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THEORIES OF AMERICAN LITERATURE: DOUBLE STRUCTURES AND SOURCES OF INSTABILITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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THEORIES OF AMERICAN LITERATURE: DOUBLE STRUCTURES AND SOURCES OF INSTABILITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Theories are models of explanation and strategies of legitimization at the same time, attempting both to impose order on cultural material and to hierarchize it by doing so. As cultural strategies, they become necessary where - and whenever the status and cultural signifance of a field of study is still unclear or contested. In this function they have been part of the study of American literature from its very beginning, because this study needed special justification at a time when the interpretation of American literature was still determined by the traditional canons of the English departments - a justification which had to be based on the assumption of a unique and independent national literature. Theoretical models were needed to delineate and define this new body of texts. And even if such models of explanation did not develop an explicit and logically consistent mode of argumentation, they were theoretically constituted nevertheless, for inevitably, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, they were generated and guided by a system of assumptions about literature that can be reconstructed in retrospect.

I

What I want to offer then in the following paper is a discussion of some of the central premises that have governed and shaped the study of American literature, and I want to do

this by focussing on an aspect that constitutes something like a connecting link between the various approaches to American literature and has often been cited —but, surprisingly enough, has rarely been discussed in detail— as one of the main elements for making the classic American narrative an especially eventful and modern type of text: I refer to the idea of a specific double structure or doubleness considered to be the source of a special tension and instability in the American novel. In the attempt to trace various versions of doubleness I want to restrict myself to a few paradigmatic studies and approaches. Rather than merely providing a survey; it seems more challenging anyway to try and supplement existing models of explanation with some observations of my own in which another possible source for that element of conflict in classic American literature can be discussed which has both puzzled and fascinated so many readers.

II

The gradual emergence of theories of American literature in the 19th century as part of a need for cultural self-definition has often been described and need not concern us here. What should perhaps be noted, however, is that most of these theories were deficit-theories. There are cultural as well as methodological reasons for this. Culturally speaking, the lack of an independent national literature was an irritating deficit for a society guided by the self-image of a chosen people; it called for an explanation. Starting with the cultural premise of a privileged nation, most of the first theories of American literature were therefore almost inevitably also theories of its defects and shortcomings. Methodologically speaking, these deficit theories up to Lionel Trilling's essay on "Morals, Manners and the Novel" illustrate a common and recurring problem in the writing of literary history which links our discussion with larger and more fundamental problems of literary studies, both on its theoretical and practical side: I am referring to the seemingly inevitable, but ever-returning tendency of literary history and literary studies to privilege one functional model of the literary text and to make this model the unquestioned norm for all subsequent acts of interpretation and historical evaluation.

For clearly, the deficit-theories, in which the lack of a long overdue national epic or national novel was deplored, based their assessment on a view of literature derived from 19th century

history of ideas which assigned the work of art a special function as a condensed version and thus superior manifestation of a civilization. It is not hard to discover in the recurrent complaints about the lack of a Walter Scott, Balzac or Dickens the model of the historical novel or, later, that of European realism - genres, which were taken to be the only adequate or even possible forms a national literature could assume. Similarly, the complaints by Henry James and others about the provinciality of their own culture, later revived by Trilling, were obviously tied to a certain functional model privileged to represent national experience most fully, namely that of the novel of manners. In both cases, the often unacknowledged adherence to models posed by the European tradition was inseparately linked with an ideal of generic consistency that was instrumental in creating a perception of the American novel as hybrid and formaly uncontrolled which was then to be criticized.

But while American critics still deplored the supposedly derivative and epigonal nature of American literature, a writer such as D. H. Lawrence, looking for alternative models to a suffocating Victorianism, created a classic American literature almost single-handedly by redefining its (assumed) weaknesses as strength, its often lamented raggedness and formlessness as a source of special vitality and energy. In retrospect, Lawrence's seminal achievement highlights the crucial - but often unacknowledged and unexamined - role which models of the function of fiction play in writing literary history. For basically, his influence maybe traced to a shift in aesthetic premises from which American literature was to be examined: Instead of accepting the aesthetics of balance and control inscribed in the novel of manners as a seemingly self-evident norm, Lawrence recongnized the potentially liberating and activating impact of a recurrent element of conflict and doubleness in American writing. Only after the models posed by the European literary traditons were no longer accepted as representing the supreme potential of fiction, the often hybrid, mixed nature of American literature, described variously as romance or as a unique blending of romance and realism, could be acknowledged as a poetic form in its own right. Since then, theories and discussions of the American novel have returned time and again to these inner tensions and contradictions, these elements of semantic and formal instability in the American narrative. The following remarks should be seen as an attempt to contribute further to this discussion.

