

**DECLARATIONS OF DEPENDENCE:
REVISING OUR VIEW OF AMERICAN REALISM**

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In one of the typical American domestic novels of the 1870s, a standard character of the genre, the rejected suitor, finds an unexpected compensation for his many prior disappointments. When the novel opens, Roger Lawrence, the hero, has just experienced another disheartening rejection as a suitor and seems condemned to a permanent life as a bachelor. Events, however, take an unforeseen turn. A gambler staying in the same boardinghouse commits suicide on the night of our hero's rejection and leaves a motherless and unprotected girl of twelve behind, whom the unloved suitor, after some initial misgivings about the long-term financial costs of such a sudden impulse of compassion and yet propelled by an unmistakably Victorian sense of duty, ends up adopting. It is an adoption - and linkage of fates - which provides the otherwise extremely conventional novel with an unexpected, titillating twist. For not only can the hero act out to his heart's delight one of the central fantasies of Victorianism, namely, the supervision and moral training of a young untutored child; but also, as it fairly soon dawns on him (and on the initially incredulous reader), in accepting his Victorian duty the gentlemanly guardian finds himself in a position to bring up his own version of the ideal bride - 'in the hope that she will - in an exercise of free choice - marry him when she comes of age.'¹

Even such a necessarily brief plot summary may suffice to indicate how thoroughly Victorian our novel is. To seek further confirmation, one could refer to such typical narrative devices as the exertion of moral influence through a skillfully placed fever crisis. What is even more relevant for our purpose is the observation that the novel offers the prototypical story of American Victorianism. Centered around the idea of moral guardianship, the text deals with the long and painful formation of character, a process in which the heroine - very often, as in this case, a sadly neglected orphan - learns to govern herself and to acquire an

unfailing awareness of what is morally right or wrong, until she finally comes to realize the unselfishness and inner worth of her long-time guardian. Where the novel deviates from the conventional version of this well-known pattern is only perhaps in the extent to which it brings together the roles of guardian and lover into one character - and in the ensuing element of erotic teasing which prompted one critic to see in it 'sex unconscious of itself, an involuntary account of it in thick Victorian wrappings.'² Very appropriately, the novel is thus called *Watch and Ward*, summarizing in its title the two main activities on which it focuses, and it may come as a bit of a surprise for the uninitiated - if such an innocent being is still left among us - that it was written by the master craftsman of the novel himself, Henry James. As most readers will know, *Watch and Ward* was his first novel, composed upon his return to America in 1870 and serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1871 - a fact that remains valid even if there is an unmistakable tendency in James-criticism to take his own later embarrassment about his first novelistic effort as a plea for mercy and to consider *Roderick Hudson*, as he did himself in the New York Edition of that novel, as the real beginning of his career as novelist.

There seems to me, however, no need for such an eager exercise in tact. Even great writers have to begin somewhere and it is exactly this question where a writer such as James began which provides a novel like *Watch and Ward* with considerable interest for a discussion of the genesis and development of American realism. For what it suggests is the extent to which James's own work, and American realism in general, had its origin in the cultural system we now call American Victorianism - so much so, in fact, that American realism might be most fruitfully described not as a movement guided by aesthetic criteria such as objectivity, verisimilitude, and representativeness, as the conventional wisdom of American literary criticism has it, but as a cultural strategy to extend and modernize basic ideas of American Victorianism in order to gain influence on the definition of American society and culture after the Civil War.

Watch and Ward is an especially rewarding example for establishing such links between American Victorianism and realism, because it offers an early version of a narrative project to which James returned time and again; above all in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*, which are clearly influenced by *Watch and Ward*. All three novels are centered around the idea of an educational experiment made possible by an unforeseen change of fortune; all three share strikingly similar character constellations; and all three test the possibilities of moral instruction and a moral growth of character in the heroine - which would

finally protect her from a scheming world - through the courtship pattern. In *Watch and Ward*, Nora has to choose between three different candidates for her favor - candidates that are characterized as representatives of different regions of cultural influence in American life. A virile but morally undisciplined Westerner and an effete exemplar of the genteel tradition of the East are two of them. In between them stands the moral center of the book, the gentleman and guardian Roger Lawrence, who, as the novel progresses, comes to stand for the possibility of a happy balance between the two sectional and cultural extremes.

