Review of *The Difficult Art of Giving: Patronage, Philanthropy, and the American Literary Market* by Francesca Sawaya

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The Difficult Art of Giving is both narrower and broader than its subtitle proclaims: while confining her analysis of “patronage, philanthropy, and the American literary market” to the work of five male authors at the turn of the twentieth century, Francesca Sawaya implicitly positions her study as a “critique of the neoliberal ‘free market fundamentalism’ of our own ‘New Gilded Age’ ([Louis] Uchitelle and [Amanda] Cox) and its relation to intellectual and creative work” (p. 187). Framed as a scholarly intervention in the socioeconomics of literary history, The Difficult Art of Giving provides an important corrective to the assumption that the shift from a patronage model of
sponsored authorship to an open, competitive, and supposedly
democratic and democratizing literary marketplace was relatively
uncomplicated and complete. To this end, Sawaya juxtaposes
Progressive Era literary texts with contemporaneous polemical and
autobiographical texts by Herbert Spencer, Andrew Carnegie, John D.
Rockefeller, and other theorists and practitioners, pointing up the
implicit and explicit critiques conveyed through the medium of fiction.
The result is a fresh, nuanced exploration of the conflicted,
ambivalent, often self-contradictory relationships between art and
corporate capitalism at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Sawaya's project rests on a series of linked paradoxes: most centrally,
as champions of corporate capitalism recognized that the fallout of the
system from which they benefited posed a threat to the system itself,
they “sought to intervene in this crisis while shoring up an ideology of
nonintervention” (p. 186). Offering a redemptive way out of this
double-bind, philanthropy proved a “difficult art” because “it
highlighted, as it sought to address, the ‘catastrophic dislocation’
([Karl] Polanyi) that capitalism was causing” (ibid.). In short, Sawaya
explains, “‘patronage and philanthropy foregrounded the fiction at the
heart of the concept of the ‘free market,’ a fiction those practices
nonetheless sought to enforce” (ibid.).

Sawaya's historical framing underscores the varied ways turn-of-the-
century authors engaged personally and critically with the ethical,
economic, and political dilemmas spawned by patronage and
philanthropy. Since these dilemmas are still very much present in the
twenty-first century, her study reveals the continuing relevance of a
host of texts that are not their authors' most familiar contributions:
Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886); William Dean
Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890); Mark Twain's *A
Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889); Charles Chesnutt's
*The Colonel's Dream* (1905); a trio of Chesnutt's “white life” stories;
and Theodore Dreiser's “trilogy of desire”: *The Financier* (1912), *The
Titan* (1914), and *The Stoic* (1947).

The book contains a few lacunae—the patronage plot of James's
*Roderick Hudson* (1875) receives scant attention, and the absence
of women writers leaves me wondering how (or whether) they negotiated
the networks of “friendship” and philanthropy that benefited male
writers. In addition, Sawaya says little about the interconnections among Howells, as editorial sponsor, and other writers figuring in her study. Such gaps are, ultimately, opportunities for future research, however, and Sawaya's cogent analysis is bound to stimulate inquiry into the intricate fiction(s) of liberal capitalism.