III

A serious, productive study of American literature, one might say then, began at the moment when critics admitted that a literary text should not necessarily have full control of its meaning. From a methodological point-of-view, it has long been one of the main challenges (and attractions) of the existing theories of American literature that most of them have been committed to a hermeneutics of unmasking, calling for a mode and method of interpretation which would be able to uncover hidden or latent meanings of a text or culture. For D. H. Lawrence, for example, the actual meaning of that classic American literature in which he was especially interested was not to be found on its surface, but hidden within the text[1]. In order to recover this deeper meaning, however, a new way of reading was required. Lawrence agrees with other critics of classic American texts that superficially regarded, they may often look like deceptively harmless genre pieces. But this first impression is deceiving, probably even to the author himself; it illustrates the inner working principle of classic American literature itself which is grounded in duplicty and self-deception. With his famous claim "Never trust the artist, trust the tale" Lawrence draws attention to a second level of meaning beneath the version of the official culture - and it is this subtext, with its own inner emotional logic and eventfulness, which for him constitutes the original American text.

What had been considered before as a - in traditional terms formless and confused mixture of genres, can now be reconceptualized in terms of a formal and semantic double structure. The impression of contradiction and inconsistency would then be due to a tension which in turn reflects the fact that two texts are in constant conflict and struggle with each other: the overt text of a self-complacent official culture and a truly American text which seems to draw its energy from an immanent psychic logic. This logic, of course, is that of a violent liberation from European authority and, linked with it, that of the genesis of a new psychic structure, of a new self which no longer wants to be one. In ever new variations, most of the time unconscious to the authors themselves, classic American literature re-enacts the drama of this act of psychic liberation. The process of destroying what

1 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; repre.; New York: Viking Press, 1964).

Lawrence calls 'white psyche' and its triumphant re-emergence as 'blood knowledge' thus constitutes not only the essence of American experience, but also the meaning of the hidden literary subtext. That this subtext, at least in theory, has no connecting links with the textual surface is then only the logical formal equivalent of a basic cultural configuration of separation and violent liberation. A movement of flight from society and the forces of civilization dominates the American narrative as a kind of deep structure[2]. On its formal level, its equivalent would then be a poetics of separation, disconnection and disparity.

"You must look through the surface of American art, and see the inner diabolism of the symbolic meaning. Otherwise it is all mere childishness". With this hint Lawrence draws our attention to the fact that it is the lack of realist representation in classic American literature, its preference of the symbolic mode, which must be considered the source of its aesthetic effects and its special cultural significance. But how does one look through the surface of a text - how do we penetrate to the supposedly genuine American subtext? Although Lawrence bases his whole argument on the existence of this subtext, he leaves us without a stable methodological suggestion how a systematic access to the American subtext could be gained. His scenario of a continuous struggle between white consciousness and blood consciousness may, in a loosely metaphorical way, evoke psychoanalytic models of interpretation, but within a very broad pattern of surface and subtext, of manifest and latent meaning, his procedure remains, as an interpretation of narrative, without any system and thus rests entirely on intuition[3].

There is, however, an interesting shift of metaphors to be noted in the process of his argument in which a loosely psychoanalytic version of doubleness as a configuration of repression is replaced by an expressionist image of skinning, conceptualizing the subtext as a level of meaning which breaks through and reveals itself in the reader's encounter with the text. Our initial observation that models of explanation always function as cultural strategies is of significance here. For while a double-decker model of above and below is useful in establishing the idea of repression, the skinning metaphor can serve as

2 The flight of the American hero from the civilizing forces of American society has been described in numerous studies. of these, Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960; rev. ed.: New York: Dell, 1966) has been most strongly influenced by Lawrence.

3 The very ambivalent attitude of Lawrence towards psychoanalysis is analysed in Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism. Theory in Practice.* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 49-55.

welcome analogy for a myth of cultural or individual self-renewal and self-regeneration. In contrast a strictly dichotomous division of the text into two levels, the image of skinning would also seem to provide a more adequate and useful analogy for the inner eventfulness of the literary text as a site of complex and complicated interaction of the old and the new: While the old skin still holds control, there are already patches in certain spots which indicate the breakthrough of the subtext. But if the metaphor of skinning is our essential methodological guide, then the reader has to gain knowledge about snakes, he has to become a pioneer and pathfinder himself. The shift of models and metaphors for the American narrative thus also carries implications for a shift in the role of the implied reader, but, in the final analysis, it does not really lead to a change in procedure. The psychoanalyst, one might say, is sent into the woods, he is cast into the heroic role of pathfinder and deerslayer, but he still has to make his decisions about the text turned snake on the basis of his own intuitive blood-knowledge.

In 1964 Leo Marx published his influental study *The Machine in the Garden* which has become one of the most widely discussed and disputed books in American Studies. It seems to me that one reason for this amazing success lies in the fact that, methodologically speaking, the approach of Marx promised to solve the problems of procedure which Lawrence had left open. For in a certain way, the myth and symbol school, for which Marx can be taken to stand, accepted the premise of an internally divided text, even if it took a different and more methodical approach to it, by trying to gain access to deeper levels of American culture through the systematic study of recurrent image patterns. Marx begins - reflecting his own claim for an interdisciplinary integration of literary and cultural analysis - with the 'close reading' of a short passage from Hawthorne's diaries which provides the basis for all of his subsequent arguments. In this passage Hawthorne describes the sudden intrusion of a locomotive into the pastoral landscape around Sleepy Hollow. For Marx, the clash between machine and garden condenses and thereby captures in metaphor a crucial conflict in the interpretation of the American experience - the conflict between a view of America as the land of pastoral regeneration on the one hand and as the land of progress on the other[4].

