

“The American Romance” and the Changing Functions of the Imaginary*

I.

In the emergence of the study of American literature and the formation of a separate discipline called American Studies, the “invention” of the concept of an “American romance” has played a crucial role. The 1940s and 1950s were the period in which the search for a national, specifically “American” literary tradition took on a new urgency. This search was fuelled by post-World War II visions of a new world power and the arrival of what Henry Luce called “the American century.” F.O. Matthiessen’s study *American Renaissance* (1941) had identified a literary tradition of great intellectual power and artistic originality and had provided it with a name that stuck. Perry Miller had transformed the perception of American culture – still widely considered provincial and without a strong cultural tradition of its own – by recovering an imposing “Puritan tradition.” However, his redefinition tied the interpretation of American culture to this Puritan legacy in a way that seemed too restrictive on regional and historical grounds. Similarly, Matthiessen’s book limited America’s unique cultural achievement to a particular period and to a small group of writers. It was the concept of the American romance which solved this impasse in matters of cultural self-definition. Ironically enough, the solution was suggested by an essay which developed the claim of a different tradition in American literature in order to describe this literature’s shortcomings, Lionel Trilling’s essay “Morals, Manners and the Novel.”¹ Trilling’s

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1 “Now the novel as I have described it has never really established itself in America. Not that we have not had very great novels but that the novel in America diverges from its classic intention, which, as I have said, is the investigation of the problem of reality beginning in the social field. The fact is that American writers of genius have not turned their minds to society. Poe and Melville were quite apart from it; the reality they sought was only tangential to society. Hawthorne was acute when he insisted that he did not write novels but romances – he thus expressed his awareness of the lack of social texture in his work” (Lionel Trilling, “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” 206). The argument Trilling pursues reappears in a nascent and far less elaborate form in F.R. Leavis’ influential study *The Great Tradition* which, in turn, is the version

essay summarizes what was more or less the standard view of American literature in English departments on both sides of the Atlantic: While the European novel traditionally focuses on society and its manners (in the wide sense of the whole array of social relations and its determinants), American writers shy away from this social reality, and, thus, from the complexity and fullness of social life. Trilling's argument was developed in the context and service of his own liberal critique of political radicalism and its narrow views of the purpose of literature. However, his argument that reality, in contrast to the epistemologically naive versions of a Parrington, a politicized Dreiser and other radicals of the Thirties, was not just lying "out there" as a self-evident moral touchstone, but was a complex phenomenon full of contradictions, unresolved conflicts, and inner tensions, paved the way for a new assessment of the romance, and, ultimately, for an inversion of his own argument.

For Richard Chase, Trilling's colleague at Columbia University, it is the "romance-novel" in its characteristic reliance on unrealistic representational modes of excess and melodrama, its willful disregard for consistency in characterization and plotting, and its direct, forceful expression of imaginary desire which captures the conflicts – and thus the "realities" – of American society much more accurately than the smoothly controlled surface of the novel of manners and its realistic mode of representation. This "re-vision" of American literature was a redefinition that was tailor-made for the needs of the historical moment by turning weaknesses into assets: In drawing on predecessors like D. H. Lawrence, Chase converted the seemingly puerile into the culturally profound, a lack of formal unity into the bold expression of a vibrant non-bourgeois culture of contradictions, and a lack of realism into a radical resistance to the middle way and its much maligned cultural

Richard Chase addresses in the introductory chapter of his *The American Novel and Its Tradition* in which he develops the theory of a specific American tradition of the novel called "the romance-novel:" "The essential difference between the American novel and the English will be strongly pointed up to any reader of F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition*. Mr. Leavis's 'great tradition' of the novel is really Anglo-American, and it includes not only Jane Austen, George Eliot, Conrad, and Henry James but, apparently, in one of its branches Hawthorne and Melville. ... True, an American reader of Mr. Leavis's book will have little trouble in giving a very general assent to his very general proposition about the Anglo-American tradition. Nevertheless, he will also be forced constantly to protest that there is another tradition of which Mr. Leavis does not seem to be aware, a tradition which includes most of the best American novels. ... Those readers who make a dogma out of Leavis's views are thus proprietors of an Anglo-American tradition in which many of the most interesting and original and several of the greatest American novels are sports. *Wieland* is a sport, and so are *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence Man*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *McTeague*, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sun Also Rises* – all are eccentric, in their differing ways, to a tradition of which, let us say, *Middlemarch* is a standard representative" (Chase, "American Novel" 2-4). Altogether, Leavis may have provided the stimulus but Trilling provided the argument.

manifestation, middle-brow culture.² Chase’s claim of a unique American literary tradition based on the idea of “the American romance” was taken up by other Americanists and turned out to be extremely effective in justifying the study of American literature as a separate field with its own need for expertise and institutionalization.

Again, this breakthrough came at a price, however. It tied the legitimation of the study of American literature to a literary genre which was of central importance only in certain historical and critical contexts and was, thus, still of limited representativeness for American literary history as a whole. In the romance-theory of American literature, the romance looms large as major achievement, while, at the same time, a wide range of other literary forms and cultural voices are excluded or ignored. Much of the intellectual attention of the first generation of professional Americanists focused on the elaboration and support of the romance-thesis. Most of the influential studies of American literature of the 1950s and early 1960s based their version of American literary history on this idea and made it the basis for their decisions on what to include or exclude, what to value or not to value in American literature. The view of American literature that emerged from these studies is that of a literature in flight from civilization and the claims of society, of a literature, in other words, of individual self-assertion, often by a male character whose only companion is a native American or dark-skinned outsider living on the fringes of society.³ This romance is, above all, a literature of rebels and outcasts who elude the iron grip of middle-class conformity.⁴ Such

2 The crucial role of the concept of “middle brow” for cultural debates of the period is hardly ever taken into account in discussions of the emergence of the concept of the “American romance.” For Chase, the major quality recommending the romance is that, in its dimensions of excess, contradiction, and formal inconsistency, it is clearly not another example of a smoothly polished middlebrow culture. Thus, a turn to the American romance gained additional cultural importance by recovering a radical tradition, not yet domesticated by middle-class conformity.

3 Cf. the summary of this characteristic “American myth” by Nina Baym: “The myth narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. This promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition. Behind this promise is the assurance that individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves. The myth also holds that, as something artificial and secondary to human nature, society exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality. To depict it at any length would be a waste of artistic time; and there is only one way to relate it to the individual – as an adversary” (Baym “Melodramas” 131f.).

4 This view of American literature found its first, nascent expression in D.H. Lawrence’s study *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Following Chase, the most important studies of that critical tradition are Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness. Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1958); Marius Bewley, *The Eccentric Design. Form in the Classical American Novel* (1959); Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*

a definition enables the liberal tradition, and its strongest voice in American Studies, the myth and symbol school, to take the romance as a point of departure for discussions of one of its central concerns about American society: the question of how “mature” and “grown-up” American society really is. For one group, the romance is a representative genre because it expresses a lingering American “immaturity” and summarizes an unfortunate American tradition of “lighting out for the territory” in evasion of social responsibility; for another group the romance is a “deep” genre, which should be read as courageous, much-needed subversion of an official ideology of American innocence.

Along with his assertion of a unique and characteristic American literary tradition, Chase had also provided an often quoted definition of the American romance:

For the moment, let me say that the word must signify, besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyll; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly (“American Novel“ ix).

In its elasticity and semantic openness, this definition was ideally suited for Chase’s purpose. It allowed him to include a wide variety of different writers and works, ranging from Charles Brockden Brown to William Faulkner,

(1960); Daniel Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (1961); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964); Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere. The Place of Style in American Literature* (1966), using not the concept of romance itself but the theory linked with it; Joel Porte, *The Romance in America: Studies in Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and James* (1969); John Caldwell Stubbs, *The Pursuit of Form: A Study of Hawthorne and the Romance* (1970); Michael D. Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (1980). Critical discussions and revisions of a theory of American literature centered around the concept of the American romance can be found in Nicolaus Mills, *American and English Fiction in the Nineteenth-Century. An Antigenre Critique and Comparison* (1973); Robert Merrill, “Another Look at the American Romance” (1981); Robert C. Post, “A Theory of Genre: Romance, Realism and Moral Reality” (1981); William C. Spengemann, *A Mirror for Americanists. Reflections on the Idea of American Literature* (1989); Nina Baym, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors” (1981) and *Novels, Readers and Reviewers. Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (1984); Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance* (1985); Edgar A. Dryden, *The Form of American Romance* (1988); George Dekker, “The Genealogy of American Romance” (1989); William Ellis, *The Theory of the American Romance. An Ideology in American Intellectual History* (1989); Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance. Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (1989); John McWilliams, “The Rationale for ‘The American Romance’” (1990); Emily Miller Budick, *Engendering Romance. Women Writers and the Hawthorne Tradition 1850-1990* (1994).

as practitioners of the American romance and thus to support his claim for the centrality and representativeness of the genre in American literary history. For subsequent generations and discussions, however, his lack of precision became something of a scholarly embarrassment. In order to make the genre of romance the centerpiece of a theory of American literature, Chase based his argument on such sweeping generalizations that heated objections were a foregone conclusion. The initial success and wide acceptance of the romance-theory became its own undoing. The growing criticism, gaining force in the late 1960s and early 1970s, ran through several stages: an early criticism “from within” insisting that Chase’s definition of the romance was not precise enough to serve as a defining concept for a specific American tradition; an increasingly irritated challenge in the 70s that his claim for a representativeness of the romance was unfounded in view of the many significant exclusions his version of American literary history entailed; and, finally, a more recent argument that the concept is really a critical invention of the then dominant liberal tradition in American literary criticism driven by the quest for legitimacy for a still fledgling, ill-treated discipline or, worse, haunted by a “melodrama of beset manhood” (Baym, “Melodramas”).⁵

The arguments offered in support of these suspicions are strong. As, above all, Dekker, McWilliams and Baym have demonstrated in detail, nineteenth-century critical terminology was so anarchic and inconsistent that the concept of romance was never used in any systematic sense for the description of genre patterns and genre attributes. In a helpful survey of the debate, McWilliams reminds us that there are really only three prominent cases in the nineteenth century in which the term romance is used as a description of a writer’s artistic goals. One is provided by William Gilmore Simms in the preface to his historical novel *The Yemassee*, another by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, and the third by Henry James in his 1901 preface to the New York Edition of his early, supposedly “pre-realistic” novel *The American*. Melville, on the other hand, who in many descriptions stands at the center of a tradition of “the American romance,” used the term only inconsistently and in a few minor cases of self-definition.⁶ At a closer look, it is clearly Hawthorne’s preface to *The House*

⁵ In an important contribution to the debate, Baym points out the male bias in the romance-theory of American literature and its source in the traditional semantic opposition between female/consensus/conformism and male/dissensus/nonconformism, which is extended to American literary history: “What critics have done is to assume . . . that the women writers invariably represented the consensus, rather than the criticism of it . . .” (129f.). On the masculinization of American literary criticism after 1900, see my essay on “The Masculinization of American Realism.”

