

Fiction and Fictionality in American Realism*

Part I: The Masculinization of American Realism

Inevitably, our rapidly changing views of realism as a literary movement must also affect the term “realism” itself. Instead of regarding realism as a mode of writing that is anchored by a stable referent from which it acquires meaning by representational accuracy, we are now more inclined to view the realist text as a rhetorical strategy designed to support a cultural claim for authenticity and authority. If the term realism is a signifier, however, whose meaning varies with a set of changing semantic relations, then a new possibility of discussing the term is opened up, namely, through the different tropes by which people try to capture its meaning. In what is, so far, the most thoughtful response to the poststructuralist challenge to realism, Christopher Prendergast, in his book *The Order of Mimesis*, begins his discussion by pointing out three of the most influential metaphorizations the term realism has undergone: realism as poison, as nausea, and as health. For Plato, there are representations which are poisonous, “such as mimetic representations, for these not only disturb the ideal hierarchy of things, but also, in so far as they are recognisable as ‘imitations,’ they draw attention to the capacity of the human mind for making, inventing, *fabricating* ... the systems under which men live” (Prendergast 12). For Roland Barthes, Plato’s poison has become nausea; for him the mimetic text is sickening and exhibits ‘une sorte de vertu vomitive,’ “not because it troubles an order in which everything is in its proper place, but, on the contrary, because it *confirms* that order” (ibid.). In contrast, Paul Ricoeur, in keeping with critical approaches in which realism’s concern with matters of successful growth and integration is emphasized, “promotes mimesis as a model of epistemological and psychological health, as a necessary condition of human growth and maturation” (Prendergast 19). What I want to do in the following remarks is to sketch out the history and characteristics of yet another trope. It is a trope that has decisively influenced, in fact, almost exclusively dominated the discussion of American realism in the last hundred years or so: the conceptualization of realism as strength.

* This essay brings together two essays on American realism that were originally published separately. “The Masculinization of American Realism” in *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 36 (1991): 71-76, and “Fiction and Fictionality in American Realism” in *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 31 (1986): 101-112. Both texts have been revised.

I want to illustrate what I mean by pointing to an example which first drew my attention to the phenomenon to be discussed here. While writing a history of American realism, I did research on John William De Forest's novel *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867), which is treated, in an interpretation by my German colleague Jürgen Peper, as an exemplary manifestation of an emerging realist epistemology. In contrast, De Forest's novel has not fared too well in American discussions. There are, however, two notable exceptions: Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore. Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War*, and, following the same tradition and clearly influenced by Wilson's lead, Daniel Aaron's book *The Unwritten War. American Writers and the Civil War*. Aaron's book is of interest here, because it provides a case study for the transformation the realist novel of the Gilded Age has undergone in twentieth-century criticism. Taking De Forest's non-fictional reports on the war, published posthumously as *A Volunteer's Adventures*, as model and pre-text through which *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* is to be read, and focusing on those chapters in the text in which De Forest deals with the sordid realities of war at close range, the novel is interpreted primarily through the generic expectations of a war reportage and is thus rescued for a realist tradition defined as a candid look at the tough realities of life. This critical move, typical for a large group of discussions of nineteenth-century American realism, has two basic consequences. It provides a generic redefinition of the realist novel of the Gilded Age which has marked and marred almost all discussions of American realism in the twentieth century until recently; and in doing so, it suggests a specific vocabulary and set of criteria for dealing with realist texts and valorizing them.

Let me begin with the latter. If realism is responsible for telling it like it really is, then the question whether a text can be considered truly realistic or not is no longer a matter of the possibilities and problems of mimesis, but of sufficient good will and courage to grasp the reality lying out there. Consciously or unconsciously, realism is thus primarily defined as a moral challenge, which, in turn, suggests to look for a certain fortitude and uprightness as a crucial criterion for genuine realism. If reality is equated with the hard facts of life such as war or life in the ghetto, then what one needs most of all in facing it is strength. (And *vice versa*: If realism is characterized by a tough, hard look at life as it really is, then it has to deal with, in fact, can be measured by, the extent to which it deals with sufficiently tough realities.) Very fittingly, the semantic word clusters used to describe realism's achievements reflect this redefinition. While in nineteenth-century discussions the realist novel is habitually tied to mimetic claims so that words like accurate, life-like, objective, typical, or representative are crucial terms of praise, the masculine redefinition favors words like tough, hard, and hard-hitting for praising realistic achievements.

This leads to the second consequence, one that has had far-reaching effects: I am referring to the fact of a generic redefinition which is really the phenomenon I want to draw attention to by talking about the masculinization of American realism. To go back to our example: What is striking about Aaron's approach to *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* is the extent to which he misreads the novel in terms of genre. Obviously, this has something to do with an epistemologically naive view, widely typical for the liberalism of the Thirties and after, in which realism is that kind of literature which does away with all literary distortions and reflects reality itself. As a result, it cannot belong to a literary genre, or, to put it differently, the only fitting genre is the hard-hitting report or reportage which tries to provide a direct, unmediated encounter with reality. Thus, in reading De Forest's novel in terms of a war reportage, Aaron must not only dismiss large parts, in fact, most of the book as regrettable digression from the path of realist virtue. He obviously also never realizes that the novel is clearly written in the mode of the historical novel which treats the history of individual characters and that of the nation as complementary (and not, as Aaron does, as antagonistic) and thus uses the courtship and marriage pattern as a national metaphor. For Aaron, these elements have no function. Seen from the genre expectation of war reportage, they only distract from a tough and unsentimental look at the brutal realities of war. What is more, not only do they distract, but they also endanger the strength of the book. In following a pattern Nina Baym has described in her essay on "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," they are seen as intrusions into a tough male world which are best met by strong, unswerving resistance. Categorically, Aaron dismisses the whole plot line around Miss Ravenel, from which the novel takes its title, as merely a "sop to romantic readers" (173).

