

Perpetual Conflicts and  
Tragedies”: Civilizatory Progress  
and Realist Writing in  
John William De Forest’s  
*Kate Beaumont*

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I

Although its author is widely regarded as one of the first and most important American realists of the nineteenth century, John William De Forest’s novel *Kate Beaumont* (1871)<sup>1</sup> has received little critical attention. Perhaps one reason for this neglect of a work that has been called “one of [De Forest’s] best novels”<sup>2</sup> is that the text suffers from some unsolved problems of generic identity. More specifically, it is the way in which conventions of the historical romance of that day co-exist with realistic narrative strategies that causes irritation among critics. Such a co-existence of “romance” and realistic elements is usually taken to be a mere concession to popular taste. Despite his commitment to realism, the realist writer is “selling out” to the sentimental or romantic demands of his audience. However, “realism” is, as a rule, not the result of an author’s sudden decision to follow a realistic program. It is, first and foremost, a strategy of authorization based on a promise of an increased authenticity of literary representation. Such a promise can only be made (and meaningfully evaluated) in relation to prior forms of literary representation. In this sense, realism must be seen as an attempt to develop out of existing ways of worldmaking a new mode of writing that would express the author’s changing view of reality more adequately. Realist writing emerges, in other words, in an ongoing

struggle with dominant modes of perception and representation that are deeply, often unconsciously, embedded in the writer himself. What makes *Kate Beaumont* an interesting novel is that it provides an instructive and telling example of one of the main tensions of nineteenth-century American realism, that is, between its cultural convictions and its empirical epistemology.

The central idea governing De Forest's best known novel, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867), which recurs in changing versions again and again in his later writing, is that of a union between two conflicting value systems. In the Civil War novel *Miss Ravenel*, these realms are the American North and South, for which Capt. Colburne and Miss Ravenel come to stand respectively.<sup>3</sup> Their personal relationship serves as a test for the possibility of reconciling the two separate realms that are at war in the novel and of reintegrating them into a union in which they would complement each other successfully. In this test, the Civil War functions as a purifying ordeal of suffering through which the characters must pass in order to make the eventual union possible. The central role of the idea of union in De Forest's work derives from the fact that it provides a symbolic configuration for the reconciliation of potentially antagonistic social and cultural forces. As such, it expresses De Forest's hopes in a new phase and a new quality of American civilization.<sup>4</sup> The union becomes, in short, a symbol for what De Forest understood to be civilizatory progress on native grounds.

Although the title of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* seems to indicate that this progress can only be achieved when the South is converted to the views of the North, the actual novel makes it much clearer that De Forest aimed at a genuine synthesis to which both realms would contribute significant elements. Capt. Colburne, standing for the North, may exemplify a superior moral stance, but within the context of the novel he is sadly deficient of all the social graces and sensual pleasures that make life enjoyable. The South, on the other hand, has cultivated these, but without the guidance and control of firm moral principles. The union of North and South, of Capt. Colburne and Miss Ravenel, it is to be hoped, will thus provide a happy balance between these two still deficient, yet potentially complementary civilizations.<sup>5</sup>

## II

It is not difficult to identify in *Kate Beaumont* another version of the central theme of De Forest's writing. As in *Miss Ravenel*, the sequence of a conflict that endangers civilizatory progress and a union that signals the arrival of a new, advanced stage is played out on two levels. One is that of a political conflict, the other that of the personal relationship between two

lovers, Kate Beaumont and Frank McAlister. Again, their relationship becomes the crucial test for a whole range of political and social hopes. Although in this book, both families live in the South and are thus not immediately distinguished by their regional loyalties, De Forest's basic narrative pattern of conflicting value realms is still in place. The McAlisters are of Scotch-Irish origin, the Beaumonts an old Anglo-Norman Southern family characterized by typical Cavalier attitudes and familiar attributes of pre-Civil War Southern culture. They are impulsive, but also immensely hospitable, proud, if not arrogant on occasions, but basically good-hearted and guided by a strong, unwavering sense of family loyalty.<sup>6</sup>

Both the McAlisters and the Beaumonts are slave owners, but the aristocratic connotations surrounding the Beaumont family are stressed, while the McAlisters come to stand for a post-feudal world. Beaumont is the man of the "old" forces of the South. McAlister creates trouble by letting himself be influenced by one of the new breed of Northern politicians to run against Beaumont. The conflict between the two families thus bears certain political implications which become explicit at one point of the novel when the narrator speaks of a conflict between the "so-called parish representation" and the electoral system.<sup>7</sup>

However, important as the political implications of the feud may be, within the context of the novel there cannot be any doubt that the main reason for the bloody feud between the two families is not political principle but lack of moral control. It is for this reason that the book is located in the South, for, as De Forest sees it, everything in its social and moral climate favors the persistence of morally objectionable practices, such as an obsolete code of honor and the code of duellos. Only outside of this environment's influence other attitudes seem to have a chance to assert themselves. The fact that De Forest brings his lovers into their first contact on a steamer may look like a concession to conventions of the popular romance. Actually, it makes more sense in the context of De Forest's geography of civilizatory progress. For the steamer is "neutral" ground and thus a territory for experiences that may break the spell of regional and cultural prejudices. When Frank and Kate meet, both of them have spent years in Europe and have acquired a certain measure of distance from the cultural conventions of the South. Consequently, they are willing to disengage themselves from them. The rest of the book will contain the unfolding and testing of this project as fiction. Can a union between the two warring realms be achieved? Or, in the language of the novel itself: "Of the paradise or inferno, which is to win?" (131).

What makes De Forest's writing after *Miss Ravenel* interesting is not only the variety of strategies which he develops for exploring his project but also the changes which his basic themes undergo. The fact that *Miss Ravenel* ended with the happy union of Capt. Colburne and Miss Ravenel must be read as the expression of De Forest's hope in the regenerating

power of the Civil War. To observe the changes in the reworkings of his project also means to trace the changes in his outlook on the possibilities of genuine progress in American society. It is as if De Forest, in telling the same story over and over and again, submits the idea through which he tried to give meaning to American history to ever-new tests and, in doing so, accommodates his hopes to a changing American reality. In this context, *Kate Beaumont* can be read as a comment on *Miss Ravenel*, just as *Miss Ravenel*, on the other hand, provides *Kate Beaumont* with additional layers of intertextuality and links it to De Forest's ongoing project of refiguring post-war America as a potentially new stage of civilizatory development. However, *Kate Beaumont* is not only a test of De Forest's gentry-belief in historical development.<sup>8</sup> It is also a test for the possibilities of realism. The two are, in fact, closely related in De Forest's work: One is chosen to usher in the other. *Kate Beaumont* can thus be seen as another attempt of his to answer the question of what realistic writing can contribute to the progress of American civilization.

In *Miss Ravenel*, the basic conflict between opposing value systems is acted out through the Civil War, and in *Kate Beaumont* through the feud between two families. One is tempted to regard this motif as a mere stock device taken from popular culture in order to attract public interest. However, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain would later employ the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud to suggest the extent to which the South was governed by chivalric illusions. As Twain demonstrates, the feud can have significance within a realistic mode of writing, apart from its potential to allow for an exciting plot. For the realist, the feud provides an ideal example of the fatal consequences which romantic misconceptions of reality can have. It therefore provokes and challenges the realist who wants to cut through such misconceptions. As the central conflict of the novel, the feud thus fulfills two functions in *Kate Beaumont*. On the moral level, it dramatizes a confusion that needs to be overcome. On the aesthetic level, the feud calls for a mode of realistic writing that would be able to reveal the foolishness of feudal conventions. The two "projects" of the novel, the contribution to civilizatory progress and the development of realism, thus reinforce each other, for only realism can provide a perception of reality through which the hold of unquestioned traditions can be broken.

