Beast/Superman/Consumer: American Literary Naturalism as an Experimental Literature*

I. Realism and Social Apprenticeship

By rejecting both religious revelation and the metaphysical assumptions of romanticism, American realism had created an epistemological problem. If religion or metaphysics could no longer be considered privileged sources of truth, then the follow-up question was how knowledge claims could be justified in a different way. The epistemological criterion that replaces religious or metaphysical revelation in classical American realism of the 19th century is experience. However, to turn experience into a reliable source of knowledge, two conditions have to be met. On the one side, the individual has to have reached a point of consciousness which allows him to see singular experiences as part of a larger context and to draw meaningful conclusions from them; on the other side, these conclusions have to be tested in ongoing processes of conversation and social interaction, because only they can provide an outside perspective that protects the individual from mere self-projection. Experience, in other words, has to become social experience. In a long-drawn process of social apprenticeship, the individual has to become a "civilized" being which is able to arrive at the right judgment on his own.

Realism is strongly dismissive of what it considers the solipsism of romantic individualism. Its goal is the development of a strong individuality but on entirely new epistemological grounds. The independence and self-reliance the individual needs in order to be able to make up his own mind can no longer be the result of a communion with nature. Neither can it result from a mere internalization of the norms of civilization, because every life constantly produces new situations and experiences. There is, then, no formula that can be applied. The ability to turn experience into knowledge cannot be learned at school. It can only be the result of a continuous exposure to real

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life. From the perspective of American realism, literature can contribute to this project in two ways. It can either focus on the development of characters that gradually learn to distinguish between romance and reality, between idealized and "actual" life. This is the narrative of liberation from potentially self-destructive illusions. On the other hand, literature can offer models of how experiences can be processed by consciousness. This is the project of Henry James, while stories of exemplary learning processes form the bulk of most other realistic novels in the Gilded Age.

The central narrative of classical American realism – presented, for example, in a novel like *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) – is that of a slow, long-drawn process of social apprenticeship and character development in which an initially immature individual, trapped in romantic illusions and narcissist fantasies, goes through a series of painful experiences that eventually teach her to overcome her own misperception of reality. One of the challenges realism holds for the reader is that it is a literature of disenchantment. The often rude "awakening" is considered wholesome and necessary for the development of an independent, inner-directed personality.[1] This scenario of individual growth rests on the assumption that there exists something like a narcissist and childish inner core that can be trained and cultivated until it finally reaches mature adulthood. The narrative of self-development is one from emotional and psychological infancy to "civilized" maturity, and the implication clearly is that this is also the way American society should go and will have to go.

It is this optimistic assumption that soon turned into a problem for American realism, for it was undermined by social and political developments of the Gilded Age.[2] The problem can be illustrated by a novel that followed *The Portrait of a Lady* almost on its heels, *A Modern Instance* (1882) by William Dean Howells, the most programmatic of American realists. At first sight, it may seem that Howells aimed at another novel of exemplary social apprenticeship. Like other realistic novels in the genre of the novel of manners, *A Modern Instance* uses the courtship and marriage-motif to describe a series of disillusioning experiences that break the initial romantic

1 I have traced this process in my essay "Henry James's *Washington Square*: The Female Self at Risk." For a general description of American realism, see my essay "Realism in Art and Literature."

2 The growing doubt about the development of American society finds expression in the theme of a growing materialism in American society, for which Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner coined the term Gilded Age in their novel of the same title. By common consent, their term has become the central category for describing the period between the civil war and roughly 1900, because it is well suited to express the suspicion that the promise of a golden age has been undermined by an unfettered materialism and transformed into merely a fake of America's promise. On the issue of the "materialism" of the age, see the introduction, written with Leo Marx, to a workshop on the "The Materialist Turn" and the paper I contributed to the session "'Money Is God': Materialism, Economic Individualism, and Expressive Individualism."

spell. But the way in which this happens in the novel soon begins to depart from the Victorian apprenticeship model. Like other characters in classical American realism, the couple in *A Modern Instance* goes through a series of painful experiences, but in contrast to the classical realist model, they do not learn anything from these experiences. Instead, they continue to make the same mistakes. As characters they show no development; the disillusioning experiences they make are not part of a learning process but have the contrary effect of arresting them ever more firmly in their own neurotic fixations. Their marriage ends in a divorce that was considered scandalous in the basically Victorian world of classical American realism and confirmed the hostile views of traditional custodians of culture that realism was an "amoral" literature of cold dissection.

II. No Teacup Tragedies

Howells attempted to soften the blow he dealt to the ideal of civilizatory progress in *A Modern Instance* at the end of the novel by suddenly elevating Atherton, a character not central up to this point, to the level of a spokesman for civilization who emphatically reaffirms the idea and need of "civilized" self-control in a long-drawn monologue. But literary critics have rightly pointed out that this "civilizatory turn" amounts to a forced, unconvincing solution which can hardly disguise the fact that Howells's realistic novel already contains something like a naturalist subtext that can barely be controlled. The realist novel of individual development begins to dissolve from within, and *A Modern Instance* can be seen as especially powerful illustration of a growing tension between realist surface and naturalist subtext. In this, the novel prefigures the gradual replacement of classical American realism by naturalism taking place in the 1890s. This development was driven by younger writers who, in many cases, had been discovered and sponsored by Howells as promising second-generation realists who would guarantee the continuing dominance of American realism in American literature.