How can the heroine learn to distinguish between these suitors? How does a person, in other words, acquire moral knowledge in a domestic novel like *Watch and Ward*? It is this testing of possible roads to true moral insight which constitutes the central project of the novel. While the text, on its surface, seems to meander rather pointlessly through the constant ups-and-downs of Nora's life, what it really does is to examine, in subsequent chapters, well-known and culturally approved ways of character formation. Intense moral supervision by her guardian Roger and the nearly obligatory travel to Europe are just two of these, but neither they, nor other proven Victorian devices allow the young and inexperienced Nora to make the right distinctions. This is an outcome to be noted, for, as a result, the novel, interestingly enough, seems to drift toward a potentially realistic criterion of knowledge: the significance of experience itself as the only valid way to obtain reliable knowledge about the world. In a moment of severe disappointment, Nora flees to New York and her subsequent experiences with the Westerner Fenton, raising for a moment even the possibility of seduction or rape, teach her a painful lesson about how much she had deceived herself about his character. But in the final analysis, experience in *Watch and Ward* remains carefully controlled by the logic of an all pervading moral law. It does not initiate a process of gradual growth by trial and error, but functions as a kind of dramatic tool for initiating a moment of sudden conversion. In the final analysis, it is thus not experience, but Nora's heart which reveals the truth to her and this moment of revelation is also the moment in which moral and social order finally coalesce.

In a fashion typical of the hybrid mixture of romance and realism which characterizes the domestic novel, the novel thus uneasily moves between two theories of knowledge and two functional models of the literary text: on the one hand, moral guardianship is recognized as standing in the way of the heroine's and, by analogy, the reader's independence; this would imply moving the novel towards the representation of experience as a source of independent knowledge and thus

towards realism. On the other hand, if fiction's primary purpose still is to provide access to a moral order, then experience has to remain under firm moral control; it can only be admitted into the novel where it can be trusted to lead to a reaffirmation of the idea of moral guardianship. It is the promise of the domestic novel to provide models of a growth in independence, but this independence can only validate itself if it acknowledges the authority and superiority of the guardian turned suitor. In analogy, one might say the literary text moves its readers through alternating definitions of experience as both a promise and a threat in order to make them accept its own function of guardianship. (For clearly, it is hoped that in reading about a learning process like the heroine's, readers will be influenced by the carefully controlled model character of the narrative.)

II

The Portrait of a Lady also constitutes itself as an experiment in education, performed on a young and culturally still unbalanced heroine, and, as in *Watch and Ward*, this experiment is set in motion by a rather arbitrary plot device which foregrounds the laboratory-like character of the narrative constellation: while fate throws little orphan Nora into Roger's way, Ralph Touchett manages to talk his father into leaving Isabel Archer part of his money for the explicit purpose of testing her potential for growth. Again, in keeping with the conventions of the domestic novel, the educational experiment is acted out through the courtship pattern, in which we find, with one interesting complication, the same character constellation as in *Watch and Ward*: Robert Fenton, the strong, but crude representative of the American West has now become Caspar Goodwood, while the role of the refined Easterner is filled out by Warburton. Most interestingly, however, the third position, that of the guardian and lover Roger Lawrence, is now split into two characters, Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond - indicating a transformation of the guardian figure which bears interesting consequences for the development of the Jamesian project. On the one hand, the wish to control and possess, which so far had been only latently acknowledged in the guardian figure is now openly admitted and criticized, if not demonized in Osmond who wants to exert as complete control over Isabel as he does over his daughter Pansy. In Osmond, the guardian has turned collector and manipulator. His urge for dominating others is no longer, as it still is in the case of Roger Lawrence or Christopher Newman in *The American*, a widely unconscious temptation but a deliberate striving for