⁶ Melville employed the concept of romance when he had decided to go beyond the “narrative of voyage” which he had used in his first two books *Typee* and *Omoo*. In a letter to his publisher John Murray, he wrote: “I believe that a letter I wrote you some time ago . . . gave you to understand, or implied, that the work I then had in view was

of *the Seven Gables* which turns out to be the centerpiece of almost all of the subsequent descriptions of the structure and function of the American romance. Hawthorne's definition, however, was in itself an exemplary act of self-authorization. It did not describe an American tradition; rather, it was an attempt to elevate the historical romance to a new level of epistemological promise and artistic respectability. As a form of self-characterization, if not self-advertisement, it is part of the mid-nineteenth-century redefinition of literature as a prophetic activity and of the institutionalization of an American literary tradition, which was energetically pursued by the publisher J.T. Fields at about the same time and which propelled Hawthorne, who had long considered himself "the obscurest man of letters in America," into the rank of an American "classic."⁷ To erect a whole theory and history of American literature on such grounds would seem to support the suspicion that the assumed centrality of the genre is really the result of a retrospective projection of a liberal tradition in search of a literature that would be best suited to express its own vision of saying "No! In Thunder"⁸ to a middlebrow culture of conformism and self-congratulation.⁸

II.

Do we have to give up the concept, then, in dealing with American literary history? Some revisionists suggest something like this when they insist that the concept of the American romance is not just inadequate because of its vagueness but downright misleading because of the many significant exclusions on which it is based. For them, the theory of the American romance has become ideologically tainted through its indulgence of adolescent male

a bona-fide narrative of my adventures in the Pacific, continued from 'Omoo' – My object in now writing you ... is to inform you of a change in my determinations. To be blunt: the work I shall next publish will be in downright earnest a 'Romance of Polynesian Adventure' – But why this? The truth is, Sir, that the reiterated imputation of being a romancer in disguise has at least pricked me into a resolution to show those who may take any interest in the matter, that a *real* romance of mine is no Typee or Omoo, & is made of different stuff altogether ... ("Letters" 70). Judging from the rare instances in which he employed the concept romance, Melville seems to have associated the term with the conspicuously unreal, allegorical and speculative, so that his subsequent work did not qualify. On his occasional, inconsistent use of the term, see Helen P. Trimpi, "Conventions of Romance in *Moby-Dick*."

7 For a description of the role of Fields in the development of a canon of national literature, see Jane Tompkins 3-39 and Richard Brodhead 48-66.

8 *No! In Thunder* is the title of a collection of essays by Leslie Fiedler. Another title, Harry Levins' *The Power of Blackness*, expresses a similar longing for a powerful, uncompromising anti-bourgeois stand. Both titles are inspired by Melville's programmatic review of Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in which Melville elevated Hawthorne to the level of an American Shakespeare.

fantasies and the instrumentalization of the term romance by a post-WW II liberalism that used it to mask its own disillusioned preference for a literature of cultural tensions over a (socialist) realism. Still, genre categories remain necessary and useful in creating a horizon of expectation in order “to guide the reader in his encounter with the text” (Culler 136). In this sense, the term romance continues to be helpful in characterizing generic conventions, narrative patterns, and a specific mode of representation of many American novels of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century. As a genre, the romance does not dominate American literature, nor does it define a specifically American tradition. Clearly, it is not *the* representative American genre and, thus, a history of American literature based primarily on the idea of the centrality of the American romance remains woefully inadequate. Nevertheless, the romance exists as an important part of the American literary tradition. It is one unfortunate consequence of the revisionism of recent years that, as a result of obvious shortcomings in anchoring a theory of American literature, the concept of the romance has become a critical term of dubious critical status, if not a case of ideological blindness. Perhaps a change in approach can help to readjust the perspective and to make the term productive again for an understanding of American literary history.

One implication of a criticism focusing on the lack of precision in discussions of the “American” romance is the assumption that, in order for a concept to become useful, one would first have to arrive at a definitive definition. In view of the wide variety of versions of the genre, such an attempt is doomed to failure, however. Instead, it makes more sense to consider a genre as a discursive set of possible components which can be arranged in varying, ever new combinations, depending on the changing functions the text is to fulfill. Genre designations such as the sentimental novel or the romance comprise several levels of meaning. They can refer to an epistemological premise, to a pattern of narrative organization, to a mode of representation, and to a theory of aesthetic effect. Clearly, all of these levels – the epistemological, the narrative, the representational, and the aesthetic – are dependent on one another and interact constantly and continuously, but they are not identical and thus form different and distinct points of reference in dealing with literature. The fact that, in talking about the romance, critics use genre differentiations such as the gothic, historical, or domestic romance, that they distinguish the quest romance from the courtship romance and the “epistemological romance” from the psychological romance of the self, points to the wide array of possible combinations within the genre.

As functions of fiction change, any of these levels can take on increasing or decreasing importance – which, in turn, will often correspond with a change in the critical perception of a genre. The sentimental novel, for example, had its most radical impact as long as its claim for the epistemological power of the sentiments dominated the critical perception of the genre,

while in its latter, and increasingly negative, reception it was almost habitually equated with an excessive mode of representation and hence with a lack of artistic control.⁹ On the other hand, Hawthorne's definition of the romance provides an exemplary case of shifting the meaning of the term from narrative convention to epistemological potential. In his characteristic emphasis on an excessive mode of representation, freed from "ordinary novelistic requirements," Richard Chase shifts to the representational level, because a definition of the romance in terms of narrative structure or epistemological promise would be too limited to carry the full burden of his far-reaching generalizations. A definition of the romance as governed primarily by a non-realistic mode of representation enables Chase to foreground an element of subversion and thus to redefine the romance as a genre of cultural resistance. In literary realism, the romance is often reduced to the level of plot and is often used as a term for "fairy tale"-happenings in order to critique its "distortion of reality." Postmodernism and poststructuralism, on the other hand, show renewed interest in the romance as a form of representation because its openly metaphoric mode seems to undermine epistemological claims for certainty and to reveal to what extent knowledge is grounded in the endless supplementarity of linguistic play, so that the term romance is no longer used as designation of a genre but refers to a rhetorical strategy or performance.¹⁰

The struggle for the meaning of the romance is thus acted out in the choices between possible levels of definition. It is striking, in fact, to realize that a history of the changing definitions of the romance could be rewritten on the basis of such choices: While Hawthorne's famous definition in *The House of the Seven Gables* emphasizes the epistemological dimension, Northrop Frye's approach draws its resonance (and "scientific" authority) from its shift to the level of narrative structure which makes it possible to study the romance as a literary system and in a systematic way. In contrast, Chase, in his focus on the oppositional potential of the romance, anticipates contemporary moves to identify the level of representation as the actual site of literature's ideological or subversive potential. Gillian Beer, on the other hand, in presenting the romance as a literature of desire, reorients the definition of romance towards questions of aesthetic experience and aesthetic effect.¹¹ For Hawthorne, as for many other American writers of the nineteenth century, the romance holds an epistemological promise, for Chase, it is primarily an oppositional form, while Frye and Beer consider it a privileged cultural form for providing insight into the nature of myth and desire.

⁹ For an example, see my essay on "The Power and Failure of Representation in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."

¹⁰ See for example Evan Carton, "'The True Romance': Philosophy's Copernican Revolution and American Literary Dialects."

¹¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface," *The House of the Seven Gables* (1952); Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture. A Study of the Structure of Romance* (1976); Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957); Gillian Beer, *The Romance* (1970).

Each of these changes in emphasis implies a different function of fiction. This is an inevitable part of any changing definition of literary genre, but, for a number of reasons, it applies especially to the romance. For it is the romance which, more than any other narrative genre, is equated with a special potential of fiction, so that the two terms seem to have become virtually synonymous at times. In its quest for an elusive holy grail, its freedom to explore “other worlds,” and its license to transcend cultural conventions of the real, the romance most readily realizes fiction’s promise to go beyond everyday reality: “Romance was the term for *any* tale or novel that acknowledged itself to be a work of invention rather than imitation ... In the same vein, in 1800, Charles Brockden Brown distinguished romance not from the novel but from history. Romance, for him, was not one kind of fiction as opposed to another but all fiction as opposed to fact” (Baym, “A Reading” 9). Hence, the romance is seen by many to embody a specific potential of fiction, is considered “pure fiction,” so to speak.¹² The changing uses made of the romance therefore promise to be of special interest for a history of the different uses to which fiction has been put and the different ways in which it has been conceptualized. Thus, in the following discussion, I shall not focus on questions of classification, nor make the romance the subject of a cultural criticism concerned with the radical potential or immaturity of American society. Rather, I want to approach the genre from the point of view of literary and cultural history, that is, as an important literary genre whose changing functions are linked in interesting ways with questions of the status of fiction and the imaginary, the liberation of the imaginary by means of fiction and, as a result of this liberation, the changing relation between fiction and social authority. In this discussion, I shall not restrict myself to texts that have usually

¹² Cf. Northrop Frye: “Romance is the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature in the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest” (“Secular Scripture” 15). Such a view of the romance as the “ur”-genre of fiction finds support in its almost ubiquitous presence. Even Ian Watt, who describes the rise of the novel as the rise of realism, finds the romance at the bottom of things: “The major objection, however, to *Pamela* and to the novelette tradition it inaugurates, is perhaps not so much that it is salacious but that it gives a new power to age-old deceptions of romance. The story of *Pamela*, of course, is a modern variant of the age-old Cinderella theme ... Richardson’s novel bears everywhere the marks of its romance origin – from Pamela’s name, which is that of Sidney’s princess in the *Arcadia*, to her assertion of the pastoral heroine’s freedom from economic and social realities when she proposes to seek refuge in nature ... But it is romance with a difference: ... his [Richardson’s] narrative skill was actually being used to ... give an air of authenticity to a triumph against all obstacles and contrary to every expectation, a triumph which was in the last analysis as improbable as any in romance. – This combination of romance and formal realism applied both to external actions and inward feelings is the formula which explains the power of the popular novel ...” (“Rise of the Novel” 204f.).

stood at the center of the ongoing debates about the theory of the American romance. Instead, I want to broaden the discussion by including texts such as Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* in which a realistic mode of representation may play an important role, but which, in terms of narrative structure, is organized by the quest for an elusive sense of selfhood and existence that can only be approached and articulated by means of fiction. It is often ignored that Chase, in preferring to speak of the romance-novel rather than the romance pure, emphasized a tendency of the romance to reconstitute itself through the novel, so that constant hybridization and a continuous mixture of forms are an essential part of the history of the romance.