In what way can the novel be said to fulfill this task? In what ways can *Kate Beaumont* be considered realistic? The recurring references to the Romeo and Juliet motif within the novel seem to indicate that the text takes its narrative organization from the familiar literary model of a struggle between stern, unyielding parents and unhappy youthful lovers. However, a closer look shows that these references remain tied to one person in the text, the dear, but unusually talkative Major Lawson who, in seeing a love story develop, cannot help thinking of "the darling romance of his life."<sup>9</sup> Even Frank's ironic comments that, if reality would indeed follow the

famous literary model, this would eventually have to lead to his own death, cannot change Major Lawson's literary way of interpreting the world.<sup>10</sup> He remains a not too harmful, but nevertheless negative example of a person whose perceptions and judgments are guided by fictional models—an attitude toward life which the novel sets out to expose in all of its often silly manifestations and harmful consequences.

A supreme example of the tendency to confuse real and imagined worlds is given by Mrs. Chester. In her case, however, the consequences are much more damaging than in Lawson's. In fact, they come close to being fatal. Mrs. Chester's constant attempts to manipulate reality according to her own, often ridiculous, fantasies are one of the main sources of the numerous complications which Frank and Kate have to confront. So far-reaching is her inability to face reality that Mrs. Chester proves immune to all attempts to correct and balance her views. Reality merely functions as a quarry for her imaginary constructs of "reality." But because she regularly misconstrues it, reality never quite meets her expectations and creates constant dissonances, until Mrs. Chester is finally unable to reconcile her projections with the continuous disruptions and disappointments of real life and plunges into madness. Her "delirium" at the end of the novel is a sign that she has finally given up all attempts to reconcile fantasy and reality and is now completely under the influence of her imaginary projections.

However, the positive and supposedly "normal" characters of the book also fight a constant battle against fictional constructions of reality which threaten to govern their life. Even the two lovers who, from the beginning of the novel, distinguish themselves by a healthy distance from the conventional fictions of Southern life, are endangered at certain points of crisis. One might say in fact that crises in the novel are defined as situations in which fictions threaten to run away with reality, where reality seems no longer able to assert itself against fictional constructs and experience loses its power of correction. For Frank, this point is reached when the resurgence of the feud has destroyed his plans to propose to Kate and she seems forever lost. The formerly competent, common-sensical mineralogist is transformed into an unhappy romantic lover whose passion turns into a self-destructive obsession. His disappointment makes him give up all interest in life, even to the point of looking forward to his duel with one of the Beaumonts as a welcome opportunity to die. The novel, however entangled it may be in certain sentimental and melodramatic conventions on other occasions, here resists the temptation of the romantic model. When Frank begins to indulge in reveries—one of the unmistakable danger signals of an unbalanced self in realistic writing—Frank's mother takes it upon herself to apply some of the "corrective" powers of real life, until he is finally taken out of his self-pity.

Similarly, Kate, who has preserved her sanity of vision throughout most of the novel, despite a seemingly endless series of adversities, finally

breaks down when her beloved grandfather is shot in yet another flare-up of the feud. In her sadness and desolation she begins to be "spiritually" affected in a way which threatens her own happiness and of which the narrator strongly disapproves:

But sadly as the physical languished, the spiritual suffered even more. Before long Kate fell into a melancholy which took an unwholesome theological cast, akin to superstition. In her diseased imagination God became a Moloch, demanding the death of the innocents of her heart. She was possessed by an impression that some great sacrifice was demanded of her. What could it be, except the man whom she now loved, as she was compelled to admit, above all other living beings? (371)

A religious concept of self-sacrifice emerges as another form of fiction that deceives and misleads the self. It is thus associated with mental illness and physical disease. As in Frank's case, one of the women in the book whose marital experiences have given her a certain measure of reality takes it upon herself to cut through the web of fictions that threatens to engulf Kate. In Kate's case, it is her sister Nellie. A victim of a husband whose handsome romantic features suggest nobility to her, while in reality they provide a facade for uncontrolled excesses, Nellie manages to convince the Reverend Arthur Gilyard not to support Kate's fancies and to leave her alone.

Thus, ironically enough, the happy ending of the novel, "conventional" as it may look at first sight, must be read as successful assertion of a realist perspective and not at all as a "concession to 'romance'."<sup>11</sup> The fact that the reworking of "Romeo and Juliet" in South Carolina does not develop into a tragedy, but turns out to be a story with a happy ending, means that "reality" has not succumbed to fictional models. Rather, it has asserted itself and successfully "corrected" the fictions of life. Reason and common sense have prevailed against the lure of fictionalization. And since individual and historical aspects are inextricably intertwined in the novel, the private union also signals progress in the history of civilization. What has been kept apart for such a long time by distorted notions of reality, has finally come together. The "romance" cannot capture the social meaning and historical significance of this event, because it aims at strong emotional identification and does not allow the self to gain distance. In contrast, realism tries to break the spell of the imagination in order to create the possibility of distance.<sup>12</sup> For only under these circumstances is the self able to go beyond its own selfish concerns and to think in historical and social terms. Realism and civilizational progress, it seems, go hand in hand.

To cut through the fictions that still govern "real" life is one of the main goals of realism. Not surprisingly, the novel is most effective in its

reality effect where it focuses on characters and character constellations which embody the discrepancies between imagined and real worlds. The subplot of the Handsome Armitage/Nellie Beaumont marriage comes to mind immediately. In following Armitage on his excursion into the camp of a few southern poor whites, the reader is introduced to "another" America outside of the boundaries and the control of dominant Victorianism.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the follies and confusions of Mrs. Chester are contrasted with the common sense of her black servant Miriam, the prototypical "lower" character of local color fiction, whose "low" outsider status allows her to voice some "truths" which the genteel Victorian code represses. Such instances indicate how American realism began to take shape in the treatment of those characters who, in social and moral terms, were farthest away from the center of civilization.<sup>14</sup>

The shift in hierarchy between higher and lower characters, and a new awareness of the "reality" of immoral and asocial behavior are not the only narrative devices through which a realistic point of view manifests itself in the novel. Even more important is the authorial voice of the narrator whose omniscience guides and directs the reader's attention. The novel's attitude toward Mrs. Chester and others is not simply one of moral condemnation. Repeatedly, the narrator tries to make us understand the reasons for her behavior. Not accidentally, one is reminded of the treatment of Mrs. Larue in *Miss Ravenel*, who stands out as a rare example of a psychologically complex character in American fiction of the time.<sup>15</sup> Although the narrator is occasionally on the verge of losing patience with this "unbalanced mind" (200), he nevertheless stresses, even in Mrs. Chester's most foolish moments, psychological causation in order to provide information that helps us to explain and understand her behavior.

Other attempts at a psychologically differentiated characterization can be observed in the portraits of the feuding family heads, Peyton Beaumont and Judge McAlister. As a heavy drinker, Beaumont exhibits an unpleasant eccentricity of behavior, but he can be charming and gentle, too. Moreover, he is a "singularly affectionate parent" (324). Judge McAlister is, as James F. Light puts it, "grave, deliberate, bland, courageous," and yet, at times, also "a hypocritical man."<sup>16</sup> McAlister is basically a well-meaning person in pursuit of his own political interests, and it just happens that, occasionally, these unfortunately interfere with his son's happiness. Either one of them, Beaumont or McAlister, defies an easy moral judgment in terms of good or bad. There are a number of factors, among them the influence of an environment like the South's, which explain their behavior and that of the other characters in the book. Handsome Armitage's moral decay, for example, is attributed to his excessive alcoholism which, in turn, is traced back to a hereditary weakness. His behavior may be deplorable, but it is also rationally explicable.

It is the narrator who provides all of this information for the reader.