possession. On the other hand, however, the loss is also a gain for the novel, for in projecting all the dangerous impulses of the guardian figure into Osmond, a benevolent version can be retained in Ralph Touchett. What makes Ralph a positive character, is that, after initially treating Isabel as an object of his curiosity, he soon realizes that she has to go through her own experiences. With Ralph, then, we have arrived at a moment in which the Victorian belief in firm moral training is replaced by realism's trust in the innate civilizing potential of experience itself. The splitting of the guardian figure and the ensuing attempt to release the gentlemanly guardian from his own inner urges for control and possession thus stand for a far-reaching liberation of experience as a criterion of knowledge, (which suggests a new stage in this evolution from Victorianism to realism that we are tracing here.) If deception is to be countered and reliable knowledge gained, then only by the formation of individuality and character through continuous exposures to experience.

But there is a price to be paid for this liberation and it is part of the richness of *The Portrait of a Lady* that it never attempts to gloss this over. Once one liberates experience to the point where one has to rely on its innate power to provide knowledge and moral distinctions, one must also be prepared to relinquish all hopes and ambitions to shape it and to exert control over it. This painful recognition which Christopher Newman, for example, was still unwilling to accept seems to be accepted quite stoically by Ralph Touchett. But such stoicism is not an unquestioned virtue in *The Portrait of a Lady*, for it is also presented as retreat from life. In comparison with *Watch and Ward*, then, *The Portrait of a Lady*, one of the classics of American realism, reveals a genuine dilemma arising out of realism's Victorian origins. On the one hand, reality is gradually liberated from the hold of strict moral control and thus also from a hierarchical model of communication and interaction.³ On the other hand, this development entails a corresponding loss of influence on the part of the civilizing agent now relegated to the role of a mere onlooker - which may also be read as the expression of a fear that the renunciation of the Victorian idea of cultural guardianship for the sake of liberating experience may eventually lead to a painful separation from social interaction altogether.

III

We cannot possibly trace here all of the various transformations which the relation between guardian and developing subject undergoes in the work of James, although it would be interesting, for example, to deal with

yet another educational experiment, that of *The Bostonians*. Here, the split of the guardian figure into two positions is maintained, but a suspicion of massive self-interest now hovers over both self-appointed guardians, Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom, so that the basic tension of the novel no longer emerges from the relation between guardian and ward, but from the power struggle between the two guardian figures. Accordingly, the novel seems to deliberately move between the narrative modes of the novel of manners and melodrama in order to produce an effect of ambiguity that would provide protection against the schemes of the guardian, whether defined as a character in the text or as text itself. The ensuing complication of the realist project can be even more pointedly traced in a text like *The Turn of the Screw*, however, where the figure of the guardian reemerges in the character of the governess. In a way, then, we still have all the ingredients of a Victorian story of education and the crucial question thus still seems to be how and to what extent reality can be brought under moral control.

As one soon finds out, however, one will never find out, for the problem of education has finally turned into the suspicion of perception and experience itself. For the first time, we are confronted with the uncanny possibility that the guardian figure's moral energy may be nothing but a neurotic symptom. Since the reader has no way of finding out whether the governess is hallucinating or not, the key categories of realism - experience, communication, and individuality - become subverted from within; as a consequence, the individual cannot be said to grow any more, it merely moves within the hermetic circle of its own neurosis. And this, in turn, confirms a suspicion one might have had all along. The Victorian guardian is now no more than a voyeur prying into the inner secrets of her pupils and trying to extract confessions of guilt to satisfy her own neurotic longings - a suspicion that has its equivalent in several changes of narrative strategy. One of the most important for our discussion is the positioning of the guardian figure itself and the consequences this entails for the process of reading. Stances of watching are typical for the governess, in fact, much of the knowledge she acquires in the text - however dubious it may be - is acquired by watching. This may suggest classifying her as another observer of Ralph Touchett's type. Yet, quite obviously, there is an essential difference separating the two. An interesting inversion is at work here. The distance which Ralph keeps to most social and emotional commitments also enables him to be a perceptive and competent judge of events. In a way, his guardianship, which can also be seen, at the same time, as Ralph's successful 'authorship' of Isabel's life, is confirmed at that moment when Isabel herself is

