

9-1-2015

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

Sarah Wadsworth

Marquette University, sarah.wadsworth@marquette.edu

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

Sarah Wadsworth
*Department of English, Marquette University
Milwaukee, WI*

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.