

# Containment or Emergence?

## A Theory of American Literature

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In the revisionist criticism that has dominated the study of American literature for the last fifteen years, we have become used to a mode of reading which focuses on literary and fictional texts as discursive and disciplinary practices. The interpretative emphasis lies on what is cleverly and cunningly contained by the text, not on what is made possible by literature. This creative potential of literary texts has, on the other hand, been an aspect which has interested Heinz Ickstadt most strongly about literature. In following his example, I want to provide the sketch of a theory of American literature in the following essay in which literature does not figure as a site of containment but of emergence.<sup>1</sup> This theory is based on the following assumptions:

1.) The gradual liberation of the 'fictive' from religious and moral contexts and its institutionalization as fiction, especially in the form of the novel, is one of the major events in modern Western cultural history.

2.) This emergence and institutionalization of fiction establishes a mode of communication with conditions and possibilities of its own and draws its major force from a particular potential, namely to provide the imaginary with a chance of articulation.

3.) The imaginary is defined here, following Wolfgang Iser, in a phenomenological sense as that realm of diffuse, discontinuous and decontextualized associations, images, desires, feelings and moods which constantly feed our perceptions and flood our consciousness but which need to be translated into a recognizable form or *Gestalt* in order to be able to articulate them.<sup>2</sup> One advantage of such a broad definition of the imaginary is thus not automatically equated with one of its possible manifestations. In fact, to trace the changing words and concepts that have been used to grasp

<sup>1</sup> I use the word containment here as a shorthand for a whole range of radical claims in which cooptation, containment, and unwitting complicity form three possible forms of ideological mimesis.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Iser's use of the concept is taken from a phenomenological tradition. His two major sources of inspiration on the imaginary are Sartre and Castoriadis. For a detailed discussion of the concept of the imaginary see Iser's books *Prospecting* and *The Fictive and the Imaginary*.

this imaginary dimension—such as fancy and imagination, prophetic vision, phantasm, the uncanny, the unconscious, or desire, to name but a few—would in itself provide a fascinating cultural history of changing conceptualizations and manifestations of the imaginary.

4.) This 'articulation effect' has made fictional texts, and especially the novel, one of the primary cultural instruments of individual self-fashioning and self-empowerment in Western societies. By giving the imaginary a *Gestalt*, fiction can articulate thoughts and feelings that are otherwise inexpressible in a culture. The freedom of fiction to give the imaginary the semblance of the real makes it possible to articulate dimensions of subjective experience that transcend existing codes of representation. However, the imaginary cannot be identical with its representation, because fiction can only give expression to the imaginary by linking it with cultural codes of the real. The articulation of the imaginary by means of fiction thus has a paradoxical nature: On the one hand, fiction makes it possible to experience the imaginary without being, or at least without being entirely, at the mercy of it. On the other hand, the combination of the imaginary and the real affects reality and redefines the imaginary; by doing so, it also socializes or naturalizes the imaginary and thus stimulates new associations and new needs for articulation.

5.) This paradoxical mutual reinforcement can be seen as a motor of an ongoing process of cultural dehierarchization and individualization in Western societies.<sup>3</sup>

Such assumptions do not necessarily stand in opposition to revisionist insights into the cooptive and disciplinary powers of fictional texts. However, they provide a necessary addition to these insights by drawing attention to a paradoxical interdependence between a growing refinement in disciplinary regimes and yet, at the same time, a growth in individual self-expression, between ever more subtle forms of ideological containment and, at the same time, a steady increase in the possibilities of self-empowerment.

<sup>3</sup> The term individual is not used here in any emphatic philosophical sense, as a subject, but in the Tocquevillian sense of a new type of social character who wants to extend his or her own possibilities of self-realization. The special potential of democracies for liberating the imaginary is already perceived by Tocqueville, although with concern: "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).

This interdependence escapes the new revisionism.<sup>4</sup> Its paradoxical logic works both ways: It is one of the major promises of fiction to give expression to not yet fully articulated, diffusely imagined desires, feelings and associations, but this articulation also leads to the discursive configuration of the imaginary element by which it was generated, and, thus, to its socialization. This configuration provides the basis for social and cultural control; however, it also stimulates ever new demands for self-expression and self-empowerment. If we follow the heated debates between the various revisionist camps about the true oppositional merits of classic and other forms of American literature, it seems that we have to choose between either one of these two possibilities. But the real challenge is to grasp their interdependence, that is, the way in which they depend on one another and constantly reinforce each other in that extremely unstable semiotic system called literature.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that the new revisionism which has given us intriguing and powerful readings of classic American literature should be dismissed. It means, however, that the role and function of literature seems to me to be more complicated than it is presented in many revisionist readings at present. Literature is a site of cultural containment and ideological formation, but it is also a struggle for expression and, in consequence, a major medium of self-definition and self-empowerment.