His frequent, often highly ironic, intrusions are thus not a jarring element by which a realistic representation is undercut.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, they form an aspect of the novel in which a realistic point of view is effectively at work. The omniscient authorial voice provides a perspective on the world which tries to explain its manifold manifestations by drawing on models of psychological, sociological and historical causation. Even the often criticized clumsiness or abruptness of De Forest's narrative transitions in such passages as "Affairs of state ... recall us to Hartland" (109) and "But we must leave the political background ... and return to the ... foreground" (110) are not out of place in this context. They fit in perfectly with the stance of a rationally oriented narrator who knows that "...we cannot tell the *whole* life, even of a country village. We must choose some characters for our painting and shut our eyes to others,"<sup>18</sup> and who does not attempt to conceal this necessity of selection, but lets the reader, with whom he hopes to be in rational agreement, in on the principles of his selections. Such direct addresses to the reader are a distinctive feature of mid-Victorian realism from which De Forest drew considerable inspiration (as his admiration for Thackeray shows). What has to be taken into account here, are two different stages in the development of English and American realism in the nineteenth century. While the latter-day realism of the 1880s moved toward the suppression and elimination of the authorial voice in order to avoid the danger of patronizing the reader,<sup>19</sup> mid-Victorian realism was grounded in the confidence of an omnipresent narrator who seeks to explain the world rationally by providing a running commentary on the strained relations between the individual and the social forces that shape his or her life. It is only in this sense that the category of "realism" can be consistently applied to *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* and *Kate Beaumont*,<sup>20</sup> although some isolated war scenes in *Miss Ravenel* have led most critics to a premature equation of De Forest's realism with "objective," matter-of-fact reporting.<sup>21</sup>

The attitude of the narrator of *Kate Beaumont* displays a commitment to an explanation of characters and events on the grounds of rationally-based and empirically verifiable models of causation. In De Forest's view it is no longer a transcendent power that shapes reality, but a field of disparate social and historical forces which have to be negotiated and reconciled in a long, seemingly endless process. This may help to explain an aspect of the novel that contributes to its considerable length and occasional diffuseness: its tactics of excessive delay, or, to put it differently, its refusal to close the flow of events in order to keep the representation of reality open and in constant dynamic motion. For a long time, the book appears to be a story of "perpetual conflicts and tragedies" (392) that seem to manifest themselves in ever-new variations. Not surprisingly, Rubin tells us: "All through the writing of *Kate Beaumont* De Forest worried that the plot was 'elephantine'."<sup>22</sup> As a result, reality seems in constant disorder; in fact, it

seems to be working against itself continuously. Again and again, the plot takes yet another unexpected twist during the course of the novel. What looks like a dangerous complication for one or two chapters is resolved without dramatic resolution, while, on the other hand, new coincidences arise and provide the novel with another unforeseen turn of events.<sup>23</sup> At one point, De Forest himself employs the metaphor of the seesaw to characterize the constant complications and reversals of the novel: "Matters worked like a seesaw: one end of the feud went down, only to see the other go up" (334).

Eventually, however, the fittingness of this narrative structure of perpetual conflicts and complications must impress itself upon the reader. Because life is no longer seen as merely a struggle of antagonistic forces, it emerges as a complex social field in which characters—who are all, to some degree, both right and wrong—constantly act upon each other. The course of events is thus constantly changed, redirected, even reversed. History—and thus civilizatory progress—appears as result of a never-ending sequence of difficult and messy interactions between psychologically complex characters. It is in this image of life as a field of interdependent, mutually interactive historical and social forces that the real strength of *Kate Beaumont's* realism lies.

### III

Coincidences in fiction merit their own consideration. Initially "great" events that signal the inevitability of fate, they assume a different status in realism, where they acquire a dimension of indifference and arbitrariness. Put differently, they become a metonymic sign for the unforeseen, uncontrollable complexities of life. The initial renewal of the feud, after it has been dormant for nearly ten years, is a case in point. At the beginning, neither Wally McAlister nor Vincent Beaumont wants to get involved with the other at a village dance. But a series of unfortunate coincidences and the psychological chemistry of the mutual interaction between Wally, Vincent, and Jenny eventually result in the flare-up of the feud at a point when it seemed to have come to an end through Frank and Kate's encounter on the boat—another coincidence, to be sure. The two coincidental meetings (Frank-Kate; Wally-Vincent) cancel each other out and provide a typical example for the contradictory, uncontrollable nature of a reality in which events are at constant cross-purpose.

But clearly not all of the coincidences in the book are of the same nature. For if the complexities of life would cancel each other out forever, how could civilizatory progress then be achieved? It is at this point that De Forest helps out on the side of progress by resorting to plot devices that clash with the realism of the text and bring his vision of civilizatory

development and realist writing into a course of collision. Of these devices, the main one is the highly coincidental death of Kate's grandfather Colonel Kershaw, who is accidentally gunned down by the drunken Armitage. This accident provides the decisive break in the seemingly endless series of conflicts in the book. The memory of Kershaw's suffering and the emotionally charged dramaturgy of his death-bed wish encourage Beaumont to overcome his aversion to McAlister and to consent to the reconciliation between the two families.

As in *Miss Ravenel*, moral insight can only be achieved through genuine tragedy, but since De Forest cannot draw on the Civil War in this story of the antebellum South, he resorts to the melodramatic device of having the central moral force of the book, the embodiment of supreme moral goodness, killed in a highly unfortunate coincidence. The incident leads to the most emotionally charged passage of the book in which De Forest does not refrain from using the ultimate melodramatic device: the death-bed scene. By employing the familiar literary tableau of pure goodness victimized, he creates a situation which seems to be created only to give plausibility to the moral conversion of the Beaumonts.

De Forest's use of a conventional melodramatic device to advance his plot at decisive points in the action draws attention to another coincidence in the novel that defies plausibility and clashes with the realistic code. Frank's encounter with Kate on the steamer may still lie within the range of plausibility, but the series of accidents that allows him to rescue Kate's life and thus to make the Beaumonts forever indebted to him is clearly another moment in the novel in which a benevolent moral law gives shape and direction to the complexities of life. If Kershaw's death suggests *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Frank's plunge into the cold water suggests the Horatio Alger hero whose rescue of the boss' daughter starts a series of events in which virtue is eventually rewarded. Kershaw's death and Frank's rescue of Kate, however, are the decisive narrative moments in the progress of the book towards the final union.

It can be seen as a first instructive result of the book's test of realism that De Forest seemed unable to advance his project of civilizatory progress by consistently applied forms of realist writing. In this context, it is interesting to note that both of the crucial "moral" events in the novel are related to what one may call the "inner circle" of characters in the novel. Frank, Kate, and Grandfather Kershaw are the embodiments of De Forest's gentry-values. They are also the characters who are largely exempt from a realistic treatment in terms of psychologically complex characterization. Colonel Kershaw, "one of those simple, pure, honorable, sensible country gentleman" (140), is good and nothing else. The intricate interlocking of illusion and reality, of good intentions and bad impulses that make life so complicated for many of the other characters, does not seem to apply to him. Frank and Kate, on the other hand, do not yet have his maturity and

are therefore in danger of faltering in their purpose when they have to confront moments of crisis. However, there cannot be any doubt that in their basic goodness of character they stand morally head and shoulders above the rest of the characters of the novel. When Frank finally proposes to Kate, she reminds him "of Murillo's Immaculate Virgin showing through hazes of aureoles." Although the narrator tries to provide some "realistic" distance to this idealization by pointing out to us in the following sentence that "the comparison sprang from the hot imagination of strong affection," he does not consider it "altogether extravagant.... there was about her something of the Madonna" (422). At this point, the novel suffers a telling irony: What stands at the end of the perpetual attempts to disentangle reality from the grasp of fictional constructs is yet another, although this time "supreme," fiction. Fittingly, Light calls Kate "another one of De Forest's young ladies on pedestals,"<sup>24</sup> while both Frank and Colonel Kershaw, as the two "worthy gentlemen" of the novel, are of "monumental" height and stand up as tall morally as they do physically.<sup>25</sup> Their unwavering moral integrity anchors the book's drive for civilizatory progress. In contrast, the characters surrounding this inner circle are characterized by psychological complexity.<sup>26</sup> The treatment of Mrs. Chester, Peyton Beaumont, and Judge McAlister is still based on the assumption of a basic consistency of character which can be rationally comprehended. But their characters have so many complex and contradictory sides that it takes a considerable degree of psychological explanation on the part of the narrator to make their behavior plausible. Kershaw, Frank, and Kate, on the other hand, exhibit a form of steady behavior that needs the narrator's explanation only in those moments of crisis where it threatens to become unbalanced. One realizes that the novel is, to a certain extent, only half (but not half-heartedly) realistic. In the final analysis, it has two sets of characters and two types of plot.