However, it soon turned out that this generation looked at classical American realism as already obsolete, because, in their view, it was still too domesticated and too Victorian. In an essay on Emile Zola, published in 1896, Frank Norris makes fun of Howellsian realism by calling his novels tea-cup tragedies: "Observe the methods employed by the novelists who profess and call themselves 'realists' – Mr. Howells, for instance. … It is the smaller details of everyday life, things that are likely to happen between lunch and supper, small passions, restricted emotions, dramas of the reception-room, tragedies of an afternoon, crises involving cups of tea." This genteel world of the novel of manners is set in programmatic contrast to the violent melodramas of Zola: "The world of M. Zola is a world of big things; the enormous, the

formidable, the terrible, is what counts; no teacup tragedies here" (Norris, *Zola as a Romantic Writer* 71-2). In his essay "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," Norris reintroduces the well-worn opposition between romance and realism, but no longer to dismiss the romance as an archaic literary genre of yesteryear, but with the provocative intention to turn the hierarchy between the two literary modes on its head:

> The reason why one claims so much for Romance, and quarrels so pointedly with Realism, is that Realism stultifies itself. It notes only the surface of things. For it, Beauty is not even skin deep, but only a geometrical plane, without dimensions and depth, a mere outside. Realism is very excellent so far as it goes, but it goes no further than the Realist himself can actually see, or actually hear. Realism is minute; it is the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner. It is the visit to my neighbour's house, a formal visit, from which I may draw no conclusion. I see my neighbor and his friends – very, oh such very! probable people – and that is all. … Let Realism do the entertainment with its meticulous presentation of teacups, rag carpets, wall-paper and haircloth sofas, stopping with these, going no deeper than it sees, choosing the ordinary, the untroubled, the commonplace. – But to Romance belongs the wide world for range, and the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man (Norris, *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* 280, 282).

Howells, on the other hand, complained about naturalism's growing willingness to deal explicitly with such issues as "the mystery of sex" and "the blank, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man," and thereby drew attention to the liberation of single phenomena out of their civilizatory and moral contexts which naturalism pursued actively.

Like literary romanticism and realism before, a native, home-grown version of naturalism developed in the U.S. belatedly. But after it had arrived around the turn of the century, it established itself as leading avant-garde literature, while European *fin de siècle* culture and British aestheticism were known in the U.S. but remained epigonal and never really caught on as strong literary movements.[3] In contrast, American naturalism developed literary

3 See Jonathan Freedman's analysis of their role in American culture in his study *Professions of Taste. Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture*: "It is a remarkable – and remarkably rarely discussed – historical datum that the influence of British aestheticism was felt early and powerfully in America, but not where we might expect it, in the sphere of high art or even that of social criticism, both of which were dominated by the twinned (and mutually reinforcing) doctrines of Emersonian transcendentalism and Ruskinian moralism largely as articulated by such established and magisterial cultural authorities as Charles Eliot Norton. Instead, it was directly in the marketplace – in the vending of 'aesthetic' domestic goods and in the development of advertising strategies for them – that the terminology, topoi, and thought structures of British aestheticism were first given their American expression" (xxiii). There are some significant literary responses to the topos of a *fin de siècle* in American literature, such as Harold Frederic's novel *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896) or Henry Adams' posthumously published autobiography *The Education of Henry*

forms that merit closer attention.

In literary criticism, there is a tendency to see naturalism merely as a radicalization of the realist project. Whereas classical American realism, the argument goes, was still Victorian in its system of moral values and therefore remained within genteel limitations of what could be realistically represented, naturalism finally had the courage to present an un-idealized version of reality and focus on those "uncivilized" social and sexual experiences that were formerly tabooed. This view of naturalism as a radicalized and more daring form of realism can be seen as consequence of a long-held, but misleading equation of realism with a particular mode of representation. On the level of representation, there exists indeed a continuity between realism and naturalism, because both aim at the creation of a credible illusion in their depiction of the "real" world. However, such a "reality effect" can be used for entirely different purposes and can therefore also have entirely different functions. Thus, a definition of realism in terms of a successfully achieved reality effect or of naturalism as striving for a radicalized reality effect remains incomplete.

In view of the fact that a realistic mode of representation, aimed at creating a reality effect, cannot be sufficient for a definition of realism, Jürgen Peper, in his study of American realism in the period after the Civil War, takes his point of departure from the following consideration: "If realism must always remain a relative term, depending on the author's view of what constitutes reality, then we must start with an analysis of his view of reality."[4] Seen from this perspective, realism and naturalism do not merely present ever more expansive and radicalized views of reality. They are distinguished by fundamentally different definitions of what constitutes reality. For classical American realism, reality is a sphere that can be rationally studied and causally explained and in which experiences can therefore produce knowledge. American naturalism rejects such a view of reality and redefines it as a sphere that escapes civilizatory (and therefore also rational) control.