4 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964): "Yet in retrospect we can see that this ordinary experience, partly because of its typicality, was one of those inconspicuous moments of discovery that has proven to be decisive in the record of our

In American Studies, the 1950's were the great period of a revived and revised history of ideas. In a number of studies, carrying telling titles such as 'Virgin Land' or 'The American Adam', central national myths and symbols were identified and analyzed as the key to a specifically American identity[5]. With his claim for a constitutive role of the conflict between pastoralism and the American ideology of progress, Marx situated himself within this tradition. There were methodological problems to be solved, however, in doing this. For in contrast to many texts of American popular culture, classic American literature of the 19th century resisted an easy inclusion into the established intellectual patterns. If Marx was to maintain his claim for the crucial role of the conflict which he had put at the center of the American experience, he had to find ways for establishing its presence within the classic American texts as well. In almost all instances, however, he had to overcome the difficulty that the text surface did not show the pattern he was looking for at all or did so only peripherally. The narrative world of a Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, or even Twain is, by and large, devoid of technological imagery. The problem thus was to track down something which existed only latently at best; moreover, if Marx wanted to demonstrate the constitutive role of the conflict he had to show that classic American literature was governed and shaped by something which was not visible or did not seem to play a significant role on the level of overt meanings.

In trying to solve the problem, Marx, as Lawrence had before him, resorted to the idea of a double structure. The dilemma that the overt level of the text does not provide sufficient evidence for establishing the postulated meaning, is solved by introducing a second level of meaning, a covert structure of the text. A brief look at the interpretation of Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* can illustrate some of the ensuing complications. Only in a very short passage of the novel do we find the intrusion of a machine into the pastoral world of the Missisippi valley: at the end of chapter 16 a steamboat emerges out of the fog and destroys Huck's and Jim's raft. For a genuinely literary analysis, however, the mere

culture. What the writer discovers, though he by no means recognizes its importance, is a metaphor... What I am saying, in other words, is that Hawthorne's notes mark the shaping (on a microscopic scale to be sure) of a metaphoric design which recurs everywhere in our literature". (p. 11, 16).

5 Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land. The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Random House, 1950). R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam. Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955). Both books have become classical studies of American Studies.

reference to the brief presence of the motif (which otherwise remains isolated within the novel) cannot be sufficient; what Marx has to demonstrate is that it also organizes the novel as literary text. In a chain of rather free and loose associations the steamboat is thus made to stand for an act of carelessness while Huck is then associated with the opposite word 'caring'. By reconceptualizing the episode as a basic moral opposition it can thus be linked with the opposition between sound heart and deformed conscience which Henry Nash Smith had worked out as a central thematic and structural principle of the novel[6]. In this way, by the formal analogy of two patterns of oppositions, Marx manages to tie together steamboat episode and a dominant structural principle of the novel as part of one and the same conflict, making the steamboat episode the focal point of a second, covert level of meaning on which the novel's critique of progress manifests itself.

In his treatment of classic American literature Marx had insisted from the start that these works would transcend the simple documentary function of the popular text, and would thus be able to provide a special and superior insight into American culture. This special insight, however, can only be found in those aspects of the work which constitute its special literary qualities and meanings, in short, its literariness. The claim is based, in other words, on the tacit assumption of a specific function and potential of the literary text which distinguishes it from other modes of communication. In a way, this is a challenging and promising point of departure. In order to determine this specific potential more precisely, however, Marx had to fall back on that literary theory of his time which seemed to have provided the most convincing definition of the specific status and potential of the literary text, that of the 'New Criticism'. In later discussions, especially within a German context, the new critical version of the 'specifically literary' has most frequently been linked the idea of structure as the key concept for the description of the work of art as an autonomous piece of language. This is only acceptable, however, if we bear in mind that structure for the New Critics does not merely denote *any* kind of stable relationship within the literary system (as it would be for structuralism); instead the term is used as a kind of shorthand for the idea of a specific coherence and organic unity of the work of art. It is the pressure of this *Gestalt* which transforms the semantics of everyday language

6 Cf. Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain. The Development of a Writer* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

within the context of the work and thus provides it with its own self-referentiality and thus autonomy of meaning. Structure is therefore synonymous with unity and coherence and thus with the idea of an organic *Gestalt* derived, in the final analysis, from romantic organicism[7]. As Murray Krieger already suggested in the 1960's, it seems therefore much more adequate to speak of the new critical position as a contextualism rather than using the somewhat vague and merely temporal label of a new criticism itself[8].