#### IV

To cut through the "fictions" people impose on life, we said, is one of the main purposes of realist writing. That this must be done by means of fiction is its main dilemma. For clearly, in transforming "reality" into narrative the writer establishes a new fiction—in this case a gentry-fiction of civilizatory progress. Here, and not in the weaknesses of individual writers, lies one of the main sources of the often contradictory nature of American realism. However, the way in which the dilemma is confronted in different novels, distinguishes types and degrees of realist writing. In comparison with *Miss Ravenel*, *Kate Beaumont* runs into obvious difficulties on this account. It is, therefore, at this point that the comparison with *Miss Ravenel* can be of special interest. As in *Miss Ravenel*, De Forest's problem

in *Kate Beaumont* arises from the double narrative he sets in motion—the fact that the realist novel also wants to tell a tale of civilizatory progress. In a way, these two aspects are linked and do not necessarily contradict each other. For it is, after all, the realist's trust in an underlying law of evolutionary progress that motivated American realism, at least in its early stages, to focus on reality more closely in an attempt to find empirical confirmation for its own view of history. It is thus not the connection of historical and literary theory in itself, but De Forest's particular linkage of them in *Kate Beaumont*, which creates a dilemma for him.

More precisely, it is the unconvincing narrative realization of De Forest's basic historical vision, that of a "union" between competing value systems in which a new stage of civilizatory development would be reached, which mars a novel that is remarkable in many other respects. In *Miss Ravenel*, De Forest could draw on the reality and experience of the Civil War as well as on its significance as a "breakthrough" in American history. He did not have to borrow any dramatic breakthroughs from melodramatic convention, because history itself provided all the drama he needed. History gave a pivot that genre could not provide. However, one of the reasons given for the disappointing public reception of *Miss Ravenel* was that people were supposedly tired of reading about the Civil War. The problem which De Forest faced in writing *Kate Beaumont* was to find another narrative device that would support his vision of a union which embodies civilizatory progress. The feud, a prominent theme in American culture of the 1870s, may have suggested itself because of its associations with a war-like conflict, but also as display of characters caught in a web of "fictions." In setting the story in the South, De Forest implicitly acknowledged that the South posed a much more severe barrier to historical progress than was suggested in the hopeful ending of *Miss Ravenel*. In a later version of the theme, in *The Bloody Chasm* (1881), he would emphasize even more strongly to what extent Southern obstinacy, in his view, still stood in the way of a true union. In *The Bloody Chasm*, the representatives of the North have to search out the hostile Southern heroine who rejects all contacts with them and can finally only be tricked into the union that is to bridge the chasm. These revisions and readjustments of his basic story reflect the increasing difficulties De Forest had in accommodating his project to the realities of reconstruction.

The reworking of the De Forest-text in *Kate Beaumont* resulted in two significant losses: To start with, the political and social connotations of the conflict are neglected, if not altogether lost. The fact that, despite the "Northern" associations of the McAlisters, both families are slave owning families of the South, is just one indication of this loss. For the sake of the union, De Forest has Beaumont win the election and makes Frank give up his scientific studies to become a landowner. In doing this, Frank may become another example of De Forest's worthy gentlemen, but the initial

promise of his learning—"I want to develop the natural wealth of my State. I want to be a benefactor to South Carolina" (190)—fades into the background, until his initial fears become true at the end: "sometimes he feared lest he should have to drop his sciences and go to sleep upon cotton, like the rest of South Carolina" (191). Far from being the symbol of a moral and political union, the relationship between Frank and Kate thus becomes nearly an end itself. To be sure, it is earned through a series of trials and tribulations, but it has lost its wider symbolic significance.

Similarly, the heroine of *Kate Beaumont* needs no real "conversion" such as Miss Ravenel experienced. She is morally flawless from the start and her connection with the South as the semantic field of moral corruption rests on nothing more than the detail that she was born into a "Southern" family. Yet from the start it is made clear that she is no real Beaumont; she is a "Kershaw." Because she is no true representative of the South, however, her final union with Frank loses most of its political and moral significance as a historical breakthrough. Instead of reflecting an awareness of the limits of one's own culture and the willingness to overcome them, the union functions as hardly more than an affirmation of genteel hopes in the eventual victory of basic, elementary goodness. In *Miss Ravenel*, the moving force of civilizatory progress was the painful experience of its absence, and in *Kate Beaumont* it can only be achieved by a melodramatic intervention into the complexities of life.

## V

*Kate Beaumont* does not succeed as a realistic novel, but neither is it a sentimental failure and a "generally unconvincing piece of work."<sup>27</sup> What De Forest tried to do in the novel was to unite the genteel reader of American Victorianism with the realist reader of *Miss Ravenel*. But the problems of the book are not merely, not even primarily, a result of this strategic compromise. It is much more adequate and profitable to see its difficulties as expression of a major problem in American writing of the period: the tension between the idea of civilizatory progress and the project of a more "modern," contemporary, and "life-like" kind of writing which was later to be called realism. Because Victorian intellectuals based their view of history on evolutionary models, "life-like" pictures or portraits (to name only two of the most frequently used critical terms of the period) held the promise not only of giving quasi-empirical support to an evolutionary theory of history but also of illustrating the special historical potential of American civilization within this process. Literature could help to mobilize this potential by undermining traditional, "Old World" forms of historical authorization, by opening the reader's eyes to the potential of American civilization, and by creating a consensus on the necessity and direction of civilizatory development. It is this last point, the creation of

consensus, which posed the greatest challenge for the realists and with which De Forest had the greatest difficulties, because he still tried to establish the basis for a consensus through “representative” portraits of the state of American civilization.