III. Terrible Things Must Happen

Norris has pinpointed the fundamental difference between classical American realism and naturalism in his essay "Zola as Romantic Writer" when he says: "Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale. They must be twisted from the ordinary, wrenched out from the quiet, uneventful round of every-day life, and flung into the throes of a vast and terrible drama

Adams (privately printed in 1907; published in 1918), but in both cases the text remains within the conceptual frame of the Victorian novel of development.

4 "Wenn Realismus stets ein relativer Begriff bleiben muß, der sich mit des Autors Wirklichkeitssicht wandelt, dann gilt es eben, 'des Autors Wirklichkeitssicht' zu erfassen" (65).

that works itself out in unleashed passions, in blood, and in sudden death" (72). This statement merits attention for several reasons. To start with, Norris programmatically rejects a focus on that which Howells still considered the basis for an undistorted look at reality, namely an unspectacular, ordinary, every-day existence without melodramatic distortions (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*). In place of ordinary reality, Norris puts the extraordinary, extreme situation in which characters are wrenched from the security of ordinary life. His view of reality as melodrama, developed in contrast to a view of reality as novel of manners, confirms the claim of a fundamental difference between realism and naturalism, but it could also be used in support of a reductive view of naturalism, which has shaped its negative image in literary history for long periods. In an attempt to arrive at a programmatic definition of naturalism as a new literary movement, naturalist novels were seen as literary versions of the biological or sociological theories of Darwin, Herbert Spencer or Taine. In this case, literary naturalism would indeed offer little more than illustrations of biological, philosophical, or sociological theories of determination, many of them obscure or obsolete by now, and its low status in the history of modern literature could be easily justified.

At a closer look, however, the statement by Norris makes the case for naturalism not on the basis of mimetic claims, but on decidedly experimental grounds. It is precisely because certain dimensions of reality can only be grasped outside of everyday life that the naturalist novel must find new and unexpected ways to draw our attention to their presence. ("Terrible things must happen to the characters of the naturalistic tale.") Paradoxically enough, it is only when naturalism goes beyond a realist representation of everyday life and must thus be considered "unrealistic" from the perspective of classical American realism that naturalism succeeds in grasping reality in its true nature. Or, to put it differently: In its self-imposed restriction to a depiction of civilized social life, the realist novel of manners in the style of Howells and James fails to capture the forces that are really at work in determining human existence. For classical realism, the melodramatic and sensationalist incident distorts a modern reality that is no longer shaped by extraordinary events and is far removed from an elementary struggle for existence. From the perspective of naturalism, on the other hand, only the melodramatic and sensationalist heightening of experience can draw attention to those elementary forces that underlie ordinary experience but are not acknowledged in the alleged "normality" of ordinary reality.

With its rejection of classical American realism, naturalism also gives up the project of meaningfully integrating single elements of experience in a story of civilizatory progress. In a specific sense, this programmatic decontextualization already anticipates literary modernism. In its search for underlying constituents of reality that are obscured by the idea of civilization, naturalism takes its point of departure from the heuristic assumption

of a "what if" that can be considered the basis of all fictional texts. And only by intensifying this heuristic dimension through melodramatic and sensationalist means can aspects of reality be made representable that remain hidden otherwise and escape our awareness. Like realism, naturalism wants to provide knowledge, but now knowledge of something that is not easily visible and accessible. Naturalism is thus not a crudely deterministic form of mimesis, but a decidedly experimental form of literature. Taking his cue from phenomenology, Jürgen Peper has called this strategy of foregrounding an element (and bracketing its contexts for the time being), a "heuristic epoché" ("heuristische Epoché").[5] In its attempt to identify and represent that which has been excluded by the Victorian idea of civilization, the naturalist text brackets the normality of everyday life in order to be able to focus on an aspect of reality that has so far been ignored or repressed because it would undermine the Victorian assumption of a continuous progress of civilization governed by an inherent moral law. The melodramatic excesses of naturalism, including its often "tasteless" indulgence in sensationalist features, are thus not lapses of artistic control or moral imagination. They may "distort" reality, if seen from the norm of its "ordinariness," but they make eminent sense as a heuristic device. They are exaggerations with a strategic purpose, powerful ways of "making strange" our "civilized" modes of perception, which for naturalism are only conventions. Traditional versions of literary history in which naturalism takes a last stand in favor of a dated mimetic aesthetics or overreaches melodramatically in a failed attempt to illustrate the idea of determination, are thus no longer tenable. At a closer look, American naturalism is already anticipating a literature of experimental modernism.

IV. Naturalist Experimentalism

When a literary text is criticized for using melodramatic means, the implication usually is that of a weakness in representation. In naturalism, melodrama reflects a conscious choice and has a particular function. Melodrama is, by definition, a genre in which characters are unjustly victimized by forces beyond their control. For naturalists, it is ideally suited to dramatize narratives of decline. Major texts of American naturalism such as Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), Frank Norris's *McTeague* (1899) (later turned into the movie *Greed* by Erich von Stroheim), or Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) unfold an unrelenting logic of self-destruction that turns the realistic narrative of self-development on its head. In each case, forces are at work that transcend civilizatory control – in *Maggie* the urban slum environment, in *McTeague* biological instincts, in *Sister Carrie* an insatiable desire. This does not mean, however, that these novels should be read as

5 Jürgen Peper, *Das Zeitalter der heuristischen Epoché.*

competing interpretations of what really determines reality, as if naturalist writers could not make up their mind which one of these forces are actually most to blame for the loss of civilizatory control. Of course, naturalists assume that, in their particular choice, they have put their finger on a key determinant. But they do not confuse literature with philosophy by claiming that the one definitive explanation has been found. Rather, what guides their choices of determinants is their usefulness for a narrative challenge to the idea of civilizatory control. This strategic dimension of American naturalism was made possible by a fact that is characteristic of American literature in general until World War I, namely that European artistic developments arrived belatedly in the U.S. – which also meant, however, that their use was often eclectic and did not limit itself to the programmatic claims of an aesthetic movement.