III.

For any attempt to trace the changing uses and functions of the romance in American literature, it is helpful to keep in mind some of the structural elements that are usually considered as basic in definitions of the genre. The traditional definition of the romance is that of a quest for an elusive goal, its characteristic narrative pattern that of a movement into unknown territories or "other," imagined worlds, including the unknown territory of the self and the uncanny world of dreams. What unites otherwise widely differing definitions of the genre is this emphasis on a movement beyond everyday experience and the claims of common sense. Remote, forbidden, elusive, idealized, miraculous, magic, and marvellous are some of the recurring and most frequent attributes. In his article for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Walter Scott defines the romance as "a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvelous and uncommon incidents" (129). This "ir-reality" of the romance can manifest itself, on one end of the spectrum, in texts of metaphysical speculation, and on the other, more popular end, in stories which miraculously overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles in arriving at a happy-ending that may strain plausibility.¹³ In its characteristic movement from "reality" to an unknown, imagined world, the romance dramatizes a clash between two aspects of our existence: an "other world" of desires and imaginary self-empowerment, and the commonplace world of actuality which constantly frustrates but also refuels our longing for transgression and transcendence. For Gillian Beer, the romance is the genre in which the imaginary is liberated in a search for the articulation and fulfillment of desires:

¹³ Two major books in American Studies which deal with these popular versions of the romance (which Northrop Frye, in *The Secular Scripture*, calls the "kidnapped romance" 168) are John Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* and Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*.

Romance is always concerned with the fulfillment of desires – and for that reason it takes many forms: the heroic, the pastoral, the exotic, the mysterious, the dream, childhood, and total passionate love. ... The romance gives repetitive form to the particular desire of a community, and especially to those desires which cannot find controlled expression within society. ... Romance, being absorbed with the ideal, always has an element of prophecy. It remakes the world in the image of desire (12, 13, 79).¹⁴

Indeed, it is this search for an object not yet fully known and hence only imagined, for something not yet existing or not yet accessible, “but possible and desirable,” which provides the only common link between otherwise widely divergent definitions of the romance as a literary genre.

Although critics like Frye and Beer use their key term “desire” in the broad metaphorical sense of a diffuse, unfocused longing, the term has recently become tied to a basic semantic opposition between (bourgeois, patriarchal, Western) repression and a vital, anarchic and untamable force of liberation. In contrast to such a form of semantic substantiation, Wolfgang Iser, in drawing on the work of Cornelius Castoriadis,¹⁵ has suggested to employ the concept of the imaginary for the diffuse, discontinuous, associative, and hence “untranslatable” stream of images and affective resources that constantly feeds fiction without, however, trying to pin down this diffuse imaginary semantically. Iser’s view of the imaginary as a potential that eludes ontological definitions and is apt to appear in protean manifestations has the advantage of conceptualizing this dimension of fiction in a way that is not limited to any particular form or function:

It is the diffuseness of the imaginary that enables it to be transformed into so many different gestalts, and this transformation is necessary whenever this potential is tapped for utilization. Indeed fiction, in the broadest sense of the term, is the pragmatically conditioned gestalt of the imaginary. ... Fiction reveals itself as a product of the imaginary insofar as it lays bare its fictionality and yet it appears to be a halfway house between the imaginary and the real. It shares with the real the determinateness of its form, and with the imaginary its nature of an ‘As If.’ Thus, features of the real

¹⁴ In another memorable phrase, Northrop Frye speaks of “the attempt to remake the world of experience into something more responsive to ... desire” (“The Imaginative” 152). If it is one goal of the romance to “remake the world in the image of desire,” then this can explain some of its recurring, often noted poetological characteristics. Because its object is something that is not yet known or articulated, but only imagined, the romance has to rely on an indirect and anti-mimetic, most often allegorical or symbolical, mode of representation. Thus, as Patrick Brantlinger points out, it will be characterized by a strongly metaphorical mode of literary representation: “While realism often seeks to reduce the metaphoric content of language to a minimum, the romance form often exploits it ... In the realm of ‘Kubla Khan’ or ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ every term seems to point beyond itself to some deeper, visionary level of meaning, hidden from the scrutiny of mere reason” (“Romances, Novels, and Psychoanalysis” 31).

¹⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, *L’Institution Imaginaire de la Société*. German edition: *Gesellschaft als imaginäre Institution*.

and the imaginary become intertwined, and their linkup is such that it both demands and conditions a continuing process of interpretation (Iser, *Prospecting* 232).¹⁶

As an agglomerate of diffuse feelings, images, associations, and visions, the imaginary needs fiction to be translated into a coherent, comprehensible, and culturally meaningful expression. It is thus part of the special attraction and usefulness of fiction that it articulates something “beyond” its own means of representation, and the romance can be seen as the literary genre which makes the expression and articulation of that dimension “beyond” its starting premise and its major rationale for existence.¹⁷

The changing critical conceptualizations of the imaginary dimension of fiction – as fancy and imagination, dream, prophetic vision, phantasm, madness, hallucination, the uncanny, infantile projection, illusion, daydreaming, the unconscious, paranoia, desire, or “otherness” – are in themselves historically instructive metaphorizations in which different attitudes are taken toward the phenomenon in the process of giving it a name. Despite their varying emphases, such conceptualizations share one basic flaw: All of them equate the imaginary with one of its possible manifestations and hence “essentialize” it as dream, desire, the unconscious etc. In contrast, Iser’s approach tries to avoid such definitions in terms of substance by describing the imaginary as a potential that nourishes fiction but also needs fiction in order to be able to manifest itself, so that it always appears in indirect form. The challenge the imaginary poses to a genre such as the romance is thus not only that of the quest for the nature of the imaginary itself, but, perhaps even more so, the problem of how to articulate it. For Chase and subsequent contributors to the theory of the American romance, this problem of articulation is solved in a simple, ultimately ahistorical way: Whenever one finds an anti-mimetic mode of representation, the romance has done its deed. This romance, however, can only articulate one and the same cultural meaning throughout literary history.

¹⁶ To clarify my terminology here: In the following argument, the concept of the imaginary is used to refer to “that whole mysterious shadow world” (G. Gunn) of images, associations, feelings, intuitions and other intangible elements that feed our cognition. The human faculty by which they are conceived and linked to each other is the imagination, the discourse by which they gain a *Gestalt* and thus a determinate cultural presence is fiction.

¹⁷ Two classical definitions of the romance in American literature take on an entirely new meaning in the light of Iser’s conceptualization of fiction as “a halfway house between the imaginary and the real:” I am thinking of Hawthorne’s definition of the romance as a “neutral territory” between actuality and spirituality and of James’s definition of the romance in the preface to the New York Edition of *The American*, which has often appeared as somewhat enigmatic: “The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know, sooner or later ... The romantic stands, on the other hand, for the things that, with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never *can* directly know; the things that can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire” (9).

If an essential part of the romance consists in the quest for the expression of something that, by definition, can never be fully known and directly articulated, then it must remain an important part of the discussion of the American romance to trace the wide array of attempts to give shape to the seemingly “unspeakable.” Both aspects of this drama of articulation – the quest for the true nature of the imaginary and the search for a form and gestalt in which it can appear – are, in fact, closely related. Neither element can exist independently from the other: “From this roughly sketched history of the various notions desired to capture the imaginary, there emerges the fact that the latter will take on different forms according to its varied performances in different contexts, and it may reasonably be assumed that the literary context will again give rise to a different type of manifestation” (Iser, *Prospecting* 276). Depending on the function the imaginary is to have in a particular textual, generic, cultural, or historical context, its manifestations will vary widely in semantic and formal appearance. In this sense, the American romance offers an especially interesting chapter of American cultural history. More specifically, it seems particularly well suited to contribute to the project of “prospecting the regions of the imaginary” (Iser, *Prospecting* 234).

IV.

In the context of this essay, an analysis of the changing manifestations of the imaginary in the American romance can only be offered in the form of a brief historical survey. Such a sketch must begin with the first dedicated romancer of American literature, Charles Brockden Brown, whose, in many ways, most interesting novel *Edgar Huntly or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker* has often been described as a quest romance.¹⁸ In the search for the murderer of Edgar’s friend Waldegrave, the romance promises to uncover the “springs of human action” – and finds more than the reader may have bargained for. In an unmistakable turn against the trust which the Enlightenment put in the rationality of human behavior and the epistemological claims of empiricism, Brown’s characters, including the first-person narrator Edgar Huntly, cannot fully know themselves, because there is a store of hidden motives which undermine rational control, or which, when they are finally articulated in one of the many confessions in Brown’s work, remain unreliable as explanations of human behavior. In Brown’s world of “gothic” horror, the relation between the “real” and the imaginary is therefore presented as a relation of doubling, in which the unruly self manifests itself in such strange and often terrifying phenomena as somnambulism, skillful ventriloquizing, or the metamorphosis into a state of savagery¹⁹ and thus constantly eludes the grasp

¹⁸ See, for example, the essay by Dieter Schulz, “*Edgar Huntly* as Quest Romance.”

¹⁹ One reason why *Edgar Huntly* has been a favorite object of Brown-criticism is that

of the “rational” self. In accordance with its varying semanticizations as supernatural, invisible, or savage, this other side repeatedly threatens to destroy or manipulate the self, and yet, despite its destructive force, it remains an object of almost scientific curiosity which drives the self to ever new forays into the “hidden springs” of human behavior. The imagination is both the source of potential insight and of heightened anxiety and terror. On the one hand, it promises to control those hidden springs of human behavior which it has stimulated in order to satisfy its own curiosity. This promise can never be fully realized, however, so that the imagination also becomes the source of ever new deceptions, self-deceptions, and misinterpretations. As a consequence, Brown’s fictional world is one of wild oscillations between rational explanation and sudden, unforeseen manifestations of irrational forces, of diabolic schemes by seemingly friendly guardian-figures and labyrinthian forms of deceit, of mysterious, ominous signs and momentous hallucinations. In this roller coaster tour de force, the reader’s imagination is continuously flooded by an onslaught of frightening images and often inexplicable turns of the plot, until a “rational” explanation at the very end signals the recovery of control. This apparent recovery, however, cannot distract from the fact that the actual aesthetic experience of Brown’s romance derives its strong effects from the unpredictable interaction between a rational definition of reality and a constantly revived imaginary challenge to it. The terror of the gothic romance emerges out of a struggle for control that fails consistently but makes it ever more urgent to confront this other side of the self.