In order to illustrate this view of literature as a realm of negotiation between seemingly contradictory functions of fiction, let me focus on two types of novels which can be considered as breakthrough genres in the development of a specific American tradition and which are nowadays often described as supreme examples of ideological containment or cultural socialization, the historical novel of the frontier and the domestic novel.

The frontier already plays an important part in a novel such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly*. But since his Indians are only beastly manifestations of an imaginary fear and nothing else, which, along with a ferocious panther, belong to a paradigm of life-threatening forces, the threat to the self remains ultimately uncontrollable and the imaginary functions as

<sup>4</sup> Actually, I think, one should speak of an act of suppression, because to acknowledge this dimension of cultural history would also mean that one would no longer be able to define oneself as victim or dupe of the system. One's own agenda would thus have to be presented as individual or interest-group claim.

<sup>5</sup> This, alone, I think can explain a strange paradox that pervades the current critical argument in literary studies and which I have described on another occasion: the fact that, contrary to revisionist analyses about the all-pervasive cooptive and disciplinary power effects of discursive regimes, a culture of opposition and dissent has emerged in contemporary intellectual and cultural life that is unique in its scope and critical intensity.

an uncanny double of the self. Cooper's historical romances of the frontier, by contrast, dramatize this Indian threat as part of a prior, savage state of civilization that must be conquered and eliminated. This encounter is staged from a perspective that makes no secret of its gentry-loyalties. It is described from the perspective of an eighteenth century model of civilizatory progress which insists on the superiority of modern stages of historical development over the savagery of prior stages of civilization but also fears 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 novels to dramatize a threat to this hierarchy in order to justify and reconsolidate it successfully, and both present their narrative in an unambiguous mode of representation which reflects their strong belief in the legitimacy and transparency of the social organization they favor. Both authors, finally, write historical novels in order to give their struggle for social recognition the heroic dimension of an epic battle. However, in their efforts to elevate the novel 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 novel is a highly paradoxical genre. On the one side, 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, in order to engage the reader for these goals, it heats up the imagination with wild adventures and daring deeds. 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 successfully contained.

The license of fiction to reconfigure social hierarchies, if only temporarily, may provide a crucial explanation for the initially unexpected success of Cooper's version of the historical novel, as, for example, in *The Pioneers*. By elevating Leatherstocking 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. However, it also creates a major problem of representation. For clearly, in view of the ultimate goal of the historical novel to legitimize an established social hierarchy, its 'wild,' heroic adventurers 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 unwilling and incapable to

adjust to the legal code of civilization. When Cooper resurrects Natty as a younger self in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty has already internalized an idea of the 'natural' order of things for which he now becomes a willing pathfinder. Simms, on the other hand, solves the challenge of temporary dehierarchization even more cleverly (but also more conventionally): In *The Yemassee*, his rough outdoor hero is really a disguised aristocrat who returns to his true identity and rightful social status after the attack of the 'savage' forces is successfully repelled. In both cases, the novel draws its appeal from a carefully controlled interaction between 'historical' and 'fictional' elements, the realm of the reality principle and the wild desires of the imaginary which are temporarily rearranged in hierarchy in order to 'tempt' and engage the reader, but which are, in the end, reintegrated into the reaffirmation of a social hierarchy legitimized now by history.<sup>6</sup> Seen in this way, the historical novel presents a highly instructive case for the gradual liberation of elements of imaginary self-empowerment in the history of the American novel. It dramatizes a state of tension and strikes a precarious balance: The historical novel has to draw on elements of 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.<sup>7</sup> Hence, it moves between novel and romance, so that it has been called both historical novel and historical romance almost interchangeably.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> On the problem of how to relate history to fiction (and how to invert the hierarchy of the two) cf. Dekker: "In *most* of his romances, Cooper solved this problem by virtually dispensing with the kind of famous historical personages and events that figure so prominently in *most* of the Waverley novels. As a result, Cooper's casts of characters could be smaller, his plots simpler, and his natural settings could bulk larger than was usual in Scott's romances. For Simms, the potential gains of concentration which Cooper's practice offered did not outweigh the losses of panoramic effects and 'real' historical interest; and so he crowded the plots of his romances with the notable figures and incidents that also appeared in his *History of South Carolina*" (63).