As I have tried to show elsewhere, the unwarranted equation of a specifically literary potential with its defintion by contextualism has its own interesting consequences and complications for the fusion of literary and cultural analysis which Marx attempts[9]. For if he intends to show that classic American literature is so thoroughly structured by the conflict between machine and garden, that it does not only permit special insight into it, but establishes its cultural centrality in the process of doing so, then any cultural analysis has to take its point of departure from the very quality that constitutes the literary text as being specifically literary: its organic unity or *Gestalt*-quality. This is a tempting solution for the literary scholar, for if the work's *Gestalt* configuration is the essential criterion for its superior cultural insight, then only he or she will be able to provide privileged access to the deeper meaning of America. On the one hand, the resort to contextualism means rescuing literary studies from a relapse into mere intellectual history; on the other hand, however, cultural meaning can now, by definition, appear only in structural patterns and configurations that have been developed to capture a specific contextually defined quality of the literary work, that is irony, paradox, tension or ambiguity.

The theoretical justification of this approach had already been presented in an article published jointly by Marx, Bernard

7 Cf. my analysis in "Das asthetische Vorverstandnis der 'American Studies'," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien*, 18 (1973), 114. The influence of organicism on American New Criticism is discussed in Herbert Grabes, "Close Reading and the 'Meaning of Meaning'," *Anglia*, 86 (1968), 321-338.

8 Murray Krieger, *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963).

9 This synthesis of formalism and cultural analysis was first attempted in F. O. Matthiessen's study *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941). For Matthiessen, however, aesthetic and cultural meaning still constitute separate spheres of the text: aesthetically, the work of those American authors in which he is especially interested is characterized by its preference for the symbolic mode of representation; culturally, these authors are linked by an unswerving democratic engagement.

Bowron and Arnold Rose under the title "Literature and Covert Culture" in 1951[10]. Following the agenda the myth and symbol school had set itself, the essay, too, is concerend with the way in which a literary work of art carries cultural meaning. Intellectual documents contain cultural commentary in direct and explicit ways. The work of art, on the other hand, reveals hidden contradictions of a culture which otherwise would remain undetected. It achieves this by means of metaphor and symbol as its own original means of expression. Thus, the image of a machine in the garden can reveal a deep-seated hostility against the official American ideology of progress - an ideology which, as the article suggests, was so strongly entrenched in the public realm that even the classic American authors themselves may not have been aware of their own inner doubts and anxieties about it. Here, too, then, the claim for a specific insight which the literary work provides is based on the assumption of a double coding of the literary text: beneath its overt structure a second, covert level of meaning can be detected which gives expression to those aspects of a culture that are repressed or not openly admitted.

One is reminded of Lawrence, but the comparison does not carry us far. For if, as is the case with Marx, a contextualist analysis is to serve as means of access to the inner contradictions of American culture, then these deeper conflicts and contradictions can be conceptualized only in terms of those special configurations which contextualism had described as essence of the true work of art: irony, tension, paradox, or ambiguity thus become key concepts for formulating a specific American experience. The double structure of the text, however, and this is what we are interested in throughout this paper - is then no more than another name for the *Gestalt*-quality of the literary work, the subtext just the other side of the coin which provides a necessary and welcome complement by virtue of which the work, in its inner dialectic between overt and covert levels of meaning, achieves its full *Gestalt*-quality, and thus its full cultural coherence and maturity. Lawrence's poetics of separation and disconnection is transformed into one of a deeper organic connection and relatedness; within the existing cultural and literary system the subtext provides exactly that opposite and opposing element which is needed to attribute to the work of art an inner balance and complexity. Although a hidden, otherwise

10 Bernard Bowron, Leo Marx and Arnold Rose, "Literature and Covert Culture", *Studies in American Culture*, ed. Joseph Kwiat and Mary Turpie (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960), p. 84-95.

not accessible insight is thus attributed to the work of art, it is now a meaning that complements American society and provides it with its own intellectual fullness and maturity. Again, we realize to what extent literary theory also serves as cultural strategy. By establishing a model of unified national identity now refined and made more complex through patterns of controlled tensions, the liberal tradition of the 1950's and 60's was able to make its own peace with an America re-conceptualized in terms of a contextually defined tragic vision which provided a flattering self-image of unity and maturity for the American experience.

IV

Contextualist premises have not only shaped the study of Marx, but have decisively influenced theories of American literature until roughly the mid-seventies. Since then, the explicit or implicit organicism of the approach which makes it possible to assign to the image, as the smallest meaningful unit of the literary text, a representative and crucial function for the understanding of a whole culture, has been questioned and attacked from various perspectives. Of these, new historicist and deconstructionist or post-structuralist revisions seem to me of special influence and importance. In emphatic dissent from the long-dominant paradigm, the new historicist revision wants to introduce that element into the writing of American literary history which the myth and symbol school had supposedly neglected: history, or, more specifically, the relation between fictional forms and the historical process. Against the former's emphasis of a somewhat mysterious national identity, the heterogeneity and class structure of American society and culture is now stressed, against a symbolic national consensus the reality of social and cultural conflicts underlined. Such redefinition of American culture in terms of conflict would seem to suggest a new view of the literary text as a field of manifold struggles and inner contradictions, would seem to ask for a corresponding view of literature as marked by inner disparity and heterogeneity. With few exceptions, however, such complicating of innertextual meaning in terms of conflict has still not taken as prominent a place as one would expect. On the contrary, and ironically enough, much of the new revisionism seems to be in strong need of stable meanings.