While in the gothic romance, the threat to the self remains ultimately inexplicable and uncontrollable, in the historical romance, it is dramatized as part of a prior “savage” state of civilization that can be conquered and eliminated. As a result, the conflict between the real and the imaginary can now be presented as struggle between representatives of hostile civilizations. As a semantically stable opposition between “wilderness” and civilization, the encounter and its outcome become predictable and, thus, a reliable source of gratification. Initially experienced as unruly double of the self and hence, because of its constantly lingering threat of self-destruction, as a source of terror, the imaginary is thus effectively tamed and “socialized” in the historical romance of the frontier. It is no accident that the historical romance not only paved the way for the final breakthrough of the novel in American culture²⁰

it recommends itself by a programmatic change in the imaginary sources of its tale: “One merit the writer may at last claim; that of calling forth the passions and engaging the sympathy of the reader, by means hitherto unemployed by preceding authors. Puerile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end. The incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology” (“To the Public” 3).

²⁰ The gothic romance, despite the feverish efforts of Charles Brockden Brown, remained a minor and largely unsuccessful episode in American literary history.

but also established narrative patterns and formulas that became the basis for a good part of American mass culture in the 19th and 20th century. The important point in this story is not the increased attraction of the imaginary itself, but the new relation it enters with the counter world of the real and its social order. Already in *Edgar Huntly*, we have a violent confrontation with savage Indians. But since these are only “beastly” manifestations of the imaginary and nothing else, belonging together with a ferocious panther, to a paradigm of the “wild,” the encounter between the two worlds has no stable mediating function and can only be staged in terms of destruction or survival.

In contrast, Cooper’s historical romances of the frontier are centered around the figure of the pioneer and pathfinder who provides the badly needed link and mediation between wilderness and civilization. If, as noted, the traditional thrust of the romance is that of a quest for an elusive goal, and its characteristic narrative pattern the movement into unknown territories and worlds beyond the range of ordinary life, such an exploration of distant worlds also lies at the center of the historical romance which draws its major excitement from the movement of its main characters between hostile worlds and different stages of civilization.²¹ In the American versions of the genre, this clash of cultures is frequently acted out in the encounter between white and Native American civilizations. This encounter is staged from the perspective of an 18th-century theory of civilization which insists on the principle superiority of modern stages of historical development over the savagery of prior stages of civilization but also regards the “modern age” as threat to communal values and established hierarchies. James Fenimore Cooper and William Gilmore Simms write on the basis of a stable, unquestioned historical and social hierarchy; both use their romances to dramatize a threat to this hierarchy in order to justify it and reconsolidate it successfully; and both present their narrative in an unambiguous mode of representation which reflects their strong belief in the reasonableness and transparency of the social organization they favor. Both authors, finally, write historical romances in order to give their struggle for social recognition the heroic dimension of an epic battle. However, in their efforts to elevate the romance to the level of a national epic, they also introduce fictional elements designed to make their stories of rightful historical genealogy interesting and “effective” as a discourse of civilization. In this, the historical romance is a highly paradoxical genre. On the one hand, it presents something like an attempt on the part of the gentry to put fiction in the service of its own agenda and values; on the other, it heats up the imagination with wild adventures and daring deeds in

²¹ On this point, see George Dekker: “Historical romancers tend to think of such societies as ideally whole and unfragmented, but they often detach individuals endowed with ‘heroic’ qualities from their proper community and make them do lonely battle with a radically new and alien civilization” (*The American Historical Romance* 41).

order to engage the reader for these goals. It stimulates and fuels the imagination – but it does so in order to increase the plausibility of its own social and cultural claims. Thus, it is in constant movement between two constitutive elements: its nourishing promise of adventure and the “socialization” of these elements of adventure, so that emerging threats to authority can be contained.

The license of the romance to reconfigure social hierarchies, if only temporarily, may provide a crucial explanation for the initially unexpected success of Cooper’s version of the historical romance. By elevating Leatherstocking in *The Pioneers* to the level of a vicarious father figure who saves the heroine where the actual father and patriarch, Judge Temple, fails, a process of dehierarchization is set in motion which becomes a major source of attraction and gratification for the reader. But it also creates a major problem of presentation. Clearly, in view of the ultimate goal of the historical romance to legitimize an established social hierarchy, its “wild,” heroic adventurer must be prevented from becoming too seductive. In *The Pioneers*, Cooper solves the problem by removing Natty from the new social order after he proves incapable of adjusting to the code of civilization. When Cooper resurrects Natty as a younger self in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty has already begun to internalize the “natural” order of things for which he now becomes a willing pathfinder. Simms, on the other hand, solves the problem of temporary dehierarchization even more cleverly (but also more conventionally). In *The Yemassee*, his rough adventurer is really a disguised governor who returns to his true identity and rightful social status after the attack of the “savage” forces is successfully repelled. In both cases, the historical romance draws its appeal from a carefully controlled interaction between “historical” and “fictional,” real and imaginary elements which are temporarily rearranged in hierarchy in order to “tempt” and engage the reader, and are then, in the end, reintegrated into the vision of a historically reaffirmed social hierarchy. Seen in this way, the historical romance presents a highly instructive example for the gradual liberation of elements of imaginary self-empowerment. It dramatizes a state of tension and strikes a precarious balance. The historical novel has to draw on the romance in order to make itself dramatically interesting and to provide a space for scenarios of heroic self-enhancement. But it also has to discipline and ultimately control these elements of the romance in order to meet their potential challenge to a social hierarchy which the historical novel set out to defend and to exempt from the suspicion of undue privileges of power and possession.²² Hence, it moves between novel and romance, so

²² I think it is the successful balance Cooper achieved between the two contradictory pulls of the historical romance which provides the answer to the question Martin Green poses: “But granted that diving interest in America – which I called the cultural reason for Cooper’s popularity – why should Cooper’s treatment of these themes have been its beneficiary, when for instance Robert Montgomery Bird’s was not, though his *Nick of the Woods* (1837) treats the same themes with what seems to me much more literary power and skill?” (166).

that it has been called both historical novel and historical romance almost interchangeably.²³

In terms of its theory of effect, the main point about the historical romance is thus not the liberation of an imaginary core of “wild,” savage self-assertion but its connection with a countermove of control, resulting in a constant tension between wish-fulfillment and restraint, the articulation of a desire for imaginary self-empowerment and its socialization. The reader is lured by the excitement of heroic deeds; at the same time, he or she is also reminded of the need for self-discipline and the legitimacy of social hierarchy. In its recurring sequences of victory and defeat, pursuit and escape, anxiety and relief, the narrative produces something like an emotional see-saw effect, in which the imagination and the emotions of the reader are constantly refueled, but also never quite released from the need for self-restraint. The heroic self-discipline which the hero demonstrates therefore also becomes a model for the reader. While the hero has to fight enemies, the reader has to grapple with his or her own projections of triumph and fear and bear the continuing challenges to a fantasy of self-empowerment “manfully.” Thus, the reader’s major “work” consists in internalizing a conflict that is carried out on the level of plot in a passionate, openly violent way which is still “savage” and pre-civilizational. Indeed, in terms of cultural history, this exemplary internalization of social conflicts is the major achievement of the most popular early forms of the novel, the sentimental, the historical and the domestic novel.²⁴

Where such internalization of conflict is experienced as burden, on the other hand, there are basically two ways out, exemplified by Melville and Hawthorne. Although both wrote epistemological romances, their work soon took different directions. As is well known, Herman Melville earned his initial reputation as a writer with a number of successful sea novels, a genre Cooper had established as part of the historical novel of adventure. Fittingly, these first novels of Melville are often called romances of adventure. In the third novel of this trilogy, Melville begins a process of transforming the romance of adventure into a metaphysical romance which reached its most impressive and best known manifestation in *Moby-Dick*. To be sure, there still is something like a romance of adventure contained in the book, but, as is well known, during the course of its composition, Melville began to hunt for “bigger fish.” The ensuing metaphysical quest redefines the romance. Although drawing on the mythic resonance of the theme, *Moby-Dick* is no longer the

²³ The unstable semantics of the genre designation thus reflects an inner conflict or tension at the heart of the genre, a tension between historical specificity and a fictionalization of history in the interest of excitement and adventure, a conflict between an imaginary attraction to the “wild” and its exemplary reintegration into a “natural” social order.

²⁴ This analysis of the historical romance could therefore also be extended to female novels of domesticity which, in striking similarity to the historical romance, have also been called domestic novel or domestic romance interchangeably.

triumphant story of a dragon-slayer who rescues the community. Instead, it turns Ahab's quest into the search for an elusive truth in an inscrutable universe which alternately teases and repels the truth-seeker. In this search, the romance becomes a drama of epistemological despair, but also of a self-authorization of the self which finds its equivalent in playful appropriation of whole worlds of philosophical, literary, and scientific knowledge by the first-person narrator Ishmael.²⁵ In fact, in this playful construction of imaginary worlds, the figure of the Faustian truth-seeker Ahab ultimately provides only another option of the self.²⁶ The book's quest for the ungraspable phantom of life turns into "the chartless voyage of an ardent, self-dramatizing 'I'" (Milder 438).

As a consequence, the function of the white whale as the most threatening manifestation of the imaginary in the novel is counter-balanced by a second role: the symbol of a malignant force is, at the same time, a "deep" symbol which anchors ever new processes of playful, imaginative world-making, until the point is no longer that of arrival or victory, but of the possibilities of self-realization, and the metaphysical quest becomes part of a romance of self-expansion. In the first, most clearly exemplified in *Mardi*, the romance preceding *Moby-Dick*, the imaginary is still the source of a metaphysical vision, in the second, of cosmic self-expansion; in the first, it holds a promise of transcendental failure or redemption, in the second, it is turning into a storehouse of cultural images on which the individual can draw for a staging of the creative powers of the self.²⁷ The romance, no longer following the predictable plot pattern of the historical romance of adventure with its sequence of spatial as well as civilizatory boundary-crossing and retreat, metamorphoses into a book that defies any narrative formula in its exuberant celebration of fiction's potential for self-empowerment.

This "romance of the self" is clearly not the romance Hawthorne has in mind. Its characteristic search for self-empowerment is consistently submitted to intense probing in his work. Hawthorne's starting point was not the romance of adventure, but the historical romance of colonial New England with

²⁵ For an especially helpful discussion of *Moby-Dick* as romance, see James McIntosh's essay on "The Mariner's Multiple Quest:" "In its narrative form, *Moby-Dick* fits the traditional literary form of a quest romance. It is a voyage or a quest to slay a monster – the White Whale, to explore a distant place or underworld in search of a treasure or secret ... In the period of literary romanticism, during which *Moby-Dick* appears as a late efflorescence, traditional romance often takes on the character of an 'internalized quest' ..." (29).

²⁶ For a more detailed presentation of this argument, see my essay "Cultures of Criticism: *Moby-Dick*, Expressive Individualism, and the New Historicism."