Once we start to consider naturalism as an experimental literature, different scenarios of determinism can thus be seen as different *heuristic epochés* and the question is no longer one of competing philosophies but one about what force is most powerful and aesthetically most effective in undermining the realistic narrative of development. Or, to put it differently: The different narratives of American naturalism with their different scenarios of what elementary forces are at work in reality should not be misunderstood as awkward attempts to lend authority to particular philosophical theories. Rather, there is a dimension of arbitrariness in their choice because they are all part of a naturalist paradigm of "overpowering forces." The crucial question is, then, which one is best suited to fill out the role of Norris's terrible things most effectively.

As we have seen, naturalistic novels are counter-narratives to stories of individual development, and the naturalist extension of what is considered appropriate subject matter for literature has its logic and driving force in the ever-new attempt to deconstruct the Victorian idea of civilization. This raises the interesting question how naturalists conceptualize human beings. In the realist narrative of development, the ability to integrate single experiences is crucial. Individuality emerges as result of a growing ability of the individual to mediate between social expectations and individual wishes. Individualization is an accepted ideal, but only because it is the best way to develop "character." In the Victorian cultural system, "character," in turn, means to have internalized certain civilized norms, so that a fully developed "character," in contrast to others, who have not yet reached that point of maturity, can be safely trusted to act on his own without undermining the social order. In that sense, classical American realism is a literature of exemplary identity formation. The goal for the individual is to develop an inner compass, as David Riesman has described the most important characteristic of individual inner-directedness.

In contrast to the ideal of an inner-directed character, naturalism insists that such an inner core does not really exist because its place is already occupied by elementary forces beyond the individual's control. Thus, even in its crudest form, naturalism is never simply an illustration of a theory of environmental determinism, for this would assume a model in which an outer force overwhelms and transforms an inner self it against its will. But the actual horror in the naturalistic novel lies in the fact that this outer force has taken the place of the inner self. Typical characters of American naturalism such as Maggie, McTeague, Carrie or Hurstwood thus cannot be used for a social criticism of American society because, at a closer look, they are not victims of the capitalist system or of a slum environment, but of their weakness of identity, or more precisely: the emptiness of their own character. If classical realism is a literature of successful (or, failed) identity-formation, naturalism is a literature of identity diffusion.

Postmodernism has argued that the absence of a strong identity is not to be deplored; on the contrary, it can be seen as liberation from the repressive effects of a super-ego. A weakness of character may thus also be re-conceptualized as liberation from rigid Victorian identities. This is the explanation for an aspect of American naturalism that may appear surprising and contradictory at first blush. The naturalist's view of reality as governed by elementary forces lurking beneath the thin veneer of civilization, can be the starting point for melodramas of decline and self-destruction but also for "wild" adventures that open up a possibility for individual regeneration. American naturalism tells gripping stories about the (rise and) fall of characters, but it also indulges in romances of superior strength; it describes painful losses of selfhood in obsessive fixations, but it also celebrates super-human empowerment.

The best-known representative of this romance of regeneration is Jack London with novels like *The Call of the Wild* (1903), and above all, *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), which take their starting point from cases of over-civilization described as unnatural and self-defeating. While American realism wants to "civilize" its characters in exemplary learning processes, American naturalism regards the idea of civilization as the actual problem. To be "civilized" means to be trapped by "unnatural" rules of behavior that undermine natural potential. To be civilized provides an illusory sense of superiority, whereas natural regeneration provides true superiority. In classical realism, certain types of books such as historical romances may be harmful, in *The Sea-Wolf* the harm is done by a bookish life in general. In *A Modern Instance*, the figure of the journalist stands for the dangers of "unprincipled" writing, in *The Sea-Wolf* the problem lies in writing itself. London's novel illustrates its damaging effects through the fate of a renowned literary author who is no longer able to survive outside of the narrow confines of his own aestheticized world. Only after he has been rescued from drowning and has to

face the brutal life on board of a ship is he liberated from over-civilization. Again, one must add that this should not be mistaken as crude illustration of a Darwinist narrative of a survival of the fittest. Once we see it as an experimental set-up, we can grasp its function as another heuristic device that allows Jack London to bracket the issue of moral principles in order to transcend Victorian self-control.