<sup>7</sup> 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 Green poses: "But granted that driving interest in America—which I called the cultural reason for 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?" (166f).

<sup>8</sup> 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. In fact, it may be argued that one major attraction of the romance consists in its

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 refuelled, 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 'romantic' and the domestic novel. In this sense, the historical novel can be seen as a form instilling a disciplinary regime. However, this model is part of a trade-off of which self-empowerment and temporary dehierarchization remain integral parts.

The adventure story à la Cooper and the female domestic novel are usually contrasted with each other as irreconcilable and antagonistic genres while, in fact, they resemble each other in striking ways in their strategies of internalization and implied theories of aesthetic effect (so that, in fact, the latter genre, too, has been called both "domestic novel" and "domestic romance" interchangeably). As critics such as Nina Baym, Jane Tompkins, and others have shown, the domestic novel—at first sight the story of an unappreciated, orphaned, underprivileged girl or young woman—holds a well-calculated theory of power designed to turn weakness into strength and make submission and self-sacrifice the basis for an assertion of the self.

At the beginning of Susan Warner's domestic novel *The Wide, Wide World*, the heroine has to learn to overcome a cruel experience of separation which turns her, not legally, but surely symbolically, into an orphan. This,

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considerable freedom in combining generic forms and modes of representation. 'Pure' examples are rarely found. The romance usually appears as a hybrid form, constantly and promiscuously establishing new discursive links and generic combinations.

clearly, is another version of the Cinderella-motif whose striking dominance in nineteenth-century women's literature must have something to do with the fact that it provides an exemplary drama of self-esteem. Inevitably, one consequence of Ellen's loss of social relation is a loss of self-esteem. Hence, it must be the project (and promise) of the novel to find new sources of self-esteem. This search draws on images of triumphant self-enhancement in the presence of a father-figure, and emotional symbiosis with a mother figure, but both of these forms of imaginary self-empowerment have to be earned, by the heroine as well as the reader, by a painful process of psychic self-regulation, as Richard Brodhead has shown in exemplary fashion. In the historical novel, the 'savage' stage of human development has to be overcome, in the domestic novel, the 'childish' stage, but, in both cases, in an intriguingly paradoxical structure, it is exactly this realm of seemingly uncivilized and 'immature' forces which becomes the nourishing ground for fiction and its promise of articulation.

I have shown in a different context how in Melville's hands, the novel, no longer following the predictable plot pattern of the historical novel of adventure with its first-next sequence of spatial as well as civilizational boundary-crossing and retreat, metamorphoses into a book that defies any narrative formula in its exuberant celebration of fiction's potential for imaginary role-play and self-empowerment.<sup>9</sup> In this process, the novel of social apprenticeship which dominates the first part of the nineteenth century is replaced by an early manifestation of an expressive individualism emerging in the work of the writers of the American Renaissance. This shift from economic or utilitarian individualism to expressive individualism provides the imaginary with entirely new possibilities.<sup>10</sup> In screening virtually the whole archive of human knowledge for the purpose of imaginary self-empowerment, Ishmael as well as Ahab discover ever new roles and forms of self-fashioning.<sup>11</sup> But they are also in constant danger of being overwhelmed by this semiotic abundance—a danger that provides Melville's rewriting of the *Bildungsroman* in *Pierre* its characteristic self-destructive trajectory. Consequently, Melville's heroes do not fail, as heroes do in the culture of economic individualism, by disregarding the reality-principle. They either exhaust or ruin themselves in the chase and struggle

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. my essay "Cultures of Criticism: *Moby-Dick*, Expressive Individualism, and the New Historicism."

<sup>10</sup> These categories are taken from Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, although I do not use them here for a critique of individualism, as Bellah does.

<sup>11</sup> For especially helpful discussions of this aspect, see McIntosh, Schulz, Porter, and Schwab.

for ever new possibilities of self-expression and self-fashioning, so that the novel's quest for the ungraspable phantom of life turns into "the chartless voyage of an ardent, self-dramatizing 'I'" (Milder, 438).