²⁷ Like Ahab, the white whale is ultimately an intertextual construction which, especially in the cetology-chapters, serves as a point of departure for the creative explorations of the narrating self. In this struggle between the whale as monstrous threat and as a paradigmatic source of fictive world-making, it is the narrator Ishmael who survives.

its focus on questions of historical legitimacy and moral guilt.²⁸ Hawthorne, however, added a new and important dimension. In *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, his first two versions of the genre explicitly characterized as romance, the conflict centering the historical novel is no longer presented as heroic, openly violent struggle between the representatives of two realms of value, nor as a story of “savage” threat and hard-won civilizatory self-control, but as inner struggle. Thus, the internalization of conflict established by the historical romance reaches a next stage, namely that of a psychologizing that is not presented as pleasurable self-expansion but as brooding, sometimes almost pathological form of self-inspection. This must also change the role and appearance of the imaginary. In *Moby-Dick* it ultimately functions as ungraspable source of self-empowerment, in Hawthorne’s romances it is the source of “dark” suggestions of guilt and sin.

This psychological turn is part of a larger context. Hawthorne’s romances, with perhaps the exception of the late allegorical *The Marble Faun*, are really stories of a painful process of individuation. Hester Prynne, emerging from a Puritan crowd in the second chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, Alice Pyncheon and Holgrave in *The House of the Seven Gables*, as well as the artist Miles Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance*, face the problem of how to establish their own identity in the struggle against the iron grip of historical and personal guilt. As *The Blithedale Romance*’s ironic depiction of a Fourierian commune makes clear, however, such a liberation cannot be achieved by a transcendentalist fantasy of individual self-empowerment and self-realization. Hawthorne’s work is one long-drawn demonstration of the deplorable moral and social consequences of such radical individualism and the inevitable social catastrophes – breakups of marriage, family and community – it must bring about. Individual self-assertion, for Hawthorne, means finding a new, “third” position between social convention and unfettered self-realization. The individual should not be a conformist, because such an attitude is self-mutilating, but he or she should also not be an “egoist” who puts individual wishes for self-fulfillment over questions of moral and social responsibility. It is therefore moments like Hester’s (and, eventually, Dimmesdale’s) acknowledgement of their moral guilt, or Holgrave’s resistance to his own craving for power, in which true individuality emerges in Hawthorne’s work. As the ending of *The Blithedale Romance* reveals, the secret which stands at the center of the Hawthornian romance is the secret of the self which has to learn to acknowledge its own “guilty” longings in order not to be destroyed by them.

Neither the historical romance, nor the romance of the self, can create such an awareness which would be able to provide the basis for a new contract

²⁸ Michael D. Bell, *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (1971), Ursula Brumm, *Geschichte und Wildnis in der amerikanischen Literatur* (1980), and Lawrence Buell, *New England Literary Culture* have discussed Hawthorne’s work in the context of a fully established literary tradition dealing with early New England history, and, especially, with the legacy of Puritanism.

between self and society. For Hawthorne, fiction becomes the space where this possibility – an art that does not shy away from moral commitment but allows for a distance that provides the basis for responsible individual decisions – can be configured. As is well known, he achieves this by creating a text of almost unnoticeable changes and shifts in meaning. In a skillful strategy of ambiguation, his romances proceed by a carefully crafted system of expository gaps, move between changing modes of representation, and stage unsolvable conflicts of meanings. As a result, a new version of the romance emerges, one that may be called the “hermeneutical” romance, in which oscillations of meaning are no longer a source of horror or of metaphysical despair but a nourishing ground for individual growth through the constant challenge of interpretive choice. Out of the dark recesses of the imaginary emanate ever new suggestions of guilty longing, of unknown secret motives and hidden sin. Since there can never be a way of knowing them empirically, however, a continuous need for interpretation emerges which initiates ever new cycles of tantalizing suggestions and hermeneutical doubt.

Hawthorne’s redefinition of the quest as hermeneutical activity has as one of its consequences the reconceptualization of the imaginary. In terms of cultural and literary history, it is, in fact, one of his major achievements, almost forgotten in an age of political criticism, that he dramatically changes the way in which the imaginary is represented. On the one hand, the powerful impact of the imaginary as a source of unrestrained self-empowerment is much more forcefully acknowledged than in the historical romance of the frontier. Hawthorne’s characters are driven by unspeakable secret longings and tortured by an incessant inner struggle between conscience and desire. On the other hand, the imaginary is removed to the level of hermeneutical enigma, “so that his narratives become fables of signification at the same time as they work themselves out as fables of Puritanism” (Buell 277). The imaginary has become, at one and the same time, ever present and yet increasingly inaccessible, and must thus become an object of constant interpretative attention, if not obsession. This hermeneutical challenge posed by the imaginary becomes one of the major themes of Hawthorne’s work.

The case is illustrated most impressively in *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne’s gripping story of adultery does not shy away from strong suggestions of illicit affairs but handles them in such an indirect (and thereby alluring) way that the attention of the reader is shifted from the act itself to its interpretation. This focus on the reassessment of guilt and the ensuing struggle for moral meaning dominate the narrative. As a token of her guilt, Hester accepts the scarlet letter, but not with the meaning attached to it by the Puritan community. In acknowledging responsibility for her deed, she has earned the right to participate in the interpretive struggle to determine its moral meaning. In first defying and then transforming society’s interpretation of her act, she individualizes herself. For Hawthorne, individualization is a process in which

one learns to take on responsibility toward oneself and the interpretation of one's own life. To achieve such a “responsible” form of self-realization, a willingness to probe and acknowledge one's own secret motives and desires is required. The romance is thus neither of interest as a tale of adventure and civilizational conflict, nor as a realm of imaginative free play and self-empowerment, but as a form through which interpretive challenges can be staged which are constantly refueled as well as frustrated by the powerful presence and yet, at the same time, increasing inaccessibility of the imaginary.

It is this legacy which Hawthorne bequeathed to Henry James who became his most important successor in American literature.²⁹ The changing fate and function of the romance in the age of realism is an especially interesting one. In general, the romance is ridiculed and the imagination harshly, and often aggressively criticized as a childish faculty that arrests individual development. Its nourishing element, desire, conceived of most often in terms of adultery, alcoholism, or a ruthless drive for success and power, seduces the self and leads it astray.³⁰ Accordingly, the romance is considered as an adolescent literature of imaginary wish-fulfillment, although it often survives as an intertextual constituent (and occasionally, as, for example in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, as an obviously unconscious narrative pattern supporting a heroic fantasy of self-empowerment).³¹ To a certain extent, James shared the realist's view of the imagination as a potentially dangerous faculty that has to be kept in check by the reality principle. But he departed from the realist orthodoxy, voiced more categorically by Howells and Twain, in acknowledging also the creative potential of the imagination. If we would not have an element of romance in life or literature, these would be “ordinary.” Art, however – this most clearly distinguishes James from Howells – must transcend the ordinary. Hence the amazing fact that the romance and the melodrama remain vital ingredients of James's works and provide important motifs as well as basic narrative patterns for his novels and tales.³²

²⁹ See Richard Brodhead, *The School of Hawthorne*.

³⁰ See, for example, Heinz Ickstadt on Howells: “Throughout his writings therefore the romance is associated with everything destructive to the balanced vision: with selfishness, the passions, the morbidity of dreams and the unconscious; with class society, aristocratic conceit and idleness, and with imperialist expansion” (98f). What has to be taken into account in describing the realists' discussion of the romance is that the term was primarily used for describing a watered-down, neo-romantic version of the historical romance gaining new popularity in the 1880s and 1890s. This is also the moment when the term realism begins to gain programmatic force.

³¹ Another interesting case for the continuing “underground” presence of the romance in the “realist age” is provided by the utopian novel. Quite appropriately, Henry George called Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888) a castle in the air with clouds for its foundation.

³² See, for example, the characterization by Greenwald: “For James, romance is especially a way to understand unconscious desires and those aspects of reality which are

Of all American writers of the nineteenth century, Hawthorne and James are probably the two that are hermeneutically most aware (and the most obsessed). In both cases, acts of interpretation are seen as crucial for individual growth. But while interpretation in Hawthorne has the function of keeping his characters (and readers) aware of the possible presence of an historical or personal guilt, interpretation, in James, creates a new reality. To be sure, the magic spell of the romance can only be broken by experience. Experience, however, has to be interpreted. In Howells and Twain, this act of interpretation is primarily a communal, conversational activity; in James it is an act of gaining consciousness in which single observations are linked in a meaningful net of relations by means of the imagination. So crucial is this ability in the world of James that, ultimately, the merely imagined can become “the real thing.” *The Golden Bowl* provides a case in point (as well as a good point of comparison because it, too, is concerned with adultery and matters of deception). Already in *The Portrait of a Lady*, Isabel Archer had, in her long midnight vigil in chapter 42, finally been able to realize Osmond’s deception by connecting single observations into a complete and thus meaningful *gestalt*. The fact that everything coheres and makes sense to her at last is confirmation of the truth of her perception (and not yet of a possible paranoid dimension). Isabel’s successors Millie Theale (in *The Wings of the Dove*) and Maggie Verver (in *The Golden Bowl*) find themselves in similar situations of becoming potential victims of deception. But in contrast to Isabel, Maggie has no *gestalt* experience that would be able to confirm her vague suspicion. Actually, she does not know anything. What her imagination suggests to her cannot be verified by putting single observations together, only by acting on the basis of her hunch. In the ensuing chain of interaction, reality emerges in reaction to the challenge of the merely imagined. In this sense, Maggie’s imagination literally creates reality. And this imagination is set to work not by experience and observation, as in Isabel’s case, but by an imaginary core of suspicion that is never fully articulated, only indicated in its most minimal and skeleton outlines, so that, in fact, it functions as a constitutive blank for Maggie’s (and the reader’s) ongoing interpretive work.³³

The imaginary in the work of James, who has provided some of the most challenging and influential rewritings of the hermeneutical romance with tales such as “The Turn of the Screw” or “The Figure in the Carpet,” is thus taken back to the level of an “unnamable” suggestion.³⁴ Paradoxically, how-

hidden” (14).

³³ It is surely not accidental that the major theoretical text of reception theory, Wolfgang Iser’s *The Act of Reading*, begins with the discussion of a tale by James, “in place of an introduction.”

³⁴ In his very aptly titled essay “The Secret of Narrative,” Todorov has given an excellent description of the central role of this unnamable suggestion in the work of James: “Thus the secret of Jamesian narrative is precisely the existence of an essential secret, of something not named, of an absent and superpowerful force which sets the

ever, this retreat to the function of a constitutive blank provides the basis for its powerful impact. By stimulating the individual to incessantly pursue and verify the unnamable suggestion, the imaginary, through a sequence of shadowy suggestions and its processing by means of an imagination refined as consciousness, emerges as the driving force in making fiction a bait for the search of the figure in the carpet. But it is equally important that the imagination and the imaginary should not be conflated. In order to become effective, the imaginary must remain an “unreadable” and therein suggestive blank, while the imagination is challenged to imagine a new and “civilized” reality for this imaginary core. Where literature successfully achieves such a transformation of the imaginary into the complex world of imagined relations, it can be called art – for which the working of a fully developed consciousness becomes a model in the late James. In this sense, James finally transformed the metaphysical romance and its secularized successor, the hermeneutical romance, into the romance of art – which signals the successful, if only momentary, “mastery” of the imaginary by transforming its tantalizing inaccessibility into the richness and reality of an infinitely complex and suggestive world.