The point here is not to single out a critic or interpretation in order to report them to a feminist media watch, but, in drawing on a case study, to describe a representative critical act, which, in my opinion, has had a crucial impact on our understanding of American literary history. In fact, I want to claim that this generic redefinition of realism is not restricted to a single group of critics, and certainly not to a liberal tradition in American literature and American literary criticism, but has also dominated the reception of the realist tradition of the nineteenth century until the recent poststructuralist critique of realism as surveillance and the repression of desire. The vocabulary and critical pose may not always have been as undisguised as in the example from which I took my cue, but the general phenomenon is nevertheless strikingly similar. It consists of a broad generic redefinition of nineteenth-century realism in which a variety of factors, ranging from the growing status of photography and newspaper reporting, to the appropriation of the idea of strength as moral strength by the Left, have coalesced to conceive of realism as the masculine discourse par excellence, a discourse not of the drawing room and the festive

dinner, but of the battlefield and the boxing ring, not of ongoing processes of communication and interaction, but of the school of hard knocks. In short, as the Mike Tyson of literary history.

The comparison is not entirely flippant. For it is the sorry fate of the strong, as the case of Mike Tyson has demonstrated again, that they have to fall eventually. This danger, in fact, constitutes what Nina Baym very aptly calls the melodrama of manhood. Similarly, American realism has never been able to live up to the fantasy of strength by which it was appropriated and this has had damaging consequences for the perception of major parts of nineteenth-century American realism. This literature is to a large degree, with the possible exception of Twain, a literature of relations and exploration of the possibilities of communication in which certain motifs, such as the courtship pattern of the novel of manners and the domestic novel, are refunctionalized as a test case for questions of perception and growth. In reducing realism to a fantasy of strength, most interpretations must see such interests as signaling the danger of weakness; instead of placing the characters in the text in a position which would allow them to face a tough reality manfully, the courtship pattern ties the hero or heroine down in private concerns which distract them from what really counts in life. A fantasy of assertive independence and emotional self-sufficiency thus clashes with nineteenth-century realism's declaration of (inter)dependence, and the fact that the realistic novel of the Gilded Age does not convincingly and consistently support a left liberal fantasy of resistance and empowerment leads to a considerable amount of aggression.

Time and again, and almost ritually, from George Santayana to Henry Nash Smith, from Van Wyck Brooks to Alan Trachtenberg, discussions of American realism of the Gilded Age end up blaming the realist for regrettable concessions to a female reading public. If realism is defined by strength, then nineteenth-century realism is failed realism. As a consequence, the story of American realism becomes the history of its failure – a failure that is retrospectively produced by applying criteria which were never those of the realists themselves. I find such an approach highly unproductive. It would seem more interesting and informative to explore why the writers of a period wrote the way they did, instead of blaming them for failing to stage a fantasy that was not their own.

In the male fantasy underlying the masculinization of realism in the twentieth century, compromise or mediation, not to speak of negotiation, are seen as signs of weakness, because they water down a strong counterstance of resistance and diminish the radical promise of the realistic claim. This may in turn provide one explanation for the generic redefinition with which I am concerned. There is not enough space here to patiently pursue all the various factors and influences that added up to the redefinition of realism as strength. Undoubtedly, one important source was provided by the philosopher George

Santayana, who already in 1911 argued that the “American will inhabits the sky-scraper; the American intellect inhabits the colonial mansion. The one is the sphere of the American man; the other, at least predominantly, of the American woman. The one is all aggressive enterprise; the other is all genteel tradition” (128f). This description, made almost off-hand in an essay on American philosophy, has become the dominant model of explanation for the approach discussed here, so much so in fact that it may be called the Santayana-paradigm.

Santayana, in turn, seems to reflect the changing social and cultural climate of the 1890s as it has been described by John Higham and others in which new cultural activities such as outdoor life, sportsmanship, and other elements express a wish for a new vitality which would be able to escape Victorianism. These changing attitudes also found their expression in the literary culture of the Progressive Era, as Christopher Wilson has recently pointed out. The emergence of writing as a profession in the modern sense obviously created a psychic need to liberate literary and other intellectual activities from the stigma of being female pursuits, as many other areas of professionalization confirm. Holding the promise of a new look at reality, professionalization implied a cold, unemotional approach to life, while Victorianism had tied ideal womanhood to strong emotionality. There may be yet another important point though. Not accidentally, professionalism and Americanism appeared to be almost synonymous for some time. There was additional promise in the linkage of literature with strength, then, namely that of providing a stance of cultural independence that was considered specifically American. In this view, ‘masculine’ writing suggests a specific American energy; it is seen as a mode of writing that convinces by its power, not its structural control, which, in other words, is free from female ‘handiwork.’ Thus, during the heyday of the paradigm from the 1930s to the 1960s, strength also became one of the major tropes for the valorization of American literature in general, as is indicated, for example, in book titles such as Fiedler’s *No! In Thunder* or in Ann Douglas’s ill-considered polemic against *The Feminization of American Culture*.