This may explain why historicist revision often shows a tendency for mere reversal: because the new revisionist does no longer, as the contextualist did, base his assessment of the function of the literary text on primarily literary, but on social considerations, the typical analogy of organicist thought - that of using the text as metaphor for society - may now have been overcome. But as a rule, the analogy is merely inverted and proceeds the other way round: a prior analysis of society now provides the configuration and images to be identified and rediscovered in the literary text.

Since what we face is still a nascent movement, all assessments must yet be tentative. Still, it is interesting to approach this new revisionism through our own guiding question about the element of doubleness in classic American narrative. Quite obviously, ideologial analysis is also based on the idea of a specific double coding of the literary text which hides and thereby draws our attention to something which society is not or does not want to be aware of. In most historical readings, however, this hidden meaning poses no longer any problem of interpretation, for the subtext can only be that of a prior social analysis. The major remaining problem left then is that of the choice of social subtext (a choice hardly ever justified or thematized in political terms, by the way)., Depending on whether I opt for Adorno or Lukacs, Lukacs or Brecht, Marx or Lenin, Lenin or Trotzky, Mao or Althusser, Althusser or Foucault, different segments of the text will emerge as most useful for the purposes of political allegorization. It may be true then that in ideological analysis text surface and subtext stand in conflicting or even contradictory relation to each other and that the literary text is thus shaped by suppressed knowledge or, if you want, a political unconscious. Yet the political unconscious is only another term for a social text of which the ideological critic has privileged knowledge. In the final analysis, thus, the actual conflict generating a historicist revision remains that between the literary text and a privileged text of social and political analysis which must be fit to anchor all subsequent acts of interpretation.

Current revisionist contributions to American literary history, among them most notably those on American romanticism and American realism, can help to illustrate and confirm this impression. In many of them, the romance is no longer of primary interest as a field of conflict in itself, but - depending on the underlying view of society which may be either of an orthodox leftist or a more anarchic persuasion - the genre is

treated either as homological correlative of social tendencies toward alienation or reification, or as successful disturbance of a bourgeois tendency toward naturalization and ideological mystification; in any case, it is placed on top of a social subtext which it affirms or from which it dissents[11]. Similarly, realism in the new historicism appears in basically two shapes: either as supreme embodiment of ideological tendencies toward naturalization and control over reality or as a last stand and welcome critique of an increasing commodification of our experience[12]. There is, as far as I can see, no methodological or innertextual crierion to determine which path to take and which assessment to make. What strikes one critic as homological correspondence is a case of subversión by writing for the other. Since in each case the interpretation itself focuses on those aspects of the text which can serve as allegories of the social subtext, the only remaining criterion seems to be that of the political decision itself, that is of a decision on the usefulness of the choice as a cultural strategy. Whether to retain American romanticism for example as a role model of intellectual resistance or to unmask it as unwitting accomplice to the incorporation of America seems to be the actual symbolic drama lying at the heart of the current revisionist discussions. If there is revision, it remains, importantly enough, one of the view of society, but hardly ever one of text and textuality itself.

V

It is exactly at this point that approaches influenced by post-structuralist literary theory become of interest in their attempts to revise an organicist closure on the level of the text itself. For the discussion of classic American literature this would seem to hold the promise of arriving at a convincing textual definition of the often noted, but rarely precisely defined hybrid nature of the American narrative and of a curiously modern metafictional

11 Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985) and Brook Thomas, "'The House of the Seven Gables': Reading the Romance of America", *PMLA*, 97 (1982), 195-211 provide excellent examples for these tendencies. In the volume *Ideology and Classic American Literature* ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986) numerous examples can be found for both of these approaches.

12 Cf. Walter Benn Michaels, "*Sister Carrie's* Popular Economy", *Critical Inquiry*, 7:2 (1980), 373-390 and a recent essay collection on American realism ed. by Eric J. Sundquist, *American Realism. New Essays.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982).

quality of a number of 19th century American works. If language is characterized by difference, by a constant deferral and dissemination of meaning, however, then this inherent instability would also seem to undermine any stable model of a supposedly specifically American poetics - unless the very heterogeneity and instability of the American text could be explained as a re-enactment of exactly this deconstructionist premise.

In their attempt to establish a close affinity between the effects writing and a special instability of the American narrative, post-structuralist revisions also take their point of departure from American romanticism - which is now, however, no longer of interest, as it is in the various forms of social and political revisionism, as the last and most challenging example for an analysis of ideology, but because there are obvious analogies between the romantic and the post-structuralist project. In both cases, a preference for open, decentered texts which seem to work on the principle of a constant deferral of meaning can be noted. In both cases, the problem of interpretation and readability is placed at the center of the text.