Seen from the perspective of an experimental set-up, the naturalist melodrama of self-destruction and the naturalist romance of self-regeneration are thus not opposites that illustrate conflicting interpretations of American life. Rather, they should be seen as complementary. A loss of inner self-control is the starting point in both cases. This loss can lead in two directions. The character of a naturalist novel can either sink to the level of a beast or rise to the level of a super-man. Beast and super-man can thus be seen as two complimentary tropes of a post-Victorian critique of civilization, which dramatize hyperbolically, that is, in an experimental mode, the opposing directions in which liberation from Victorianism can be conceptualized. In modernist primitivism, the proximity of these two seemingly opposite narratives becomes even more obvious. The "primitive" character in modernism is both: beast and therefore super-human.

V. Sister Carrie

David Riesman's concept of the inner-directed character offers a fitting description of the idea of character in the realistic story of self-development.[6] The concept Riesman offers for the description of the post-Victorian, modern equivalent is that of an other-directed character by which he means characters with weak identities who draw their orientation from others (such as, for example, their peers).[7] At first sight, this category does not seem to fit the naturalistic character. Neither the figure of the beast, nor that of superman, is other-directed in Riesman's sense. This does not disqualify the analysis offered so far, but points to a need for further differentiation. Beast and superman may provide the most spectacular manifestations of an alternate naturalist concept of character. But in American naturalism we find at least one other version of naturalist post-Victorianism which may be, in fact, the most interesting of all.

I am referring to a novel which is seen today as one of the major achievements of American naturalism and whose amazing modernity has been grasped only in the last years. Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* (1900)

6 For a clarification of the concept of the inner-directed character and its applicability to American realism, see my essay "Henry James's Washington Square: The Female Self at Risk."

7 David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*.

has long been dismissed as a flawed novel marred by its adherence to the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer, before more recent readings have opened up new perspectives on the novel. The novel tells the story of a young girl from the countryside, Carrie Meeber, who goes to Chicago in search of work and becomes the kept woman of the traveling salesman Drouet. When she gets acquainted with Hurstwood, the chief manager of one of the most respectable restaurants in town, he leaves his family for her, steals a large sum of money and takes her to New York. This is the beginning of a narrative of decline for Hurstwood who eventually, after many mishaps, ends up a homeless person and commits suicide. Parallel to his sad fate runs Carrie's success story in which she becomes a popular actress. When Hurstwood commits suicide, Carrie has reached the peak of her fame.[8]

When *Sister Carrie* was published in 1900, its publisher was afraid of a public scandal, because Carrie's social rise could easily be interpreted as reward for an openly amoral behavior.[9] However, Carrie is neither amoral, nor cynically calculating. She is neither a vamp, nor a prostitute, and although she is a kept woman, she is nevertheless almost "innocent." Her main motivation is her hunger for an identity. What motivates her is neither an obsession, nor a moral flaw. In a much more radical sense than any of the other characters of American naturalism, her inner self is empty and this emptiness is not oc-

8 The anti-Victorian thrust of this plot is unmistakable, as Cathy and Arnold Davidson point out in their essay "Carrie's Sisters: The Popular Prototypes for Dreiser's Heroine:" "The social sacrifices Hurstwood made foreshadow no subsequent reward but only his total collapse. Carrie continues to rise – a working girl rewarded, according to the conventions, for all the wrong reasons" (404). At the beginning of the novel, the narrator refers us to the two options a narrative about a young woman going alone to the city usually had at the time: "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility" (1). However, as the Davidsons emphasize, both options are refuted by Carrie's success: "Yet Carrie herself manages both to 'fall into saving hands' and also to assume 'the cosmopolitan standard of virtue.' Moral terms like 'better' or 'worse' seem, finally, naive and inapplicable" (400).

9 After its rejection by Harper's, Dreiser had submitted the manuscript to the newly formed publishing house Doubleday, Page and Company, for whom Norris was a reader. Norris liked the novel and recommended it for publication. Since Mr. Doubleday was traveling outside of America, the junior partner Walter Page accepted the novel officially for publication. However – this is Dreiser's version –, when the novel was read by Doubleday's wife after their return to the U.S., the company withdrew its acceptance and asked Page to talk Dreiser into a withdrawal of the novel. However, Dreiser refused and insisted on the fulfillment of the contract. The novel was published but not actively promoted. In the first 16 months after its publication, 456 copies were sold, with Dreiser earning 68.40 Dollars from their sale. The publication history of the novel is described in detail in Donald Pizer, introduction to *New Essays on 'Sister Carrie,'* 10-11.

cupied by any particular determining force other than her unfocused desire .[10] If there is no interiority, however, what is it that gives her life its direction? Critics have long been puzzled by Carrie's motivation and have found it difficult to liberate their readings from naturalistic clichés. Conceptually, there seemed to be no alternative concept available. But the lack of focus in Carrie's behavior can best be captured by the concept of desire as a word for the wish to extend one's identity by imaginary attachments to figures and objects, without however staying attached to any of them.[11]

When Carrie arrives in Chicago, she is ignorant and innocent in the social as well as sexual sense. For realism, this would provide an ideal point of departure for a story of growth. However, such a self-development can only take place on the basis of an ability to integrate experiences meaningfully. In contrast, Carrie's diffuse and unfocused desire is endlessly supplementary; it easily and freely moves from one object to the next and thus cannot be arrested in any of these attachments.[12] An internalization of principles in the manner of the inner-directed character is no longer possible for such a character, because Carrie's desire is not consistent enough to link itself consistently with any particular object or principle. In effect, in its diffuse and superficial dimension it comes close to the desire of the consumer.