ready to become the author (respectively, guardian) of her own life. In contrast, the dilemma in which the governess is caught might be characterized by saying that she, too, strives to achieve the status of an author of her own story, but that, by never being able to bridge the distance which prevents her from making sense out of her own experience, she always remains restricted to the role of a reader who tries in vain to give coherence to an enigmatic text. In her person - and this seems to me the actual source of the difficulties in the interpretation which *The Turn of the Screw* poses - the perspectives of the guardian and ward thus merge. Or, to put it differently, because of the tale's carefully sustained ambiguity, readers can never be sure whether they are reading the story of a legitimately concerned guardian or of an unstable heroine who herself is in need of guardianship.

This, in turn, has far-reaching consequences for the function of the literary text itself, for now the reader can no longer treat the text as a model of behavior, as in the case of *Watch and Ward*, nor as a model of open communication, as in the case of *The Portrait of a Lady*, where the reader, like Isabel in the text, is supposed to gain knowledge through a gradual process of interaction with the text. As Shoshana Felman and others have pointed out, in comparison with these two possibilities, *The Turn of the Screw* works, in analogy to the perceptual problems of the governess herself, like a trap of projection, that is, like a stimulus for a voyeurism which uses the ambiguity and interpretative openness of the text for the construction of an imaginary object that may only reflect the reader's own wishes and anxieties and thus keep him or her trapped in a cycle of promise and disappointment.⁴ The changes in the guardian figure thus find their equivalent in the changing functions of the literary text itself and this, in fact, may provide additional support for my decision to take the relation between guardian and developing subject as a *mise en abyme*, that is, as a mirror within the text, for the changing functions of fiction in realism.

IV

To begin the story of American realism with a character like Roger Lawrence may appear to be an unusual, if not downright questionable point of departure. Clearly, it stands in marked contrast to most discussions which logically tie American realism to the political and economic crises of the 1880s. Such an approach, however, must run into serious difficulties with large parts of the realist project of the Gilded Age. It can do little or nothing with Twain, James, and DeForest and even in

the case of Howells, a note of disapproval and disappointment persists because so much of his work fails to match his programmatic statements which he put together in piecemeal fashion in the 1880s. In other words, read backwards, from the critical ambitions of naturalism and left liberal intellectuals, American realism must dwindle down to a brief historical moment of programmatic self-awareness in some Howellsian novels of the 1880s. Time and again, the story of American realism is thus told as the story of failure; almost routinely, American realists are scolded for their lack of a realist backbone and for a tendency to strike compromises with a genteel system of values.

However, to discuss realism primarily on the basis of its own programmatic claims or by checking it against a list of urgent social crises is the wrong beginning in my opinion; instead, it seems much more sensible to consider where realism came from and to trace its subsequent development from there. To take Roger Lawrence as a possible point of departure allows us to stress both the Victorian origins of the realist project as well as its remarkable continuity which, in an ongoing process of revision and renegotiation, leads from Victorianism to early glimpses of modernism. Victorianism, in other words, always remained a constitutive element of American realism and was not an unfortunate relapse or a temporary loss of nerve. As the example of James has shown, there can be no doubt that the realist novel in America began as - and remained - a literary strategy of American Victorianism, but not, as most critics continue to imply, because its writers were too timid to shed Victorian conventions, but because American realism, from its start, developed as an advanced version of the Victorian civilizing project, that is, as an attempt to use literature as a discourse for establishing a cultural consensus on the potential and the remaining shortcomings of American civilization. If there is one common denominator that dominates the various forms of American realism, ranging from the historical and political novel, travel literature and local color fiction to the novel of manners and the utopian novel, including novels so vastly apart in style and structure as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is thus not an elusive norm of objectivity or representativeness nor a concern with specific social problems but the attempt to provide instances of an exemplary learning process in which the main characters finally learn to trust their own instinct and experience as the only reliable source of knowledge. The starting point and connecting link of American realism is thus not social criticism but the Victorian story of education, in which individual victories and failures are metonymically related to national possibilities. Accordingly, realism's central stories are ones of

exemplary growth or failure; its basic narrative thrust is the symbolic integration of disturbing cultural material into the coherence of the text; its goal is to develop fictional models and a vocabulary for the idea of successful relation. The increasingly critical dimension that enters American realism during the late 1880s and 1890s is thus not its generating force, but already an alarm signal that its own civilizing project had begun to run into increasing difficulties.