There are obvious similarities here to the argument of another theoretician of American literature, Charles Feidelson, who already in 1951 considered *Moby Dick* as a novel concerned with the meaning of meaning[13]. Feidelson, however, was a modernist and his symbolism accordingly a philosophically refined version of contextualism; the self-reflexivity and ambiguity, which for him constituted the difference between American and English romanticism, was thus not yet the inevitable result of 'writing' but an early anticipation of a symbolic and thereby specifically poetic potential of language which subsequently reached its highest expression in literary modernism. From this perspective, a work such as, e.g., Melville's *Billy Budd* could appear as a moment of indecision about the symbolic potential of literature. For the deconstructionist, on the other hand, such an assessment must be untenable, since in its tendency to center the discussion of American literature around the concept of a specifically symbolic potential of literary language, it is still influenced by a latent logocentrism. It is therefore no accident that Barbara Johnson, in a detailed reading of *Billy Budd*, attempts to reemphasize that the purpose of this apparent retreat into allegory can be seen in the undermining of the authority of allegory itself: "If *Billy Budd* is

13 Charles Feidelson, *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

indeed an allegory", she writes, "it is thus an allegory of the questioning of the traditional conditions of allegorical stability"[14]. Her own reading dissolves the moral conflict of the story in favor of a reading which sees the text in constant movement between two kinds of reading and thus two views of the text. Each of the characters within the tale thus re-enacts a divergent attitude toward language and writing, creating a textual movement of constant oscillation between these two possibilities and positions. For Johnson, this movement contains its own political significance:

> "In studying the plays of both ambiguity and binarity, Melville's story situates its critical difference neither within nor between, but precisely in the very question of the relation between the two as the fundamental question of all human politics"[15].

In the final analysis, then, Johnson's reading allegorizes the text twice: as political allegory and as an allegory of instability, that is, as an allegory of Johnson's own deconstructionist view of the effects of writing.

The unmistakable tendency to turn the literary text, in deconstructing it, into the allegory of this very act, deserves special attention: in focusing his or her own interpretation on the inherent instability of meaning, the deconstructivist is in danger of turning each interpretation into a confirmation of an essential insight into the nature of language. This may explain why almost all poststructuralist attempts at reconceptualizing classic American literature are characterized by a surprising homogeneity; despite their often highly idiosyncratic and labyrinthian ways of reading they show a surprising uniformity and predictability of results. Again and again these studies come to emphasize the concern of their texts "with the nature of language", in other passages "with the nature and practice of writing". "Each of these anomalous works" one author writes about his choice of texts, "is viewed as a metaliterary reflection on the possibility of artistic representation". Similarly, for another study the radical modernity of American romantic literature and painting consists "in its recurrent self-consciousness and self-referentiality", "ultimately in an exploration of the limits of language". And very rightly the

14 Barbara Johnson, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*", *Studies in Romanticism*, 18 (1979), 572.
15 *Ibid.*, 596.

writer asserts in another passage: "The sublime painting tells but a single tale" [16].

A strange dialectic is at work here. Theories of fiction can also be regarded as ever new attempts to determine that otherwise inaccessible dimension of meaning or experience which makes us real literature in the first place. But the ongoing attempts to determine this elusive quality do not only in our brief survey of theories of American literature tell a story of constant retreat - from an intuited blood knowledge to the no longer translatable and discursively irreducible contextualist *Gestalt* and on to the point in deconstruction where all the text can do, in order to undermine its own logocentric ambitions, is to stage its own problematic and final unreadability in ever new maneuvers of supplementation and dissemination. If it is, however, the purpose of the hybrid American narrative to dramatize and re-enforce writing's tendency toward dissemination, if, in other words, the reading of the text can no longer be centered around a stable *Gestalt* of meaning, then all interpretation can do is to re-enact this very process of dissemination in endless repetitions, then everything that remains to be said *about* a text can only consist in an allegorization of the idea of linguistic difference itself. The endless deferral of meaning which in *theory* produces ever new analogies for an emergence of meaning, in *practice* often ends in only one. The instability and constant oscillation of the literary text comes dangerously close to an unequivocal concept of unreadability and thereby results in paradox: for ironically enough, it is the delimitation of the text's signifying potential which unexpectedly produces a newly monologic structure of argumentation.

Transformed into an ever new example of linguistic difference, the double structure of the American narrative thus reemerges as both enactment and allegory of the bottomless duplicity of language itself. The idea of difference would seem to lose its heuristic usefulness, however, if it is only conceived of as a process for undermining meaning and thereby dissolving constant interaction and oscillation into an allegory of mere unreadability.

16 John Carlos Rowe, *Through the Custom-Hose. Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), p. 2, 6, XII. Bryan Jay Wolf, *Romantic Re-Vision. Culture and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century American Painting and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. XIV, 59 f., 178. Other studies drawing on deconstructionist ideas are John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Charles Caramello, *"Moby-Dick* and the postmodern Turn", *Silverless Mirrors. Book, Self & Postmodern American Fiction* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1983), pp. 54-93.