The subsequent history of American literature can be seen as that of a continuous unfolding and increasing radicalization of this expressive individualism, although there are moments and movements like the work of Hawthorne and that of American realism, which try to integrate the claim of individual self-assertion into visions of a transformed community.<sup>12</sup> Where this is done with a certain consequence, however, the imaginary reasserts itself in entirely unforeseen ways. A good example is provided by Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* which starts out as a project to readjust the imbalances between individual and society in exemplary fashion, only to discover unexpected possibilities for self-aggrandizement nourished by the very 'fictions' which the book set out to discipline. But the most impressive case is provided by James who first bases his negotiation between individual and society on the possibility of common experiences, then realizes the need for an interpretation of these experiences through consciousness, and finally reveals the uncanny presence of imaginary elements of desire, voyeurism, even vampirism, and, above all, a will to power and self-assertion in this consciousness. In this process, the realist project is transformed from within and a new conceptualization of the imaginary is opened up, as, for example, in James's stories "The Figure in the Carpet" and "The Turn of the Screw" in which the imaginary becomes an ungraspable bait.

It is fascinating to consider, for a moment, the transformations which the imaginary undergoes in the development of American literature: In Hawthorne it is a source of 'dark' suggestions of guilt and sin that create all kinds of ambiguities. But, it is still morally encoded. In realism, we find a determined attempt to redefine the imaginary as literary illusion and to control it by contrasting it with 'experience.'<sup>13</sup> However, as the realists,

<sup>12</sup> This, in fact, explains Hawthorne's characteristic choice of genre. In calling his novels romances, it is often forgotten that they take their point of departure from the historical novel and its particular interest in Puritanism. Bell, Brumm, and Buell 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. The American Revolution, the encounter between white settlers and Native Americans, and the Puritan past of New England were the three dominant themes of the American historical romance until the Civil War.

<sup>13</sup> 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 morbidness of dreams and the unconscious; with class society, aristocratic conceit and idleness, and with imperialist expansion" (98f.).

including Howells, find out this 'romance' of real life is much more powerful than they were willing to acknowledge. In James's enigmatic stories of the 90s and the late novels, a new stage is reached. The imaginary becomes a source of unnameable suggestions which do no longer trigger moral reflection but horror. With the works of Kate Chopin, which occupy a major role in the transition from nineteenth to twentieth century fiction, a long tradition of regarding the imaginary with both fascination and fear, comes to an end. In *The Awakening*, the imaginary is now reconceptualized as authentic life-giving force which can no longer be represented, not even by enigmatic, ambiguous signs. It can only be experienced through sensuous suggestion, acknowledging the force of an intangible desire (as does Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* at about the same time). As Jürgen Peper has pointed out in the context of a different, but related argument,<sup>14</sup> the subsequent development of modern literature in the twentieth century can be seen as an attempt to penetrate ever new layers of cultural convention, including those of language, in order to get access to an underlying, but inaccessible authenticity that cannot be represented in language. It can only be represented indirectly by evoking feelings, moods, and associations that are tied to the signs used for representation. When the idea of an 'authentic,' unrepresentable existential dimension is finally undermined by postmodernism's redefinition of reality as a semiotic universe, this must, in turn, also affect the conceptualization of the imaginary. Instead of acting as placeholder for an existential truth that cannot be expressed, the imaginary now becomes a generator of an endless chain of signifiers and plots that only faintly retain the possibility of an underlying meaning.

This story of the changing conceptualizations and literary manifestations of the imaginary has two sides to it. 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 in Brown's work to the narrative function of a mere blank or empty signifier. Hawthorne's characteristic modes of ambiguity, even James's 'unspeakable suggestions,' though they may only function as hermeneutical baits, still hold a promise of meaning. In contrast, Chopin's evocation of sensuous experience (or, to give another example, Fitzgerald's green light on the other

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Peper's pioneer study *Bewußtseinslagen des Erzählens und erzählte Wirklichkeiten* to which we all owe a lot.

side of the bay) assume 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.

This story of retreat is closely bound up with the rejection of those (real or imagined) authorities which seem to impede individual self-realization and self-empowerment. Here, too, a fascinating story of changing concepts of the 'antagonist' to individual self-empowerment is opening up in which the initially universal claim (and restraints) of rationalism which still govern the world of Charles Brockden Brown are first taken back to a historical dimension, the concept of civilization and the idea of gentry-guardianship, and then reduced to a social dimension, the authority of moral and social traditions which become 'manners' in the work of James. In James, manners can be both deceptive and an element of self-definition, in Chopin, they are only oppressive and threaten to suffocate the self. In the world of Dreiser and Fitzgerald, on the other hand, manners are displaced by a new materialism that is much harder to grasp and to battle because it already resembles the unstable plasticity of the consumer market and the stock exchanges; moreover, it is so all-pervasive that the individual can no longer be sure whether he or she is not infected by these forces and desires. This, in turn, triggers the modernist search for non-materialistic residues of existence such as art (or the aesthetic realm) or an existential reality that explodes all social conventions.