While James was refining this creed to perfection, novels like Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* or Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* began to question its assumptions. It is hardly accidental that this was done with special poignancy by female writers. The possibility that the ideal of individual growth offered by the realist project is one that may “civilize” existing hierarchies but also keep them in place must have been easier to see from a female point-of-view. It would be tempting to discuss *The House of Mirth* in this context, because the novel constitutes itself, in the tradition of a basic plot pattern of the courtship romance, as the heroine’s quest for the highest prize, but then quite unexpectedly and daringly turns the courtship romance into a gripping melodrama of self-destruction. Because Lily Bart is stimulated by too many stimuli, she cannot keep her quest in focus. *The Awakening*, however, may provide an even better case study for the purposes of our discussion, because it starts out as a realistic novel only to subvert the genre radically and without any possibility of retreat and reconciliation. At first sight, *The Awakening* is a story of growth, standing in a tradition of the realistic *Bildungsroman* ranging from Elisabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons* to W.D. Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*,

whole present machinery of the narrative in motion. The motion is a double, and, in appearance, a contradictory one (which allows James to keep beginning it over and over). On one hand he deploys all his forces to attain the hidden essence, to reveal the secret object; on the other, he constantly postpones, protects the revelation – until the story’s end, if not beyond. The absence of the cause or of the truth is present in the text – indeed, it is the text’s logical origin and reason for being. The cause is what, by its absence, brings the text into being. The essential is absent, the absence is essential” (145).

Henry B. Fuller's *The Cliff-Dwellers*, and Kate Chopin's first novel, *At Fault*. Critics are right, however, to distinguish *The Awakening* from this tradition by assigning it to a special subgenre within the group, that of the "story of awakening."³⁵ Clearly, Edna's personal development does not result in a "realistic" balance between individual desire and social responsibility. On the contrary, it eventually leads to a radical assertion and expansion of the self at the cost of all remaining social ties. In this relentless search for an elusive self-realization, *The Awakening*, despite its verisimilitude in the description of social types and events of Creole life, draws on the romance – for example, by using fairy tale motifs and, more generally, by putting the heroine Edna Pontellier on a quest for a goal that she can never reach and that seems to withdraw with each act of liberation and step towards it.

It is a measure of Chopin's departure from the realistic novel of individual development that social reality cannot offer any models or suggest new possibilities of self-realization for her heroine. In Mme. Ratignolle, the devoted mother and angel of the house, and Mlle. Reisz, the determined, lonely artist, the novel presents alternate options of the female self and finds them both wanting. Clearly, it is not society but a world beyond society, which is not yet "socialized," that provides the strongest stimulant in the search for new possibilities of self-empowerment. In "The Story of an Hour," a short story of self-assertion preceding *The Awakening*, this stimulus is provided by a mysterious force called "it" which emerges from the realm of nature. Similarly, in *The Awakening*, the senses, by absorbing a wide spectrum of impressions ranging from the lure of the sea to the vague suggestiveness of music, constantly reenergize the self and fuel its longing for self-expansion. Music, the semantically most open and suggestive artistic medium, becomes Chopin's exemplary form of art, and the paradigm of the aesthetic. Again and again, Edna is influenced in her search by short, often decontextualized images such as the "oceanic" meadow of her childhood or the bird with a broken wing. In contrast to a novel like *The Portrait of a Lady*, it is thus no

³⁵ The problems that emerge in applying the term *Bildungsroman* to female fiction of the nineteenth century is described by Johanna C. Kardux: "One of the reasons that the *Bildungsroman* genre appealed to many mid-nineteenth-century women writers was perhaps that its traditional belief in a coherent self and in the possibility of development enabled them to construct stories about strong female protagonists that had gratifying implications for their own search for social and literary identity in a patriarchal society. Yet though in some ways liberating, the genre also poses problems for women writers Many of the formulaic events that structure the male *Bildungsroman* – the sea voyage, the journey to the city in search of an education or career – were options unavailable, or available only in highly circumscribed ways, to female protagonists in Victorian America. Therefore, women writers had to accommodate the genre to their needs, often in ways that were subversive of the implied sexual politics of the male generic paradigm" (106). Susan J. Rosowski thus suggests distinguishing between the *Bildungsroman* as a primarily male genre and female "novels of awakening ... a type of literature about women analogous to, yet different from the bildungsroman" (26).

longer the interpretive activity of consciousness which makes the self grow. In contrast, Chopin’s heroine seeks to get rid of the burden of consciousness by showing a remarkable preference for semi-conscious states of being, such as, for example, sleeping, dreaming, dozing, or the moment of awakening. For Edna, “growth” in the realist sense would only mean growth into another social role, and thus into another imprisonment of the self.³⁶

The equivalent of Chopin’s transformation of the romance from self-empowerment by means of fictional role-play to a new form of self-assertion by a radical retreat from the imprisonment of all social roles is the transformation of the nourishing element of the romance, its freedom to draw on the imaginary. For Melville, the imagination is the main medium of creative world-making, which draws, in turn, on a cultural imaginary provided by an ocean of material ranging from folklore, myth and anthropology to different religions and literary traditions. For Chopin, this work of the imagination is superseded and swallowed up by the imaginary and its unfocused longing. The imaginary is the site of impulses that are not yet articulated and thus socialized. It has two “homes” in *The Awakening*: nature and the realm of the aesthetic, which is, in turn, redefined as that kind of artistic expression which models itself after the sensuous suggestiveness of nature and the world of the senses. Accordingly, Chopin’s novel does not tell a story of female emancipation in social terms, but offers the story of a boundless, constantly recharged yearning for fusion that follows its own radical logic of expansion up to the point of dissolving the self. And the closer the novel gets to an expression of this unsocialized force, the more it turns from realist novel to romance.

The Awakening, too, is thus moving between two genres and perspectives: In order to reveal the social imprisonment of the self, the novel has to rely on a realistic mode of representation in which choices of social identity are acted out in a series of social encounters and social conflicts. The self is to expand beyond this social world of realism and the novel of manners, however, because this social concept of the self is still based on domestic, Victorian ideas of selflessness, self-discipline, and self-denial, particularly in the realm of the senses. Since Edna does not want to acknowledge such limitations to the self, she has to discard this social self, just as the novel itself has to discard the realistic novel of manners and the *Bildungsroman* out of which it developed. In order to go beyond their limited social options, the novel has to bring the self (as well as the reader) as closely as possible into contact with an imaginary world of forbidden yearnings and unfocused longings. This mixture of generic modes has created interesting problems of reception: Those readers who want to stay within the realistic world of “real” choices are dissatisfied with the ending of the novel which they read as “defeat” of an important political project. Those readers, on the other hand, who cherish the radicalism

³⁶ On the strange interplay between regression and emancipation in the novel, see my essay “Tentative Transgressions: Kate Chopin’s Fiction as a Mode of Symbolic Action.”

of Edna's break with society, applaud the ending as triumph of a finally unfettered desire. In this case, the romance – redefined as imaginary stimulant of the self – would be that genre in which the hierarchy between the real and the imaginary is inverted, so that an experience of escape and fusion is provided to the individual and its desire for self-realization. Fiction becomes a realm not of the internalization of conflict (and hence of a masochistic “taming” of the imaginary) but of the liberation from that internalization.

There is no space here to pursue this story in detail up to the present. A few general points have to suffice for indicating the direction the history of the romance takes in twentieth-century American literature. To many critics who conceived of the history of the novel as the rise of realism, the renaissance of the romance especially in postmodernism came as a surprise and as an irritation because this reappearance seemed to indicate a renewed departure from the proper task of the novel. This reemergence of the romance is especially striking in the early novels of Thomas Pynchon whose heroes and heroines are put on quests for the elusive meaning of such mysterious signs as the letter V or the TRISTERO system. This quest, however, does no longer manifest itself as search for an “other world” of metaphysical truth or, as in Chopin's case, for a yet unsocialized form of authentic existence, because the linguistic “constructedness” of this goal, and hence its arbitrariness, is not only acknowledged but foregrounded in postmodern literature as evidence of an all-embracing textualization of life. While the metaphysical, psychological and hermeneutical romance of the nineteenth century are all based on the assumption that “all tangible objects as well as human languages are essentially symbolic, referring beyond themselves to some source of meaning,” the main question that emerges in twentieth-century versions of the romance is, “What if there are no sources but only symbols?” (Baym, “Reading” 83)

One of the first novels to foreground this suspicion is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* in which the green light on the other side of the bay constantly feeds Gatsby's puzzling infatuation with Daisy. Fitzgerald does not hesitate to reveal this projection as adolescent illusion. But he also preserves a certain kind of respect for the energizing force of Gatsby's shallow ideals which distinguish him from the callousness and cynicism of the social set around Daisy. Accordingly, *The Great Gatsby* wants to preserve a residue of this idealism by dramatizing a quest for Gatsby's secret in a sequence of unmasking and mythic remaking of the Gatsby figure. The novel is to stimulate the imaginary and yet, in its awareness of the fatal consequences of romantic projections of the self, distance it by highlighting the discrepancy between grandiose myth and its pathetic adolescent substance. By rescuing a “mythic” core of self-projection from its social appropriation, the novel tries to preserve an element of the romance as indispensable for the self – as well as for fiction. For Fitzgerald, the imaginary is something like a hidden crevice of the self, the site of its childish desire and adolescent ambitions, which,

although embarrassingly naive and surprisingly conventional, nevertheless form its best part. Society deforms and destroys this better part – and thereby also the imaginary core at the heart of the American dream. In both cases, that of Chopin as well as that of Fitzgerald, the imaginary provides something like an authentic, not yet socialized element of human existence which art, by drawing on elements of the romance, is to recuperate as experience.

