Grant Program: Provost Humanities Internal Grant (Fall, 2011 application; grant used Fall, 2012)

Grant Title: “The Ache of the Actual”: Pain, Anesthesia, and the Aesthetics of U.S. Literary Realism

Amount of Award: $8,000

Final Report:

I used my Provost Humanities Internal Grant in Fall, 2012 for a teaching release that allowed me to write one of the chapters in my third monograph, which was then titled “The Ache of the Actual’: Pain, Anesthesia, and the Aesthetics of U.S. Literary Realism.” (I’ve since dropped the “Anesthesia” from the title.) That chapter on William Dean Howells became the basis of a recently-accepted article in a prestigious journal in my field. At the time I applied for the grant, I conceived of this project, before I began writing it, primarily as a book about realism’s resistance to a widespread contemporaneous cultural revulsion from pain. This revulsion was underwritten by late-nineteenth-century advances in anesthesia and analgesics as well as by emergent religious ideologies including Mind Cure and Christian Science. As I wrote in the project narrative for the grant, my initial premise was that U.S. literary realists bucked the contemporary preference for a pain-free life and instead endorsed residual cultural understandings of pain’s benefits to a life well- and fully-lived. As a group, the realists were wary of a world devoid of pain, a world benumbed and flattened by the sensory pleasures afforded by consumerism and a shallow materialism. As I saw them then, the realists all shared a critical stance toward the intertwined cultural pursuits of painlessness and pleasure and each represented pain as an inescapable reality. At the time, I had sentimentalism in mind as another potential foil for the realist efforts, but I had not developed that literary mode into the full-fledged interlocutor for realism that it represents in the current incarnation of the project. My thinking about this topic has evolved since then so that I now situate realism as countering not only a cultural desire for numbness to pain but also its sentimental intensification. I also delve more deeply into what realism was for rather than merely against. Hence I now argue that the realists embraced the sensitivity to pain that their contemporaries associated with the civilizing process and invoked to justify their avoidance of pain. However, the realists portray voluntary exposure to pain rather than avoidance thereof as essential to enhancing and demonstrating civilized refinement.

Back in 2011 when I submitted my grant application, I thought I would argue that the realists challenged the prevalent revulsion from pain by dramatizing the benefits of moderate experiences of pain. The realists, I argued then, were attracted to pain as a topic since it helped them to emphasize the material dimensions of the body and the world that are essential to the realist worldview. At the same time, pain as a literary theme enabled the largely skeptical and secular participants in the realist movement to resist deterministic notions of identity as neatly and wholly reducible to physicality; pain even functioned for the realists like residual notions of the soul or emergent notions of the unconscious in that it, too, conveyed depth beneath surface and intimated the extent to which both reality and identity invariably exceeded mere embodiment. My tentative thesis was that the realists sought to eschew the excessive depictions of pain associated with competing literary modes while still endeavoring to represent suffering
so that its value would be conveyed to their skeptical peers and embodiment could be rendered palpable but not all-consuming.

The spring and summer preceding my fall 2012 grant, I wrote a first draft of a chapter on Edith Wharton and pain. I started with Wharton since she wrote so openly of her disdain for those of her contemporaries who confused the “absence of pain” with “the definition of happiness!” (Letters, 219) In her fiction, Wharton suggested that moderate experiences of physical pain could foster such positive qualities as “endurance and renunciation,” so much so that a dying character in one of her late novels observes, “Maybe we haven’t made enough of pain—been too afraid of it. Don’t be too afraid of it” (The Fruit of the Tree, 407; The Gods Arrive, 402). As I argued in that chapter, Wharton repeatedly suggests that an engagement with pain could function to add depth, meaning, and immediacy to life while building character and sharpening already-established powers of discernment and appreciation. The chapter focuses primarily on two lesser-known novels by Wharton, the 1907 The Fruit of the Tree and the 1927 Twilight Sleep, as elaborations of Wharton’s preference for an aesthetic indebted to pain.

During my release from teaching that fall, I revised the Wharton chapter and drafted the chapter on Howells. I also began the work of crafting an article based on both of these chapters, which eventually evolved into the essay that was recently accepted in the premiere journal in my field, American Literature. Like the chapters upon which it drew, however, the initial draft of this article (rejected by a different journal) was primarily focused on pain’s role as what one critic has called “the realest real thing” in realism—which is to say that I was more interested then in how pain functioned as a representation of reality than I was in how pain functioned for both the realists and their characters as a means of cultivating and displaying refinement. Thus I got bogged down, for instance, in meditating on what Howells meant by the term “real suffering” (which he uses repeatedly in his novel A Hazard of New Fortunes). In the initial draft of both the article and the Howells chapter, I traced a pattern of wounds inflicted prior to narrative time in three of Howells’s major realist novels. My sense at the time was that these pre-existing wounds instantly confer on each character a past that includes suffering and loss; this lent physical pain an undisputed status that helped to make the general realist point about human situatedness within a range of informative contexts and constraints and the particular point about pain’s unavoidable impact.

Since that time, successive rounds of revision on the article with an eye toward publication have led me to reformulate its central argument as well as its focus and structure. In light of these significant revisions, which culminated in the forthcoming American Literature article, I now need to perform a substantial overhaul of the three book chapters already drafted; I also need to find the time to write the fourth and final chapter on Twain as well as the epilogue. I am applying for a second Provost Humanities Internal Grant this fall in order to complete the work on this manuscript and see it to publication as a book within the next few years.