However, it is one of the paradoxical consequences of this retreat to a seemingly authentic, uncorrupted sphere of life, that the relentless and continually radicalized search for an authentic dimension that is not yet compromised by social forces reveals ever new layers of linguistic and cultural convention, until the idea of authenticity is itself undermined. As a consequence, not only the concepts of art and self are now considered as discursive constructs that imprison and 'discipline' the individual, but also such seemingly private dimensions as sexuality, the emotions, and the body, so that it has become the major project of contemporary art to overcome the separation between life and art and to dissolve the authority of these concepts by parodistic, self-reflexive, or deconstructive forms of signification.

This, in turn, must again extend the conceptualization of the antagonist. Already in modernism—and then especially in the culture of the 50s—, the threat of materialism is complemented, and, in part, replaced by the concept of conformity which, in contrast to materialism, can no longer be tied to specific acts. It is simply the absence of individuality, but the only judge on

whether the chance for individuality is absent, is the individual him- or herself. Still, as long as materialism or 'conformity' are the antagonists, there is still the possibility to escape from them. The flight from conformity lies at the center of many, if not most, cultural texts of the 50s; the question of whether an exemplary individual managed to escape from materialism forms the central drama of revisionist marketplace criticism. However, if the separation of life and art is broken down and the belief in an 'authentic' self or existence is destroyed by insisting that the self is generated by linguistic or discursive conventions, then the threats to the individual can arise from literally everywhere. Society becomes a linguistic system or discursive regime, social criticism is replaced by the search for 'plots,' and cultural criticism becomes a search for invisible power effects. Thus, in postmodern literature it is the ubiquitous presence of narrative or linguistic patterns in all processes of sense-making that threatens to engulf the individual and make it subject to invisible power effects. Thus, what is still a source of potential insight in James—the fact that single impressions cohere—becomes a sign of possible paranoia or of a potentially totalitarian dimension of the social or cultural system.

In this cultural history of forces that stand in the way of the self—and this is the important point here—, there is then an unmistakable tendency to gradually broaden the perception and definition of the antagonist. In most nineteenth-century texts, claims of order are still tied to specific social groups with special authority such as the gentry; or to specific philosophical concepts or positions such as the enlightenment, Calvinism, idealism, transcendentalism etc. If threats to the individual are dramatized, they are attributed to clearly identifiable historical forces such as Puritanism, the Southern system of slavery, or the city. These are already rather broad categories, so that a good deal of public exchange is generated by the counter-attempt to dispel or problematize such generalizations—by claiming, for example, that not all Southerners are cruel slave owners etc. But the source of power is still attributed to a social or cultural realm that is separated from others. One can therefore flee or fight this opponent, for example, by leaving the city, fighting a civil war, breaking with religion. In such struggles, society is still conceptualized as an entity with a distinct historical and regional identity which can be described by spatial, temporal, and social distinctions: past and present, upper and lower class, North and South. In the reconceptualization of social threats as materialism, society is redefined as consumer culture, in the criticism of social conformity as mass society. In both cases, the them/us dichotomy loses its clear-cut spatial or temporal contours. Materialists and conformists can be anywhere in

principle, you never know where and when you encounter them. Nevertheless, materialists and conformists are still visible opponents one can identify and avoid. In a world of invisible linguistic and discursive power effects, on the other hand, one can never be sure whether their identification is an act of paranoid projection or shrewd insight into the hidden mechanism of the system.

These varying conceptualizations of the antagonist must in turn shape the conceptualization of the counter-force on which the individual can draw in his or her own search for self-empowerment. The two conceptualizations are, in fact, interdependent. Where eighteenth-century rationalism and the idea of civilization still 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 his or her own potential. While, at first, the painful search for individual identity seems to provide a chance 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 'unnameable' 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. An 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.