To reconceptualize 19th century American realism as originally and primarily a civilizing project by means of fiction can also help to differentiate more clearly the major constituents that shape the literary system we call realism.

1) Any communicative act implies a strategic or pragmatic dimension; or, to put it differently, it must assume a certain cultural purpose or need. This is what one may call the implied cultural function of the text; 2) This pragmatic dimension is one reason why literary realism, like any other type of literary text, does not simply reflect reality but offers a version of it based on certain assumptions about the nature of reality and the possibility of gaining knowledge about it; and 3) In order to fulfil its function as a cultural strategy, the realist novel, consciously or unconsciously, has to be based on an implied theory of effect, that is, on an idea of how the literary text will be able to realize its cultural goals through its narrative strategies and organization of linguistic material.

In distinguishing these three basic constituents one really talks about three basic functions of fiction: to provide knowledge, to serve as a mode of cultural self-definition, and to provide an aesthetic experience. The interesting point for the purpose of our discussion is that these three aspects, not only in realism, remain logically dependent on each other: at each stage of literary history, including the inner history of realism, they come together in specific constellations, which suggests that one should consider the possibility of tension, or more exactly, of competition, between various functions of fiction in realism itself. What remains unsatisfactory about mimetic concepts like the mirror-metaphor, life-likeness or truthful representation is not only that they are epistemologically naive, but also, and maybe more so, that they define the realist text through a single function, namely by registering something as accurately as possible that is already there. However, if realism, as most critics seem to agree nowadays, is a symbolic construct based on a certain effect, the reality effect, in order to be successful as a cultural strategy, if, in other words, it is really no more (and no less) than a rhetorical gesture to claim special authority for its own interpretation of reality, then the crucial question is no longer how successful it has been in realizing its own

claims, but by what choices the system is organized - and perhaps simultaneously disorganized.

Watch and Ward - to go back to the example from which I set out - is still strongly dominated by the priority of cultural function, reflecting Victorianism's obsession with moral instruction to which fiction's other potential remains subordinated. The prevalent view of reality is of a world governed by an all-pervasive moral law; if this is held to be self-evident, however, the best, in fact, the only way of gaining reliable knowledge about the world is by strict, unwavering moral discipline. Focusing on the figure of the guardian therefore makes sense, for clearly, as far as early American Victorianism is concerned, it seems like a fitting metaphor for the task literature is to perform on the reader: quite literally the text is to be the reader's guardian and is to provide the reader with clear moral guidance. The weak point of this system is the novel's theory of effect, however, which relies on the model character of its narrative and implies acts of imitation and identification on the part of the reader. Such a strategy has one basic flaw which impairs its cultural effectiveness. Although its promise is the formation of a stable moral identity, this identity, ironically enough, is only gained by acknowledging the superior authority of the guardian.

For the self-image of a young nation whose promise lay in a democratic communality of independent individuals, such a solution remained unsatisfactory. (I think that this is also the main reason why the domestic novel was never officially acknowledged in American literary and cultural history. It did not fit the dominant Americanism.) It was the priority the domestic novel set on moral instruction that the realists began to argue against with increasing fervor, because, in their opinion, such bookish dependency kept common Americans - and with them American civilization - from realizing their potential. What realism promises therefore - and here it goes beyond the domestic novel - is to liberate experience as the main source of knowledge and thus to transform moral instruction into genuine learning. Its initial cultural vision was based on the assumption of a common dialogue on the promise and remaining shortcomings of American civilization which would be able to forge a common vision and a viable cultural consensus.⁵ Such a dialogue presupposed the existence of a common basis for knowledge that was equally accessible to all. Thus, in order to fulfil its cultural purpose, the realist novel has to take something like an epistemological turn, however naive it may appear today, because the success of its civilizing project now depends on the question of whether and how reliable knowledge can be gained. This means, it must focus on exemplary stories of right or

wrong perception and if the novel is to help readers to train their perception, then it has to assign them a new role not as ward but as democratic equals who are invited to an ongoing dialogue on the nature and current state of American civilization, and yet are left alone to form their own conclusions because of a basic trust in their common sense and innate morality.