The masculinization of American realism would thus be part of a broader cultural development which still has to be explored in more detail. In this story, the generic redefinition of nineteenth-century realism could provide a telling chapter. One may end this historical chapter of the story of American realism by emphasizing a particular aspect of that story, which may also help to explain its amazing success, namely, the usefulness of this redefinition for radical gestures (albeit apolitical and spontaneous ones, based more, it seems, on psychic needs than ideological loyalties). In this sense, the changing fortune of realism also provides a chapter in the sociology of the literary intellectual. This story is, as we all know, characterized by a growing independence, but also marginality. The further the distance from the center

of power, however, the less incentive there is for compromise and mediation and the greater the temptation to compensate for this marginality by the symbolic construction of strength. By harshly criticizing Howellsian or Jamesian compromises, one can also assert one's own immunity to similar corruptions. Literary criticism, I suspect, is thus inevitably, or, if you will, always already, a kind of role-taking, and it is certainly a supreme irony of literary and cultural history that this suspicion is, among other things, confirmed by a movement, literary realism, which promised to escape such fantasies by its proximity to reality itself. Instead, things may have worked the other way around: the tough realities, whether of war or capitalism, have been used – misused may be an even better word – to give authenticity and authority to a gratifying fantasy of moral superiority and resistance.

Part II: Another View of American Realism

I. A Literature for Grown Persons

Classic American realism of the period between 1865-1900 did not come into existence as a violent break with tradition. Nor was it a movement guided by a well-worked out theory of realism focusing on the tough realities of life and supported by writers intent on writing novels that would stand as successful illustration of their own realist program. What stood at the beginning were rather interventions into the literary world of the romance. These interventions, however, had their cultural purpose – they served as literary devices to establish a cultural vision that evolved out of an advanced stage of American Victorianism. Briefly speaking, attempts in the mode of writing that later came to be called realism can be seen as symbolic strategies to influence the definition of American society after the Civil War. Reflecting the crucial role which the idea of civilization played for the self-definition of the so-called Gilded Age – which Ursula Brumm has worked out in her essay on the idea of progress in American thought of the 19th century – the Civil War was regarded as a watershed in American history. The divided nation was reunited; slavery, its last moral blemish, had finally been abolished. In the first example of American realism, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, John William DeForest suggests that the union between North and South holds the promise of a new America which now seems ready to enter a stage in the development of human civilization never before attained.

This new stage, however, was still a promise; it had yet to become a reality. Outworn cultural conventions and a widespread persistence of foolish romantic notions prevented American society from realizing its full potential. It was here that literature was called upon to play a most important role as moral and intellectual stimulus that would convert readers to a full perception of the potential of American civilization. In order to function as

a civilizing instrument, however, the novel had to be redefined and upgraded as a mode of discourse: “If, after half a century,” Howells wrote in *Criticism and Fiction*, “fiction still mainly works for ‘children, minors, and semi-fatuous persons of both sexes,’ it is nevertheless one of the hopefulest signs of the world’s progress that it has begun to work for ‘grown persons’ ...” (103).

If the novel was to develop into something that “grown persons” (and by that, one can surmise, Howells meant especially adult males) would take seriously, it had to be purified of those excesses and infantile residues of the romance which distorted the perception of human nature and the social fabric. The romance, in this sense of an infantile discourse, became the sign of a lack of control in American civilization, of a weakness in the culture, that still stood in the way of its democratic and cultural progress, and the struggle against it could thus be seen as a cultural task of the first importance: “Whatever in my mental make-up is wild and visionary, whatever is untrue, whatever is injurious,” Howells quotes a skeptical reader with approval, “I can trace to the perusal of some work of fiction” (92). What unites novels otherwise as different as *Huck Finn*, *Silas Lapham* or *The Portrait of a Lady* is a movement beyond such dangerous states of mental and emotional dependency. In each case, the text is centered around an exemplary process of learning in which characters misguided by books are confronted with the painful consequences of their own false perception of the world. In this process, it is experience that makes all the difference. The imagination, of course, is not to be denied as a source of knowledge, but it needs to be restrained and checked by experience. The fatal error is to imitate models of behavior offered by literature (that is, to borrow someone else’s perception). In contrast, representative characters of classic American realism – from Miss Ravenel to Isabel Archer and Annie Kilburn – finally learn to trust their own experience as the only reliable source of knowledge. And this, by analogy, was also the promise the realist text extended to its reader. If the perception of a specific potential of American civilization was to be grounded on the possibility of a common experience, then the realist text had to find ways to make the reader experience the necessity of experience itself.

II. A Critique of Fiction By Means of Fiction

How could this be accomplished? How could the novel generate a reading that would correspond to realism’s theory of gaining knowledge? At first, the American realists seem to have assumed that it would be sufficient – in Howells’ words – to expose the idle lies about human nature and the social fabric on which the romance based its effects. The potential of American civilization would then become self-evident, common sense and common vision would prevail. Such a strategy explains, for example, the predominance of a

theme in classic American realism that has puzzled and irritated subsequent generations of critics in their search for a pure and uncontaminated realism. I am referring to the central role thematic elements of the novel of manners and the domestic romance such as courtship and marriage continued to play in the realist novel. To see this thematic emphasis merely as a deplorable concession to a female reading public is to miss its specific point and function within American realism. Quite obviously, the motif of courtship plays a crucial role in illustrating the problem of perception that is at the core of the realist project. Since in the age of Victorian morals the relation between the sexes is still dependent on a perception and knowledge of the other that, for the most part, remains external, courtship and marriage are particularly well suited to dramatize the painful, self-destructive consequences of an inadequate and distorted reading of reality. In the end, the sad fates of a Marcia Gaylord or Isabel Archer teach a welcome lesson: to trust only one's own experience, to learn to see and judge for oneself. Refunctionalizing the motif, the realist novel thus tries to revise and re-plot the story of courtship and marriage as a test-case of how to acquire reliable knowledge about the world.