Several critics have pointed out in the last years to what extent *Sister Carrie* is also a text about modern consumer culture which was beginning to

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10 Kurt Müller draws attention to Carrie's lack of attachments ("Bindungslosigkeit") and of distinct character traits ("Eigenschaftslosigkeit"). Consequently, her personal relations, no matter whether with her family or her different lovers, remain superficial. Cf. *Identität und Rolle bei Theodore Dreiser.* Cathy and Arnold Davidson stress how easily and almost casually Carrie turns away from the man who has sacrificed everything for her. Nevertheless, we do not see her as selfish or "heartless." The Victorian ideal of self-sacrifice is discarded here almost *en passant*.

11 Dreiser uses the term "desire" throughout *Sister Carrie*. However, in literary criticism it only became an important term for understanding the novel in the 1980s in the wake of a poststructuralist critique of systemic logic and its psychic manifestations. The term stands at the center of the debate between Walter Benn Michaels and Leo Bersani that followed the publication of Michaels's seminal essay "*Sister Carrie's* Popular Economy." In his essay, Michaels provides a critique of Bersani's book *A Future for Astyanax,* which he characterizes as an uncritical celebration of the subversive force of desire. See Bersani's response and the response to the response by Michaels: "Rejoinder to Walter Benn Michaels;" "Fictitious Dealing: A Reply to Leo Bersani."

12 Philip Fisher has pointed out that the characters in *Sister Carrie* live in a state of constant longing: "Carrie herself lives with the Hansons while longing for the life represented by Drouet, only to get Drouet and long for the life represented by Hurstwood and in turn to get Hurstwood only to long for the life represented by Ames" (159). In the end, Carrie has risen to the peak of success but has not reached the end of longing. The last sentence of the novel indicates that she never will: "In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, you dream such happiness as you may never feel" (369).

emerge at the time of the novel's publication in the form of department stores, shopping arcades, the beginning of professional advertising, and the creation of decorative shop-windows.[13] In this respect, *Sister Carrie* is markedly different from other novels of American naturalism which often focus on the modern city but present it as an archaic, uncivilized space in which a merciless struggle for survival takes place. In contrast, Dreiser's city is not that of the ghetto, but of shopping streets, restaurants and the theater. Dreiser's linkage between Carrie's desire for identity and the new consumer culture is perceptive, because modern consumer culture owes its success not only to its ability to stimulate desire by superficial attractions but also to its promises of a new identity. But, contrary to many critics of modern consumer culture, Dreiser presents this "superficial" dimension of identity-formation not as a deplorable lack of depth but as a gain. Precisely because Carrie's desire is never strongly and permanently attached to any particular object, it can remain a driving force in her never-ending attempts to fashion herself anew. Looking at other people and urban spaces constantly refuels her desire because it confronts her with new and different options of herself, which she eagerly appropriates.[14]

It is one of the many intriguing paradoxes of the novel that this self-fashioning by desire makes Carrie ever more attractive, successful and independent, although she does not develop as a person and always seems to stay the

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13 See Rachel Bowlby's study of the role of consumer culture in European and American naturalism, *Just Looking*: "Within a very short period, department stores had been established as one of the outstanding institutions in the economic and social life of the late nineteenth century; and together with advertising, which was also expanding rapidly, they marked the beginning of present-day consumer society." Bowlby stresses the role of conspicuous, almost "magic" theatricality in the presentation of the consumer objects: "Like the exhibition palaces, they utilized new inventions in glass technology, making possible large expanses of transparent display windows. … Glass and lighting also created a spectacular effect, a sense of theatrical excess coexisting with the simple availability of individual items for purchase. Commodities were put on show in attractive guise, becoming unreal in that they were images set apart from everyday things, and real in that they were there to be bought and taken home to enhance the ordinary environment" (3, 2).

14 In this context, Leonard Cassuto has argued that *Sister Carrie* anticipates Lacan's theory of subject-formation (see his essay "Lacanian Equivocation in *Sister Carrie, The 'Genius'* and *An American Tragedy"*). I do not find Cassuto's claim convincing: For Lacan, desire leads to misrecognition; for Dreiser it opens up ever-new possibilities of self-fashioning (and thus also explains social change). In this "dramatist" concept of a performing self (or, to be more precise, of a self constituted by performance), Dreiser is much closer to pragmatism and, especially the theory of identity formation by George Herbert Mead, than to poststructuralism and Lacan – although, on the other hand, he does not accept the normative base of Mead's argument. In his study of Dreiser, Kurt Müller points out interesting parallels between certain sociological theories of identity formation and Dreiser's work. See his *Identität und Rolle bei Theodore Dreiser.*

same as a character. Thus, at the end of the novel, she is radically different from the beginning and yet, she is still the same. Ironically, it is precisely this apparent paradox that allows her to remain true to herself, because in its diffuse emptiness, her self is characterized by the possibility of always being different. Not accidentally, the profession in which she excels is that of an actress. Perceptively, Dreiser anticipates modern concepts developed first by symbolic interactionism of a performing self that only exists in role-play.[15] This also explains why Hurstwood is doomed to fail and why Carrie can succeed. As an inner-directed Victorian character, Hurstwood is a bad actor and can excel only in one role.[16] His inner-directedness prevents him from re-inventing and re-fashioning himself. Once he has left his safe Victorian world, internalization becomes a prison house of identity. He cannot simply become somebody else. In Carrie's case, on the other hand, the ease of her constant change in role play is the pre-condition for her "development." Again, Dreiser anticipates modern theories of identity and the self here. Only a few years later, the new medium of film produced an altogether different type of "personality" in the form of celebrity that only seems to exist in public representation.[17]