Such forms of interdependence (and interplay) can hardly be grasped by traditional liberal theories of American literature, because these theories are locked in a basic, restricted, and ultimately ahistorical opposition between conformism and rebellion and, hence, argue along the reductive semantic lines of society/conformism/realism on the one side versus individual/ nonconformity/romance on the other. Critics like Chase articulate a certain moment in the history of cultural self-empowerment I have traced, but they are incapable of developing any self-awareness about the projective dimension and historicity of their own theory. For this post-war liberalism, the romance posed the challenge of coming to terms with two possible versions of individualism in American life: While the

individual who evades social responsibilities by lighting out for the territory exemplifies a type of individualism that lies at the bottom of what is wrong with American society, the individual who says "no! in thunder" to middle-class expectations exemplifies the individual who rescues American life from the iron grip of conformity and whose right for unfettered artistic self-expression must therefore be protected at all cost.<sup>15</sup> The one type of individualism is to blame for the fact that American society appears superficial, maybe even for the fact that it has not developed a socialist tradition or a tradition of social or political engagement, the other type of individualism remains the only hope against a bourgeois regime of moral censorship and the tyranny of cultural conventions.

The radical revisionism of American literary history emerging in the late 1970s focused on this reaffirmation of a promise of individual self-assertion as the core of liberal self-deception. The debate has continued to focus on the genre of the "American Romance," which the liberal tradition had identified (and often criticized) as the major novelistic expression of American individualism. The romance has thus remained a central topic in the ongoing debates on the true nature of American literature, 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. Walter Benn Michaels's 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" (156 f.), 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. If the literary symbol is ambiguous or

<sup>15</sup> The key author for this period is Leslie Fiedler, exactly because of his methodological indifference and his unrepentant reappropriation of literary studies for the purpose of self-expression. See his books *Love and Death in the American Novel* and *No! In Thunder*, but also his rather bold defense of a wild, unruly imaginary even in novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Clansman* in *What Was Literature*, published separately as *The Inadvertent Epic: From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Roots* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980).

'unknowable,' then only because it represents something that is hidden by the system and not supposed to be known. In Michaels's case, this 'absent cause' is the market—a market, however, that is no longer a metaphor for the instability and corrupting forces of social life, but for the invisible hand of the system.<sup>16</sup> From being the site of the not yet domesticated, the imaginary thus becomes a model case of how even the seemingly most private and inaccessible sphere of the human make-up is thoroughly pervaded by the logic of the market or other systemic effects.

However, such an analysis of the systemic containment of all acts of individual resistance can only be made, as I have tried to show in tracing the trajectory of the interdependence between imaginary self-empowerment and changing conceptualizations of society and social control, 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. It constitutes, in other words, a romance of its own—and clearly one, that is not pervaded by the market, but is the result of a process of ongoing dehierarchization propelled by the discovery and increasing use of literature as means of individual self-empowerment. 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 in which self-empowerment is no longer obstructed.

In contrast to recent revisionist accounts, then, I see the social and cultural role of American literature not primarily in the systemic containment of individual liberation, but, quite on the contrary, in its constantly renewed stimulation—a stimulation for which internalization of

<sup>16</sup> As Michaels puts it: "Looking for the Seven Gables in Salem, Hawthorne says, is a mistake because it 'exposes the Romance to an inflexible and exceedingly dangerous species of criticism, by bringing (its) fancy pictures into positive contact with the realities of the moment.' The implication seems to be that the romance (unlike the novel) is too fragile to stand comparison with reality, but Hawthorne immediately goes on to suggest that the difference between the romance and the novel is perhaps less a matter of their relation to reality than of their relation to real estate. . . . The romance, then, is to be imagined as a kind of property, or rather as a relation to property. Where the novel may be said to touch the real by expropriating it and so violating someone's 'private rights,' the romance asserts a property right that does not threaten and so should not be threatened by the property rights of others. The romance, to put it another way, is the text of clear and unobstructed title" (157).

conflict and discursive regimes which socialize and contain the imaginary (and other seemingly non-discursive elements) regularly provide new springboards. The individual that has been strengthened by an internalization of discipline or by establishing an identity (even of an illusionary nature), will pursue its own interests and claims, including those for the articulation of his or her desires, more insistently, setting in motion ever more radicalized struggles for self-expression and self-empowerment. Such a claim, I am afraid, is not a message people want to hear, however. My theory, to make a last point, can explain why. For in order to justify their own far-reaching claims for self-empowerment, they need a force which stands in the way of the self and the more pervasive this force is, the more radical and categorical can the claim for self-expression and self-empowerment be articulated. Thus, it is very likely that revisionist critics will continue to tell only one side of the story, although this version of American literary and cultural history cannot explain the emergence of their own critical culture and its far-reaching cultural impact.

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