It was one of the constant dangers of such realist revisions of the romance, however, to remain on a primarily thematic level of revision, to offer counter-models of behavior, not of reading. Ironically, the strategy of influencing the reader would in this case still be based on the same functional model that the domestic romance employed: that of setting a strong example of behavior for the reader. But the realist's critique of the romance had also been that of the genre's form and function. The danger of the romance did not only lie in the examples it set, but even more so in the self-indulgent kind of reading it suggested. Its theme, as we have seen, could be re-emplotted to teach a new and helpful lesson, but if literature was to promote a different kind of knowledge then the use of the text made in the reading process itself had to be part of the change. The danger, in other words, lay in replacing one model of behavior with another, but not the view of art as model itself.

It is exactly at this point that the realists seem to get into trouble with the concept of fiction. One may have noticed, for example, that in my quotation of the Howellsian critique of romance Howells himself employed the term fiction instead of romance. At times, in fact, the two words seem to have become virtually synonymous, both carrying the same connotation of illusion, if not downright lying. But if fiction was an illusion, what about the fictional nature of realism's own critique of fiction?

To cut through the fictions people impose on their life was one of the main goals of realism; that it had to do this by means of fiction seems to emerge as one of its main dilemmas. We appear to have reached the ultimate paradox: a critique of fiction by means of fiction. It is a contradiction which seems to confirm the modernist and postmodernist suspicion that the realist text lacks an awareness of its own fictionality and is thus based on naive self-deception.

As a consequence, to quote Harry Levin, it “goes out of its way to avoid the appearance of the fictitious,” as if it would be possible to deny the fictional mode altogether (25). Realism’s critique of the romance, however, can only be considered a contradiction if realist fiction would indeed have done nothing but to replace one model of behavior with another, if it would have made a claim for superior cultural authority by calling the romance a lie while at the same time trying to deceive the reader about its own fictional mode.

Yet though there is a tendency in realism, typical of 19th-century rationalism, to delude itself about the extent to which we fictionalize in perceiving reality, it seems too easy to see the realist’s critique of fiction as merely a naive illusion about the possibilities of replacing fiction by fact. For clearly, what the realists had in mind was not the elimination of fiction, but its redefinition – and the ensuing conflict is therefore not one between illusion and reality, but between two different functional models of literature. Two meanings of the word fiction must be kept apart here: 1) our modern, all-embracing sense of the word in which fiction has come to denote a tentative, experimental mode of discourse, bracketed, so to speak, by an ‘as-if’ that turns fiction into a means of cultural experimentation; and 2) the meaning of the word from which the realists took their point of departure – in which fiction, exclusively defined through the romance, carried the association of an infantile indulgence in fantasy and wish-fulfillment. In the first sense there never seems to have been any confusion among the realists that they wrote fiction and the critique they leveled against the romance was thus not aimed at the mode of fiction itself, but only at a certain use made of it. If the romance catered to infantile forms of regression, then the novel had to help the reader grow up and face the necessity of rational self-awareness and self-control. Fiction had to be redefined and re-written as the discourse of adults.

III. Why Do We Read Realist Novels?

At this point, it is necessary to extend the model of explanation initially proposed. For even if this model helps us to understand how American realism came into existence as a cultural strategy, designed to suggest a new vision of America, it still fails to explain how this goal could be reached through the inner organization of the text itself. Consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly the realist had to base his work on a theory of how the text was to achieve its cultural aims as an effect of the reading process itself. Two answers are suggested by almost all of our current discussions of realism. In the more interesting and ambitious one, structuralism has reminded us again that realism is not a final ‘breakthrough’ to reality, but the verbal construction of a reality made to appear more real than that of non-realistic fiction through the use of certain communicative strategies. In this view, the

reading effect we call 'realism' is created by a linguistic convention, that is, a standardized mode of presentation, used by the writer to appeal to some set of existing preconceptions about the nature of reality which he hopes to share with his audience. Hence in order to create a reality effect, realist fiction must be consistent with another pre-existing discourse, not with its referent. The impression, or rather the illusion of realism is thus created by familiarity – realism is that type of fiction in which the structures of our own life-world converge with that of the text.¹

Why do we read realist novels then? The answer structuralism seems to imply is that we find a special security and thus gratification in the recognition and confirmation of our own habitual patterns of thought and belief. Such an explanation, however, would leave open the question why – not only American – realism created such controversy when it emerged and why it literally had to force its way into a hostile culture. If realism as an aesthetic effect comes into existence by a similarity between the patterns of our everyday perception and that of the fictional world, then such a homology obviously had not been established yet at that stage in cultural history. On the contrary, in order to arrive at a consensus realism first had to convince the culture of the validity and plausibility of its own vision. Thus, the realist novel was not simply generated by the need to express a consensus, but by a gap between its own vision and prevailing cultural paradigms of the real, a gap which it could only hope to bridge by means of fiction. This in turn suggests a second theory of effect: namely, that by naturalizing signs and striving for life-likeness, the realist text intends to initiate processes of identification and imitation.