And this in turn would seem to imply that even concepts such as instability or unreadability can only be used productively if that is not entirely eradicated to which they themselves have been set up as counterparts, interestingly enough, by means of another binary opposition. How can we preserve the poststructuralist emphasis on the instability of meaning, however, and still capture elements of a specific strategic and thus historical dimension of the literary text? In the context of our discussion, one might argue that the monologic tendencies of the post-structuralist reconceptualization of American literature can only be overcome if its key concept of difference is set in relation to that concept which it tends to explode and to dissolve from within: the idea of doubleness or double structure in the literary text.

It is at this point that we have to return to our initial observation about the importance of implied functional models for the perception of literature. The crucial role of Lawrence for establishing a specific American tradition was seen in the fact that he undermined the up to then dominant realist model of literary function - without however defining his alternative tradition in a theoretically very consistent way. He nevertheless made an important suggestion by drawing attention to a double structure constituted through the conflict between opposing or contradictory levels of meaning which imbued classic American literature with its own inner tension and unexpected eventfulness. In subsequent studies those critics who followed the lead of Lawrence tried to determine this textual model more precisely by introducing the concept of 'romance' as designation for a specifically American mode of narration. As a rule, however, definitions of the genre rested content in pointing out its lack of realism and its greater freedom of representation[17]. A theoretically coherent attempt to define the genre as a text generated by a tension between overt and covert structure was offered by Leo Marx - an attempt, however, which resulted in transforming the American narrative into a contextualist work of art. In the newer attempts at political or ideological revision the romance, in turn, reemerges as constituted by a double structure of literary and

17 Cf. the most influential of these studies, Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1957): "As for my main purpose, it is: to assess the significance of the fact that since the earliest days the American novel, in its most original and characteristic form, has worked out its destiny and defined itself by incorporating an element of romance". (p. viii). "The imagination that has produced much of the best and most characteristic American fiction has been shaped by the contradictions and not by the unities and harmonies of our culture... The American novel tends to rest in contradictions and among extreme ranges of experience". (p. 1).

social text, in which the literary stands to a subtext of the "real" either in a relation of disturbing disparity or homological replication. Deconstruction, finally, in which American romanticism becomes a supreme example of a constant deferral and substitution of meaning, redefines the romance as the ever new, ahistorical staging of a fundamental problem of signification; the monologous narrative it tells, however, provokes a wish for reconceptualizing and rehistoricizing the problem of doubleness and multi-generic coding in the American narrative. For hermeneutically speaking, the strong tendencies toward (re)allegorization within current revisionist attempts are an indication that these readings still attempt to ground their theories and interpretations of American literature on one functional model of the literary text.

Approaching the problem from an interest in *Funktionsgeschichte*, that is from an assumption that the functions of fiction are not stable but in continual development and movement, the first question to ask would be whether we can get closer to the complex interaction between the cultural and the literary by identifying something like an implied functional model of the romance. What, in other words, is the cultural and aesthetic effect and potential which it implies? Recurrent characterizations of the romance as a realm of imaginative freedom or a site of conflict remain unsatisfactorily global. It is striking anyway that most existing theories about its function and potential still remain rather abstract and vague; in fact, one might say that it has always been a problem of the concept that it blends reference to genre with reference to function.

If the literary text is to be understood as a strategy to influence our perception of the world, then this cultural goal, consciously or unconsiously, has to be based on a theory of aesthetic effects - that is on an assumption of how the text may achieve its cultural aims through its formal and rhetorical structures. As cultural strategies, designed to influence a culture, fictions thus develop 'projects', that is models and analogies of the effects which they want to achieve. And although there is a certain tendency of fiction to pressurize and subvert all stable models of world or text, the text, in a process of constant analogizing, has to rebuild such models for the reading experience in ever new analogies in order to secure its own readability. Such implied functional models, however, should not be confused with a text's genre or period classification. The difference may be easier to grasp if we include a brief look at

that type of text which was essential in creating the need for an alternative tradition in the first place, the realistic mode of representation. In terms of genre, realism has always been considered the supreme example of a stable kind of text. The actual complication in explaining American literary realism and its often criticized inconsistencies, however, is that it has always been moving between at least two possibilities of fiction and that its own inner history thus presents a running commentary on the problems and difficulties of each: On the one hand, the realist text was to serve as a stable vision of reality, providing models of right and wrong behavior through the plausibility and assumed authenticity of its representation. On the other hand, the reader was not simply to learn through actas of imitation and identification, but through the inner dialogicity of the text itself which - serving as a model not of behavior but of a mode of communication characterized by interaction and conversation - was supposed to enable the reader to develop his own ability for perceiving and judging reality[18]. In contrast, the romance of the 19th century aims not at an increase of communicative potential but at conversion. Gaining cultural significance at a moment in which a transcendent moral order had become increasingly enigmatic, aesthetic experience is to restitute what mankind seems to be in danger of losing. This, however, is the official version of the romance, the textual surface which even the sympathetic Lawrence considered as being of questionable merit. Using the romance to initiate acts of conversion would have meant, for writers like Hawthorne, Poe, or Melville, to merely reproduce the goals and values of the dominant culture in writing. Inscribed into classic American literature is therefore a second kind of functional model emerging in the critique of the official romance and commenting on it from within.