It is this assumption of a pre-linguistic, quasi-phenomenological dimension of human existence which postmodern literature can no longer accept because of an overpowering awareness that the “authentic” is in itself only another discursively constituted cultural construction. It is interesting to compare the different conclusions that writers like Pynchon and Donald Barthelme draw from this starting point. For both, insight into the semiotic nature of the imaginary desire generating the romance cannot have the consequence of discarding it for the real, because the real is only another linguistic construct. In this sense, the romance pattern becomes the paradigm for an epistemological dead end in which the search for knowledge can only lead to “strange loops” of exchange between the real and the imaginary and thus to constant flare-ups of epistemological anarchy and despair. This must have consequences for the role of the imagination: In Pynchon’s work, it becomes hyperactive in its endless search for the plot that drives the narrative and centers the text. In its promise of establishing hidden links between decontextualized events which may be mysteriously connected, the imagination also becomes the site of possible paranoia – for a state of mental hyperactivity which is for Pynchon, however, no longer a state of neurosis, but also of increased creativity. Becoming entangled in a maze of possible relations, Pynchon’s heroes and heroines are trapped in an interminable quest for meaning that may imprison them in the imagination of paranoid plots, but also motivates and revitalizes them. Reading Pynchon, as an unending flow of interpretations and, especially, term papers shows, does not lead to epistemological frustration or ontological despair but, quite on the contrary, to a very satisfactory experience of “creative paranoia.” While the novel constantly suggests the inevitability of hermeneutic failure, it also provides an obviously highly gratifying experience of either happily anarchic or happily apocalyptic guess-work, generated, ironically enough, by the hopelessly labyrinthian, moebius-like character of the quest for meaning. For Ahab, the impossibility of obtaining metaphysical truth is painful and torturous; for the characters of Pynchon (and their admiring readers) it provides a welcome point of departure for an endless series of self-dramatizations as “crazy” quester.

The case is different in the work of Barthelme which is, in certain ways, the more experimental of the two but also the less rewarding in terms of aesthetic experience. Barthelme’s work is more radical because it acknowledges the linguistic arbitrariness of world-making even more strongly than Pynchon and thereby takes away the last suggestions of meaningfulness and

depth on which Pynchon's texts still thrive. Barthelme's art is one strictly of the linguistic surface; consequently, a story such as "The Glass Mountain," a parody of the search for the holy grail, consists of a collage of 100 divergent, arbitrarily connected paragraphs, in which the sacred and the profane, the medieval world of quests and the vulgar life and lingo of contemporary New York are intertwined in order to foreground the linguistic logic of textual world-making. In consequence, the quest in Barthelme's exemplary post-modern romance *The Dead Father* unfolds as an intertextual collage, and the adventurer's struggle against the father becomes a tiresome cataloguing of possible textualizations of the oedipal scene. What, in past romances, would have served as deepest, "unspeakable" motive, becomes part of another chain of signification which is anchored by the "strong" signifier "father" because it retains a last remnant of mythic resonance.

In Barthelme's work, the romance which drew much of its promise and imaginary allure from its suggestion of an "other world" of sublime events and savage passions, of metaphysical truth and "deep" psychological insight, of daring boundary-crossing and self-empowerment, has, it seems, come to an end or, at least, to an impasse. If the elusive goal by which the romance is generated is revealed to be merely another strong signifier, then, its quest can only unfold as a process of textualization in which a logic of morphological, graphic and phonetic association determines the direction the text (and hence the quest) takes. In this radically textualized world, epistemological promises and typical plot patterns of the romance are reduced not only to a cultural storehouse of possible associations but, more precisely, to linguistic material which follows its own arbitrary rules of world-making. The romance is redefined by a mode of representation that refuses to represent anything but its own linguistic play. Chase might have been highly pleased about these new examples of texts full of "ruptures" that evade the demands of realistic representation. However, he probably would not have been so, because this romance cannot tell us anything about America. It is no longer the paradigmatic genre of metaphysical depth but, on the contrary, of a mere linguistic surface that works against its own symbolic potential. As linguistic material, however, the once powerful symbols of the romance tradition have become part of the constant circulation of verbal "trash," so that the challenge does no longer emerge from the problem of articulation but from the task of preventing such signs from disappearing altogether in a tidal wave of proliferating signs. The imaginary in Barthelme, it seems, is hardly more than another textualized realm from which no regenerating escape into an "other" world of desire can be expected.

And yet, such an analysis of the radical textualization of the imaginary does not tell the whole story of the surprising renaissance of the romance in American postmodernism. Writers like Pynchon or Barthelme revive the genre not only because they want to demonstrate that even the mystery-prone

and symbolically charged romance can be reduced to the profane level of a mere linguistic surface. For clearly, this all-pervasive and inescapable textualization of all aspects of life is also seen as banalization and registered with melancholic sadness. Barthelme's characteristic technique of constant semantic rupture is therefore designed to free the strong signifier from its complete immersion in a linguistic chain in order to evoke a last, faint echo of a mythic center that has disappeared in language. For Melville, the “strong signifier” of the white whale is a source of creative gamesmanship (including the role of the tragic quester); for Barthelme, the textualization of the “dead father” is experienced as both liberation and loss. Thus, the all-embracing textualization of the imaginary has the paradoxical effect of making it, on the one hand, finally accessible as only another instance of verbal trash, while, at the same time, a last, entirely inaccessible remnant is retained through a sequence of puzzling, decontextualized images and the evocation of faint moods. Both aspects, in fact, reinforce each other. Because even the romance can manifest itself only as another linguistic surface, the postmodern text, if it wants to be more than a mere mimicry of this situation, has to find ways to represent and yet also transcend such processes of textualization. In the case of Barthelme, this is achieved by endless parodistic reruns of conventional linguistic and narrative choices, which, in foregrounding the linguistic structure of world-making, make us aware of something that language attempts to express but never quite does. The imaginary seems reduced to language, and yet, it keeps on standing triumphantly as that last, inexplicable store of images and moods that resist textualization. Such an “unspeakable” something which drives signification exactly because it can never be fully represented and can only be experienced as aesthetic or linguistic effect, is the legitimate object of the romance and the romance thus the logical generic choice for a radical postmodern critique of representation. What remains unknowable, however, is not a metaphysical promise, psychological motive, or the correct interpretation of experience, but the nature of the sign itself. The romance becomes a romance of the linguistic sign.

V.

Despite its occasional image of a form of old-fashioned fabulation, the romance, it seems, does not go away. It survived the arrival of historical consciousness by providing the historical novel with patterns of narrativization that created an essential part of its appeal; it survived the era of the realist novel as a “germ” or subtext of the realist courtship drama and, subsequently, regained lost territory through the increasing importance which the imagination assumed in the interpretation of experience; finally, it survived its own demystification as a generator of endless linguistic chains of signification

by drawing attention to the way in which real and imagined worlds pervade each other in an all-encompassing textualization of the world. In all of these changing versions, it retains its basic narrative thrust of an exploration of the “other world” of the imaginary. But at the same time, the form and function of this imaginary undergoes a series of instructive metamorphoses, ranging from Brown’s “sublime” terror about the irrational forces of human nature that manifest themselves in sleepwalking or ventriloquizing doubles, to Cooper’s “savage” stages of historical development, and on to Melville’s storehouse of metaphysical speculation and cultural lore of all areas and ages. In Hawthorne’s transformation of the historical and the metaphysical romance into the hermeneutical romance, the genre gains a new self-awareness about its own imaginary sources and their powerful impact on human behavior (including that of reading). As a result, the imaginary is presented in the suggestive, yet also equivocal mode of ambiguity and becomes an object of intense speculation. This tendency to identify the imaginary no longer by a moral or philosophical attribute (such as savage or irrational) but as an interpretive challenge is further intensified in James in whose work the imaginary core is taken back to the faintest, often unnamable suggestion – and thereby proves especially effective in shaping reality, because the tantalizingly vague and inarticulate becomes a driving force in an increasingly obsessive search for meaning. In contrast, Kate Chopin’s work draws its power from the sensuous evocation of this imaginary core, which she reconceptualizes as an unsocialized natural force that propels the heroine in her drive for liberation and unfettered self-realization. In her work as well as that of Fitzgerald, the imaginary is seen as an authentic, unsocialized dimension of human existence which the romance elements of the text are to recuperate, while post-modernism’s radical rejection of the idea of authentic experience transforms the imaginary into a strong signifier that retains a last faint suggestion of meaning exactly through its constant ruptures of semantic consistency.

Each of these changing conceptualizations of the imaginary must affect the form in which the romance appears. Where the imaginary is conceived as the other, irrational side of the self, the text will be governed by the characters’ attempts to regain control and to use the narrative for the purpose of self-inspection: first-person narration, inconsistent plotting, tales within the tale, a string of confessions, and a vocabulary of conjecture form essential parts of Brown’s fiction. Where, on the other hand, the imaginary is defined in terms of semantic oppositions drawn from binary models of civilizational development, the romance loses its epistemological thrust and enacts its quest on the level of a plot organized as violent encounter between hostile, almost manichaen antagonists. As long as Melville’s romances are staged as quests for metaphysical knowledge – as they are most clearly in *Mardi* – the epistemological level dominates; when this quest, in initially almost unnoticeable ways, becomes a quest for self-empowerment and self-expansion

in *Moby-Dick*, it is the playful metaphorical mode of representation which redefines the romance, so that “whole chapters of *Moby-Dick* can be omitted without affecting the progress or conclusion of the plot at all” (Trimpi 120). Similarly, in Hawthorne and James the redefinition of the imaginary as possible transgression twice removed by historical distance and hidden motives of the self, puts the burden on the level of allegorical, symbolic, ambiguous, or indirect forms of representation in order to create a “romance-effect.” Where, on the other hand, the imaginary is reconceptualized as authentic life-giving force, ways have to be found to elude conventions of epistemological speculation, and narrative organization. Even the level of representation loses its importance because the imaginary is no longer a source of tantalizing ambiguity but of that which cannot be represented, only experienced. The romance begins to define itself through its potential to draw on a realm of sensuous suggestion in order to create a special aesthetic effect. Finally, where the imaginary is reduced to a generator of plots or signifiers, the romance can only unfold as labyrinthian, Sisyphus-like form of textualization in which the traditional romance continues to exist as a source of intertextual collage and “strong,” though fragmented signification. It is this redefinition of the quest as inescapable linguistic circularity and endless deferral which explains the renewed importance of a seemingly old-fashioned genre and provides it with a surprising topicality in a time of radical philosophical anti-foundationalism.

VI.

The story of the changing conceptualizations and literary manifestations of the imaginary, as I have traced it here, has, in many ways, a paradoxical quality. On the one hand, it is clearly a story of liberation: While most conceptualizations of the nineteenth century still emphasize an uncanny, potentially self-destructive dimension, the imaginary, beginning with Kate Chopin, emerges as a liberating force in most twentieth century versions. At the same time, the story of the changing literary manifestations of the imaginary is one of constant retreat, ranging from the still overpowering presence of the double and the savage to the narrative function of a mere blank or empty signifier. As soon as, starting with Hawthorne, the quest for truth becomes a quest for moral choice and meaning, the romance turns into the story of a continuous withdrawal of meaning. Although Hawthorne’s characteristic modes of ambiguity cannot be dissolved into unequivocal meaning, they still pose a choice between a limited number of alternate possibilities. Similarly, James’s “unspeakable suggestions,” even though they may only function as hermeneutical baits, still hold a promise of meaning. In contrast, Chopin’s evocation of sensuous experience and Fitzgerald’s green light on the other

side of the bay gain a central role in the text because they are, by definition, “untranslatable” in their primarily sensuous suggestiveness. Finally, the postmodern romance of a Barthelme retains meaning only as a faint echo of mythic patterns and narrative conventions.