As an explanation of literary effects, however, the concept of identification seems just as deficient as the assumption of a mere familiarity of worlds. Instead of conceptualizing the reading process as an act of identification, it appears much more reasonable to think of it in interactionist terms, that is, as a kind of internal dialogue between various aspects of the self in which the I and Me, the spontaneous and the socialized aspects of the self enter into complicated negotiations made possible through the tentative as-if-status of the fictional text. This, in turn, would imply that typically realistic goals such as the naturalization of signs, or the striving for verisimilitude, do not simply

¹ David Lodge provides a succinct definition of the structuralist view of realism: "A working definition of realism in literature might be: *the representation of experience in a manner which approximates closely to descriptions of similar experience in non-literary texts of the same culture*" (Lodge 25). See also Roger Fowler: "'Realism' is a convention of discourse; or rather, several conventions, since a range of different patternings give rise to the impression of realism in different writers and different works" (Fowler 99). Other important structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives can be found in Roman Jakobson, "On Realism in Art;" Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de Réel" and *S/Z. An Essay*; Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*; Philippe Hamon, "Un discourse constraint;" and Christine Brook-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*.

function as a strategy of persuasion. What purposes are they supposed to fulfill then? The answer lies, I think, in the new kind of semantization which realist fiction wanted to evoke and, ultimately, in a new theory of communication it wanted to realize.

Of all the strategies through which the realist novel strives to establish its own world as 'real,' that of creating an innertextual plausibility seems to be the most basic and the most important. In response to a moment of epistemological crisis, realism as a strategy of representation promised to reconstruct the world on the basis of a new coherence. In doing so, it set itself an ambitious and complicated task: to create a sense of coherence, although, or rather precisely because, such coherence was no longer guaranteed by a transcendent moral law. As a consequence, the element of contingency in the experience of reality had increased. Reconstructing the world on a new epistemological base thus meant to establish semantic linkages between an increasing number of seemingly contingent elements of reality – a project that could be confidently tackled because the belief in evolutionary progress asserted the existence of causal connections between all empirical objects and events. The success of the operation was crucial. For only if the new epistemological premises proved their usefulness, could the project of anchoring a new national self-definition in experience be successful.

The ensuing task was to model American reality in fiction so that its diverse and seemingly random aspects could be linked as parts of a coherent system, of a new civilization that provided them with meaning. Confirming a belief in a new stage and moral quality of American society depended on the extent to which realist fiction succeeded in doing this. Stances of inspection thus dominate early American realism. In his first novel, *Their Wedding Journey*, Howells proudly emphasizes the eventlessness of both the journey and the book. The programmatic aim of the novel is the development of a new mode of narration that would be suited to register the significance of the commonplace and seemingly random aspects of American life as part of a pattern of promise. Similarly, it is certainly no accident that many important realists – De Forest, Twain and Howells as well as James and Fuller – chose for their early literary efforts the genres of travel narrative and local color story, in which the inspection of a new and unknown territory creates the need to establish patterns of cultural consistency that are not yet sufficiently visible for the traveling tenderfoot.

The increase in detail in American realism has usually been discussed as an example of verisimilitude, that is, as a device to create what Roland Barthes has called the reality effect. It can also be seen, however, as a consequence of the necessity to establish a new semantic coherence. Characterization in the realist novel is a case in point. For whereas in the romance the essence of character is still typically grasped by comparatively few but significant signs such as for example the color of hair, the perception and judgment of

characters has become increasingly complicated in realism. Accordingly, a far greater number of signs has to be introduced and processed and only if all of these can be meaningfully linked as part of a coherent semantic field of reference can we hope to understand a character fully. In a key scene of *The Portrait of a Lady* the problem is dramatized in the discussion between Isabel Archer and Mme. Merle. In it, Isabel still argues for the pre-realistic, romantic view of what constitutes the self. If, as she claims, dress, house or social environment have no significant bearing on a person's identity, then the novel could indeed dispense with their detailed description. Yet Isabel's understanding of reality is clearly faulty and incomplete at this stage of the novel, as her own misreading of Osmond and Mme. Merle will soon demonstrate. In contrast, Mme. Merle seems to represent the realist perspective in the conversation between the two. In her view, the self constitutes itself only in constant interaction with its environment; following this view, James dwells at great length on how people look, what they wear, and where they live.

Mme. Merle, however, is not the author's voice in the novel. On the contrary, she most clearly represents the dangers of a development about which Isabel as well as the reader have to be warned. For although Mme. Merle has realized that meaning is created in constant interaction with the social environment, she has not drawn the kind of conclusion from it on which a new civilization could be founded. By manipulating the increasing difficulties in linkage which perception now encounters for her own purposes, she has resorted to a well-calculated strategy of deception. If the relationship between a sign and its referent is no longer stable, then signs can easily be manipulated for the purposes of impression-management. In order to counter this and to become thus a match for the Mme. Merles and Osmonds of this world, Isabel – and with her the reader – must learn to develop a sense for the increasingly complex relations between sign and referent. As she finally comes to realize, appearance and reality, sign and referent can no longer be linked in any fixed and stable way. On the contrary, knowledge of their true relationship can only be gained through a long and complicated process of experiences for which there is no short-cut available and no guarantee of success can be given – for as life unfolds, new linkages are constantly revealed. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, to live is thus to go through a potentially endless sequence of experiences and to go through experiences in realism means learning to connect a seemingly contingent multitude of signs into a coherent and causally linked whole. Seen in this way, verisimilitude is no longer a narrative strategy to foreclose the imagination, but one that activates it through the constant necessity of interlinkage. For if it is no longer possible to ascribe with any degree of confidence a fixed and stable meaning to a given sign, then it is only through the constant interlinking of signs that meaning emerges.