The preferred literary genre for achieving such national self-definition was still the historical novel, which was also the novelistic genre most respected by the gentry. De Forest remained within its “heroic” narrative code in which progress is achieved by a narrative sequence from conflict to conversion and solved by a symbolically charged union between conflicting realms. Although De Forest’s epistemology is already “realistic,” his narrative form is not. In this sense, *Kate Beaumont* provides an interesting chapter in the genesis of American realism. More specifically, it provides a good opportunity to disentangle the discussion of American realism and its emergence from the iron grip of a by now completely conventionalized opposition between “realism” and “romance.” To describe the genesis of American realism in these terms is misleading, because the dichotomy between romance and realism is, in its programmatic form, a retrospective projection. It was created in the realism war of the 1880s primarily as a strategy of realist self-authorization and was then perpetuated by a critical tradition of “hard-boiled” realists in the twentieth century who redefined realism as a form of uncompromising anti-sentimentalism.<sup>28</sup> However, the opposition between romance and realism misrepresents the emergence of American realism, because it implies a situation of choice which did not exist in this form. American novelists after the Civil War were groping in the dark: Cooper was no longer taken seriously. There was Hawthorne, whose authority was unchallenged (and who was not at all criticized for writing “romances”)—but apart from him, there was little else. In his essay on “The Heroine of ‘Kate Beaumont,’” Howells looked back at the post-War period and captured the uncertainty of the moment: “If we put aside the romances of Hawthorne and the romantic novels of Cooper, we can hardly find much fiction of American scope and import before the Civil War, except ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin.’ That was a great novel, marred by defects of art, and fettered to a cause, but still a great novel, and really the earliest American novel.” In this situation, De Forest did not look like an imperfect realist, but as an author of great promise who was greeted with relief: “After the war we began to have other novels of material proportions, and first among these were the stories of J. W. De Forest.”<sup>29</sup>

In his 1868 essay “The Great American Novel,” De Forest had himself revived the call for a novel that would define and express American society in the way the great epics of the past had expressed and summarized their age.<sup>30</sup> For the purpose, he reviewed the existing candidates. Washington Irving “was too cautious to make the trial: he went back to fictions of Knickerbockers and Rip Van Winkles and Ichabod Cranes...” (32). The same might be said of Cooper who

devoted himself to Indians, of whom he knew next to nothing, and to backwoodsmen and sailors, whom he idealized; or where he attempted civilized groups, he produced something less natural than the wax figures of Barnum’s old museum. If all Americans were like the heroes and heroines of Cooper, Carlyle might well enough call us “eighteen millions of bores.” As for a tableau of American society, as for anything resembling the tableaux of English society by Thackeray and Trollope, or the tableaux of French society by Balzac and George Sand, we had better not trouble ourselves with looking for it in Cooper. (32)

Neither can Simms be of much help, because “the best and worst thing to be said is this—that he is nearly as good as Cooper, and deserves fame nearly as much” (32). But even Hawthorne, “the greatest of American imaginations” has “staggered under the load of the American novel.” His romances are “delightful,” but fail to give a representative picture of American society and its people:

Such personages as Hawthorne creates belong to the wide realm of art rather than to our nationality. They are as probably natives of the furthest mountains of Cathay or of the moon as of the United States of America.... They have no sympathy with this eager and laborious people, which takes so many newspapers, builds so many railroads, does the most business on given capital, wages the biggest war in proportion to its population, believes in the physically impossible and does some of it. (32)

At the end of De Forest’s review of likely candidates for the “Great American Novel,” there is only one candidate remaining:

The nearest approach to the desired phenomenon is “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.” There were very noticeable faults in that story; there was a very faulty plot; there was (if idealism be a fault) a black man painted whiter than the angels.... But there was also a national breadth to the picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling. Though comeliness of form was lacking, the material of the work was in many respects admirable. Such Northerners as Mrs. Stowe painted we have seen; and we have seen such Southerners, no matter what the people south of the Mason and Dixon’s line may protest; we have seen such negroes, barring of course, the impeccable Uncle Tom... (33)

For De Forest, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a promise—one that was not kept, however. After praising Stowe's *The Pearl of Orr's Island* as a "cameo of New England life," he goes on to ask: "But what special interest have Southerners and Westerners and even New Yorkers in Yankee cameos?" (33). Eventually, De Forest thus arrives at the conclusion: "Is there, in other words, a single tale which paints American life so broadly, truly, and sympathetically that every American of feeling and culture is forced to acknowledge the pictures of likeness of something which he knows? Throwing out 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' we must answer, Not one!" (35).

De Forest's essay provides not only a critical assessment of the state of American literature at the time. It is also a program. This is made clear already in the first sentence: "A friend of ours, a fairly clever person, and by no means lacking in common sense on common subjects, has the craze in his head that he will someday write a great American novel" (31). At every leisure moment, this "friend" "returns to his idea of producing 'the Great American Novel'" (31). *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, published one year earlier, can be seen as one of the results (and the essay as an attempt to make us appreciate its goals and ambitions).<sup>31</sup> In focusing on the struggle between North and South, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* offers a broadly outlined tableau of American life, transcends narrow sectional loyalties and attempts to give an idea of the potential of American civilization by painting American life during and after the Civil War "broadly, truly, and sympathetically." As a defining moment in American history, the Civil War provided an exceptional opportunity for De Forest to aim at a representative picture of American civilization and link it with an exemplary civilizational teleology.

But apart from this golden opportunity, the goal of an "exemplary" national representation encountered particular difficulties in the United States. In contrast to earlier calls of gentry-intellectuals for the "Great American Novel," De Forest realized that its continued absence was not to be attributed to the weakness of American writers but to the special conditions of American life. As he points out in his essay, the mobility and heterogeneity of American society undermine any representative "tableau" of social life: "Can a society which is changing so rapidly be painted except in the daily newspaper? Has any one photographed fireworks or the shooting-stars? And then there is such variety and even such antagonism in the component parts of this cataract. When you have made your picture of petrified New England village life . . . does the Mississippian or the Minnesotian or the Pennsylvanian recognize it as American society?" (37). The English or French writer does not know

such kaleidoscopic transformations and no such conflicting claims of sections. Hundreds of years ago English aristocracy assumed the spiritual nature which it holds with little change to the present

day. It had made its code of honor; it had established its relations with the mass of the nation; it had become the model for all proper Englishmen. At this time it is a unit of social expression throughout the kingdom. A large class of people go up to London at the same season, go into the country at the same season, lead very nearly the same lives, have the same ideas and tastes. There you have something fixed to paint. . . . (37)

De Forest's astute analysis reveals the breakdown of the central assumption which anchors the historical novel: that of the representativeness and typicality of its characters, customs, and conflicts. To write an "American novel," one therefore would have to "modernize" the historical novel or adapt it to the special conditions of American life. *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* can be seen as an attempt at such modernization, and in *Kate Beaumont* De Forest tries to apply the model he had developed in *Miss Ravenel* to a topic and theme outside the Civil War. In focusing on a border region in Southern culture, he provides a social tableau of American life; in staging a struggle between competing value realms, he dramatizes the "conflicting claims of sections" which he regards as the main obstacle to civilizational progress; in reenacting the drama of the Civil War in displaced form, he returns to what he considers the major "kaleidoscopic transformation" of American life. In this sense, *Kate Beaumont* can also be seen as a test of whether and to what extent *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* could provide a narrative formula for De Forest's civilizational theories.

In his search for a narrative formula that could become the basis for the "Great American Novel," De Forest still remained within the representational goals of the historical novel. But so did most writers of that time and certainly most of the critics. A common point of reference in the literary criticism of the period is the ideal of a broad historical panorama or a representative social tableau. The novel is conceptualized as picture or canvas, and praise is regularly expressed by drawing analogies to history painting, as, for example, when Gordon describes the strengths of *Kate Beaumont*:

At one view we get a sweep of scenery in which to estimate Mr. De Forest's range and performance; and we must applaud both the striking foreground of action and the fine background of charitable knowledge and intent. . . . He is not a painter of delicious colors and complexions, but a draughtsman of form and action; or he is a fresco-artist doing boldly on large surfaces histories of average humanity,—strong, legitimate effects to be enjoyed *en entier* and not close-scanned with half-shut eyes.<sup>32</sup>

In his review of *Kate Beaumont*, Howells praises the novel for providing "the first full and perfect picture of Southern society of the times before

the war; certainly it is the most satisfactory; and if the duels and informal combats and debauches and difficulties of all kinds seem too frequent for the truth, we must not forget that our author is working artistically, with the right to assemble the dramatic points of his material, and we must remember what the truth was about that bygone state of things" (61). The novel may have shortcomings in realism, but these are explained by the representational needs of the genre. In calling for the representative American novel, De Forest himself had introduced the word "tableau," demanded "national breadth" in representation, and defined the "Great American Novel" as a "picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence" (31).