This epistemological turn eventually found expression in a new kind of genre designation in which the relation to reality becomes the distinguishing feature and in which realism's own generic origins are effectively obscured. However, this turn also created new pressure on the literary system whose development we are tracing here, namely, the challenge to offer convincing versions of the kind of experience that would support realism's own belief in a world that can be intersubjectively known; these different versions of what constitutes genuine experience in realism can also provide a useful point of departure for sketching out its amazing diversity. For Twain, the promise of experience obviously lay in the explosive force of the direct, spontaneous encounter which seemed ideally suited to blow away outworn cultural conventions. Knowledge was thus most reliably produced by a strategy of humorous confrontation. Twain's early books are hardly more than a loosely connected series of such confrontations, their theory of effect, influencing a whole tradition of American writing, is based on the liberating power of authenticity. This also remains Twain's major problem, however. For if the spontaneous encounter is to generate knowledge that is culturally meaningful, one must be able to use it as basis for generalization; each generalization, however, is undermined by the next spontaneous encounter. As a consequence, the breakdown of the realist project in Twain's writing is not primarily a result of his growing disillusion with America. Instead, the impossibility of establishing the direct, spontaneous encounter as an epistemologically valid base for reconceptualizing a regenerated civilization, most clearly revealed in the *Connecticut Yankee*, seems to lie at the core of his growing disillusionment.

Howells and James, on the other hand, obviously considered a model of dialogic exchange, patterned on the idea of an ongoing conversation, as the supreme model of the type of experience that would be able to generate culturally meaningful knowledge. Hence, the dialogic principle through which experience is constantly set in perspective became the guiding principle of their work in the 1880s. As I have tried to show, this meant to take back the idea of cultural guardianship because it stood in the way of a common democratic vision. This tendency finds its formal equivalent in gradually diminishing the role of the third-person narrator

and the subsequent shift in the relation between showing and telling which also strengthen the reader's role in the formation of meaning.

But, as we have seen, the liberation has its price and creates a new source of pressure, because it also diminishes the text's control over the interpretation of reality. As a result, many classic realistic novels of the early 1880s are marked by anxieties about the possibility that their strategy may backfire and endanger the novel's cultural function; they are therefore decisively shaped by counter-moves of forced reintegration, as, for example, in the elevation of Atherton to the voice of civilization in *A Modern Instance* or in Isabel Archer's return to Osmond at the end of *The Portrait of a Lady*. The developing subject is confirmed in the authorship of her own life, but the narrative makes sure that the text she writes reaffirms a cultural ideal of shared responsibility - individual identity is thus gained by the recognition of mutual dependence.

This, in fact, is the central dilemma of American realism that constantly threatens to subvert it from within and explains the vulnerability of its supposedly stable and reassuring acts of representation. In order to realize realism's trust in the innate civilizing potential of experience the text had to loosen the Victorian hold on experience and open itself up to all those aspects that still stood in the way of successful cultural integration. But in opening itself up, the novel, at the same time, also increasingly reveals material which threatens to explode the possibility of a cultural consensus and thus signals a possible loss of cultural influence on the part of the civilizing agent. The epistemological turn of the domestic novel, its liberation of experience as a source of knowledge, thus creates a new challenge, namely how to accommodate realism's civilizing function with a reality that increasingly seemed to resist symbolic integration into a new stage of American civilization after the Civil War.