VI. Incalculable Variability

Dreiser can carry his subversion of a Victorian concept of character further than other American naturalists because, in contrast to them, he has a theory of identity that allows him to provide a more convincing explanation of the problems of identity-formation than Howells. I am referring to his theory of human beings as marked by an anthropological lack with which he opens Chapter 8 of *Sister Carrie*:

> Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason. On the tiger no responsibility rests. We see him aligned by nature with the forces of life – he is born into their keeping and without thought he is protected. We

15 See Fisher, who provides a list of the many identities Carrie performs on the stage and in real life: "Carrie is Sister Carrie, Carrie Meeber, Cad, Mrs. Drouet, Carrie Madenda, Mrs. Murdock, and Mrs. Wheeler as well as Laura, Katisha the Country Maid, the frowning Quakeress, and her many other roles" (160).

16 Thus, when Hurstwood takes on another name in order to avoid being caught, he assumes a false identity designed to hide his real identity, as Fisher points out: "Dreiser very carefully differentiates acting from deception. Carrie acts, Hurstwood deceives" (159).

17 Cf. Fisher, who points out the parallels between Carrie and the stars produced by the mass media: "One of the first consequences of Carrie's success as an actress is that she begins to receive a regular stream of marriage proposals from men who know nothing of her but what they have seen in her performance" (167).

> see man far removed from the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by too near an approach to free-will, his free-will not sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance. He is becoming too wise to hearken always to instincts and desires; he is still too weak to always prevail against them. As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not yet wholly learned to align himself with the forces. In this intermediate stage he wavers – neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free-will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other – a creature of incalculable variability (56-7).

An interpretation of reality that does not take this incalculable variability into account must be unsatisfactory. It will also fail to provide a proper moral evaluation of Carrie's behavior, as Gordon Taylor has pointed out: "In the eyes of the world, Carrie has simply fallen; in Dreiser's view she has acted in response to real forces, both within and without herself, that the world has not yet learned to recognize" (145).

Dreiser's view of human beings as being shaped by an anthropological lack presents yet another way of liberation from the "iron cage" of an inner-directedness. Along with the beast and the Nietzeschean superman, both spectacularly "savage" fantasy figures of an experimental anti-Victorianism, we get the figure of the modern consumer as yet another alternative. While beast and superman are figures of archaic excess, the consumer presents a contemporary version that comes close to Riesman's description of the other-directed character. The beast can still be understood as a melodramatic counter-figure to classical realism. While Dr. Jekyll or Norris's Andover are trying to lead rationally controlled lives, the beast is already lurking underneath, ready to take over (see also Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper"). The beast breaks up Victorian self-control, but in a way that still requires symbolic containment, even punishment, because the liberation from inner-directedness by uncontrolled instinctual forces poses a threat than can destroy the self. In contrast, the superman figure is not one of archaic excess, but one of superhuman empowerment, yet with clearly demarcated temporal limits. The same struggle for survival that leads to the development of his superior strength will also eventually lead to his defeat and displacement. In the first case, liberation from self-control is gained at the price of a descent to the level of savagery; in the second, it leads to a superiority built on quicksand. The consumer, on the other hand, is immune both to the fear of savage self-destruction and to the sensationalist thrill of superhuman superiority. Since the consumer's personality is empty, it can be filled ever anew with new identity options without having to pay the price of a permanent attachment to any one of these roles.

VII. The Naturalist Double Structure

The consumer, then, provides a third option in naturalism's search for an escape from the Victorian straitjacket of "civilized" self-control. But this very "modern" view of human beings must pose problems for an aesthetic theory of effect. If human beings are characterized by an anthropological lack and therefore have to fill their own inner emptiness ever anew by an attachment to arbitrary objects, then this could also mean that they approach literature in the same manner. In this case, the reader would treat the literary text as just another object of consumption. This is a description of contemporary culture that we frequently encounter in the cultural criticism of modern mass culture. Indeed, critics have drawn attention to the strong presence of modern mass culture in Dreiser's novel. However, Dreiser's incorporation of mass and consumer culture is not intended as mimicry. Certainly, Dreiser does not want to produce a cheap novel for consumption. His literary models were the French realists and naturalists[18] and like them, he wanted to use literature to reveal the conditions that shape reality. In what way can he hope to reach the reader, however, when the reader approaches the novel in the mode of a consumer? What is the implied theory of effect of his novel and, more broadly speaking, that of American naturalism in general? Or, to put it differently: What is the relation between a naturalist theory of identity and naturalism's theory of aesthetic effect? So far, this essay has focused almost entirely on the level of literary representation, and thus an impression might have been created that the implied theory of effect attributed to the naturalist novel is strictly mimetic. But if such a theory of effect is considered insufficient (as most critics would argue today), what are the alternatives? What effects can be produced by melodramas of savage self-destruction that, seen from a mimetic aesthetic, could have the effect of a painful, masochistic subversion of Victorian self-control at best?