In keeping with his own gentry-loyalties, De Forest continued to tie the role of literature to the idea of historical and social representativeness, although he was fully aware of the difficulties of applying the idea to American society. For the purpose of providing a representative picture of American society, the novel of manners could not be useful, as he had pointed out in his comparison between American society and Trollope's England. The regional portrait was better suited to American conditions, but it strengthened sectionalism, instead of overcoming it, and thus worked against the idea of civilizatory progress. De Forest's strategy of creating representativeness therefore lies in the comprehensiveness of his representation of a civilization. As in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the picture of American life has to be so broad and true "that every American of feeling and culture is forced to acknowledge the pictures of likeness of something which he knows" (35). This explains three distinct formal features of his novels: the authorial voice, its ironic tone, and his often "weak" characterization, especially of his main characters.

In line with traditional forms of the historical novel, in which historical events and individual fates are inextricably linked, characters, for De Forest, are still types. They "represent" a larger tendency in history or society, and derive their significance from the fact that they stand for a civilizatory potential or weakness. A detailed focus on individual characters would endanger their usefulness for such generalizations. De Forest's tone towards his characters is, therefore, often distant and satirical. His interest does not lie in his characters' inner lives, it lies in their representativeness as historical or social actors. However, to fully grasp this dimension, information on history, society and the special conditions of action has to be given to the reader. In order to realize the historical significance of his story, the narrator must act as the reader's guide. De Forest's much maligned authorial voice is needed to secure the meaning of events by pointing out what is typical and therefore "representative" about them, while its ironic tone signals that there is still a considerable distance between civilizatory ideal and reality.<sup>33</sup> For latter-day realism-minded critics, this ironic tone was one of the major sources of irritation because, in their view, it obstructed

an impression of "objective" reality. But, ironically enough, for De Forest it is an important and indispensable narrative device to create a "reality-effect."

For De Forest, the claims of individual characters are still subordinated to the needs of civilizatory development. For him, the individual gains identity through history and its struggle toward progress. This was the major problem a realist of the next generation such as Henry James had with his work. His reviews of De Forest's novels are historically significant, because they illustrate the differences between two generations of realists and indicate the direction which realism would take in the later '70s and in the '80s. James' strongest objection against De Forest, articulated most clearly in his review of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion*, is against "the constant presence of the author upon the stage as manipulator of the figures" (49). This narrative stance is the "weakest point" of De Forest as a novelist, because "he certainly fails to give his personages so much life and separate individuality as to make us accept them for real and forget the writer" (49). In a number of exceptional cases, De Forest's characters have individuality, but these remarkable portraits (James himself praises De Forest's "accurate and spirited portraiture" of Carter) are restricted to his "mixed" characters. In contrast, his inner circle of characters has to play an exemplary role in the story of civilizatory progress and therefore remains under tight authorial control. While De Forest still calls for the typical, James insists on "separate individuality." As usual, Howells stands in between. In one respect, his essay on *Kate Beaumont* illustrates the change in emphasis brought about by the new realist school of American fiction, because it focuses almost exclusively on the novel's characters. But in contrast to James, Howells can still appreciate many of the characters because of their social representativeness.

When James wrote his review of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* in 1867, he had not yet published a novel. His first novel *Watch and Ward* was serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1871 and is by no means an impressive show-case for individuality. It is, in fact, an inferior book to *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* and even to *Kate Beaumont*. What makes James' comments on De Forest important, nevertheless, is the anticipation of a major shift in the idea of social representativeness. While De Forest wants to adapt the historical novel to contemporary needs and criticizes Cooper for his outdated themes and figures, James criticizes De Forest for still writing a kind of novel that neglects "the personages of the story" (49). Individuality is the key term here. In the historical novel, the representative dimension is provided by the depiction of an exemplary struggle. Individual characters gain their importance from their role in this drama. Civilizatory progress has priority over "separate individuality." James' review suggests that this is unacceptable for him. It is unacceptable, not because James wants to give up the idea of civilization, but because, in his view and that of the realists

of his generation, the fate of civilization depends on the capacity for learning and "growth" in its individuals.<sup>34</sup> The struggle for individuality thus begins to take priority over the historical struggle.

However, the civilizatory potential of the individual can only be tested in a long-drawn-out learning process. The "new American school" of Howells and James therefore focuses on the social apprenticeship of the individual in all of its complicated and painful nuances. In its concern with larger historical and social tableaux of society, the historical novel is ill-suited to tell such stories of individual development. It can place its characters in the grip of "perpetual conflicts and tragedies" and trace the strangely twisted causality of individual fates, but it cannot unfold the drama of individual identity-formation in detail. In the cases of both *Miss Ravenel* and *Kate Beaumont*, De Forest therefore had to resort to plot-generated conversion experiences, which many critics found unconvincing, in order to describe his heroine's learning process. Seen this way, nineteenth-century American realism emerges as a literature of individualization which De Forest anticipates in some of his characters but could not maintain in his inner circle of characters. It took modernism's radicalization of the idea of individuality to reveal, on the other hand, to what extent even James' liberation of the individual was still based, in turn, on the belief in a joint civilizatory project which was not to be given up but realized more effectively without authorial guardianship. The realist novel of Howells and James therefore has to be exemplary in a different sense than De Forest's. It has to strengthen the reader's individuality by making him part of a "dialogic" structure of constant exchange and conversational reconsideration, while De Forest's approach, despite his vision of a mutually complementary union, could remain monologic in terms of aesthetic strategy and effect.

## VI

De Forest is a realist, but a realist who still wants to function as guide and guardian of the reader. What his work illustrates is that realism did not develop out of a programmatic struggle with the romance but in the search for a genre and narrative form that could thus serve as a new source of authorization for American civilization. Standing in a gentry-tradition, De Forest could think of the writing of fiction only in terms of public service. For this, the novel had to provide representative pictures of American civilization. The goal of representativeness, however, has an in-built tendency toward realist modes of representation, because the represented world must be recognized and accepted by readers as their own. De Forest thus shares with the later realists a vocabulary of life-likeliness based on analogies between novel, canvas, picture, portrait, daguerrotype and pho-

tograph. The difference lies in what should be represented. While De Forest's "historical" realism still depicts the struggle for a national identity which will "convert" the individual to civilization, the new school of realists shifts its attention to the difficult and painful struggle for "separate individuality." Consequently, their interest can no longer lie in a broad national or civilizatory tableau. Instead, they move from the comprehensive panorama of a civilization to the interior of travel compartments and drawing rooms in order to focus on the individual in his or her formative moments of social interaction.

As the case of De Forest demonstrates, nineteenth-century American realism did not grow out of a literary program designed to realize goals such as "objectivity," "verisimilitude," or "truthfulness," but in the struggle for "representative" individuality. It is the result of increased claims of the individual to be recognized as the exemplary social "unit" of the nation. This individualization of the gentry-novel proceeds in small steps: While De Forest is still criticizing Cooper's characters, James already criticizes De Forest's. Whereas De Forest calls Cooper's characters "wax figures," James calls De Forest's characters "puppets." Soon, younger writers and critics will call James' characters repressed. *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* and *Kate Beaumont* highlight a crucial moment of transition in this story of individualization. They illustrate the dilemma emerging from the redefinition of what constitutes civilizatory representativeness, while their ambivalent reception already signals the breakdown of the concept itself. As De Forest's "experiments" reveal, the novel could no longer convincingly claim a role of national self-definition.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* and *Kate Beaumont* should be seen not as promising experiments on the road to "The Great American Novel," but already as its obituary.

