (333) is what saves. As George Perkins points out, that statement is not supported by evidence anywhere else in the novel.17

The core issue—control versus naturalness—was long since decided for Halleck. He has chosen (Biblical) control of his passions, a severe rigidity that has cut him off from the instinctual flow of love and passion and doomed him to moral squeamishness. Kinney, on the other hand, goes on about his foolish business without any real moral dilemmas, moving with the rhythms of his natural impulses, defined, corrected, and refined by his close reliance upon and openness to the natural world.

Whether it is possible for sophisticated man-in-society to reach back for that corrective influence is not resolved for Howells, but he suggests that if man could connect the mental construct (law, religion, etc.) of his civilized world to his passional nature (represented by Kinney, nature, healthful food, etc.), the dialogue of the two would resolve the issue: it is the pastoral journey of the latter nineteenth-century.

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17. Perkins, p. 435.