What is the connection between these seemingly contradictory movements of liberation and retreat? A story of either epistemological or social avant-gardism cannot provide a sufficient explanation. Although changing epistemological premises and social conventions provide a context for the history of fiction and its changing use of the imaginary, fiction is more than the illustration of an epistemological problem or the expression of opposition. For Wolfgang Iser, it is one of the major functions of fiction to serve as a medium for the articulation of this imaginary. In doing this, the individual gains an ex-centric position toward itself.³⁷ By providing a gestalt to that which is otherwise unnamable, an important act of articulation is achieved which helps to make the imaginary accessible to individual self-fashioning as well as to cultural self-definition. In this sense, the imaginary has an inherent potential of cultural dehierarchization, because it adds new elements and configurations to the ongoing conversation of a culture. The more intense and far-reaching this articulation is, the greater its potential of self-empowerment. By serving, among other things, as articulation of so far unexpressed and often “unknowable” dimensions of human existence, fiction, irrespective of its actual political content and contexts, has emerged as an important force of cultural dehierarchization in Western society – and so has the romance, despite its popular image of an aristocratic, infantile and reality-distorting literary form.³⁸

Inevitably, this story of self-empowerment is, on the one hand, closely bound up with the rejection of those (real or imagined) authorities which seem to impede individual self-realization: the restraints of rationalism, the concept of civilization and the claims of gentry-guardianship, the authority of moral and social traditions which become “manners” in the work of James, the self-evident authority of patriarchal family arrangements, a new materialism, and finally even the authority of modernist views of art and authenticity. In this cultural history of forces that stand in the way of the self, there is an unmistakable tendency to gradually broaden the perception and definition

³⁷ A similar, quasi-anthropological point is made by John Dewey in his *Art as Experience*: “The need of life itself pushes us out into the unknown. This is the abiding truth of romance” (173).

³⁸ The special potential of democracies for liberating the imaginary is already perceived by Tocqueville: “I have no fear that the poetry of democratic peoples will be found timid or that it will stick too close to the earth. I am much more afraid that it will spend its whole time getting lost in the clouds and may finish up by describing an entirely fictitious country. I am alarmed at the thought of too many immense, incoherent images, overdrawn descriptions, bizarre effects, and a whole fantastic breed of brainchildren who will make one long for the real world” (489).

of the antagonist. In most nineteenth-century texts, claims of order are still tied to a special social group such as the gentry or the Puritans, or to specific philosophical concepts or positions such as the Enlightenment, Calvinism, perhaps even transcendentalism. In general, however, beginning with the late James and the work of Chopin, the definition broadens to that of society in general, or, in the case of Fitzgerald, to a “new,” materialistic America, while in postmodernism, it is the ubiquitous presence of narrative or language in all processes of sense-making that threatens to engulf the individual. What is still a source of potential insight in James – the fact that single impressions cohere – consequently becomes a sign of possible paranoia or of a “totalitarian” dimension of the social and cultural system.

These varying conceptualizations of authority must in turn shape the conceptualization of the counter-force on which the individual can draw in his or her search for self-empowerment. In fact, the two conceptualizations are interdependent. Where eighteenth-century rationalism and the idea of civilization anchor social authority, a challenge will most likely emerge from the irrational and the savage. Where this semantic opposition is replaced, in the Jacksonian period, by the conflict between individual and society, this newly discovered individual must begin to explore the options it has for realizing its own potential. While, at first, the painful search for individual identity seems to provide a sufficient form of self-assertion, the coercive dimension of all social identities, and, ultimately, of language and other discursive regimes are gradually realized and radically criticized. In the process of this discovery, the significance of an “unnamable” imaginary must increase, because it holds out the promise of a force that remains inaccessible to social control. At the same time, however, this imaginary must also constantly retreat in order to maintain this very status as an inaccessible and uncontrollable force. A paradoxical interplay is thus set in motion: The stronger the promise of self-empowerment by means of fiction, the greater the sensitivity to historical, social, and cultural sources of coercion; the greater the sensitivity, the broader and more comprehensive the definition of what constitutes coercion; the broader the definition, the greater the retreat of the imaginary to that which cannot be controlled and domesticated by the social or linguistic system. This, in fact, is the reason why the story of individual self-empowerment, where it is acted out through changing forms of the romance, is also the story of the constant retreat of the imaginary.

VII.

The romance has remained a central topic in the ongoing debates on the true nature of American literature in the radical revisionism emerging in the late 1970s, although questions of definition, for a long time at the center

of the debate, have disappeared almost completely. Recent discussions have not focused on the tenability and representativeness of the romance-thesis but on its political implications. Recent writing on the romance reflects two stages in the development of this radical revisionist criticism. Initially, an idea of the “subversive” potential of the romance is retained in a critical approach informed by poststructuralism in which books by Brown, Melville, Hawthorne, or Poe “deconstruct” themselves in the endless deferral and difference of meaning. Yet in another, increasingly influential, school of reading these works are “unmasked” as texts of ideological containment and cooptation.³⁹ One form of radical critique consists in the claim that the desire at work in the romance and its language is in itself deeply informed by systemic features such as the market. For liberalism, the romance was a source of opposition because it resisted the domestication of the imaginary and thus preserved it as a subversive force. For the new cultural radicalism, the romance is part of a discursive formation that skillfully absorbs this oppositionalism. For the one, it confirms the possibility of nonconformism, for the other, its discussion is especially well suited to foreground the fictitious nature of this hope.

Walter Benn Michaels’ essay on “Romance and Real Estate” provides an exemplary case. In rejecting a liberal view of Hawthorne’s romance as “revolutionary alternative to the social conservatism of the novel” (156f.), Michaels rereads it as a form of displacement and subtle containment: “But in my reading, the point of the romance is neither to renew the past nor to break with it, it is instead to domesticate the social dislocation of the 1840s and 1850s in a literary form that imagines the past and present as utterly continuous, even identical, and in so doing, attempts to repress the possibility of any change at all” (179). For such a radical revision, Michaels has to reconceptualize the imaginary dimension that nourishes the romance. What distinguishes his and other examples of the new revisionism in American literary history is a radical political allegorization of the imaginary.⁴⁰ If the literary symbol is ambiguous or “unknowable,” then only because it represents something that is not supposed to be known. In Michaels’ case, this “absent cause” is the market. His romance is thus shaped not by its relation to an “other” world but by its relation to property. From being the site of the not yet domesticated, the imaginary becomes a model case of how even the seemingly most private

³⁹ Cf., for example, Myra Jehlen: “A central thesis of this chapter is that the anti-historicism and the disengaged, abstract concept of personal identity which characterize the romance, like those same aspects of Emerson’s thinking, are ideological and ideally suited to the maintenance of a specific society, that individualistic “nation of men” which Emerson envisioned as America’s special destiny” (133). Various forms of political criticism of the romance-thesis are offered by Reising, Murphy, and Ellis.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Michael Rogin on *Moby-Dick*: “That romance prophesied an American variant of the ugly revolution; it looked beneath the beautiful dreams of 1848, and chronicled their defeat” (22).

and inaccessible sphere of the human makeup is thoroughly pervaded by the logic of the market or other systemic effects.

In this political allegorization, the specific literary manifestation of the imaginary no longer matters. Like the liberal theory of the American romance, the radical revision remains locked in a quest for true oppositionalism, only more radically so. Liberalism still based its claim for the subversive potential of the romance on aspects of form and other possible sources of aesthetic experience such as, for example, its “excessive,” melodramatic, anti-mimetic mode of representation. The new cultural radicalism decides questions of possible effects no longer on the basis of narrative or other formal aspects of the text but on the basis of a prior political analysis of American society. If this political system is characterized by an uncanny capacity of absorbing all forms of resistance, then it must become a special challenge for the radical revisionist to demonstrate that even the romance is shaped by this same “absent cause.” However, such an analysis of the systemic containment of all acts of individual resistance can only be made from the perspective of a radical norm of self-realization. The more radical the claim for individual self-assertion, the more “totalitarian” will the social system appear that stands in the way of that claim. In this sense, the new cultural radicalism, although ostensibly unmasking and criticizing an ideology of individualism, voices this critique from an even more radical vision of that same individualism. Inevitably, such a vision of the unobstructed freedom of radical self-assertion must draw on the imaginary in order to even think the possibility of an “other,” fully liberated self.⁴¹ It constitutes, in other words, a romance of its own. Where it “unmasks” the romance as complicitous, it does so in the name of its own political romance of a society without coercion and restraints which, in striking analogy to the function of the imaginary in Barthelme’s work, appears in Michaels’ sweeping and uncompromising analysis as a last, faint nostalgic echo of past hopes and illusions.

Emily Budick points to the liberal views of the romance against which such an emphatic revisions of the theory of the romance are written: “Traditionally, Hawthorne’s text has been understood as being about individualism and human aspiration, and as therefore apolitical” (Emily Budick, “Sacvan Bercovitch” 52). In the reading of cultural radicalism, it is this fiction of a possible escape from politics which describes its actual politics. But it remains one of the great confusions of current debates to assume that when a text “is about” individualism, it is a-political or only political in the sense of evading politics. In this essay, I have argued that the romance is culturally and historically most significant where it is most strongly aiming at

⁴¹ Castoriadis has pinpointed the imaginary core underlying all conceptualizations of the symbolic order: “Let us recall that God itself is an imaginary construct. For the law as a social institution, this imaginary figure serves as origin and ultimate legitimation” (220, my translation).

self-empowerment. However, in contrast to recent neo-historicist accounts, I see this significance not in the systemic containment of individual liberation, but, on the contrary, in its constantly renewed stimulation. In this sense, the history of the American romance is part of a history of cultural dehierarchization which leads straight up to the current cultural radicalism. By reducing fiction to a rhetoric of power, this new cultural radicalism has closed itself off against the acknowledgement of this development and the role the romance plays in it. In addition, it ignores the actual political challenge posed by the romance: the crucial role of the imaginary in social arrangements and social visions. Although a seemingly aristocratic genre, the romance has, in and through its changing uses of the imaginary become an important genre of democratization, because as "pure fiction" it is ideally suited to articulate an imaginary dimension that is the nourishing ground for ever new claims of the individual. The romance and its changing functions are not only part of a history of cultural dehierarchization. They are, in fact, one of its driving forces.

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