This is also the moment, by the way, in which Howells and James part company. Since Howells had made the socializing power of the small group the measure for the possibilities of American civilization, he got stuck at the moment in which his own claim for truthfulness revealed more and more material that could no longer be integrated into the exemplary communities of his novels. His work is able to acknowledge diversity, but not unbridgeable difference. James, on the other hand, could go on, in fact, could push his work to new levels by radicalizing the epistemological turn of the realist project. Already in *The Portrait of a Lady*, experience becomes only meaningful by being processed through consciousness. This acknowledgment initially seemed to intensify doubts about the status of knowledge (and thus the promise of a new stage

of civilization), as can be seen in his enigmatic period, in which the fear of being imprisoned in consciousness begins to dominate his work. The guardian figure, as we have seen, is thus relegated from author to reader. But what initially provided a further source of pressure on realism's civilizing project also paved the way for a new solution which led to another and final readjustment within the realist project. After emphasizing its cultural function and epistemological promise, it is now the aesthetic function, that is, a new theory of effect, that becomes the major hope for the civilizing project. For if experience has become a problematic source of knowledge, only a certain way of processing it, for example, by sustained ambiguity, can counter its deception-potential. In other words, the work of art in our modern sense has become the supreme source, in fact, the only reliable source of knowledge and this shift from the question of perception to an increasing priority of the aesthetic dimension also has implications for the third major constituent of the project, its cultural function. The work of art is now the supreme guardian and the last and only remaining civilizing agent.

One could argue that at this point, when the aesthetic function has to carry all the cultural and epistemological hopes of fiction, a new danger - and thus a new source of pressure - arises: communicative interaction can turn into mere semiosis or the dialogic principle into merely semantic free play. This would seem to raise the question of cultural function anew. Hence, the recurring attempts in the 20th century to reappropriate realism as a literature that, by virtue of its seemingly close relation to reality, appears to guarantee an immediate cultural usefulness of fiction. Unfortunately, it was a version of realism that, for the most part, was returning again to the unchallenged dominance of one function, namely its usefulness as a cultural strategy and thus fell way behind the self-investigation that was already underway in 19th century realism. In fact, I would like to argue that poststructuralism's very limited view of realism as a reassuring myth of order has conflated 19th century realism with socialist realism and the roman à thèse in order to produce a version that serves its own ideological needs.

And so on and so forth. We cannot possibly discuss here all further steps and readjustments of the system whose development we have traced, but the basic pattern should have emerged with sufficient clarity. Realism, as any other literary system, is a heuristic fiction that is put to the test in the act of writing and is shaped by multiple, interlocking constituents. Thus, it should be regarded as an ongoing project, as a complex interactive system in which the relations between its basic constituents and possibilities, when under pressure, shift and have to be

constantly renegotiated. This, in turn, would also seem to call for an interactionist mode of explanation, not a monolithic or monologic one. In view of the complexity of American realism I find any approach unsatisfactory which rests its definition on the privileging of any of its functional aspects.

Finally, such an attempt to recast the question of realism in more complex terms may also provide a useful point of departure for assessing recent poststructuralist discussions which have transformed realism from its long-time standing as a privileged voice of criticism to a much maligned agent of bourgeois repression. In these determinedly revisionist views, realism's striving for representational transparency secures a totalitarian tyranny of the referent; in terms of cultural function, this makes realism a discourse of surveillance which is complicit to a policing of society; and finally, psychologically, the realist text is sickeningly repressive in subordinating desire to the reality-principle or to the claims of the symbolic order. This critique, reflecting a new cultural radicalism, has its merits in drawing our attention to elements of domination and coercion in realism's scenarios of communicative interaction, and above all in its metonymically charged courtship patterns - elements of power that were not as clearly seen before, especially in those approaches that want to affirm realism's own idea and ideal of consensus. What seems problematic, on the other hand, is the sweeping nature of these charges which, in a rigidly schematic binarism and thus in a striking contradiction to poststructuralism's own suspicion of stable binary oppositions, pits a monolithically conceived realism without any inner development and change of historical function against fantasies of semantic and social free play that elevate the visions of the Paris May to the seemingly only possible norm for human relations.