As perception becomes an increasingly difficult act for the characters in the realist novel, however, so it does for the reader. For his own training in reading, too, there can be no short-cut and no easy success-formula. By moving him, in obvious analogy to the characters within the novel, through a series of failed hypotheses, realist fiction makes the reader experience the necessity of exposing himself to ever new instances of communicative interaction, since only they can promise 'growth' in our knowledge of reality. In this sense, the realist redefinition of the novel aims at replacing an offer for imitation by an invitation to the reader to follow the mode of perception and interpretation established in the novel itself; fiction is no longer to serve as a model of behavior, but as a model for the reading activity. Ideally then, the text constitutes itself as a space of communication, as a stimulus for generating ever new acts of communicative interaction. A successful reading would then be one which uses the text as part of a cultural dialogue which constantly opens up new linkages and thus creates the possibility of establishing coherence and meaning in the act of communication itself. In brief: The art-as-model paradigm would be replaced by a view of fiction as a model of communication.²

IV. The Realist Theory of Communication

In an important essay on American realism Heinz Ickstadt has demonstrated the possibility of re-conceptualizing the period's theory of realism as a theory of communication. As he argues, the crucial role of the idea of communication can, among other things, help to explain an otherwise puzzling formal adherence to the novel of manners in American realism. In it, the dialogue between members of a society stands at the center of the narrative, always holding the promise of a future consensus. Classic American realism, it can be claimed, is built around the idea of conversation:

² In my opinion, the prevailing dichotomy between modernism as a type of literature that activates our perception and realism as a literature that suffocates it may very well be in need of revision, or, at least differentiation. For since meaning is potentially everywhere in realism, the reader is constantly challenged, as he is indeed in daily life, to look for those semantic interlinkages that would make the single sign meaningful. Today's reader of experimental fiction, on the other hand, may disengage himself much more easily from the text because he or she knows by now that the dazzling multiplicity of codes is only meant to "represent" the idea of the text's own subversive potential. This, at least, would explain a certain type of "allegorical" reception of modernist and postmodernist literature, in which the (most of the time professional) reader, far from being drawn into the openness of the text and thus being "activated" by it, rests content in reaffirming the text's openness without really entering it. In these (monologic) interpretations, experimental texts have become mere allegories of the idea of modernism or postmodernism.

This inner space of communication for Howells always has ideal implications. Where it works democracy is experienced in the free exchange of opinions, right conduct affirmed or redefined in rational discourse, experience reflected in dialogue. When conversation deteriorates or collapses, a deeper crisis is always indicated – many of his novels are centered in such catastrophes of communication (Ickstadt 86).

If the realist novel is to avoid such breakdowns of communication, then the reader has to become part of the dialogue in the act of reading itself. It is now easier to understand the basic thrust of the realist's attempt to redefine fiction as a cultural act. From the point of view of the realists, the reading activity demanded by the romance is one that denies communication – isolated and withdrawn in regressive fantasies the reader is cut off from communication and thus from the possibility of genuine experience and knowledge. The realist novel, on the other hand, sets out to reconnect him with a social order created, maintained and controlled by communicative interaction.

It is here that the rhetoric of mimesis and the corresponding de-emphasis – if not innertextual suppression – of fictionality can be accounted for as part of a realist theory of communication. To provide a common ground for the comparison of worlds and experiences was a precondition for the dialogue the realist novel hoped to initiate. If the reader was to be drawn into this dialogue, realist fiction did not only have to devise a way to be taken seriously as grown-up discourse; it virtually had to establish itself as a conversational equal by establishing a familiarity of worlds which could then become the backdrop for the actual effect to be achieved – that of a change or adjustment in perception. De-emphasizing fictionality was thus, in principle, not a ruse to escape the fictional mode – which, in an institutional sense, could not and was not to be denied anyway – but a device to enable the fictional text to fulfill its revised function as a model of communication. To be sure, such de-emphasis of fictionality involved a calculated risk and, ironically, held the danger of opening up new possibilities for identification on the part of the reader. And yet, it seemed the only effective way to move the reader into the role of a grown-up. If, on the other hand, the realist strategy would be effective, the reader in his newly acquired role as adult reader would no longer be tempted to exhibit the childish reading habits invoked by the romance, his naive attitude toward literature as a model would be successfully transformed and the realist's struggle for a new attitude toward reading and reality would be won.

V. Familiarity and Disturbance

Yet even in reconceptualizing the realist text as a model of communication, the problem still remains why the realists thought fiction an especially useful tool for establishing the kind of communication they had in mind. There

are obvious answers on an institutional level – the promise of a wider scope of dissemination among them – but again it is the innertextual potential that interests us. In what sense can a certain type of naturalized text be especially effective in establishing communication with the reader? There are, I think, two essential aspects to be considered.