As we have seen, the theory of effect of classical American realism is based on the premise that literature should help readers develop a sense of observation, so that experience can lead to knowledge. In order to achieve this, realists replace the omniscient authorial voice of the historical novel by a more dramatic form of representation, in which the narrator retreats or becomes even invisible, while the reader is elevated to the position of an independent observer and a conversational equal. In contrast, the naturalist

18 Cf. Yoshinobu Hakutani who points out that Dreiser "had long brooded over the aridity of American letters. … Even as late as 1911 his American literary admirations included only a few. … 'When I go abroad,' he says, 'it is very different. Balzac, Zola, de Maupassant, Daudet, Flaubert, and Anatole France are great towering statues to me – the best in France'" (205). Hakutani quotes from *Letters of Theodore Dreiser* 121. – The transatlantic context of American realism and naturalism is described at length in my essay "Morality, Modernity, and 'Malarial Restlessness': American Realism in its Anglo-European Contexts."

theory of effect is much harder to grasp, and this may be one of the reasons why, so far, there are few analyses available. The only claim that might be safely made is that the dialogic goals of the realist novel do no longer apply. The "primitive" characters of naturalism do not possess sufficient self-awareness to function as conversational equals. In their often complete lack of self-consciousness, naturalist characters cannot provide models of social apprenticeship. Instead, the authorial voice becomes important again to explain to the reader what the characters themselves cannot understand. The characteristic narrative strategy of naturalism is therefore that of a double structure of representation. At times, the narrator presents the perspective of his main characters, while at other moments he keeps ironic distance to them – i.e. when Norris tells us about McTeague that he has bought a picture of the court of Lorenzo de Medici for his dentist office because this picture gets him more human beings in one pictorial frame than other pictures and can thus be considered a real bargain. In almost every novel of American naturalism, melodramatic agitation and authorial distance (often of an ironic kind) do therefore co-exist and often overlap almost unnoticeably. Every novel therefore requires a careful and detailed analysis of its own.

Sister Carrie, too, is characterized by a double structure. The strong presence of a narrator who takes his time to comment on his characters in particular, and on the world in general, has often been criticized as one of the major flaws of the novel. What such a criticism fails to address, however, is the function of this double-voiced perspective. For it is precisely this double structure which undermines a consumerist perspective – not only because it constantly interferes with the diffuse desire of the novel's characters, but also because it analyzes and distances this desire in the very act of describing it. At the same time, Dreiser must be careful that the distance does not become too wide, because this would mean that the novel would lose its imaginary attraction. Dreiser's game consists in a risky balancing act, which may explain the ambivalent responses the novel has found for a long time. On the one hand, the reader is encouraged to follow the diffuse, unpredictable vagaries of desire and thus to overcome the iron cage of Victorian self-control. On the other hand, the reader is placed in a position from which he can study the events as an experiment and thus protect himself from being overwhelmed by the forces that drive the characters in the novel.

The continuous movement between impulse and rational control that Dreiser describes as result of an anthropological lack in human beings is thus also characteristic of the reading process and can lead to reader responses of "incalculable variability." The reader is both within and outside the world of the novel and must constantly change positions. He can read the novel as the narrative of Carrie and thus reduce it to a popular novel, but he can also read it from the authorial perspective of the narrator and conceive of it, as critics did for a long time, as a kind of sociological study. Most likely, however, the

reader will move back and forth between these different perspectives and thus follow Dreiser's theory of effect in which the interaction of perspectives is designed to prevent mere consumption. This is a strategy that, in a way, already anticipates literary modernism, but remains nevertheless different in one important respect. In contrast to modernism, Dreiser puts his hopes for knowledge not on strategies of de-familiarization, but on the effect of an interaction between different perspectives. The reason lies in his view of human beings: A strategy of de-familiarization would take away the sources for a constant replenishment of desire which for Dreiser keeps human beings going.

Soon after *Sister Carrie* was published, modernism in literature and the fine arts would also postulate a pre-civilizatory dimension of human beings – either in the form of an unconscious, or a myth, or primitive residues, or an authentic, pre-linguistic experiential dimension. It is one of the main projects of modernism to get the reader back into contact with a not yet civilized substratum of his own existence. For Dreiser, this dimension remains diffuse. His own model of how human beings search for identity through the never-ending supplementarity of a performing self bears surprising similarities to theories of identity formation developed at about the same time by American pragmatism, most prominently in the work of George Herbert Mead. In this, Dreiser goes further than contemporaries like Stephen Crane, Frank Norris or Jack London, who subvert Victorian self-control by an inner division of their characters or by fantasies of superhuman regeneration outside of the confines of civilization. From a postmodern perspective, Dreiser's concept of identity formation also looks more far-sighted than the modernist project of an existentialist re-authentification of knowledge by means of de-familiarization. In its melodramatic and sensationalist aspects, American naturalism goes beyond the realistic story of development and can be seen as one of the last chapters of a realistic mode of representation in the 19th century. However, as we have seen, it can also be considered the first modern literature.

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