Civilizatory progress and a realistic point of view are the two aspects through which De Forest's novels define themselves. Yet, in De Forest's work, these aspects, far from being productively linked, are, in fact, increasingly on a collision course. This is a problem which his work shares with many interesting American novels of the period. If *Kate Beaumont* is a test of realism that failed, it remains an interesting case study in a series of works that did likewise, not because their authors failed as writers, but because the premises they submitted to a fictional test could no longer be convincingly reconciled in one narrative. In this sense the novel is indeed, to a much larger extent than Edmund Wilson implied by his observation, "significant of a special situation which prevailed at that period in American fiction."<sup>36</sup>

## Notes

1. The novel was first published in serial form in *The Atlantic* in 1871-72.
2. James F. Light, *John William De Forest* (New York: Twayne, 1965), p. 121. In his introduction to a recent collection of critical essays on De Forest, James Gargano points out that "many leading journals acclaimed *Kate Beaumont* as a novel without equal in its time." *Critical Essays on John William De Forest* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1981), p. 6. See Gargano's survey of the favorable critical reception of the novel upon its publication on p. 15 of his introduction. In his anonymous review of *Kate Beaumont* in the *Atlantic Monthly*, 29 (March 1872), 364-65, W. D. Howells wrote: "With 'Miss Ravenel's Conversion' and 'Overland,' 'Kate Beaumont' forms, to our mind, strong proof that we are not so much lacking in an American novelist as in a public to recognize him." Rept. in *Critical Essays*, p. 63. In 1902, in looking back at De Forest's career, Howells wrote: "When he was writing the novels which, like 'Kate Beaumont,' commanded for him the admiration of those among his countrymen best fitted to know good work, it seemed reasonable that he should be lastingly recognized as one of the masters of American fiction; and I for one shall never be willing to own him less, though I cannot read many pages of his without wishing he had done this or that differently" (105). "The Heroine of 'Kate Beaumont,'" *Harper's Bazaar*, 35 (Oct. 1901), 538-44; rept. *Heroines of Fiction* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1901), II, 152-63; rept. in Gargano, *Critical Essays*, pp. 99-105.
3. See my analysis of the novel in Winfried Fluck, *Inszenierte Wirklichkeit. Der amerikanische Realismus 1865-1900* (München: Fink, 1992), chap. 3.
4. I disagree with James Gargano "that De Forest's views are vaguely evolutionary, melioristic, and definitely religious." "Kate Beaumont and the Omnipresent Narrator," in *Critical Essays*, p. 171. In *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* De Forest's spokesman Dr. Ravenel draws on Enlightenment models to place America's political union after the Civil War in a history of civilizatory progress: "As long as we were bedraggled in slavery there was not much room for honest, intelligent pride of country. It is different now. These Europeans judge us aright; we have done a stupendous thing. They are outside of the struggle, and can survey its proportions with the eyes with which our descendants will see it. I think I can discover a little of its grandeur. It is the fifth act in the grand drama of human liberty. First, the Christian revelation. Second, the Protestant reformation. Third, the war of American Independence. Fourth, the French revolution. Fifth, the struggle for the freedom of all men, without distinction of race or color, this Democratic struggle which confirms the masses in an equality with the few. We have taught a greater lesson than all of us think or understand. Once again we have reminded the world of Democracy, the futility of oligarchies, the outlawry of Cæsarism" (494f.). John William De Forest, *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1869; repr.: Columbus, Ohio: Charles Merrill, 1969), p. 495.
5. The fact that he completely ignores the crucial role of the nineteenth century idea of civilizatory progress in *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* is my only disagreement with Thomas Fick's analysis ("Genre Wars and Rhetoric of Manhood in *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*," *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 46 [1992], 473-94) which otherwise stands out among literary criticism on the novel. As with most other realists of the period, the critique of the romance in De Forest's work with which Fick deals is part of that larger narrative. Where it looks inconsistent from today's point-of-view, it does so because of De Forest's belief in the "romance of civilizatory progress."
6. The semantic oppositions include, as Jay Martin notes, "the English Puritan and the French Chevalier, the Unionist McAlisters and the Calhounist Beaumonts, the Saxon and the Latin" (*Harvests of Change* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1967], p. 34). In a re-edition of *Kate Beaumont*, Joseph J. Rubin adds: "The low country Beaumonts are Huguenot Episcopalians; the original McAlisters are upland Scotch-Irish Presbyterians." ("Introduction," *Kate Beaumont* [State College, Pa.: Bald Eagle Press, 1963], p. 16).
7. J. W. De Forest, *Kate Beaumont* (State College, Pa.: Bald Eagle Press, 1963), p. 110. All further citations in the text are from this edition.
8. James A. Hijiya traces De Forest's gentry affiliations in his study *J. W. De Forest and the Rise of American Gentility* (Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England, 1988).

9. Light seems to miss this point when he speaks of "the recurring complications of what De Forest insistently calls the story of Romeo and Juliet in the American South." *John William De Forest*, p. 123.
10. As Jonathan Culler and others have pointed out, critical intertextual references by which the realist text distances him—or herself from a literary pre-text, play an important role in the self-authorization of realism, because they contribute to a strategy of naturalization. *Structuralist Poetics, Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 152-3.
11. Robert Falk, *The Victorian Mode in American Fiction 1865-1885* (East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1964), p. 121.
12. In this sense—and in contrast to many misperceptions—realism does not present the last stand of a dated mimetic aesthetics but actually paves the way for modernism.
13. Gargano must refer to this aspect of the novel when he says: "Despite its structural laxness, *Kate Beaumont* triumphs as a novel of naturalistic scenes anticipatory of the earthy realism of William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. De Forest's description of a 'Cracker' ball, for example, has explosive vitality, and his account of a mock duel between a Southern aristocrat and his 'low-down' friend, both of them drunk, befuddled, and ludicrously concerned about their honor, is a masterpiece of vulgar comedy." "Introduction" to *Critical Essays*, p. 3f.
14. As Gargano points out, it is this aspect of the novel which has been praised most strongly: "The only unstinted praise accorded the book has been reserved for its graphic descriptions of 'low life' in the antebellum South." "*Kate Beaumont* and the Omnipresent Narrator," p. 164. Not everybody was enthusiastic, however. An anonymous reviewer of *Kate Beaumont* for the *Nation* found the novel "absolutely reeking with bad whiskey and noisy with pistol-shots." *Critical Essays*, p. 60.
15. In his review of *Miss Ravenel's Conversion* in the *Nation*, Henry James acknowledged the realistic strength of De Forest's "mixed characters" by making one exception in his otherwise harsh criticism of what he considered uninteresting characters: "One exception we make to this assertion regarding the personages of the story. Carter is well depicted; daguerreotyped from nature. We all have seen just such men, and all can recognize Mr. De Forest's accurate and spirited portraiture" (*Critical Essays*, p. 49). To Mrs. Larue, on the other hand, who has been praised even more strongly by twentieth-century critics, James refers only very primly as "a French woman of Louisiana" (50). Perhaps, the customary contemporary standard phrase of realist praise—"we all have seen just such..."—could not be applied by him in this case. It is amusing indeed to see the limits of a naive concept of realism such as "life-likeness" exhibited by the master realist himself. James was not alone in this, however. In his essay "The Heroine of 'Kate Beaumont,'" Howells would later write of Mrs. Larue: "I remember in 'Miss Ravenel's Conversion' a very lurid Mrs. Leroy [sic], of whom I cannot think without shuddering" (*Critical Essays*, p. 102). And in his review of *Kate Beaumont*, Howells complained that "Mrs. Chester is made too much of, however, for a woman so simply selfish and disagreeable" (*Critical Essays*, p. 63).
16. Light, p. 127.
17. In his introduction to the volume *Critical Essays on John William De Forest*, James Gargano consistently treats the "long authorial asides" that are characteristic of De Forest's work as flaws. For Gargano's critical comments on the narrator in *Kate Beaumont*, see the introduction (p. 14) and his essay "Kate Beaumont and the Omnipresent Narrator" in the same volume: "DeForest's failure, I contend, may be traceable to the vision of reality put forth by the ubiquitous authorial presence who directs the action, interprets the characters' emotions, and determines the values by which individuals and society are to be judged" (164). For Gargano, this aspect provides the crucial explanation "why De Forest's once acclaimed realism has failed to capture the imagination of twentieth century readers" (164) and, more specifically, why the once acclaimed *Kate Beaumont* has been largely forgotten. De Forest's "omnipresent narrator" must bear the major responsibility for the book's declining fortunes" (166).
18. Quoted in Rubin, p. 32.
19. From this latter-day perspective, a critic like Gargano can therefore conceive of De Forest's use of his narrators only as an attempt to dominate the reader's perception and interpretation of reality: "Behind the authorial posturing may be detected the suspicion that