It seems justified, for example, to point out, as Leo Bersani does in a representative contemporary critique, that realism always tries to incorporate and control desire in scenarios of growth and balance. The typical narrative it tells is therefore that of a painful entrance into the symbolic order in which, to quote George Levine, 'an excessively romantic and egoistic heroine must learn the relation of desire to possibility, of self to society.'⁶ Still, one would want to know what the theory of human development is that would not have to acknowledge any compromise between desire and possibility. If the question of desire is not a matter of either-or, however, but of how much and how far, the idea of negotiation becomes crucial. And here it is striking to realize to what extent American realism itself in its constant attempt to readjust to the changing needs and newly emerging pressures on its own civilizing

project and in a remarkably sustained effort of self-examination, gradually acknowledges and reveals the dangers of domination and coercion in its own scenarios of courtship and symbolic union; in fact, as I have tried to argue, the pressures emerging from its increasing problematization of the idea of guardianship was part of the logic which undermined the realist project from within. If we are not satisfied with the solutions with which the realists have come up, this should not be too much of a surprise, because they could not possibly have read Barthes or Foucault who after all provide the subtext for our current analyses of the relations between art and power and love and power.

This, in fact, may be the ultimate problem realism has to face in this day and age. Interpretations and evaluations are also always matters of self-definition. For such a self-definition 19th century American realism does not have to offer much these days, for instead of glorious acts of liberation and resistance, it emphasizes the idea of interdependence. It is, in other words, of no use for the current cultural radicalism. In its concern with the inevitability but also with the difficulties and dangers of relations realism presents something like an ongoing reflection on various states of dependence. In a way, this also goes against the American grain. One explanation of why American criticism has shown relatively little interest in this important chapter of its own literary and cultural history may lie in the fact that in its concern with relations realism works against basic American fantasies. In contrast to American Romanticism, with which critics have remained endlessly fascinated, American realism does not offer declarations of independence, but of mutual dependence. One should add, however, that an insistence on the inevitability and necessity of mutual dependence should not be confused with an affirmation of dependency. Nor is this done by American realism itself. In its ever new attempts to find a convincing literary representation for the idea of successful relations, it presents the question of how such relations can be established as a continuous problematic on all levels of cultural activity: in the creation of meaning and aesthetic experience, in the establishment of genuine reciprocity in communication and social interaction, in the formation of social and personal identity, and, last but not least, in the interpretation of both reality and literature. In fact, in its obsession with the problem, it offers something like a phenomenology of possible relations, including those of deception, coercion, emotional dependency, and, in the work of writers like Kate Chopin, a discussion of the promise and problems of a retreat from relations. If we accept this, however, then it seems fitting to also extend the idea of interdependence to the interpretation of the phenomenon itself, as I have tried to do in

focusing on the relation between guardian and ward as a *mise en abyme* not only for the Jamesian project, but for American realism in general, defining realism as a complex system of elements whose interaction produces ever new gains and losses, insights and limitations, promises and breakdowns. In short, what I suggest is to read American realism not as an exercise in social criticism that fell short, nor as an exercise in surveillance or just plain self-deception, but as a literature of exploration.

REFERENCES

1. Leon Edel, 'Introduction', *Watch and Ward* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p.6.
2. *Ibid.*, p.9.
3. An extended discussion of this aspect of American realism can be found in my essay 'Fiction and Fictionality in American Realism', *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 31 (1986), 101-112.
4. Shoshana Felman, 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', *Yale French Studies*, No. 55/56 (1977), 94-207. See also Shlomith Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity - The Example of James* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977) and Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), chaps. 6-8.
5. On this point, see the excellent discussion of American realism by Heinz Ickstadt, 'Concepts of Society and the Practice of Fiction: Symbolic Responses to the Experience of Change in Late Nineteenth Century America', *Impressions of a Gilded Age: The American Fin de Siecle*, eds. Marc Chénétier and Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: Amerika Instituut, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1983), pp. 77-95.
6. George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination. English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterly* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1981), p.45. For Bersani's argument see 'Realism and the Fear of Desire', *A Future for Astyanax* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976).