Communication becomes necessary when problems have to be clarified, when consensus does not yet exist. If the purpose and gratification of realism, on the most general level, was to establish a new coherence, then communication was required where the task of providing this coherence was not yet accomplished or was threatened by elements of disruption that could not be made consistent with the idea of a new civilization. Fiction not only allowed the reader to rehearse tentatively responses to such dissonant experiences. What made it especially useful for stimulating communication was that, in its own structure, it could anticipate the process it intended to initiate. Grounded in the very conflict that it strives to control and naturalize, the realist text constantly moves between the disturbance of meaning and its reconstitution on a new basis. As a mode of communication it is, in other words, patterned on the model of an inner conversation. Ironically then, the often criticized inner contradictions of American realism, as, for example, its uneasy co-existence of elements of romance and realism, are not to be seen as self-destructive aberrations from a narrow path of realist virtue, but should rather be regarded as its nourishing element. If realism ever succeeded in creating a completely realistic illusion, its own communicative potential would vanish and the text would lose much of its interest.

If the specific usefulness of fiction for initiating processes of communication lay in its own dialogical potential, however, why was realism intent on reducing this inner tension instead of increasing it as a modernist text would? The explanation seems to lie in a different theory of communication, that is, in a different theory of how literature can achieve perceptual and social change. While modernist literature pursues strategies of radical semantic disruption, for the realist effective communication only seems possible through a controlled interplay between semantic familiarity and its disturbance. Realism, one might say, is thus torn, or rather, moving between these two worlds. It tries to establish a familiar world in order to have a common ground to correct it, and its corrections and transgressions always remain linked to the familiar in order to make them effective. Its usefulness for drawing the reader into the text, then, lies neither solely in its familiarity nor in the fictional disruption of that familiarity, but in a carefully controlled tension between the two; if the gap between the inner world of the text and that of the reader is opened up too widely, this inner tension is exploded, and the need for communication breaks down. This means, however, that the very aspect that could be considered as especially effective for stimulating communication – the inherent dialogical potential of the fictional text – is

also a source of constant instability, enabling communication as well as endangering it.

A strange irony is at work here. In realizing its own view of experience as the essential mode of knowledge, the realist novel constantly tests and risks its own coherence; but only in risking it can it fulfill its own potential as a space of communication patterned on the model of a dialogue. The dilemma re-emerges on several levels of the text. Semantically, realism has been described as a move toward semantic closure, but, as we have seen, it is also, in order to arrive at closure, a strategy to open up reality toward the contingent and unfamiliar. If realism wants to establish a new semantic coherence, then it has to focus on those elements that are not yet linked; in doing this, however, the realist text, by its own inner logic, also constantly strives to introduce those elements that question its own plausibility.

From the perspective of cultural history, American realism has been described as a strategy to affirm social order by incorporating elements of disorder into models of social cohesion. In trying to do so, the realists – in the words of Alan Trachtenberg – gave themselves “one of the most strenuous and complex intellectual tasks of the era; not to blink at the new facts of conflict and loss in America and yet to continue to believe in it” (256). What has long been considered as the actual source of realism in the novel of the period, its new subject-matter, is thus really only a temporary disturbance of its innertextual world; the realist novel can be seen as an attempt to draw new materials into the text in order to integrate and control them. In an instructive sequence of genres, the new realities of the industrial age thus entered the realist novel as challenges which put the character of American civilization to a test. In the political novel of the Seventies, for example, the deterioration of politics from the gentry-ideal is satirized, in the local color fiction the threatening anarchy of the border regions explored; in the early Eighties businessman and labor leader enter the realist novel of manners as potential candidates for conversion to the goals of a new social order; while the social and utopian novel of the late Eighties begins a descent into the lower regions of the new cities which figure as an unknown threatening territory that needs to be mapped out, made coherent and then linked to the society at large.

In all of these instances the realist project was the incorporation of the new realities of the Gilded Age into the idea of American civilization, but in the end the attempt resulted in complication and paradox. Its initial premise had been the assumption that realism would be able to integrate new and yet disturbing elements through a communicative interaction which would steadily increase social coherence and rational consensus. Yet in seeking consistent patterns in American reality, fiction again and again uncovered new and disturbing elements of that very same reality, which could not be immediately integrated or which resisted final integration. As a result, the ideal of a new civilization became more elusive with each attempt to establish it. While

Howells was still elaborating a theory of American realism, many works, including some of his own, had already begun to subvert its premises. The dialogic mode unfolded its own unexpected eventfulness and with that eventfulness its own potential as a cultural commentary, revealing an insoluble inner complication of the realist project itself. Realism as communication was never completely successful in establishing a consensus because it was fiction, and yet the realists could only hope to realize their cultural goals by drawing on this very fictional element.

Such inner complication however, could not leave realism's own theory of the literary text as a model of communication unaffected. The novel that was to become the first really great example of American realism, Howells' *A Modern Instance*, is a telling case in point. In introducing the subject of divorce as a typical phenomenon of an increasingly liberal civilization, Howells thought he had found a topic of such wide national importance as slavery had been a few decades before. The story of Marcia Gaylord and Bartley Hubbard which ends in divorce would exemplify the dangers to the idea of civilization that certain new tendencies in American life entailed. The ensuing problem was how an awareness of the damage could best be communicated to the reader as an effect. *A Modern Instance* seems to me the first example in American realism which not only affirmed the necessity of conversation and communication on the thematic level, but tried to realize a model of communication in its own formal structure. No exemplary learning process takes place in the text. In the early chapters, insight and knowledge are not provided by a model character, but are supposed to emerge in the act of reading, in which the denial of a moral center forces the reader to realize what no one in the novel tells him. Yet clearly, if the strategy works, the activated reader is supposed to arrive at conclusions, which the narrator, who repeatedly talks to him of "our civilization," hopes to share with him. *Hopes to share!* For if the characters in the novel no longer serve as models, he cannot be sure. The opening up of the realist novel as a model of communicative interaction clearly bore the danger of unexpected and unwelcome results. Consequently, *A Modern Instance* is both marked and marred by the suspicion that the realist strategy might backfire. And as the functional model complicated itself, so did the attitude towards deemphasizing the text's fictionality.