anything unexplained may be misunderstood and may have a dangerous life of its own" (*Critical Essays*, p. 168). Because Gargano equates realism with "non-intrusion," and authorial intrusion therefore with an unconquered idealizing tendency, he fails to see the function of the narrator and misinterprets his role in the novel's characterizations: "By carefully controlling and limiting his reader's reactions to his fiction, De Forest or his authorial surrogate projects his artistic world in terms of an idealized world of rarefied if not half-spiritualized human beings like Colonel Kershaw, Frank McAlister, and Kate Beaumont." It is, on the contrary, only through the mediation of the authorial voice that it becomes possible to present such decidedly "un-genteel" characters as Mrs. Chester, Handsome Armitage, Peyton Beaumont, Judge McAlister, and the "lower" characters of the book.

20. For a discussion of De Forest's realism in terms not of his subject-matter but his mode of comprehending and representing the world, see the pioneer study of Jürgen Peper, *Bewusstseinslagen des Erzählens und erzählte Wirklichkeiten in amerikanischen Romanen des 19. und 20. Jhs., insbesondere am Werke William Faulkners* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), chap. 3.

21. This view received strong support from new editions of De Forest's remarkable wartime reportages and essays, *A Volunteer's Adventures* and *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction* in the 1940s. In a review of the latter, Perry Miller wondered how the author of these books and of *Miss Ravenel*, "the realist of 1867," could turn into "the commonplace romancer of *Kate Beaumont*?" (*New England Quarterly*, 21 [1948], 392-94).

22. Rubin, p. 27.

23. To give but one example: when Mrs. Chester, who has fallen madly in love with Frank, complains to Major Lawson about Frank's inattention, the old flatterer tries his best to soothe her. Yet this skilled elimination of one problem immediately creates another: "But in doing thus much good he unwittingly did some mischief for he reawakened Mrs. Chester's foolish hopes" (199). In the following chapter, Mrs. Chester tries to divert Frank's attention from Kate by bringing him together with Jenny. But again the scheme backfires, as she becomes jealous herself. Most interaction in the novel develops along lines of such constant, entirely unexpected complications.

24. Light, p. 124. This view seems to contradict the fact that Howells chose to write on Kate as a remarkable heroine of American fiction. However, even Howells had to admit that "the want of something salient in her appearances unfits her for quotation" (*Critical Essays*, p. 105).

25. Undoubtedly, Frank, too, is strongly "idealized," but to see his origin in "conventional romantic literature," as Light does, is not very convincing. (Light, p. 124). More important for understanding his character is the ideal of the worthy and noble gentleman for which Washington served as a recurrent model in the period after the Civil War. Cf. the description of Frank's face: "there was in it a wealth of both dignity and benignity; it reminded one of the early portraits of Washington" (p. 50). For the concept of the worthy gentleman in De Forest's writing see Frank Bergmann, *The Worthy Gentleman of Democracy: J. W. De Forest and the American Dream* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1971).

26. Even a Jamesian like T. S. Perry wrote in an otherwise unfriendly comment on De Forest (*North American Review*, [Oct. 1872], 366-69): "We should be sorry, however, if we did not do justice to the vividness with which he has drawn many of his side-characters, especially in his latest novels and in many of his less ambitious magazine sketches."

27. Harvey M. Sessler, "A Test for Realism in De Forest's *Kate Beaumont*," *American Literary Realism*, 2 (1969), 276.

28. This "hard-boiled" redefinition created a predicament that has characterized discussions of American realism ever since: the embarrassment that the major writers of American realism in the nineteenth century no longer met the criteria of "genuine" realism and had to be criticized for not being "real" realists.

29. W. D. Howells, "The Heroine of 'Kate Beaumont,'" p. 99. Similarly, in an essay in the November 1873 *Atlantic Monthly* on "Mr. De Forest's Novels," Clarence Gordon starts out with the question what good novels Americans have besides Hawthorne's and comes up with the following answer: "Margaret, Last of the Mohicans, Typee, Uncle Tom's Cabin, Rutledge, Virginia Comedians, Queechy, Elsie Venner, Hannah Thurston, Horse Shoe Robinson, Kate Beaumont." Gordon goes on to call *Kate Beaumont* "the most prominent, the

most popular, and probably the best of Mr. De Forest's works" (*Critical Essays*, pp. 82, 94).

30. The essay appeared first in the *Nation*, 9 Jan. 1868, pp. 27-29, and is reprinted in *Critical Essays*, pp. 31-37. All further quotations are from this source.

31. There can be no doubt that De Forest is talking about himself: "During eight or ten years he has struggled for his prize. He has published two or three experiments which have been more or less well spoken of by the critics, and rather more than less neglected by the purchasing public. Now and then, collared by the material necessities of life, or by some national enthusiasm even stronger than his own, he has turned aside into other pursuits, has fought at the front, has aided in the work of reconstruction, has written articles and other things which he calls trivialities. But at every leisure moment he returns to his idea of producing 'the Great American Novel'" (*Critical Essays*, p. 31).

32. *Critical Essays*, p. 95.

33. This view of a work which is weak on characterization, but "strong" on history is reaffirmed by a modern critic like Gargano who strongly criticizes De Forest's control of his characters but praises *Kate Beaumont* for its "memorable social history": "As a picture of the antebellum South, with its *code duello*, its pugnacious lords of the manors, and its idle young men, *Kate Beaumont* is memorable social history" (*Critical Essays*, p. 14).

34. James' individuality is thus not to be confused with Romantic individualism. For James and Howells, the individual is, by definition, a social being. A separate individuality can therefore only be developed in interaction with society.

35. Thus, in an obvious response to De Forest's essay on "The Great American Novel," the "Jamesian" T. S. Perry categorically rejected the project: "We have often wondered that the people who raise the outcry for the 'Great American Novel' did not see that, so far from being of any assistance to our fellow-country-man who is trying to win fame by writing fiction, they have rather stood in his way by setting up before him a false aim for his art, and by giving the critical reader a defective standard by which to judge his work" (*Critical Essays*, p. 79).

36. Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 708.

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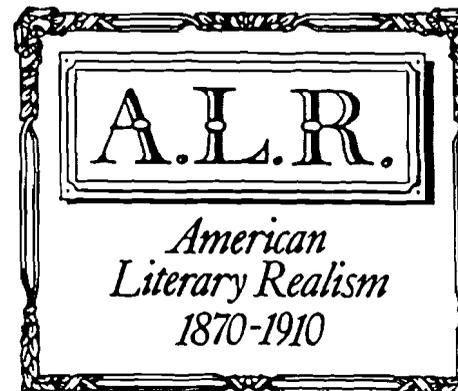
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