Fiction and Fictionality in American Realism

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, classic American realism is seen as a cultural strategy to influence the definition of a new stage of American civilization after the Civil War. In order to achieve this purpose, the realist had to base his work on a theory of effects. Classic American realism has been habitually described as a (Victorian) model of reality; a closer analysis shows, however, that it based its hopes of creating a "common" vision of the specific potential of American civilization not on expectations of identification and imitation, but on a process of communication and conversation which the novel was to initiate and support through its own dialogical mode of representation. For the realist, fiction's usefulness for drawing the reader into an ongoing dialogue about American civilization lay neither in the familiarity of its world, nor in the fictional disruption of that familiarity, but in a carefully controlled tension between the two. Typically realist strategies such as the striving for naturalization or the de-emphasis of fictionality, can thus be seen as part of an attempt to establish a new kind of semantization, and, thereby, a new function for the novel. An art-as-model paradigm is replaced by a view of art as a stimulus of communication. Yet even this revision of our traditional views of the realist text is in need of further differentiation. For in the final analysis, what complicates any explanation of American literary realism and its often criticized inconsistencies is the fact that it constantly oscillated between these two possibilities of fiction, so that its own history presents a running commentary on the problems and difficulties of each. This would allow us to rewrite the history of these inconsistencies as a clash between two functional models of the literary text; rather than deploring the lack of an "uncontaminated" American realism, the irritating co-existence of different aesthetic strategies should be seen as a source of cultural commentary and insight.

I

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 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' ...."[1]

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."[2] 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

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 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. For 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-emplot 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 revision of the romance, however, to remain on a primarily thematic level of revision, to offer countermodels 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.[3] Realism's critique of the romance, however, can only be considered a contradiction as long as realist fiction did indeed do nothing but replace one model of behavior with another, if it 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 mean-

[1] William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), p. 103.
[2] Ibid., p. 92.
[3] Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 25.

ings 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-fulfilment. In the first sense there never seems to have been any confusion among the realists that they wrote fiction and the critique they levelled 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

At this point, it is necessary to extend the functionalist 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 'break-through' 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.

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 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 this, 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 all important realists—DeForest, 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, hous

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.[4]

[4] 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.

IV

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:

> 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 centred in such catastrophes of communication.[5]

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: 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 deemphasis—if not intertextual 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 serious 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,

[5] Heinz Ickstadt, "Concepts of Society and the Practice of Fiction: Symbolic Responses to the Experience of Change in Late Nineteenth Century America," in *Impressions of a Gilded Age: The American Fin de Siècle*, ed. Marc Chénetier and Rob Kroes (Amsterdam: Amerika Instituut, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1983), p. 86.

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

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. For while modernist literature pursues strategies of radical semantic disruption, for the realist effective communication seems only 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 remain always 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 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 this, 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."[6] 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.

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[6] Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 256.

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.[7] 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 materials. 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,

[7] In his *Democracy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978) 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.

challenging the reader with alternative visions of breakdown and regeneration with which he has to come to terms.[8] 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 focussing 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. 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.[9] 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

In 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 and thus undermining its own dialogic potential.

[8] Cf. Ickstadt, "Concepts of Society."

[9] Cf. Winfried Fluck, "The Restructuring of History and the Intrusion of Fantasy in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*," in *Forms and Functions of History in American Literature: Essays in Honor of Ursula Brumm*, ed. W. Fluck, J. Peper, and W.P. Adams (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1981), pp. 134–148.

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 functional model 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 functional models I have tried to describe. It is a history that cannot be unfolded in neat chronological order, however, 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.