Intended as an invitation to role-playing, this de-emphasis, as I have tried to show, had the purpose of encouraging the reader to act the part of a grown-up member of American civilization. Yet in the process of writing, a suspicion must have taken hold of Howells that his reader might not be a complete grown-up yet and that the novel's strategies might fail to transform him into one – which also raised the frightful possibility that the reader might confuse the signals of the text altogether and read them in unintended and unsuspected ways. Who was to guarantee, for example, that the reading public might not become infected by Marcia's shortcomings? Howells, as is well known, must

have lost his nerve after some 30 chapters or so, and broke up the dialogical structure of the novel rather violently.³ In introducing the up-to-then largely dysfunctional Atherton, he literally forced a voice of civilization into the novel in a desperate attempt to regain symbolic control over his material. In doing this, however, he also undermined the working assumption from which he had started. Realism, by following its inner logic of opening up toward experience, could not automatically serve as stimulus for a new consensus on American civilization. As a result, Howells moved back toward the idea of the realist text as a model of civilization in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and the subsequent novels within American realism can be read as fascinating battle-reports on the conflict that had been opened up in *A Modern Instance*.

A Hazard of New Fortunes, Howells' second ambitious attempt at centering the idea of American civilization around the idea of communication, ends in a near collapse of communication in the novel itself, which holds however the promise of a regenerating experience on the part of the reader and thus manages to maintain a dialogical mode as novel, challenging the reader with alternative visions of breakdown and regeneration with which he has to come to terms (cf. Ickstadt). The novel's logical sequel, *Annie Kilburn*, however, must be one of the most strongly controlled versions of American realism that we know. It is at this point that Howells and James finally separated. Howells' political radicalization led him to take back the idea of communication in favor of the art-as-model paradigm; James, who had already established a dialogical mode in his novels by liberating his heroes and heroines from the superior moral guidance of the guardian figure, and who had then, in focusing on the workings of consciousness, intensified this dialogical mode by examples of truly achieved inner dialogue, began to deconstruct reality into processes and to radicalize the idea of perception by interaction.⁴

Howells and Twain, on the other hand, seem to have despaired eventually in their attempts to unfold the dialogical potential of the novel. For Howells, the idea of control and consensus by communication could no longer be convincingly realized and yet it could not be given up. Twain, who had started out in the monological mode of the tall tale tradition, only succeeded once – in *Huckleberry Finn* – to establish something like a dialogical mode. In its most interesting sequel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, his fantasies remained largely unchecked because – in juxtaposing two extremely unequal modes of communication – Twain had manipulated the communicative situation from the start in favor of his own monomaniac and monologic concerns

3 In his *Democracy and the Novel*, Henry Nash Smith has drawn our attention to the inner tensions within the novel. Smith tries to explain them by what he calls the theological components in Howells's theory of realism, that is, a weakness in ideology. I find it much more convincing to see them as the result of a clash between two models of the realist text.

4 For a more detailed description of this development, see my essay "Declarations of Dependence: Revising Our View of American Realism."

(cf. Fluck, “Restructuring”). One is reminded of the complete breakdown of communication into neurotic and inherently ambiguous forms of perception in a text like *The Turn of the Screw*, but while the Jamesian text, in its carefully calculated indeterminacy, may be successful in reinserting the reader into a (new) mode of perception, the manipulation in *A Connecticut Yankee* retains the reader in mere complicity.

VI. Conflicting Models of Aesthetic Effect

By reacting against the cultural effects of the romance, the realists had also reacted against a view of fiction-as-model and replaced it by a belief in fiction as a stimulus for communication – assigning the dialogical mode a central role both in the culture and in the literary text. Because of its own conversational structure, the realist novel was to further this mode of communication and was especially qualified to do so because it allowed threatening and unfamiliar experiences to be introduced in a tentative, experimental way – thereby initiating a process of conversation both in the novel and with the novel in the process of reading. In this conversation, the deviant aspects constituted both the necessity and the possibility of communication. But, as we have seen, they were also the aspects that constantly called the validity of the realist project into question. If the inner tension of the text became uncontrollable, communication and thus the final goal of a new national order were jeopardized; if order was established too tightly, on the other hand, the text was in danger of becoming a mere model of behavior and thus undermining its own dialogic potential.

We are here, it seems, at the heart of the problem. American realism has been habitually described as an (insufficient) model of reality; in revising and extending this view, I have tried to describe it as a model of communication. But even such a revision seems in need of further differentiation. In the final analysis, the actual complication for an analysis of American realism is that it was in constant movement between these two possibilities of fiction, that its own history presents a running commentary on the difficulties of each. It appears therefore impossible to come up with one model of aesthetic effects for a description of American realism. On the contrary, I would suggest that its own history of inconsistencies could be most fruitfully rewritten as a clash of the two models of aesthetic effect I have tried to describe. It is a history that cannot be unfolded in neat chronological order, however, but only as a story of constant negotiation often within one text – resembling a fever curve more than a line of linear development and offering, in its own dialogical way, a fascinating study in the perpetual decomposition and recomposition of a literary system.

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