The ensuing decomposition and recomposition of its own inner textual system (and, accordingly, of its own implied functional model) can be briefly illustrated by referring to a novel such as Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* which has served as a test-case of almost all theories of American literature. In one respect, to be sure, the novel can be seen as a project of de-allegorization and thus as a critique of the official version of the romance. For this purpose the gradual transformation of the meaning of the letter A from allegory to symbol provides the strongest analogy (or, as I would like to call it, functional model):

18 Cf. Winfried Fluck, "Fiction and Fictionality in American Realism", *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 21 (1986), pp. 101-112.

as the letter is de-allegorized and thus liberated, so the implied reader, the American as puritan, is to be transformed and perhaps even humanized by the encounter with the novel as a whole. The act of liberation, however, poses its own problems, for if it is carried too far the moral function of the novel might be lost altogether. Accordingly, those passages in the novel where Hester wants to escape the impact of the letter show an unmistakable tendency for textual re-allegorization. The loss of a moral quality in the America of the 19th century, deplored in the Custom-House Preface, is thereby met by a text which has to fulfill a precarious double function. Against the threatening loss of a moral dimension it wants to evoke an element of moral seriousness in the reader; at the same time, however, it has to work against a tendency toward moral re-allegorization and linked with it, of self-righteousness. An emerging 'symbolic' romance is thus to broaden our perception of a moral order of which the 'allegorical' version of it has to keep reminding us - which, in turn, may explain the novel's characteristic oscillation between an allegorical and a symbolic mode of representation.

Seen this way, the novel is marked by the juxtaposition and interaction of two functional models in one text, by the co-existence of several projects that are forced upon it by the complexities of a specific historical situation which it can only attempt to control at the price of ever new contradictions and renegotiations. If *The Scarlet Letter,* as a typical example of American romanticism shows an instability of signification - and thereby a quasi-modernist awareness of the problem of readability - then this complexity and complication might very well be attributed to a process of constant negotiation between alternative and opposing models of fiction which have their own however, the rigid separation and hierarchical double decker model of upper and lower level, bland surface and meaningful subtext is irretrievably lost in favor of an interactionist pattern of horizontal as well as vertical contact, blending and interlocking - a temporarily dominant model eclipes its competitor which, though displaced, remains in view as a constant challenge and continues to subvert the authority of alternative versions. Serving as a metaphor for this interactionist dimension, the image of oscillation may be useful in marking the transition from a poetics of separation to a poetics of permanent negotiation and interaction.

Have we finally arrived at an explanation which could serve as a key for understanding the ominous American bastard form 'romance'? It would te tempting indeed to come to an end at this

point, but it would also be premature. For in referring to the phenomenon of constant interaction between two or more implied functional models of a text, we have isolated an element of double structure which is certainly not restricted to American romanticism. In Mark Twain's *Huck Finn,* e.g., - to touch briefly on another text which has played a prominent part in theories of American literature - we find an analoguous source of the text's amazing modernity. Again we may say that the difficulty which American literary criticism nas had in coming to terms with the heterogeneity of the book can be traced back to the recurrent attempt to interpret it in terms of one functional model of the literary text. Seen as a symbolic strategy to influence American culture, however, the novel contains both a strategy of cultural subversion and a story of moral regeneration and exemplary growth. On the one hand, the novel can be regarded, in both its theme and form, as one of the most advanced American examples of a decompostion of the Victorian novel. Subverting Victorian ideals of narrative order through its first-person narrator, it clearly moves toward modernists models of the literary text and thus, in terms of function, toward a de-hierarchization of perception. On the other hand, Twain obviously does not entirely trust the liberating effect of such early modern tendencies, since they alone cannot establish the promise of a new national order. In reaction, he draws on elements of the Victorian novel of education which suggests that the book may be taken as a similar model for the reader and may thus assume a function of re-hierarchization. These two models of the literary work remain in conflict throughout the text and as in the case of *The Scarlet Letter* none of these implied models manages to gain dominance in the course of the novel. Again the ensuing result is a constant decomposition and recomposition of the literary system from within - a process, however, that begins to accelerate and extend in the transition from realism to modernism and finds its eventual thematization in American postmodernism. The 'romance' in the narrower sense of a specific genre of romanticism, may thus loose its privileged position for a discussion of American literature, but the attempt to understand it as a type of text with its own cultural significance and aesthetic effect has drawn our attention to an aspect of the constitution of meaning in narrative whose own inner historic development and transformation can now be explored further. It suggests redefining the often noted element of conflict in the American novel as a clash between such functional models and raises the possibility of

reconceptualizing the striking dimension of doubleness in classic American writing as a result of an interplay between alternately present and absent models of the literary text. It should be obvious how a history of the changing functions of the American narrative could take its point of departure from this notion and it will also be noted how a question of intellectual history has been redefined as a question of poetics - which, however, may open up new possibilities of rehistoricizing the problem. If successful, it could this be a last instance of interaction, but this time one which reflects a major concern of the Constance school of reception theory, that between poetics and hermeneutics.